



The Conquest Of Manipur: British Domination And It's Enduring Legacy

¹Alex Laiphprakpam, ²Dr. Ngangom Jasantakumar Singh

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, ²Assistant Professor

¹ Department of Public Administration,

¹ Arunodaya University, Itanagar, India

Abstract: Before the British officially annexed Manipur in 1891, its strategic location between India and China made it a crucial zone for British geopolitical and commercial interests. British involvement deepened with the outbreak of the Third Anglo-Burmese War (1885), leading to growing control over Manipur's politics. The Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891 was a turning point, resulting in British annexation and the reduction of Manipur's monarchy to a puppet regime. British governance introduced administrative and legal reforms that disrupted indigenous political systems and brought about profound social and cultural changes. Western education and missionary activities reshaped local traditions, especially in the hill regions. Economically, British policies led to changes in land tenure, agriculture, and trade, aligning Manipur more closely with British India's colonial economy. Despite these changes, Manipur became a center for resistance against British rule, with women playing a significant role in uprisings such as the Nupi Lan. By the 1930s, nationalist sentiment had spread, culminating in Manipur's brief independence in 1947 before integration into India. British colonialism left a lasting impact on Manipur's political, social, and economic fabric, shaping its modern identity.

Index Terms - Anglo-Manipuri War (1891), British Annexation, Impact, Indigenous Political Systems, Social System, Nationalist Sentiment.

INTRODUCTION

Manipur was an ancient kingdom that has witnessed both prosperity and adversity over its lengthy history. "It is situated in north-east India on the border with Myanmar. The area of state is about 8,500 square miles, comprising a central valley, the traditional home of the Meiteis (Meiteis), which is surrounded by ranges of hills inhabited by tribal peoples. This consists of many disparate groups, which later observers classified under the two general tribes of Naga and Kuki" (Parratt 1). Prior to the advent of the British in Manipur, the state was ruled by monarchs who upheld a well-established system of government, comparable to those presented in earlier periods, with a strong emphasis on law and order, as was proved during the reign of King Loyumba. This system of governance was in place before the British arrived in Manipur.

Before the British officially took control of Manipur in 1891, their relationship with the Manipur was shaped by geopolitical concerns and commercial interests. Manipur's strategic location between the Indian subcontinent and China made it a critical zone in British imperial calculations. This region was viewed as a

buffer, first against Burmese expansion and later as a defense against other European powers, particularly France, which began exerting influence in Southeast Asia during the late 19th century.

Up until the outbreak of the Third Anglo-Burmese War in 1885, British policy towards Manipur was largely influenced by what was termed “Burmophobia”—the fear of Burmese expansion into British-held territories in India. Given Manipur’s proximity to Burma, the British sought to maintain a strong but non-intrusive relationship with the Manipuri kingdom, using it as a buffer to keep Burmese influence at bay. However, this was not simply a defensive strategy; it was also driven by commercial interests. British capitalists had already penetrated into both Burma and Assam, and controlling or maintaining friendly relations with Manipur was essential to secure the smooth flow of resources and goods between these regions.

“Several key events set the stage for the British annexation of Manipur in 1891. A series of internal conflicts in Manipur, including succession disputes, gave the British opportunities to intervene in local politics under the guise of mediation, ultimately leading to their direct control over the state. It is worthy of note, however, that the British East India Company Government had entered in to political alliances with Manipur before 1806” (Singh “British Administration in Manipur: 1891-1947” 2).

The history of British imperialism in India is characterised by significant shifts at both national and state or provincial levels. Manipur, a little but strategically important state in northeastern India, encountered British influence in very complicated ways. Situated between Burma (now Myanmar) and India, Manipur's geographic position made it a compelling target for British involvement, particularly in the context of their extensive imperial aspirations in Southeast Asia. The British governance in Manipur, albeit comparatively short-lived in relation to other regions of India, profoundly influenced its political, social, economic, and cultural frameworks. This chapter analyses British interference in Manipur, assessing its effects on indigenous political institutions, social structures, the economy, and its influence on the state's participation in the broader Indian independence struggle.

1.1 Political Impact

The biggest direct effect of British governance in Manipur was on its political framework. Before the British invasion, the monarchy of Manipur was the foundation of its rule, bolstered by a feudal elite. The British steadily subverted the autonomy of the Manipur monarchs, ultimately relegating them to the status of puppet rulers.

