

**THE MANIPUR POLITICAL AGENCY WITH  
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE FRONTIER PROBLEM, 1836-1891 :**

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## INTRODUCTION

The present state of Manipur lies between 23.47 and 25.41 north latitude and between 93.6 and 94.48 east longitude. It has an area of roughly 22,356 sq kms of which the hills take up 21,151 sq kms.<sup>1</sup> The State in fact is geographically divided into two distinct regions the hills and centrally situated valley. Manipur is also a gateway of India to South East Asia and has an international boundary with Burma, now Myanmar, in the east and south east. It is bounded in the south west by the state of Mizoram, in the west by Assam and in the northwest by Nagaland. The valley is oval shaped, 2600ft above sea level. At one time in history the river Chindwin in Myanmar was said to form Manipur's natural eastern frontier and the Kubo valley remained a bone of contention between Manipur and Burma till 1949.<sup>2</sup> The state of Manipur in the early nineteenth century and before was called by different names by the neighbouring countries which often confused geographers: the Burmese termed it Kathe, to the Assamese it was Meklee, to the Cacharis, Moglie while the Shans in Burma called it Cassay.<sup>3</sup>

The general aspect of the hill ranges consists of occasional conical peaks and precipitous cliffs of bare rock otherwise of

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<sup>1</sup> Roman Constantine: *Manipur Maid of the Mountains*, Delhi, 1981, P.18.

<sup>2</sup> Senajaoba Naorem : *Manipur past and present* Vol.III, Delhi 1995, p.1.

<sup>3</sup> R B Pemberton: *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*: Calcutta 1835, P.21.

irregular serrated ridges.<sup>4</sup> Some of the notable hills in the east are the Saramati or Ching-angouba ( white –hill), the Somrah, Kassam, Nupital or Maphitel ( Heirok range) and the Yomadung. Hills found in the west are the Nungibong, Kala Naga, Chakka – Nungba and Koubru – Laimaton, which are the southern branches of the great Barail range. These enormous hill-range were always regarded as insurmountable barriers leading to their isolation. But in reality, there were tracts through these ranges which serve us routes for both trade and human migration, possibly from prehistoric down to the present times.<sup>5</sup>

hills to

and the The range of hills to the north constitutes the watershed and was often regarded as the most desirable boundary between Manipur and the Naga hills. The important rivers in the state are the Imphal, the Iril, the Toubal, and the Nambal which flow across the valley. The Barak originates in the folds of Kopamedza in the northern hills, flows southward and then bends north at Karong and then below Maram takes a second bend to the south right through the hills. It ultimately joins the Ganges and Brahmaputra after turning westward through Cachar and Sylhet. The Barak has many tributaries from the western face of the hills that guard the western side of the valley of Manipur.<sup>6</sup> The rivers of Manipur except the Laimatak flow from the north to the south. The Barak and the Jiri rivers in the west are navigable for a pretty long course. After

<sup>4</sup> E W Dun: *Gazetteer of Manipur*: Calcutta, 1886, Reprint Delhi 1972, p.1.

<sup>5</sup> Gangmumei Kabui : “ Glimpses of land and people of Ancient Manipur.” in Sanajaoba Naorem (ed): *Manipur Past and Present, The Heritage and Ordeals of a civilization*, Vol. I, History, Polity and Law, Delhi, 1988, p.9.

<sup>6</sup> T C Hodson, *The Naga Tribes of Manipur*, London, 1911, Reprint Delhi, 1996. P.3.

flowing upwards of 180 miles through a mountainous region, the Barak is navigable for about 20 miles above Baskandee.<sup>7</sup> The Imphal river too has a long mileage of navigation .Other rivers like the Makru, the Irang, the Lengba and the Laimatak are crossed between Manipur and Cachar.<sup>8</sup>

Manipur enjoys a sub-tropical monsoon climate that varies in different geographical regions, according to altitude of the ranges. Topographical varieties with a short distance result in rapid climatic changes. The Barak basin and the lower foot hills of the Eastern hills, bordering Burma, have a warmer climate than the central valley and the surrounding hills. Similarly the western portion of the region tend to have more moisture than the eastern because of its location on the windward slopes of the hills.<sup>9</sup>

The rainy season commences in April and lasts till the end of September. July, August and September are the wettest months of the year. Travelling particularly in the hills during these months is, as elsewhere in the North East is extremely hazardous. The rainfall in the valley does not exceed 60 inches while in the hills it can certainly be estimated at 100 inches . The forests are mixed tropical one with evergreen varieties and are particularly dense in the hills in its west.

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<sup>7</sup> R B Pemberton, *Op. Cit.*, p.5.

<sup>8</sup> Verrier Elwin (ed). *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century*, London, 1969, p. 453.

<sup>9</sup> V P Sharma, *The HMars of Manipur: An Anthropological exploration*: Delhi, 1992, p.6.

However, since the colonial period and commercialization over the period the forests in Manipur have been denuded. Those in the hills have fallen prey to the axe of the cultivators mainly due to the practice of shifting cultivation. Of the various flora, the valuable trees found in Manipur are the teak, which had often in the past, caused conflict between Burma and Manipur over its extraction, and the “Wooningthou” one of the finest timber wood, are of great demand. There are also Khasia pine available in the north east and bamboo forests in the west. Agar, which is an international trade commodity is also found in some parts of Manipur. One of the most spoken flora is the famous ‘Siroilily’<sup>10</sup> in Tangkhul region, in the north eastern side of the state. Palm trees and Supari or betel nut trees are also found, though are scanty.

