1891 Anglo-Manipuri War And Rarely Known Manipuri Heroes

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Abstract: The Anglo-Manipuri War (1891) was a historic event of all the Manipuris. It also ignited a serious concern to the British citizens as in the event seven British officials were murdered. Some deep rooted anti-British mindset of the Manipuri masses that had apparently led to the murder could be- that after the First Anglo Burmese War (1824-1826), the Manipuris were not allowed to expand territory beyond their unproductive mountainous region, that their resourceful Kabaw Valley was ceded to Burma and that the Manipur Levy, which was a part of the British army, was also discontinued rendering the Manipuris to face a serious shortage of Rupee. The anti-British mindset of the Manipuri masses culminated when the British Government gave orders to deport Yuvaraj Tikendrajit for his revolt in 1890. To arrest the prince, the British army attacked the palace of Manipur and killed many innocent Manipuris on 24 March, 1891. Subsequently, those British officials were murdered leading to the declaration of war on 31st March, 1891 against Manipur. Every Manipuri community fought the war united, but as they were much inferior to the mighty British, the Manipuris were defeated with a loss of about 400 warriors. But historians mainly recognise only those Manipuris punished later by the British Government giving rare notice to those who had sacrificed their lives at different battles of the war.

Keywords: Anti-British mindset, united, Manipuri warrior, scant notice.

Introduction

The Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891 was a great event in the history of Manipur. Being a mighty colonial power, the British authorities underestimated the Manipuris with the notion that the kingdom was already under their control. Indeed their sudden attack at the capital of Manipur on 24 March 1891 to arrest and deport Yuvaraj Tikendrajit was a turning point in the history of Manipur. In the day’s undeclared war at the palace of Manipur, not only the Manipuri warriors but also many people were brutally killed. Subsequently, owing to the demand of Manipuri masses, seven unguarded British officials were murdered. But surprisingly, on 4 April 1891, the Manipuris released 51 arrested Hindustani sepoys (Indian sepoys in the British army) giving them Rs. 5 each. After the event of 24 March, the British declared war on 31st March, and sent British army via. Kohima, Tamu and Silchar. Famous battles were fought at Thoubal, Kakching and Khongjom in the eastern front of the war. Battle of Khongjom was the most horrific battle of the war. Great freedom fighters- Major Paona Brajabasi, Chinglen Sana, Khumbong Major, Loitongba Jamadar, Keisa Jamadar, Heirang Khongja, Kangjam Tona Singh, Sagolsem Keiphaba and many more Manipuri warriors sacrificed their lives at this battlefield. Reporting on it, Captain Rundall expressed: “Of the enemy 76 dead were counted inside the work (mud made Manipuri fort) and two wounded and just outside the work 52 dead were counted those killed in the nala (drain which surrounded major portion of the fort) were not all counted as they laid in heaps in the water nor did he counted those killed by the guns and mounted infantry. The mounted infantry estimated that they killed about 50 and some villagers have since told me that 400 fell on that day.” The war was also a memorable event of the Manipuris, for both the valley and hill communities fought united to protect their rights.

On the palace revolt of 21September, 1890 under Senapati Tikendrajit, Gangmumei Kamei writes, ‘Mr. Grimwood (Agent at Imphal) said, “The primary cause of outbreak was without any doubt the bad feeling between the Pucca Sena and his elder brother, the Senapati (Bir Tikendrajit) about which I have occasionally noted in my diary.”’ Following the chain of events after the September revolt, the British declared war against Manipur, and in the war the Manipuris were defeated with a great loss. Subsequently, there was a trial of arrested Manipuris held under the British authorities. Accordingly, five persons were hanged...
and other twenty-three Manipuris were deported to Andaman Islands. On the first group of deported Manipuris, the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Manipur expressed that Maharaja Kulachandra, his two brothers and 12 noblemen were sent to Kalapani for life imprisonment and they reached Port Blair on 23 November, 1891 from Calcutta on board the ship S.S. Shahjahan. No doubt, on this event previous scholars had studied on the causes and results of the war. But they failed to study the reasons why were Thangal General (an eighty year old courtier) and the Manipuri masses involved directly in the murder of those British officials. Besides, the scholars also failed to mention the bravery of many Manipuri martyrs who had sacrificed their lives at Thoubal Athokpam, Kakching and Khongjom. Keeping it in view, this paper makes an attempt to study on the missing areas collecting materials from different archives, chronicles, secondary source books and oral sources.