1.1.1 The Anglo-Manipuri Conflict and Its Consequences (1891)

The Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891 was a pivotal event in the history of British-Manipur relations. The battle originated from internal disputes among the royal family, but it rapidly intensified into a wider struggle between Manipur and the British. Subsequent to the British triumph, the kingdom was officially conquered, and the ruling monarch, Maharaja Kulachandra Singh, along with other royal family members, faced exile or execution. The loss in the Anglo-Manipuri War signified the end of the sovereign kingdom in Manipur and the commencement of direct British governance. Subsequent to the war, the British appointed Churachand Singh, a scion of the royal lineage, as a nominal monarch under their supervision. The true authority was with the British political agent in Imphal, who managed both domestic and foreign matters. The conventional governing systems of Manipur were diminished, and the kingdom was assimilated into the British administrative structure as a princely state.

1.1.2 Disintegration of Indigenous Political Institutions

The British introduced novel governing approaches that undermined the established local administrative institutions. They implemented a system of indirect control, whereby traditional chiefs and village leaders were preserved but subordinated to British authority. This method of governance diminished the authority of the Meitei monarchs and resulted in the fragmentation of the native political framework, leaving Manipur’s rulers with less control over their domain.

1.1.3 Legal and Administrative Reforms

The British regime implemented contemporary legal and administrative frameworks. The British instituted their legal systems, creating courts that adhered to British rules instead of the customary norms that had governed Manipur for generations. This alteration significantly impacted the local population by redistributing authority in favour of colonial officials, hence marginalising indigenous leaders and traditional institutions.

1.1.4 Societal and Cultural Influence

The British administration in Manipur instigated substantial alterations to its social and cultural structure. The British implemented Western education, missionary endeavours, and new social conventions, which often conflicted with the ancient lifestyles in Manipur. 1. Introduction of Western Education: A significant and enduring consequence of British control in Manipur was the establishment of Western education. British missionaries and colonial authorities founded schools that taught English in conjunction with contemporary disciplines like mathematics and science. This educational system significantly influenced the perspectives of a new generation of Manipuris, who encountered Western concepts of government, nationalism, and change. The dissemination of Western education was gradual and inconsistent, sometimes restricted to the metropolitan elite. This established a social gap between those educated in the British system and the rural populace who adhered to traditional ways of knowledge and practice. Miranda Bembem Mutuwa asserts:

The introduction of formal western education in Manipur was initiated in the nineteenth century by early political agents like Captain Gordon, James Johnstone etc. In 1837, Capt. Gordon opened a school in Langthabal on a trial basis which did not succeed³. However, until the last decade of the nineteenth century, progress in western education remained limited. It was unpopular amongst the highly orthodox Hindu community of Imphal and in the rest of the valley. The first Political Agent Captain Gordon established a primary school, however, it went defunct with his untimely death. In 1872, Political Agent Major General W. E Nuthall opened an English School in Imphal. The school was supplied with books, maps and other necessities worth Rs. 400/Rs 500 by the Government of Bengal.⁴ In 1877-78, when Political Agent, James Johnstone reported that there was no demand for education in the state except for 50-60 boys receiving formal education from a school in Imphal, he was referring to the same school. He wrote "Education has certainly retrograded in Manipur instead of advancing". (548)

She also states:

1891 marked a watershed in the development of education in Manipur. After the Anglo-Manipur war, the British took over the administration of Manipur until the minor Raja could be installed on the throne in 1907. The role of the Political Agent changed and he was granted more authority than before. He was raised to the position of a regent and a superintendent of the state. In the letter from the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, Assam, dated 7th October, 1891, he was given full powers to introduce any reforms in the existing administration that was considered as beneficial to the State. The only limitation to his power was that he should not interfere in issues regarding customs and traditions of the Manipuris.⁷ Sir Robert Reid commented, "From 1891, Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences. 10(2): April- June, 2019 549 Manipur entered on a new phase of its history characterised, as the terms of the Sanad indicate, by close control by the British government and, indeed, until power was made over to the young Raja and his darbar in 1907, by direct administration by British officers." Influential Political Agents like major Maxwell and J. Shakespear took a keen interest in the development of western education. This made the situation conducive for the establishment of schools. (548-549)