Of the fauna, the Indian hornbill, and rarest of them all the brow antlered deer, the Sangai are worth mentioning.<sup>11</sup> A large size stag is also common. There are different varieties of birds found in different parts of the state.

The land routes connecting Manipur valley with Burma, Cachar district and Nagaland lie across the hills. Thus Manipur is linked with the rest of the country by National Highway No.39 from Dimapur in Nagaland to Imphal and National Highway No. 53 links Imphal with Silchar in Assam. Manipur has a population of 18,26,714 persons, according to the 1991 census; the sex ratio being

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<sup>10</sup> Gangmumei Kabui: *Op.Cit.*, p.9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

988 females per 1000 males.\* Out of this total population two third are from the valley area and one-third from the surrounding hills. Currently the state has eight districts- viz, Senapati, Tamenglong, Imphal, Churachandpur, Chandel, Thoubal Bishnupur and Ukhrul district. It is one of the smallest states in basis of population and area in the republic of India Union.

### THE FRONTIER AND FRONTIER TRIBES:

The hills surrounding the valley, the home of a variety of ethnic groups, constitute Manipur's frontier. The term was often used to denote a linear boundary where it existed and at times it was a region, the hills surrounding the valley. In the east the Kubo valley was the frontier with Burma. The control and management of the hill tribes and the relations with Kubo valley was Manipur's frontier problem, to oversee which the Political Agency was established in the first instance.

From the earliest times the Thangkhul Nagas inhabited the hills immediately to the east and north east of the Valley of Manipur, bordering the Kubo valley.<sup>12</sup> The Thangkhuls or Loohoopas as they were often called in the nineteenth century were one of the most numerous of the tribes around Manipur. The villages which were nearest to the valley and thus exposed to interference

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\* Census of India, 1991, Series 15, Manipur.

<sup>12</sup> T C Hodson: *Op. Cit*, p.2, for details see W McCulloch : *Account of the Valley of Munnipore, and the Hill Tribes*, (Calcutta, 1859), pp. 57 ff.

from the plains were said to have had suffered from Manipuri dominance, often leading to the desertion of their villages. But those in the interior region which were difficult of access were much bolder and because of their reputation as courageous warriors were not lightly interfered with.<sup>13</sup> Among all the hill tribes they were the most troublesome, occasionally making raids into the valley itself. Still like all hill-men they were afraid to quit the shelter of their hills for any long distance and when in the plains were always beaten back by the pony cavalry of the valley.<sup>14</sup>

McCulloch who knew them well says that they were feared even by people on the Burmese side of the hills who as far as the Ningthee tremble at his name. With good reason for they had suffered much at his hands. Feuds among them were endemic and McCulloch further writes:

Amongst them one village holds several others in subjection, exacting from them tribute of cloth, etc, and so well supplied have some of them been they boast their women never make cloth. In addition to this, should the dominant village require their services, they supply contingents for any fight. They have their hereditary village chief, he has no great influence.<sup>15</sup>

West of the Tangkhuls and north of the valley were the Mao and Maram Naga tribes. Some early British writers referred to these two as Quasi-Angami Nagas on the ground that they are more

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<sup>13</sup> McCulloch: *Op.Cit*, pp.66-67.

<sup>14</sup> AAR: 1868-69.

<sup>15</sup> McCulloch, *Op.Cit*, p.67.

closely connected with the Angami than with other tribes.<sup>16</sup> McCulloch says, though they declared themselves to be of one common stock and closely allied by intermarriage, they were often at deadly feud with one another. Among the Marams, the married men even slept at the resorts of bachelors,<sup>17</sup> an unusual custom resulting from their sense of insecurity.\* The Maram were said to have had two chiefs.\*\* The Mayangkhang group, or the Kolya, Khoirao, who were considered to have descended from the Marams inhabited the hills south of Mao and Marams.<sup>18</sup> As McCulloch observed, they bought slaves with a view to gaining a profit from their sale, though they never kept slaves themselves. North of the Mao tribes were the Angami villages, in perpetual feuds with each other. The Angami were known too for their blood thirsty attacks on their weaker neighbours. It was their attacks which attracted the attention of the British Government and led to ineffectual endeavour for their prevention, for many years.

The Kabui Nagas inhabited the hills between Cachar and the valley of Manipur in their whole breadth, a distance about forty miles. It was said to have extended an equal distance to the south, the whole of the tract being thickly studded with villages, some of them

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<sup>16</sup> T C Hodson: *Op. Cit*, p.2.

<sup>17</sup> W McCulloch, *Op. Cit*, p. 69:

\* The Archive Records and Administrative Reports showed that upto the third quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Marams, particularly the village of Willong had constant conflict with the Angami village of Khonoma, Mezoma and Jotsoma: AAR: 1874-76.

\*\* See for details, Mc Culloch, *Op. Cit*, p. 70.