**Historical Background**

In 1823, when Prince Gambhir Singh of Manipur was ruling over South Cachar (a region neighbouring with the British Sylhet), the Burmese had not only occupied upper Assam and Manipur but also invaded Cachar in lower Assam. The Burmese defeated the army under Gambhir Singh and occupied Cachar. It was a direct threat to the British Indian Empire. Therefore, in a letter to the Court of Directors, it was stated later: “Under such an emergency it was natural that every resource, however trifling, should be sought after and the re-establishment of the Munnipore dynasty seems to have been a scheme peculiarly favoured by the late agent Mr. Scott.” With this view, a group of Manipuris known as ‘Raja Gambhir Singh’s Levy’, which was then in Cachar, was accepted to join the British army at Badarpur (now in Assam) in April 1824 as war against Burma had already been declared on 5 March 1824. The number of the Burmese Army in Cachar was about 8000 strong. At this juncture, the British army under Lt. Col. William Inns arrived at Badarpur on June 20 and then proceeded to Jatrapur, Cachar. On the way, he tried to dislodge the Burmese from the heights of Talain where they strongly fortified. For three days (July 6, 7, 8) British guns fired on the stockade; Gambhir Singh with his excellent local knowledge, assisted the operation. By the end of October, 1824, the entire Burmese Army in Cachar retired to Manipur. On the role played by Gambhir Singh in Cachar, it was stated: “Gumbheer Sing ... with whom we had negotiated, raised from among his own followers a body of 500 men, who actively cooperated with our troops in expelling the Burmese from Cachar.”

Meanwhile, Brigadier-General Shuldham decided to march to Manipur so that Burmese army in Arakan could be diverted giving advantageous position to the British army. But he failed to enter Manipur because of the unfriendly condition of nature. At this juncture, Gambhir Singh proposed to take up the task. Earlier, the prince had also been induced by David Scott to lead an expedition for the conquest of Manipur. ‘Raja Gambhir Singh’s Levy’ left for Manipur on 17th May, 1825, with Lieutenant R.B. Pemberton. The party, after facing so many difficulties, reached Maklang (a village in the valley of Manipur) on June 10 and expelled the Burmese from Manipur. Therefore, the conquest of Manipur in the First Anglo-Burmese War was the handiwork of the irregular and unpaid ‘Raja Gambhir Singh’s Levy.’

