

ABSTRACT

**PRINCELY STATE OF MANIPUR: DURBAR, THE RAJ
AND RESISTANCES
C. 1900-1950**

By

Veewon Thokchom

**MZU REGISTRATION NO. : P1906540
M.Phil REGISTRATION NO. : MZU/M.Phil./605 of 12.06.2020**

**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF
PHILOSOPHY IN HISTORY**

**Supervisor
Khwairakpam Premjit Singh, Ph.D.**

**DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY & ETHNOGRAPHY
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
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Supervisor

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**In partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree of Master of
Philosophy in History of Mizoram University, Aizawl.**



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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled "*Princely State of Manipur: Durbar, the Raj and Resistances c. 1900-1950*" submitted by **Veewon Thokchom** for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy**, is an original research work done under my supervision and guidance. The dissertation submitted by him has not formed the basis for the award to the scholar for any degree or any other similar title and it has not yet been submitted as a dissertation or thesis in any university. I also certify that the dissertation represents objective study and independent work of the scholar.

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DECLARATION

I, Veewon Thokchom, hereby declare that the dissertation entitled “*Princely State of Manipur: Durbar, The Raj and Resistances – 1900-1950*” is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this dissertation did not form the basis for the award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the dissertation has not been submitted by me for any research degree in other Universities or Institutes.

This is being submitted to Mizoram University for the Degree of Master of Philosophy in the Department of History & Ethnography.

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STATEMENT ON ANTI-PLAGIARISM

It is hereby certified that the M. Phil dissertation entitled, “*Princely State of Manipur: Durbar, the Raj and Resistances c. 1900-1950*” is the result of Master of Philosophy research programme and have not taken recourse to any form of Plagiarism in any of the chapters of the dissertation, except for quotations, from published and unpublished sources which are clearly indicated and acknowledged as such. The source material from works such as books, articles, essays, interviews and internet sources are properly acknowledged and quotations and paraphrases are clearly indicated. This dissertation or any version of it has not been previously submitted to any university and the same has not yet been published.

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GLOSSARY

<i>Brahma Sabha</i>	A council of Manipur Brahmins
<i>Chandan Senkhai</i>	Subscription of fixed rate by the Manipuri State Durbar every Meetei had to contribute
<i>Corvee</i>	A day's work of unpaid labour every male had to work for a certain period of a year for the maharaja
<i>Lalup</i>	A system of unpaid labour every male between the age of 17 and 60 had to place at the service of the maharaja for a certain number of days
<i>Lambus</i>	Low level officials appointed for the purpose of administration in the Hills
<i>Maund</i>	Weight measurement standard which is equal to 40 seers
<i>Marwari</i>	Foreigner merchant class
<i>Pothang</i>	Practice where males had to provide labour for maintaining and construction of roads, drains, and bridges etc.
<i>Thana</i>	police station
<i>Sanad</i>	A testimonial or certificate or order from the British government to the Manipur maharaja.
<i>Mayang</i>	Non Manipuris from mainland British India. Cachar was also called Mayang Leipak.
<i>Mangba-Sengba</i>	Concept of pure and impure introduced by the Brahma Sabha
<i>Lai</i>	Meetei Deity
<i>Cheitharol</i>	Manipuri royal chronicle
<i>Kumbaba</i>	
<i>Durbar</i>	Royal court, later administrative and judicial institution constituted by the British
<i>Chengkup</i>	Powder resulting from the husking of rice used for feeding live stocks such as chickens, pigs and cows
<i>Meruk</i>	Rice weight measurement almost equal to one seer
<i>Pakhangba</i>	Serpent Meetei deity associated with royal bloodline and divinity