<sup>18</sup> T C Hodson, *Op. Cit*, p.4.

of considerable size. The Kabuis were divided into families, Koomul, Looang, Angom and Ningthanja. Before their subjugation to Manipur the most successful warriors had been the most influential men in the village; but wealth and the ability to speaking well in public also contributed to their position as leaders. McCulloch says there was no essential difference between the divisions of the Kabuis, the Songboos and pooeerons, as regards to appearance, manners and customs. There was, however, considerable differences in dialect and consequent difficulty in communication for which they often had to resort to Manipuri.<sup>19</sup> The Manipuri language infact acted of the *lingua franca* for the tribes whose dialects were unintelligible to one another.\*

Next to the Kabuis are the Quoireings who inhabited all the hills north of the former between the high range that skirts the valley of Manipur and the river Barak as far as the Angami tribes. This tribe, as is well known suffered much from the aggression of the Angamis.<sup>20</sup> During the period under review the tribe seemed to consist of nine villages which formed the north-western frontier of the state of Manipur.<sup>21</sup> On the eastern side of the Manipur valley are the Maring tribe. They connect the Tangkhuls with the other southern tribes. They were said to have been a numerous tribe not

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<sup>19</sup> McCulloch, *Op. Cit*, p.49 ff.

\* This situation is much the same with the Nagas in communication with Assam where a pidgeon Assemese called Nagamese is used among the various tribes,

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> T C Hodson *Op. Cit*, p. 5.

long ago. This tribe is the only tribe who traced their origin at “Haubum Maruk”, part of the Manipur Capital.<sup>22</sup>

According to T C Hodson the tribe commonly classed together as Naga and Kuki occupied definite and different areas in their hills. A line drawn across the map following the Kubo valley road through the village of Aimole and joined to the Cachar road traversing the western hills from Bishenpur in Manipur to Jiri Ghat on the western line of boundary of the state of Manipur separates the Naga area from the Kuki area.<sup>23</sup> This however includes more than a few Kabui villages. Generally speaking north of the line are the Naga settlements and the south the Kuki settlements. The Kukis or Khongjais as they are called in Manipur occupied the hills to the south of the Kabuis. Though many of them <sup>were</sup> at extreme south, they caused fear from their numbers and the bloody attacks they sometimes made upon their neighbours. South of the Kukis were the tribes of Pawi, Sukte, Taute, Lushai and other tribes. These were far better armed than the Kukis were at the time. All these various tribes or even sub-tribes were said to be of the same genus but at deadly feud with one another. The Kukis were driven from their native hills towards the north and scattered around the valley of Manipur and the hills of north and south Cachar the process took

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<sup>22</sup> McCulloch, *Op. Cit.*, p.65.

<sup>23</sup> The Kukis were in fact widespread and first came to be called as such in the Chittagong-Tripura-Sylhet frontier. The earliest reference to them is John Rawlins “On the Manners, Religion and Laws of the Cucis or Mountaineers of Tipra:”, *Asiatic Researches*, Vol. II, No. XII, Calcutta 1792; and John Macroe, “Account of the Kookies or Lunetas”, *Asiatic Researches*, Vol. VII, No. VI, Calcutta, 1801. See also C A Soppit, *A Short Account of the Kuki- Lushai Tribes*, Reprint Aizawl, 1976.

place over a long period of time and continued well into the period under survey.

Their own explanation of their separation into tribes with different dialects, makes interesting reading. Three grandsons of their first chiefs, who while playing were struck with a confusion of tongues. Thus Thado, the second emerged as one Kuki tribe, who were accordingly called the Thados. The two major groups later became Changsels and the Thlungums. The Thados were divided into greater clans of Thado, Shingson, Changloi, Hangseen, Keepgen, Kaukeep, from whom again sprang many other clans inferior in rank but as numerous as themselves, such as Chongfoot, Telnok, Holtung, Mongvoong and Voongtung.<sup>24</sup>

Kamsol tribe were the descendents of the Mongvoong clan. They had been long in subjection to Manipur. The groups that inhabit in the south-eastern part, called Anal- Namfau, take their name from two large villages which they occupy. They also claim to have come from the south and though they were similar in appearance were deadly at feud with the Thado Kukis. The Anals have immediate connection with the Manipuris.<sup>25</sup> Aimole, Kom, Koireng, Chote, Pooroom, Muntule, Karum, are also part of the Kuki stock. The Kom group at one time were a powerful tribe and their chief village contained as many as six hundred houses. They bordered the other Kukis and though they had connection with them

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. The spelling of the names of these tribes created considerable confusion and often made identification exceedingly difficult.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

through inter marriage, their feuds were as McCulloch remarked were "frequent and bloody". Several Kuki or Thado villages were said to have paid them annual tributes.

The Chasad Kukis to the North east of the valley live alongside the Tangkhuls and were at feud with them. Johnstone was of the opinion that they once lived south of the Manipur valley but due to some past grievances they moved to the hills towards Kubo valley. Johnstone described the Kukis as wandering race consisting of several tribes, who have long been working up from south.<sup>26</sup> Among all these tribes, inter-tribe or inter-clan warfare appear to be ~~appear to be~~ a common factor. The Nagas likewise were at feud with each other and at times with the Manipuris.