The Levy faced great difficulties due to the shortage of provisions. Consequently, the prince left 300 men in Manipur, and returned to Sylhet by the end of June 1825 to discuss his problems and other policy matters. Lt. Pemberton, returning to Sylhet with Gambhir Singh, reported on the latter that “the success of the enterprise was due mainly to his energy, perseverance and skill.” At Sylhet, the prince got the order of the British Government accepting inclusion of his Levy in the British army with a new denomination. With this happy news, Gambhir Singh left Sylhet for Manipur on 4th December, 1825, along with Captain F.J. Grant and Lieutenant R.B. Pemberton. Arriving at Kangla (palace in Imphal) on 23rd of the instant, Gambhir Singh declared that his Levy would be a part of the British Army with a new denomination-the ‘Manipur Levy’; the British Government had accepted to increase its strength to 1500 infantry and 150 cavalry; the pay, provisions and all equipments of the Manipur Levy would be borne by the British Government and the same would be collected from the Magazine at Chandrapur (a place at the western foothills of the Bhuban Mountain, Cachar); Cap. F.J. Grant and Lt. R.B. Pemberton would be the Commissioner and the Assistant Commissioner of the Manipur Levy with Lt. George Gordon (who had not arrived at Imphal that time) as the Adjutant.
On it, Cheitharol kumbaba (Manipur chronicle) also highlights that the Maharaja (Gambhir Singh) coming with two Ferunghees (British) entered the capital on Friday, the 23rd December, 1825, and arranged a grand feast for the ‘Four Victoria Battalions.’ On this occasion, Alexander Mackenzie also stated: “In 1825 the force was increased to 2000 men, and placed under the command of Captain Grant; it was denominated the Manipur Levy.” Gambhir Singh now decided to expel the Burmese from Kabaw Valley (plain area between Manipur of this day and the Chindwin River now in Burma) which had been for Manipur for ages in the past. Nur Singh was, therefore, sent along with 1000 men to Tamu on 1st January, 1826. On being asked for reinforcement, Gambhir Singh along with the two British officers left for Tamu on 13th January, 1826. Conquering not only Tamu but also Samsok, the prince unfurled the flag of Manipur on the bank of Chindwin on 1st February 1826. In this way, under the leadership of Gambhir Singh, the Manipur Levy completed re-conquest of Kabaw Valley. On Gambhir Singh and his followers, Captain Grant reported, “...the activity, judgement, and skill, he (i.e., Gambhir Singh) had displayed on this occasion, have proved the justice of the opinion previously entertained of his merits. The steady gallantry which, without the usual aid of cannon, could force a brave enemy to evacuate a strong fortified position, is a very satisfactory illustration of the character of his followers....” Indeed, had the British not received the timely help from the Manipuris, it would have been impossible for them to attack Burma through Manipur bringing the war to conclusion soon after the Treaty of Yandaboo, 24th February, 1826. Although the treaty recognised Gambhir Singh as the Raja of Manipur, yet it did not mention anything on Kabaw Valley. Soon after the treaty, the Burmese started encroaching into Kabaw Valley crossing the Chindwin River (the Ningthee). It resulted in a serious unrest to the Manipuri masses and the Government.

Before the stated Anglo-Burmese war, Gambhir Singh and his brothers had established their political hegemony in South Cachar by ruling over its territories for about six years (1818-1823). His followers, the chunk of the Manipur Levy, had enjoyed the wealth and prosperity of South Cachar. Although they were defeated by the Burmese in the last part of 1823, yet they extended their maximum support to the British in expelling the Burmese from Cachar. Therefore, after the Treaty of Yandaboo, Gambhir Singh and his followers encroached upon Cachar establishing their outpost at Chandrapur. But the British Government annexed South Cachar in 1832, to the great dissatisfaction of Gambhir Singh and his followers.

When the Naga Tribes raided the neighbouring plains protected by the British Government, the British authorities stated: “Gambhir Singh (Raja of Manipur) should be held accountable for the behaviour of the Nagas thus considered to be placed under his permanent authority.” But, when Gambhir Singh intended to conquer the Naga Hills permanently, the British Government objected as it is stated that “the ambitious Manipuris would have been a very dangerous neighbour of our (the British) vassal Purander Singh, whom we were then enduring to establish on the throne of upper Assam....It did not absolutely prohibit him (Gambhir Singh) from subjugating the Nagas; but it forbade him to descend into the plains on the Assam side.” Indeed, in 1835, the forest between the Doyeng and the Dhunsiri was declared to be the boundary between Manipur and Assam. Hence the Manipuris were not allowed to expand their territory beyond their unproductive hilly region.