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

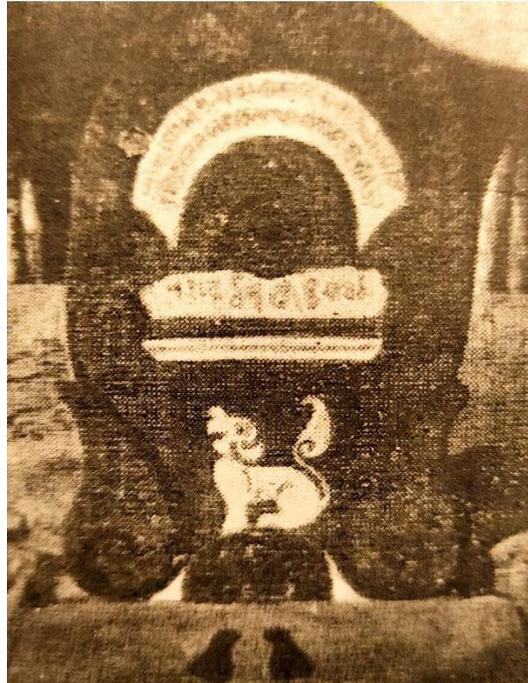


Fig. 1.1 – Inscription of Raja Gambhir Singh at Kohima, 1833

Source: Photo by James Johnstone



Fig. 1.2 - Raja Nar Singh

Source: Painting by RKCS Art Gallery, Imphal

Chapter 1

Introduction

On 19 April 1891, the sovereign authority of the regent Kula Chandra Singh of Manipur came to an end by the proclamation of Her Majesty the Queen, Empress of India. Following this, the administration of Manipur was taken over by the General Officer Commanding of Her Majesty's forces in Manipur. Almost a month before this, five British officers – J.W. Quinton, chief commissioner of Assam; Lt.Col. C McD. Skene of the 42nd Gurkha Rifles; F.St.C. Grimwood, political agent at Manipur (September 1889 - March 1891); W.H. Cossins, assistant secretary to the chief commissioner of Assam and Lt. W.H Simpson of the 43rd Gurkha Rifles, were sentenced to death for their excessive intervention in the independent state's internal politics of Manipur.

Now the kingdom was brutally suppressed, the British officials captured the main suspects in killing the five British officials and other architects of the Manipur Uprising and put on trial. Kajao Singh, who speared Grimwood, was hanged on 24 May 1891; Niranjan Subedar, a renegade ex-sepoy of the 34th Native Infantry of the Indian Army, was hanged on 8 June 1891; Senapati Tikendrajit and Thangal General were hanged in public on 13 August 1891 at Pheida-pung (Polo Ground), Imphal.

1.1 Debate on Colonial Historiography of Manipur

In the historical writings of Manipuri, there are varying narratives on the dilution of political sovereignty of Manipur before the Anglo-Manipur war of 1891, which eventually led to the emergence of two schools of historians. One postulates independent sovereign power while the other claims a declining power whose internal political matters had been interfered with by the British as early as the first half of the nineteenth century, even to the extent of losing its internal sovereignty.

Karam Manimohan argues that after the death of Raja Gambhir Singh in January 1834, William Bentinck considered it necessary for the British to establish a permanent office in Manipur, the office of the political agent, and Lieutenant Gordon

was considered for the post. The English East India Company (EEIC) placed Chandra Kirti, the late Raja's infant son, on the throne, and Nar Singh became the regent of Manipur. In 1844 the young Raja's mother attempted the regent's life and having failed, she self-exiled with the Raja in Cachar. After this incident, on 28 September 1844, Nar Singh was officially "recognised" by the Company as the Raja of Manipur. The second political agent, Captain William McCulloch, who was firm on establishing a paramountcy in Manipur, remarked in 1851 that "good order and the maintenance of authority in this (Manipur) country can be effected only by the British government. In a country which, like this, owes its existence, and owns that it does so, to the British government, the influence of that government ought to be paramount and capable of effecting this."¹

Gangmumei Kamei, on the other hand, asserts that "Manipur since Gambhir Singh had maintained the status of an independent kingdom. The king performed the customary *Phambalkaba* (coronation ceremony) which was a compulsory state ritual to be performed by a king. Manipur had its indigenous political and administrative systems, currency, flags, and royal insignia."² Accordingly, Manipur as a country, maintained relationship with the British as a sovereign kingdom and had its foreign minister (*Aya Purel*) in charge of Burmese affairs. Manipur, in a purely legal sense, was "*de jure* independent of and *de facto* dependent on the British."³ However, it can be noted that Manipur was only independent in the legal sense and had already lost its power as a sovereign country. As Gunnell argues, the British exerted suzerain control in all but name.⁴

In understanding this debate, however, it would miss the crux of the whole conception of British rule in Manipur if the concept of indirect rule as a historical process as proposed by historians like Michael Fisher, Ian Copland, Barbara Ramusack, Karuna Mantena, etc., is not taken into account. They have shown

¹ K. Manimohan, *Hijam Irabot Singh and Political Movement in Manipur*, New Delhi, B.R Publishing Corporation, 1989, p. 18.