The valley was occupied by the Meitheis. They called the valley "Meithei Laipak", meaning the broad-land of the Meitheis.<sup>27</sup> Another group who settled in the valley are the Muslims or Panggans, quite distinct from the Meithei group. They are supposed to have originated from Cachar as prisoners of war taken by Meitheis, McCulloch gives the following description about the people of the valley:

From the most credible traditions, the valley appears originally to have been occupied by several tribes, the principal of which were named Koomul, Looang, Moirang and Meithei, all of

<sup>26</sup> James Johnstone: *My Experience in Manipur and the Naga Hills*, London, 1896., Reprint Delhi, 1990, p. 25. T C Hodson was once told by a Kuki, "we are like the birds of the air, we make our nest here this year, and who knows where we shall build next year," the statement which clearly indicates their nomadic way of life. T C Hodson, *Op. Cit.*, p.2.

<sup>27</sup> T C Hodson, *The Meitheis*. London 1908, p. 1

whom came from different directions. For a time, the Koomul appears to have been the most powerful, and after its declension, the Moirang tribe. But by degrees the Meithei subdued the whole, and the name Meithei has become applicable to all.<sup>28</sup>

McCulloch continued to remark, that since their conversion to Hinduism the Meitheis have claimed for themselves a Hindu descent.\*

McCulloch believes that Meitheis had descended from the surrounding hill tribes. The tribes men also have traditions that the Meitheis were off-shoots from them. Interestingly Manipuris or Meitheis themselves show that upto the recent period they practised all the customs of hill people of the present day. There are common beliefs as regards superstition. McCulloch thus recorded one custom to show the possible connection between the Meitheis and the Nagas:

The Ceremony denominated “ Phumban Kaba” or “ ascending the throne” is performed in Naga dress, both by the Rajah and Ranee, and the “ Yim Chau” or “ great house”, the original residence of the Meithei chiefs is, though he does not now reside in it, still kept up, and is made in the Naga fashion.<sup>29</sup>

It has been suggested that before their contact with the British the Maitheis had no knowledge of firearms, or at least did not know to handle a musket: “most of them have never fired a shot out of them”, remarked McCulloch. The Manipuris were in constant touch with the aggressive Burmese and it is not unlikely that they were

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<sup>28</sup> W McCulloch, *OP. Cit.*, p.4.

• Pemberton on the other hand had concluded that they are descendent of ‘Tartar Colony from China’.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p.5.

fairly well acquainted with firearms and gun powder making. Like the hill tribes of the North east they used spears, bows and arrow for self-defence or for aggression and the destruction of game. The dao, its blades ranging from one to two feet in length, and firmly fixed in a wooden or metal handle forms the inseparable companion of the Manipuris<sup>30</sup> Aramba; a type of weapon was also used both for pursuing and retreating, round shield made of buffalo hide and studded with brass knobs sufficiently thick and strong to turn a spear thrust was also carried. But during T C Hodson's time were used mainly for ceremonial purposes. A kind of bow used as catapult was not uncommon. It used pellets of hardened clay which could travel with considerable force and with some accuracy.<sup>31</sup> What made the Manipuri military arms of considerable strength was the organisation of its Pony cavalry. When horses were introduced to Manipur is difficult to ascertain, but Manipuri cavalry was much sought after even by the Burmese.

The weapons used by all the hill tribes are the spear and dao: these vary much in shape, length and size. The bow and arrow, which are frequently poisoned was almost confined to the Kukis.

Other methods of warfare practiced by the hill tribes, were the use of concealed pitfalls and of panjies, or pointed stakes of bamboos hardened by fire and mainly use in case of retreat.<sup>32</sup> Living at the hill tops they use to roll down stones against their enemies. In

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<sup>30</sup> Mc Culloch, *Op. Cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>31</sup> T C Hodson, *The Meitheis*, London 1908, pp.20-21.

<sup>32</sup> AAR, 1868-69.

addition waylayng and ambuscading was a common practice. Attacks and raids upon villages were commonly carried out at dawn.

In a country in which each family produces nearly all that it consumes any advancement in the arts can scarcely be expected. But the development of Manipur was in addition affected such institutions as the 'Laloo'. Nevertheless silk, of a good quality, even though the articles manufactures had not attained any great degree of excellence, was manufactured from silkworms from Kubo. Quoting Pemberton, McCulloch says, "the principal articles manufactured are such as would be thought of in the earliest stages of civilization- axes, hoes, and ploughshares for felling timber, and preparing the ground for agricultural purposes".<sup>33</sup>

The valley was rich in salt springs, such as those of Waikhong, Ningyel, Seng-mai, and Chundrokhong. Salt manufactured was sufficient to make it an article of traffic with the hill tribes, who bartered for it their ginger, hillcloth and cotton. Manipur's money revenue was exceedingly small, the principal item being the compensation, paid by the British Government for the loss of Kubo valley. The principal import into Manipur was supari or betel-nut, paid chiefly in cash. Coarse cloth were exported, but their manufacture decreased with the arrival of the western goods. A very profitable trade across the Burmese Frontier in buffaloes existed but due to Manipuri intrigues, interference and exactions the traders

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 33 ff.

were driven back to Kubo.<sup>34</sup> In spite of the encouragement given by McCulloch private trade which was beneficial to the people was opposed by the upper classes and this took long time to overcome. The slave trade in which Manipur Government officials engaged themselves was suppressed by the efforts of the Political Agents.