Kabaw Valley had been under Manipur during most part of its political history. On the valley, it is expressed, “For the greater part of the century (18th century) the Kubo Valley unquestionably belonged to Manipur and it was never in any sense a Burmese province, being, when not under Manipur, a feudatory of the great Shan Kingdom of Pong.” Later, it was given to Burma by Marjit Singh (1813-19) so as to get the Burmese support in acquiring the throne of Manipur. After seven years Burmese devastation of Manipur (1819-1825), the latter was re-conquered by Gambhir Singh with the help of British India. When the prince became the Raja of Manipur after the Treaty of Yandaboo, this valley became a hot spot of political dialogue. In June 1826, Major General Archibald Campbell was informed that “the Government should maintain the right of Gambhir Singh over northern and middle portion of Kabow Valley (Samjok and Khampat) but the southern portion (Kule) had to become a subject of negotiation.” However, the Burmese court objected to the line of boundary proposed by the Government of India. Accordingly, two Burmese envoys arrived in Calcutta in 1830, and their first and the foremost demand was “the restoration of the Kabow Valley.” Before their
arrival in Calcutta, the British Government also sent Major Burney as the British Resident in Ava in April 1830. He was instructed that “your attention should be given to the trade of Ava with a view to reporting to his Lordship-in-Council the practicability of extending and facilitating British commerce and the consumption of British manufactures.” In this way, so as to expand British trade and also to avert another expensive war against Burma, the British Government issued its final decision: “.....the Supreme Government still adheres to the opinion that the Ningthee formed the proper boundary between Ava and Manipur; but that in consideration for His Majesty’s (Burmese king) feelings and wishes and in the spirit of amity and good will subsisting between the countries, the Supreme Government consents to the restoration of the Kubo Valley to Ava, and to the establishment of the boundary at the foot of the Yoomadoung hills.” Accordingly, Major Grant and Captain Pemberton handed over Kabaw Valley to Burma on the 9th January, 1834. Knowing this delicate issue and also to alleviate emotional part of the Manipuris, British India gave from its exchequer 500 Sicca Rupees per month to Manipur. To the Manipuris, the loss of Kabaw Valley was just like the snatching of a child from a mother’s lap. On this issue, the Court of Directors also expressed, “We are glad to find that the transfer of the Kuboo Valley to the Burmese authorities took place so satisfactiously....Major Grant and Captain Pemberton, the Commissioners and Lt. Macleod, deputed by the resident to accompany the Burmese Officers are entitled to commendations for the manner in which they executed their rather delicate duty.” It proves the deep injury inflicted in the mind of Manipuri masses by the British Government.

In the Revolt of 1857, British India decided to establish a Manipur Regiment for the maintenance of peace in the eastern British frontier. However, the people of Manipur did not like to extend their support to this recruitment rally keeping in view of those previous selfish designs of the British Indian Government. McCullock, the Agent then, reported on the 12th February, 1858: “During the last two days the common conversation of the Munniporees has been in a style showing they would rather have nothing to do with the mutineers; saying that as they (Hindustani rebels) are co-religionist they (Manipuri Masses) can meet no harm from them and that all mutineers want is the Sahibs life and why sacrifice lives for the Feerunghees.” Hence, by 1857 the anti-British feeling of the Manipuri masses was very serious.

**Immediate cause of the war**

In 1886 Maharaja Chandrakirti Singh died, and his son Surchandra ascended the throne of Manipur. But the new king was an incompetent one and, therefore, repeated revolts against him disturbed Manipur time and again. There were two rival factions in the court of Manipur. One was led by the new king and his brother Paka Sana, the other was under Prince Kulachandra and Prince Tikendrakajit. Consequently, a palace revolt led by Tikendrajit broke out on 21 September, 1890. Maharaja Surchandra and his party did not try to resist it and, therefore, took shelter inside the British Residency. Thereafter, Surchandra was allowed to go outside Manipur on pilgrimage by Mr. Grimwood, the Political Agent. Kulachandra ascended the throne. But, reaching Calcutta, Surchandra appealed to the Viceroy to regain his lost throne. After due discussion, Lord Landsdown directed the Chief Commissioner of Assam to recognise Kulachandra as the Raja of Manipur, and at the same time to deport Tikendrajit beyond Manipur. The provision of Tikendrajit’s deportation was against the wish of Manipuri masses as he was the most trusted and also capable man in Manipur. Acting on the decision of the Government, Mr. Quinton, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, arrived at Imphal on 22nd March, 1891 to arrest Tikendrajit. Repeated Darbars (conferences) were scheduled to arrest Tikendrajit but failed. Ultimately, on the early morning of 24th March the British army under Lt. Brackenbary attacked the palace at Imphal with an objective of arresting Yuvaraj Tikendrajit Singh. Thus, there was an undeclared Anglo-Manipur War.