1.1.5 Christian Missionary Endeavours

British governance facilitated the entry of Christian missionaries into Manipur. The missionaries, mostly from European and American nations, operated in the hilly regions, converting several indigenous people to Christianity. The spread of Christianity among the Nagas, Kukis, and other hill tribes resulted in considerable cultural changes, as several groups started to embrace Western values while discarding indigenous traditions. This religious shift also fostered social differences inside Manipur. The Meitei population in the valley, mostly Hindu, encountered conflict with the recently converted Christian tribal factions. The religious difference, intensified by the British policy of distinct governance for the hill tribes and the valley, had enduring effects on social cohesiveness in Manipur. To quote the words of Pettigrew:

I am establishing the Christian communities, and to be help to the missionaries. I am establishing the Christian churches in Manipur in such a way that they themselves in the years to come will rejoice with those who have laid the foundations in seeing a self propagating, self supporting, and self administering body of men and women in their evangelistic and elementary education work, freed from the supervision and control of the missionaries. (Dena 90)

1.1.6 Marginalisation of Indigenous Culture

British control resulted in the marginalisation of traditional Manipuri culture. The British prioritised Western cultural forms, leading to the abandonment of traditional arts, music, dance, and literature that had thrived under the Meitei rulers. The use of English as the medium for education and administration further diminished the significance of the Manipuri language and literature.

1.1.7 Medical Works

Wherever mission stations were established, hospitals also inevitably came up. When the mission centre was transferred from Ukhrul to Kangpokpi, a leper asylum and a dispensary was established. "At the request of Pettigrew, Dr. G.C Crozier and his wife came to Manipur in 1918 from Tura, Assam and took charge of the newly constructed dispensary. In the leper asylum many were healed. Dr. Crozier brought a medical assistant from Tura, A Garo named Aban H. Momin, who later married Tangkhul girl" (Dena 90-91)

1.1.8 Literary Works

The missionaries never underestimated the importance of translation and literary works. From the start, William Pettigrew was actively involved in the creation of both religious and secular writings. In 1896, two years after arriving in Imphal, he translated the Gospel of St. Matthew, St. Mark, and the Epistles to the Romans and Corinthians into Manipuri. These were published in collaboration with the British and Foreign Bible Society. Following his relocation to Ukhrul, Pettigrew quickly mastered the Tangkhul language and collaborated with the Bible Society to translate the New Testament into that language. In 1926, the Tangkhul New Testament was released, maybe the first in a tribal language of Manipur. In the words of Lal Dena:

Besides these translation works, William Pettigrew devoted himself to linguistic studies and research in Manipuri language. When in 1923 George Grierson, director of linguistic survey of India, suggested that materials be collected and a monograph be published in archaic Manipuri, the political agent in Manipur had to ask Pettigrew to supervise this research work. A Tangkhul dictionary, a vocabulary of nearly 1000 words of Manipuri, a grammar of about 50 pages and the translation of two selected scripts - one from historical and another from linguistic were prepared and published. In appreciation of his research in the languages of Manipur and archaic Manipuri, Pettigrew was made one of the members of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1930. Later, the general secretary of the society commented that Pettigrew's work in Manipur was a great contribution to philological science. (92)

1.2 Economic Impact

The British administration instigated substantial changes in Manipur's economy, especially regarding land tenure, taxes, and commerce.

1. **Modifications in Land Tenure and Agriculture:** During the British colonial period, land transformed into a tradable commodity, marking a substantial shift from the conventional system of land ownership, whereby property was jointly owned by communities or governed by the monarchy. The British implemented a land tax collecting system that imposed a significant burden on the rural populace. A multitude of farmers struggled to meet the elevated taxes levied by the British, resulting in pervasive indebtedness and land forfeiture.
2. **The transition to a revenue-based structure** also affected agricultural productivity. The British promoted the production of cash crops like cotton and tea, which yielded more profits for the colonial government, but this adversely affected traditional subsistence agriculture. Consequently, several Manipuri farmers grew reliant on the world market for their sustenance, rendering them susceptible to variations in international pricing.
3. **Trade and Economic Integration with British India:** Manipur's economy grew progressively assimilated into the British colonial economy. The development of roads and railroads enabled the transportation of products and people, connecting Manipur to the broader markets of British India. This expansion of commerce rendered Manipur economically reliant on British India, as indigenous businesses found it unable to compete with British produced products.
4. **Exploitation of Natural Resources:** The British sought to capitalise on Manipur's natural resources, especially its forests and mineral riches. Extensive areas of land were deforested for wood, and the colonial government issued permits for the exploitation of natural resources, often disregarding the environmental consequences and the welfare of the local populace.