The principal crop was rice, which was also the staple food. Other crops consist of tobacco, sugarcane, indigo, mustard and different varieties of lentils or dal. Opium was also cultivated. Garden products of different varieties were also introduced by the European officers in the residency. The tea plant was also native to Manipur and a lucrative trade, though monopolized by the Rajah, was carried on with Cachar. In the hills the common mode of cultivation was by jhuming, or slash and burn. Cultivation thus depends entirely upon their utilizing the slopes of the hills. The jhum cycle was ten years. Along with rice some other crops were also planted, like, yams, beans, sweet potatoes and a variety of others. Some tribes like the Mayangkhangs, Tangkhuls, Marams and Angamis also practice terrace cultivation.

Before the advent of the British relations between the Hill tribes and the Manipuris were never cordial. Manipur's line of communication with the west lay through the hills occupied by the tribes and it required large armed bodies of men to move in safety between Manipur valley and Cachar.<sup>35</sup> Even then travellers

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>35</sup> AAR, 1868-69.



were often compelled to pay large amount at every village before permitted to continue their journey.<sup>36</sup> As these villages were in constant warfare no travelers dared to venture through their country. Some of the villages were exceptionally large. T C Hodson claimed to have seen himself in the early twentieth century the ruins of a number of villages in the jungles which were said to be Kabui villages. Some Kabui villages to south of the important village of Nongba had also been destroyed but whether by Kukis or the Manipuris themselves, it was difficult to ascertain.

It is clear from the above description that there was a good deal contrast between the plains and hill dwellers. On this a modern writer had something to point out in general:

It is seldom realised that the problem of hill-valley relation is not something peculiar to India. The world over wherever hill and valley population exist, the problem exist also. The more advanced countries it is less accentuated, while in the less developed nations it is more strident.<sup>37</sup>

He further says the differences are not confined merely to the lie of land but a reciprocal aloofness seemed ingrained in their way of life, "They dress differently, eat differently, worship differently and even think differently."

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<sup>36</sup> R B Pemberton, *Op. Cit.* p.56.

<sup>37</sup> R Constantine: *Op. Cit.* p. 18.

## ESTABLISHMENT OF MANIPUR

British relations with Manipur began with Burmese problem on the eastern frontier of Bengal. <sup>38</sup>The Burmese absorption of Arakan in 1784-85, Manipur in 1813 and their appearance in Assam in 1816-17 brought them into direct contact with the British. It was in this context that Assam, Cachar and finally Manipur was to play a dominating role in the Company's policy in the Eastern Frontier. <sup>39</sup>

Jai Singh left many sons and after his death the dark scene of murder and treachery took place among his sons. During the rule of Chourjit Singh, the third son, his younger brother Marjit conspired against him. Having failed he fled to Burma, where later he obtained the help and expelled Chourjit Singh in 1812. Marjit ruled till 1819, unmolested from Burma, but on his refusal to pay the tribute the Burmese attacked him and he fled to Cachar, where his brothers Chourjit Singh and Gambhir Singh, were also taking shelter. The

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<sup>38</sup> Burmese aggression against Manipur in fact began much earlier. In 1749, Gureeb Nawaz was defeated by the Burmese but compromised by giving up his daughter to the Burmese King. After the death of Gureeb Nawaz the Burmese turned their arms against Manipur. Unable to cope with the Burmese the Manipuri Princes sought for a protector. It was during the alternate rule of Gourou Sham and Jai Singh, they applied to the British Government for aid. A treaty of alliance, offensive and defensive was signed on the 14 September 1762, with Hurre Dass Gossain, on behalf of Jai Singh by Verelst in which a contingent of British Troops was promised to the Rajah whenever expedient. In return Rajah promised the British a grant of land 8000 cubits of free of rent forever, almost like Shah Alam II's grant of Dewani in Bengal. This was the genesis, the contact of Manipur with the British Government. Jai Singh or better known Chingtung Komba abdicated the throne to his eldest son in 1798, and died at Nuddea while on pilgrimage, the following year.. See E W Dun *Op.Cit*, P. 29, also see John Parrat & Saroj Parrat: *Queen Empress Vs Tikendrajit Prince of Manipur: The Anglo-Burmese Conflict*, 1891, Delhi 1992, p.12.

<sup>39</sup> Imdad Hussain: "Manipur and the defence of the Eastern frontier, 1824-35: in J B Bhattacharjee (ed.): *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, Imphal, 1990.p.173.

Rajah of Cachar assigned the three brother a certain Pergunnah, but they were not satisfied with this and usurped a portion of the dominion of the Rajah. The three brothers at the same time continued to quarrel with one another rendering Cachar as miserable as they had Manipur. It was at this stage of things the first Anglo-Burmese was broke out in 1823, and the three brothers seemed to have forgotten their animosities and begged for British protection.<sup>40</sup>

On the 23 September 1823, a Burmese force overran a small island on the Naff driving off with some casualties a detachment of Bengal Infantry. This was exactly what David Scott warned against the Burmese ambition in expanding their empire. Lord Amherst at once recognised the logic of Scott's arguments. In a directive in October 1823, he set forth the objectives of British that was to form the basis for the treaty of Yandaboo (1826):

To expel the Burmese from the country of which they have recently possessed themselves on our frontier, as Assam, Munnipoor, and Arracan, by encouraging and supporting the original inhabitants of these in any attempt which they may be disposed to make to restore the line of their native Princes, and thus securing for ourselves a barrier of friendly states between the British and Burmese dominions along the whole of our Eastern Frontier.<sup>41</sup>

When reports reached Fort William of Burmese forces converging upon Cachar, Scott was instructed to tell the Burmese that Cachar was under British protection, as it was resolved to bring the state

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<sup>40</sup> W McCulloch *Op. Cit.*, p. 7-8.