**Impact of the attack at Kangla**

In the undeclared war, many civilians were killed. Pukhranba Tanka, Khumbong Subedar, Leisang Jamadar and Athokpa Dewan died fighting against the British. Lt. Brackenbary (the only British officer killed by the Manipurins in hand to hand fight) and some sepoys of the British army lost their lives on the side of the British. While the war of 24th March was at its peak, the British declared ceasefire at 8 P.M. and, ultimately, fighting ended. For a Darbar to be held instantly at Kangla, 5 British Officers and a Hindustani bugler came to Kangla. When the conference failed to pacify those angry Manipuri masses and courtiers, they resorted to the killing of
seven British officials viz. Mr. J.W. Quinton CSI, Chief Commissioner of Assam, Lt. Colonel C. McDowal Skene, D.S.C., Commanding the 42nd (Gurkha) Regiment of Bengal Light Infantry, Mr. F.St. Clair Grimwood, ICS, Political Agent in Manipur, Lt. W.H. Simpson, 43rd (Gurkha) Regiment of Bengal Light Infantry, Mr. W.H. Cossins, ICS, Asst. Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Mr. W.B. Melville, Superintendent of Telegraph, Assam Division and the latter’s assistant, Mr. O’ Brien.

**Battlefields at Thoubal Athokpam, Kakching and Khongjom**

Having heard the British setbacks at Imphal, Lt. Grant of the 12th Burma Madras Infantry advanced to Manipur from Tamu and reached Thoubal Athokpam with 85 rifles on 31st March. On this day the British also declared war against Manipur. Lt. Grant’s objective was to march up to Imphal and rescue the British officers. He, therefore, attacked the army of Manipur, 800 in number, at Thoubal.

On this battleground, Grant narrated: “We opened volleys by sections (ten men) and then advanced, one section firing a volley while the other rushed forward thirty paces, threw themselves down on ground, and fired a volley, on which the other section did likewise.”

On this first day of declared war at Thoubal, Manipuris under Senapati Angou, Wangkheirakpa Mipak, Sana Dolaroi Hanjaba, Yaiskulakpa Sana Haojaomacha and Major Chongtham Angaton (Aya Puren) lost about 20 men. Casualty on the British side was only one. In the continuing war at Thoubal Athokpam, which showed superior military skill of the British, about ten Manipuris including Sana Haojaomacha Yaiskulakpa and his eldest son Sengoisana breathed their last on “Monday, the 6th April, 1891.”

Sana Haojaomacha was the most senior Manipuri warrior among the Manipuris who had laid down their lives in the battlefields of the war.

Since war had been declared, three powerful columns of British army were sent to Manipur via Silchar, Kohima and Tamu. To resist the British column from Tamu, 700 Manipuris were sent to Thoubal under Wangkheirakpa Maipak and Abungjao Yenkhoiba Major. At this critical time, the Maharaja sent Chongtha Mia Major, Paona Major and four hundred Siphais to Thoubal, and they reached the place on Monday, the 20th April, 1891. At Thoubal, to check the British advance at Palel, they left the place in the night of the same day marching along the Burma Road. Captain Wangkheir Meiraba and his followers were ordered to march to Palel via Kakching. But at Kakching, Wangkhei Meiraba’s party was ambushed by the British who were already there. In the ensuing battle at Machin Manao Chinglak on Thursday, the 23rd April, 1891 Captain Wangkheir Meiraba and 19 of his followers laid down their lives. On this battle in and around Kakching, Khelchandra expressed, “When the Manipuri force under Wagkhei Meiraba Poila arrived at Kakching they were taken by surprise by the British troops under Major Leslie. A hand to hand fighting took place there. In this encounter 20 Manipuris including Wangkheir Meiraba Poila died after fighting bravely against the outnumbered British army on 23rd April 1891.”