² G. Kamei, *A History of Modern Manipur 1826-2000: A Study of Feudalism, Colonialism and Democracy*, New Delhi, Akansha Publishing House, 2016, p. 185.

³ Kamei, *A History of Modern Manipur 1826-2000*, p. 186.

⁴ G. Cederlof, *Founding an Empire on India's North-Eastern Frontier, 1790-1840*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press (OUP), 2005, p. 201.

extensively that British imperial rule in the Indian princely states was heavily influenced and shaped by the administrators' actions on the spot (“man in political line”), by political philosophy of the idea of justice, rule, and government taking roots in the metropole. They argue that residents helped formulate British policy and at the same time endeavored to enforce itself through Indian rulers. Indirect rule had some marked advantages in both practice and policy over direct rule. For smooth execution of administrations, local conditions were always taken into account and were adjusted. The local condition and the execution of policies from the metropole went hand in hand. In addition, “princely states” were not homogenous in its social, economic and political dynamics. While bringing these states under the umbrella of “indirect rule”, they presented their own characteristics of evolution, size, and assumed independence.

1.2 Establishment of British Paramountcy in Manipur

After the Anglo-Manipur War 1891, the British paramount power established itself as the indisputable authority in Manipur. They have thus started the era of “three-fold oppression” - colonial control, feudalism, Brahminism in Manipur history as John Parratt describes in *Wounded Land*. Manipur’s external affairs were now completely in the hands of the British and internal affairs, to various degrees, were administered through the political agent. Now colonial recognition of Manipur as a “princely state” brought her under “indirect rule” while being monitored closely and controlled by the representatives of the Raj. They established an independent office of political agent in the capital city and occupied a space of power at the royal court. Though “indirect” and out of the purview of directly ruled British India, laws and bureaucratic system sharing the same spirit and ideology of the British Raj were introduced.

The supremacy of the British was embodied in the *sanad* issued to the minor Raja Chura Chand Singh on 18 September 1891. The previous day, 17 September 1891, Major H.St.P. Maxwell (political agent of Manipur) visited the Raja’s house and handed over the official order of the British authority that the minor had been, henceforth, appointed as the new Raja. There could be two reasons as to why the

particular minor was chosen. Firstly, the Raj had wittingly appointed this scion of an indirect heritage to disappoint the direct royal descendants which had rebelled against the imperial power. Secondly, the British could send him out of the state for his education during which period the British paramountcy could establish firmly in Manipur.⁵

Now coming to the introduction of a new political order in Manipur by the British official in the nineteenth century. The position of the political agent was first sent to Manipur in 1835 for the “preservation of friendly intercourse, and as a medium of communication with the Manipur government, and, as occasion may require, with the Burmese authorities on that frontier, and more especially to prevent border feuds and disturbances which might lead to hostilities between the Manipurians and the Burmese.”⁶ Thirty-five years later in 1870 the duties of the political agent were more strictly defined reflecting further extensive British pressure on Manipur “primarily in insisting upon a strict fulfillment of the duties which the Raja was bound by treaty to perform, and in bringing his influence gently and gradually to bear upon the Raja ...”⁷

The appointment of George Gordon as the first political agent marked the formalisation of relationship between Manipur and the British. This was executed to keep the Burmese at bay using Manipur as the first line of defense. For the British, it was always militarily strategic to have a friendly ally at the frontiers.

1.3 Changes in Existing Administrative and Judicial Structures

As soon as the country was brought under the control of the British in 1891 numerous courts for adjudication of specific legal matters were abolished. The highest judicial institution, Cherap Court, which existed just below the Durbar, was kept intact after its strength was reduced to just five members. A new court called the Town Panchayat (Sadar Panchayat) was instituted on 15 November 1891 subordinate to the Cherap Court. It had jurisdiction only in the capital city of Imphal and dealt

⁵ Manimohan, *Hijam Irabot Singh and Political Movement in Manipur*, p. 3.

⁶ Manimohan, p. 5.

⁷ Manimohan, p. 5.

with minor criminal and civil cases and had the power to fine up to ₹100. A lower court called Rural Panchayat Court was also set up with fines up to ₹50 and handled civil suits of ₹50 or less. An interesting character of all these courts was that no trial of any British nationals was allowed here, meaning, the new judicial system introduced should deal with only the colonial subjects.