<sup>41</sup> FSC 31 October, 1823: No.17.

under company's protection. And therefore no interference could be permitted. He was further authorised to use the army to enforce the claim. Scott later gave the following assessment of British gains as regards to Cachar:<sup>42</sup>

The occupation of the country will.... Tend materially to the easy defence of the frontier, not merely by giving us possession of the passes leading to Munnipore.... But chiefly a depriving them of the advantage they would have derived from the possession of so convenient a retiring place after their passage across the mountains and compelling them to meet us immediately after a harassing journey through the hills and risk a battle without further supply of provision that they may carry with them.

Scott's assessment of Cachar as regards to climatic and unhealthy condition which would not fit the military operation made him fear that the Burmese might take advantage, inspite their inferior equipments and poor organisation. Therefore he suggested to the Government of India to let Gambhir Singh undertake the protection of the principal passes of Cachar<sup>43</sup>. In his recommendation Scott emphasised the important role of Gambhir Singh. His willing hand in storming the Burmese stockades in the clashes that followed Bikanpur had caught Scott's imagination. He quickly realised that the Manipuri mounted troops in the absence of cavalry with the British would be useful in cutting up the retreating Burmese. His recommendation was the organisation of 50 horse and 300 foot soldiers under the personal command of Gambhir Singh. This was

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<sup>42</sup> FSC 2 April, 1824; No. 6, Scott to Swinton, 20 March, 1824.

<sup>43</sup> Imdad Hussain : *Manipur, Op. Cit.* p. 174

also immediately sanctioned. Reports of Gambhir Singh's action in the operation against the Burmese following the formal declaration of war on 5 March 1824, were well received in Fort William. The council saw in him a leader capable of inspiring in Manipur and establishing a further barrier on the Eastern Frontier. It was considered 'highly important' to provide him the means to make the attempt.<sup>44</sup> Gambhir Singh displayed on the occasion a degree of gallantry, energy and zeal, that evoked strong recommendation from the officer on the spot.<sup>45</sup>

Manipur's importance came to be more fully appreciated when later in the month reports came in. The evidence that suggested that the Burmese from Manipur could easily find passage in various directions through Cachar and Tripura. Scott's recommendation in these circumstances was explicitly stated:

The establishment of an independent Government in Manipur in alliance with us would undoubtedly prove the most powerful check upon the Burmese Government that could well be devised by affording us at all times a ready passage into the heart of their dominions, and as an ally, a military power that could on occasion prove really useful to us.<sup>46</sup>

It seemed clear enough that the occupation of Cachar would be inadequate to stop the Burmese so long as Manipur remained in their possession. Therefore Amherst's conclusion was that immediately

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>45</sup> R M Lahiri, *The Annexation of Assam, 1824-1854.*, Calcutta, 1994, reprint p. 16.

<sup>46</sup> FSC 8 April, 1824: Nos. 5-8.

help should be extended to Gambhir Singh to establish an independent Government between the British and Burmese territory. The five hundred stand of arms on the way to Cachar was diverted to the Manipur Chief . In 1825 the force was increased to 2000 men and placed under the command of Captain Grant and denominated the Manipur Levy. This was later again increased to 3000 and more men. Gambhir Singh continued to drive the Burmese out as far as Kubo valley, making Ningthee as the Eastern boundary of Manipur.<sup>47</sup> Thus when the treaty of Yandaboo was signed on 16 February 1826, Gambhir Singh was recognised as the independent Rajah,<sup>48</sup> by the Burmese. Gambhir Singh could steadfastly withstood against the Burmese and the threat from them became less to the Company's frontier. Not only towards the Burmese, he was determined and was also encouraged to reduce to subjection those hill tribes surrounding the valley, who had thrown off their allegiance during the Burmese invasion, and made frequent incursions into the valley.<sup>49</sup> He by the help of fire-arms in his possession speedily reduced the larger portion of the hills to subjection. Dr Brown remarked that “ smarting under all that they had suffered from the tribes, the Manipuris made fatal use of their new weapon”.<sup>50</sup> Before his death he had controlled the Kabuis completely and brought it fair order the Tangkhuls, and the Kolya Nagas. He made his influence considerably felt, especially on the northern part of the hills occupied by the Angamis. The Manipuris

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<sup>47</sup> W McCulloch, *Op. Cit*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>48</sup> E W Dun, *Op. Cit*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>49</sup> FDP, 1 October, 1832: No. 163, Jenkins and Pemberton to the Secretary to the Government of India.