On the other Manipuri front, not much far from Palel, Major Chongtha Mia Singh (Manipuri Commander at Khongjom) and Paona Brajabasi constructed their clay fortress near the Khongjom river in the western side of Indo-Burma Road. On 24th April, Lt. Cox spied out the disposition of the Manipuri troops at Khongjom. But the Manipuris opened fire to Cox’s party. Realising the gravity of the situation, the two Majors requested the Commander-in-charge at Thoubal to supply the pounders of high calibre. Failing which, those Manipuri warriors had to face the British army with their small weapons. The British commander General Graham ordered Captain F.M. Rundall to be the leader of the attacking British army at Khongjom. The historic Battle at Khongjom was fought on the Twenty-fifth April, 1891. When the war began, powerful British guns effected fatal impacts at the fort of Manipur, but those gallant Manipuri warriors fought bravely to safeguard the territory and independence of Manipur. But they were defeated and most of them were killed.

As stated earlier, Major Paona Brajabasi, Chinglen Sana, Khumbong Major, Loitongba Jamadar, Keisa Jamadar, Heirang Khonga, Kangjam Tona Singh, Sagolsem Keiphaba are so far known Manipuri martyrs of this battlefield. An oral history on the recovery of the corpse of Kangjam Tona Singh from Khongjom accounts: “It was told that after reaching Khongjom, the party saw a terrible scene of decomposed dead bodies in the mud. With great difficulty they identified the body of K. Tona Singh seeing the latter’s Khong-Khut (limbs of the body).” The Battle of Khongjom was the decisive battle of the Anglo-Manipuri war. On the 27th April, 1891, the British Forces occupied Kangla resulting in the end of freedom of all the Manipuris.
United effort of the Manipuris in the war

It is really undeniable that the Manipuris living both in the hills and the plain fought the war united. Traditions express that the Maharajas maintained a very sound relationship with the hill people of Manipur. Till today, everyone could see Manipuri festivals like Lai-harao and Mera Hou Chongba at which all the Manipuri communities join together and witness these festivals with great joy. Having this unbreakable bond of unity, there were many Manipuri hill people at Kangla Fort when it was attacked on the 24th March, 1891. It has already been stated that two Tankhuls also lost their lives in hand to hand fight on that morning. At Mayangkhang, as mentioned earlier, when the British officials-Mr. Melville and Mr. O’Brian were attacked, the Nagas of that place played a great role under their chief- Chirai Naga. The Kukis and the Nagas of Southwest Manipur also showed their great animosity resulting in repeated skirmishes when Mrs. Grimwood and the British army retreated on the Cachar Road in March, 1891. At the time of advancing the British column from Silchar, the Kukis of Manipur broke the suspension bridge over the Irang river to check the British advance. When the Manipuris were defeated, Maharaja Kulachandra, his brothers and a great number of Manipuri followers took shelter at Chassad for some days. The then Chief Political Officer in Manipur also reported on 27th April, 1891: “The Regent, Senapati, and brothers left palace for Tangkul hills 8 p.m. 26th.”

On 27 April 1891, the British forces occupied Imphal resulting in the end of freedom of all the Manipuris. Later, for waging war against British India, five Manipuri leaders viz. Bir Tikendrajit (Jubaraj), Thangal General, Niranjan Subedar, Kajao Singh Jamadar and Chirai Naga were hanged to death by the Government of Manipur is a very rare occasion in history. It is also a fact that the Manipuris fought the war united. As they were brave and independent loving people, those unfriendly British policies and the brutal killing of civilians on 24 March 1891, made history a new turn. Therefore, after the palace attack, the aged Thangal and Manipuri masses retaliated directly to those British officers. No doubt, on this memorable event, history text books have mainly mentioned the names of Paona Major (died in fighting), those five hanged and twenty-three transported after different trials, and they were also remembered every year giving them floral tributes. But many great Manipuri warriors who made supreme sacrifices on different battlegrounds of the undeclared and declared war viz. Pukhranba Tanka (who inflicted a fatal wound on Lt. Brackenbury), Khumbong Subedar, Leisang Jamadar, Athokpa Dewan, Yaiskulakpa Sana Haojaomacha, Sengoisana, Chinglen Sana, Khumbong Major, Loitongba Jamadar, Keisa Jamadar, Heirang Khongja, Kangjam Tona Singh and Sagolsem Keiphaba are rarely known as history gives them scant notice.

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