The Manipur Levy, founded in 1824 by Gambhir Singh with the help of the Company to fight Burmese occupation during the *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* popularly known as the Seven Years Devastation (1819-1826), was abolished in 1892. A new armed force called Military Police Battalion was set up consisting of 14 native officers, 49 non-commissioned officers, and 400 sepoy. Here, the need for a modern bureaucratic institution was realised, in the “only with the bureaucratisation of the state and the law in general can one see definite possibility of a sharp conceptual separation of the ‘objective’ legal order from the ‘subjective’ rights of the individuals....”⁸ The new military establishment was led by a commandant, Mr. Crawford, who was then the assistant to the political agent of Manipur. This force was paid partially in cash and partially by free grants of land and rations. By 1894-95 a precise cash payment was introduced. During the same period, a small Civil Police operational in the capital was established in 1893, consisting of a sub-inspector, a head constable, and eleven constables. The Rural Police was also established by appointing a chowkidar for about every hundred houses.

The most crucial aspect of British rule after 1891 was the direct control exercised over the hill areas of Manipur. In 1893-94 a paid staff of officials was instituted and the hills were divided into five divisions, each headed by an official called *Lam-Subedar* with a modest payment of ₹15 with seven *Lambus* on ₹7 each to assist him. Again in 1906, J. Shakespear, the political agent of Manipur, withdrew all matters concerning the hills from the State Office and a special office with two clerks was established. In 1907 the hills came under the direct administration of the vice-president of the Durbar subject to the general control of the political agent. While the

⁸ M. Weber, ‘Bureaucracy’, in A Sharma, N. Gupta (ed.), *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. 67.

administration of the entire state came under the purview of the Durbar of which the Raja was the president, the hill tribes were excluded from the jurisdiction of the Durbar itself.

1.4 Establishment of the Durbar

On 15 May 1907, the administration of Manipur was handed over to the Raja and the Durbar by the colonial authority, thus started the tenure of a British appointed king who “having removed from the state for most of his formative years ... scarcely appreciated the finer points of the *Meetei/Meitei* culture and statecraft” and whose “exposure to the ways of the British seems to have affected him so little, and that he comes through a caricature of a lazy Oriental despot rather than the enlightened ruler the British no doubt had hoped for.”⁹ The Durbar was to be managed under a “Set of Rules” called “Rules for the Management of Manipur State” which was sanctioned by the government of India. The official ceremony of the installation of the young Raja to the throne was held in the next month of February and was presided over by Lancelot Hare, the lieutenant-governor of East Bengal and Assam. The formation of the State Durbar was supervised by Lancelot Hare, and it constituted Chura Chand Singh as the president, W.A. Cosgrave as the vice-president with the addition of three ordinary members namely, Rajkumar Dumbra Singh, Gokul Singh (*Naharup Lakpa*) and Ibungo Chaoba Singh. There were also three more positions of the additional members which included Bindhu Madhab Shastri, Ningombam Yaiskul Lakpa, and Maibam Tamro Singh.

The *Pothang* system was abolished in 1892, reintroduced in 1904, and after a widespread agitation was abolished again by a proclamation on 9 June 1913. Under this system of forced labour, each village was obliged to carry the baggage of touring state officials and to maintain roads, embankments and schools, and other duties. The rajkumars, the Brahmins, and the king’s and Govindajee’s honorary servants were also exempted from this compulsory labour.

⁹ J. Parratt, *Wounded Land: Politics and Identity in Modern Manipur*, New Delhi, Mittal Publication, 2005, p. 18.

At the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 the Raja of Manipur supported the British war effort earnestly. In addition to the subscriptions to various war funds, he presented the Raj with four motor ambulances at the cost of ₹28,000, and also an airplane which amount to ₹22,500. The fact of complete neglect of the hill tribes can be judged by the amount (s) of expenditure which was merely ₹18,000, i.e., about a quarter of the house tax they paid. This was exacerbated by forced recruitment in early 1917 for the Labour Corps which were to be sent to France. Chura Chand had already offered to raise 2,000 labours and another 20,000 later on. Both Chura Chand and the political agent had not anticipated the difficulties in raising such a large number of recruits. As the recruitment process began Kuki chiefs began to oppose it. As a result, the British government started to send out notices to the principal chiefs “telling that recruits for labour corps would not be demanded, but they must submit to the punishment for their ‘organised resistance’ to the demands of the State and for their refusal to obey orders.”