1.3 Resistance and It's Role in the Indian Independence Movement

Notwithstanding the difficulties posed by British governance, Manipur emerged as a locus of resistance against colonialism. The Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891 was the first significant occurrence of Manipuri resistance, albeit it was not the last one. In the early 20th century, the impact of the Indian independence movement began to be felt in Manipur, particularly through the influence of Western-educated Manipuris and nationalist leaders.

1.3.1 The Role of Women in Resistance

A significant feature of Manipuri opposition to British rule was the substantial involvement of women, especially during the Nupi Lan (Women's Wars) of 1904 and 1939. These movements were primarily driven by economic grievances, as British policies on land and trade disproportionately affected women traders in the local markets. The Nupi Lan protests became a symbol of Manipuri resistance, and they played a crucial role in mobilizing public opinion against British rule.

1.3.2 Manipuri Nationalism

By the 1930s and 1940s, the ideas of Indian nationalism had reached Manipur, particularly among the educated elite. Manipuri leaders began to demand greater autonomy from British control and sought to align themselves with the broader Indian independence movement. The rise of nationalist sentiment in Manipur culminated in the events of 1947, when the kingdom briefly regained its independence before being integrated into the Indian Union.

Conclusion

The British rule of Manipur established a lasting legacy that transformed the region's political, social, and economic structure. The 1891 annexation signified the erosion of indigenous political autonomy and the establishment of a colonial authority that compromised traditional traditions. British legal changes, Western education, and missionary endeavors transformed the social terrain, creating differences between the valley and hill communities. The implementation of new land tenure systems and the incorporation of Manipur into British India's colonial economy resulted in extensive displacement and dependency. Manipur emerged as a hub of resistance, with women spearheading groups like as the Nupi Lan and fostering an increasing nationalist attitude. The perseverance and defiance of the Manipuri people resulted in a temporary restoration of independence in 1947 prior to their incorporation into India. British colonization, however brief relative to other areas, significantly shaped Manipur's contemporary character, establishing both obstacles and groundwork for subsequent political and cultural changes.

REFERENCES

- Dena, Lal. *British Policy Towards Manipur (1762-1947)*. Nongeen Publications, 2008.
- Devi, Kh. Sarojini. *British Political Agency in Manipur (1835-1947)*. Linthoi Publications, 2005.
- Hocking's Paul, *British Society in the Company Crown and Congress Era*. Vikas Publishing House, Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi.
- Hodson, T.C. *The Meitheis*, Akansha Publishing House, 1908.
- McCulloch, Lieutenant Colonel, C.M. *Valley Of Manipur*. Gian Publishing, 1980.
- Menon, V .P . *The Story of the Integration of the Indian States*. Orient Longmans Ltd, 1956.
- Mutuwa, Miranda Bembem. Urbanization and Education in Imphal during the Colonial Period. *Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 10(2): April- June, pp- 547-552, 2019.
- Panda, B.H. *The Indian National Movement: 1889-1947* (ed), Macmillan and Company, 1979.
- Panikkar, K .M. *An Introduction to the Study of the Indian States to the Government of India*. Martin Hopkinson & Company, 1927.
- Parratt, Saroj Nalini Arambam. *The Court Chronicle of the Kings of Manipur (The Cheitharon Kumpapa)* (Vol-1). The Jain Book Publication, 2005.
- Ram, Umashankar. The British Rule and its effect upon Social, Cultural and Economic Status of Rural India. *Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. 11(4): October –December, pp- 345-349 2020.
- Roy, Jyotirmoy. *History of Manipur*. Mukhopadhyay, 1958.
- Sanajaoba, Naorem (editor). *Manipuri Treaties and Documents (1110-1971)*. Mittal Publication, 2021.
- Singh, A. K. and Hanjabam, S. S. (eds). *Manipur Myanmar Historical Connections*. Concept Publishing Company, 2022.
- Singh, M. Ibohal. *Constitutional and Legal History of Manipur*. Samurou lakpa Mayai Lambi College, 1986.
- Singh, Naorem Joykumar. *History of Manipur (1819-1972)*. Jain Book Publication, 2019.
- Thomson, Edward and Garrett, G.T., *Rise And Fulfilment of British Rule In India*. Central Book Depot, Allahabad, 1966.
- Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Society 1780-1950*. R & R. Clark Ltd., 1966.