<sup>50</sup> AAR, 1868-69.

penetrated into the hills between Assam and Manipur at different times to subjugate them.<sup>51</sup> Lieutenant R B Pemberton while referring to the Kabui Nagas writes that by 1827, “ the travellers and dak-man traversed the whole country with perfect safety. They were by then tributary to Munnipore.”<sup>52</sup>

Thus the fear of fire-arms existing among the hill tribes, operated with a lessen force year by year but as they in their turn possessed and acquainted with their usage trouble continued. Any hostile movement on the part of the hill tribes bordering the Manipur valley, inevitably reacted on the British provinces to a certain degree. Therefore to make a good stand against the hill tribes during Gambhir Singh’s time it was undoubtedly found necessary to resort occasionally to severe measures.<sup>53</sup> For such action the Manipuri levy was utilised by the Rajah at the advice of the British Officer incharge. Captain Grant, who was stationed at Manipur to supervise the Levy gave the following report on the activities of the Levy:

The control exercised by me over it amounts to the extent of ordering it for inspection of the arms and accoutrements as I see fit, I muster it on every full moon. All detachment sent against the hill tribes are detached with concurrence and all casualties are reported to me by the native officers. Formally when paid by Government the Levy was regularly drilled and exercised but of late few opportunities offer for that purpose. The men have no other means of subsistence than their own labour and are consequently employed from April to

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<sup>51</sup> FDP, 1 October, 1832: No.163.

<sup>52</sup> R B Pemberton, *Op. Cit.* p.56.

<sup>53</sup> AAR, 1868-69.

November in cultivating the lands assigned them by the Raja from November they have hitherto since their arrival in Munnipoor, been continually employed in bringing under subjection and restoring the tranquility amongst the surrounding hill tribes, whom the unsettled state of the country for many preceding years had rendered refractory and encouraged to insubordination.<sup>54</sup>

But the excessive punishment was put to stop by the order of the Government of India.

Gambhir Singh, ambitious and unscrupulous, even aimed at annexing Cachar to Manipur. For this as a preliminary step, advanced towards western bank of the Barak river which formed the natural boundary between the two principalities. In 1828, the Rajah of Cachar raised complain to the British Government in which, Tucker, the Commissioner of Sylhet, asked Gambhir Singh to explain his conduct. Even Captain Grant, the Officer at Imphal reported the incorrectness of Gambhir Singh's conduct but he denied that the river Barak was the boundary between the two states. But the British Government took no steps to refrain him. Encouraged by such indulgence, he occupied Ilaka known as Chandrapur belonging to the Rajah of Cachar.<sup>55</sup> Later an agreement was signed between the two Rajahs on 15 July 1829, whereby gradually Gambhir Singh set up a police establishment at the place. It should be kept in mind that Chandrapur region was rich in economic resources. Subsequently other notable events followed in this region, in which

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<sup>54</sup> FDP, 1 October, 1832:, No. 165, Captain grant to Jenkins and Pembert on.

<sup>55</sup> H K Barpujari, (ed.) *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol, IV Guwahati. 1992, pp.60-61

Govinda Chandra was also put to death by the will of Gambhir Singh in April 1830.<sup>56</sup>

About the same period, the question of the settlement of Kubo valley was also on the scene. In January 1830 Major Burney was appointed resident at Ava, in confirmity with the 7<sup>th</sup> Article of the treaty of Yandaboo.<sup>57</sup> On his arrival at Ava, he found the tension over the Kubo valley was building up to such a pitch, that an open rupture with Manipur was feared. To make the matter worse, Captain Grant and Lieutenant Pemberton, the Commissioners from Manipur side, besides their planting of the boundary flags had issued a proclamation that all Burmese subjects of the disputed areas must leave by 25 June 1830, or be considered subjects of the Rajah of Manipur,<sup>58</sup> which irritated the Burmese. In 1831, the two Commissioners on their part expressed their dissatisfaction with Major Burney, relating to the detainment of two women fugitives. The Rajah of Manipur had allowed to retain two men fugitives and asked to be released two women fugitives, but the Burmese did not complied to it. Thereafter two British officers requested the court of Ava, for the mutual restoration of fugitives.<sup>59</sup> This was later fulfilled by the Burmese. However, the frontier disturbances remained unresolved, with Burma as well as with other hill tribes.

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<sup>56</sup> R C Majumdar: *The History and Culture of the Indian People: British Paramountcy and Indian Renaissance*: Bombay, 1963, pp. 136-37.

<sup>57</sup> A Mackenzie, *History of the relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes on the North East Frontier of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1885, p. 180.

<sup>58</sup> D G Hall: *Henry Burney: A Political Biography*, London, 1974, Oxford University Press, p. 213.

<sup>59</sup> FDS, 29 April, 1831, Nos. 11-12.

## EPILOGUE

The fifty five years from 1836 to 1891, marks an important phase in the relations between Manipur and the British. The First Anglo-Burmese war (1824-26) saw the emergence of the Manipur as an important factor in defence of the Bengal's eastern frontier. But within six years of the conclusion of that war the position of Manipur was found to be ineffective as a bulwark against future Burmese aggression. The British accordingly decided to withdraw its supervision of the Manipuri Levy. But recognizing the importance of the petty state with reference to the Burmese question and the problem of the hill tribes, particularly the Angami Nagas, Lord Bentinck decided to establish a Political Agency at Imphal. The early years of the Political Agency was entirely dominated by the Angami problem.