As rebellions break out in 1918, there were numerous raids conducted by the Kukis in the valley that left more than 200 deaths. The British took a whole year to suppress it completely. By March 1919, all the leading Kuki chiefs were taken into custody, and around 1,000 guns were confiscated.

1.5 Early Discontent Against British Rule

The *Nupi Lan* of 1904 was the first people’s movement in modern Manipur. It was a mass demonstration triggered by the arbitrary nature in which lieutenant-colonel H.St.P. Maxwell issued an order to temporarily resuscitate the *lalup* system. The system which had already been abolished was restored to rebuild the assistant political agent’s bungalow which burnt down on the midnight of 15 March 1904. Again after three and half months, on 6 July the Khwairamban Keithel, a women’s market, which had 26 sheds with a capacity of 3,000 seats was completely burnt down. Later, on the night of 4 August, the bungalow owned by the political agent was destroyed in a fire. On 15 October more than 5000 women thronged the compound of the political agent against the resuscitation of the *lalup* system. Earlier on 30 September at the Pucca Bridge (Thong Nambonbi), a similar mass

demonstration took place in which several disgruntled aristocratic rajkumars had made speeches and instructed the people to not give up and resist orders from the government. The leaders of the agitation were arrested later and finally banished to Lakhipur in the Cachar District by an order dated 13 November 1904.

Five years after the establishment of the British colonial rule in Manipur, Hijam Irabot was born on 30 September 1896 at Oinam Leikai near the Pishum Bridge. He became one of the most popular leaders in modern Manipur who took a pivotal role in establishing various organisations which later became the centers of modern political formations and freedom struggles. In the formation of the Nikhil Hindu Manipur Mahasabha on 30 May 1934, he became the founder member of the organisation. The formation of such an organisation was a consequence of the cultural movement that was emerging in the first half of the twentieth century. The organisation later developed into a political group that started questioning the existing social and political structures.

It is also important to understand the figure of Irabot by locating him in the renaissance of Manipuri literature as “an integral part of a much wider concern for the discovery of the Meetei/Meitei identity.”¹⁰ This cultural movement did not locate in isolation and has to be studied in its liberating dimensions as the gist of the larger development of a “national culture” which is imperative in decolonisation as Frantz Fanon argues. The search for a “cultured individuals” is essential as these men “demand for a national culture and the affirmation of the existence of such a culture represent a special battlefield.”¹¹

The cultural movement of the period cannot be overlooked as merely a process. It was, on the contrary, a search for the past, and the reinvention of a culture rooted in the Manipuri language. This is how various vernacular magazines began to be published in the valley. This was the first print culture that appealed to a wider public audience, with the establishment of magazines such as *Meetei Chanu* (1922), *Yakairol* (1930). When the first non-Bengali drama union, the Manipur Dramatic

¹⁰ Parratt, *Wounded Land*, p. 29.

¹¹ F. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, London, Penguin Books, 2001, p. 168.

Union, was founded in 1932, various plays in the Manipuri language were released and were received with a tremendously positive response from the public. This was a radical departure from the earlier plays that were played in Bengali language with Hindu mythological themes. The stress on the local vernacular language can be interpreted as resistance in itself as a language that is foreign and imposed on a people can take them further and further away from themselves to other selves, from their world to other worlds.¹²

1.6 The Late Days of Colonial Rule

The fourth meeting, the Chinga Session of the Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha held on December 29 1938 was a landmark in the political movement of Irabot, and for that matter Manipur. The Mahasabha evolved into a purely political platform that encompassed all the people of Manipur of both in the hills and the valley with the word “Hindu” being omitted from the name of the Mahasabha. In a very symbolic gesture, Irabot opened the Chinga Session by unfurling a flag embossed with *Pakhangba Paphal*, which was very similar to the Manipuri national flag used before the British conquest of Manipur. After the Second *Nupi Lan* broke out on 12 December 1939, Irabot was arrested on 9 January 1939 and sentenced to three years of imprisonment. He was released from Sylhet jail on 20 March 1943 but was not allowed to return to Manipur for the next three years. When he was finally allowed to enter Manipur in March 1946, he organised a new political party called the Manipur Praja Mandal. Two years later he was elected to the Manipur Assembly from the Utlou Constituency in the first election held in independent Manipur. He went underground after the Pundongbam Incident in which a police officer was killed in a mass demonstration against the proposed formation of the Purvanchal Pradesh comprising Manipur, Tripura, Cachar, and the Lushai Hills. This event led to the genesis of the first underground movement in Manipur in the post-British period with the formation of the Communist Party of Manipur on 29 October 1948.