Until then Gambhir Singh was given a tacit consent to establish control over the Nagas. It was the continued opposition of Captain Francis Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam and Agent to the Governor General North East Frontier to the extension of Manipur's influence or control over the hills so near to his charge that finally led to its abandonment. This made the work of the Political Agent at Imphal in keeping Manipur in check extremely important. One of the

early measures adopted towards this end was the delimitation of Manipur's Naga hill frontier.

Though the Kuki problem began to make its appearance during these early years it was the second Political Agent, Captain William McCulloch, who found a solution to it. Indeed, McCulloch's policy of placing Kuki settlements in exposed frontier regions came to be adopted later in the Naga hills. McCulloch's Political Agency in fact saw the basic emergence of the principles of frontier management. It does not appear however, that McCulloch successfully restrained the Manipuris from interfering in the feuds of the Angami Nagas. The non-intervention policy towards the Angamis and other Nagas enjoined upon Assam gave every opportunity to the Manipuris to involve themselves in Angami affairs. This interference was to continue for a long time. McCulloch's strong rule and his own personality gave him a dominant position in so far as Manipur's relations with the frontier tribes was concerned. The fact that the Government of India decided uphold the position of the Rajah against his rivals further added to the strength of the Political Agency. The frontier question remained uppermost in McCulloch's understanding of his position as Political Agent. It was for this reason that he had protested against the proposed abolition of Residency in 1861.

In so far as the internal affairs of Manipur was concerned McCulloch maintained a policy of non-interference. Only in such matters as slave trading that he exerted pressure for its abolition.

McCulloch maintained personal relations with the Royal family and is said to have even married a Manipur lady of the Royal House. Thus McCulloch's policy makes a sharp contrast to his successor's Dr Thomas Dillon. As Michael Fisher writing on the Residency system in India says :

instead of the Resident intervening himself he was to use the Chief Minister and Ruler to accomplish the company's goal indirectly. The Resident was expected to use respect and conciliation in the management of natives which by rendering them contented and efficient in their proper stations, enables them to become the zealous and useful instrument of maintaining the honour and power of the British Government in India. Resident who failed to do this were censured.<sup>1</sup>

This was what had happened to Dr Dillon. His tenure at Imphal was a total disaster from the very beginning. He was unaware of the nature of the relations that existed between his predecessor and the Manipur authorities. His view of his position was that of Political Agents in other native states of India. He began interfering in several aspects in the internal administration, which provoked opposition. Thus he was found unfit for the post and the Government of India removed him within a short time. In contrast McCulloch's years came to be considered as the ideal. Little wonder that he was recalled from retirement to the Political Agency in 1863.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Fisher : *Indirect Rule in India, Residents and the Residency System: 1764-1857*, Delhi, 1991, p.221.

By then McCulloch had advanced in years and lacked the energy he had shown in earlier years. His successor, Assistant Surgeon, Robert Brown, certainly lacked his dynamism. This can be seen in the problem of the Lushais. The Lushais, who had become a thorn at the side of the authorities in Cachar, Sylhet and Chittagong was equally a problem to Manipur. More than Manipur it was the officers in the other frontier districts that had a more determining role in development of Lushai policy. Indeed, the Viceroy, Lord Mayo's policy towards the Lushais had for its object the security of Cachar, Sylhet and Chittagong hill tracts. In so far as Manipur was concerned the policy dictated by the Viceroy was merely extended to it.

The problem of the Naga Hills illustrates the subordination of Manipur's interest to that of Assam. The way the frontier between the Naga Hills and Manipur was delimited clearly shows how Manipur and the Rajah was treated. Had Chandra Kirti Singh being more timid the entire Tangkhul area would have been lost to Manipur. Colonel Johnstone, who was always sympathetic towards Manipur and worked for her interest thus explains:

I should like to have seen Manipur get more, as a set-off against our unjust treatment in former years, but as we were sure eventually, to occupy all the Naga Hills, it was necessary to make such an adjustment as would not injure British interests in the future.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> James Johnstone: *Op. Cit.*, p. 94.

The establishment of the Naga Hills District in 1881 marked the end of the Naga hills-Manipur frontier.

Johnstone's more lasting contribution, however, was the settlement of the south and south-eastern frontier problem. If he had his way the Kubo Valley and a large part of Chin Hills, at least upto the river Chindwin would have been part of Manipur. The third Anglo-Burmese war and the annexation of upper Burma brought an end to Manipur's Burma frontier. The period under review shows that the Political Agents acted almost independently of the Rajah in so far the relations with the Frontier Tribes and Burma are concerned. The internal position of the Maharaja was not affected. The remoteness of the Political Agency in Manipur and its relative unimportance made the Government of India unaware of the developments in Manipur. No thought was given to the importance of appointing strong and efficient Political Agents at Imphal after the third Anglo-Burmese war. This was unfortunate as the pre-occupations of the Political Agents in frontier affairs especially after the 1870s led to the re-emergence of intrigues within the Royal family. Added to this the military build up in Manipur during the operation against the Burmese and the pacification of the Chins had cast some suspicion about British intentions against the state. It is therefore not unreasonable to conclude that such factors were responsible for the tragedy that overtook the British in 1891.