The Second *Nupi Lan* happened in the last month of 1939. Before the galvanisation of a mass movement in full swing, there were dissatisfaction and

¹² N. Thiong’o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers, 1986, p. 12.

resentment built up against the Raj and the existing economic condition from the early nineteen-thirties. The economic grievance emerged out of the massive rise in the price of rice due to excessive colonial practice of exploitative export. While there might be several political implications in the history of Manipur, most importantly, the movement was the “galvanising effect on the political movement against British paramountcy.”¹³ The event was a catalyst for the demand for a democratic and constitutional monarchy in the state.

On 12 December 1939, a huge number of women thronged the State Office and demanded that the president of the Manipur State Durbar, Mr. T.A. Sharpe, stop exporting rice from Manipur immediately. The compound was occupied for a whole day by nearly 4,000 women and was cleared in the early evening when a platoon of the Assam Rifles arrived and dispersed the protestors leaving dozens injured. The movement lasted more than 10 months as the British government was unwilling to give in to a single demand. Meanwhile, the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha began to put pressure on the government with more intense demands of:

- A complete stoppage of rice export business from Manipur
- Trial of state officials and police who assaulted and wounded women
- Establishment of responsible government in the state

In another memorandum to the Raja they also demanded a Constituent Assembly, a Unicameral Legislature of 100 members out of which 80 were to be elected and 20 nominated by the Raja, the leader of the largest party in the Legislature to be the prime minister, etc.¹⁴

Whereas it can be said that the causes of the “Women’s War” were economic, there was overall discontent with the British rule in Manipur.¹⁵ It was because of this that there were persistent demands for a whole radical change in the administrative structure of the state with demands for a responsible government and a Constituent Assembly. It cannot be denied that the political environment of the nineteen-thirties

¹³ Manimohan, p. 15.

¹⁴ Submitted on 2nd October 1939 to His Highness.

¹⁵ K. Manimohan, *Nupi Lan: Women’s War of Manipur*, Imphal, Karam Premlata, 2000, p. 264.

gave rise to the reform movement which was a radical move towards a new beginning of a modern democratic polity.

If the various movements of the first half of the twentieth century can be said to be the visible manifestation of actual conflict between the dominant and the subordinate, James Scott's theory on domination and resistance can shed new light on the different levels at which political confrontations are carried out in isolation yet inextricably in the unseen landscape out of the purview of the dominant and the subordinate in their own spheres.¹⁶ This unseen and un-surveillance nature of resistance is what is termed as "hidden transcript," which in the case of the subordinate is where their real politics of "infrapolitics" resides.

With this introduction to the British colonial modern Manipur history, the research looks into the British colonial rule in Manipur i.e., from 1891 to 1947, and the years after which saw the emergence of a Constitutional Monarchy in 1948 which lasted one year until the controversial Shillong "merger" of 1949 to the Indian Union. It reinterprets this period of Manipur history from the perspective of a colonial logic of domination, material exploitation, and control by employing the concept of "indirect rule." The intended purpose is to enquire about the British policies of law, police, administration, monetary taxation, and overall control. Consequently, it retraces the various aspirations of the people and the resistance meted out to the British rule, resistance that was obvious and visible in its practice.

1.7 Review of Literature

Hijam Irabot Singh and Political Movement in Manipur by Karam Manimohan is one of the most important historical works to understand modern Manipur history. The book is a scholarly work in the sense that the author used extensive archival sources. It lays in detail the almost everyday unfolding state policies of the British and the Raja vis-a-vis the ever-widening political maturity of the people of which Hijam Irabot was in the forefront.

¹⁶ J. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcript*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1990.

Nupi Lan - Women's War of Manipur by Karam Manimohan provides the most detailed historical narrative of the two Women's War of 1904 and 1939. It is not a mere narration of the events but also extensive research of the political and economic climate of the first half of the twentieth century that eventually gave rise to these two events. Women played an important role in the economic sphere and it was more than evident that women would rise in rebellion if the colonial economic exploitation were to affect them the hardest.

John Parratt's *Wounded Land; Politics and Identity in Modern Manipur* is a major historical text that covers a Manipur's history from the beginning of colonial rule in Manipur to the 2004 mass movement in Manipur against the rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama by Assam Rifles. It lays in the detail the different layers of oppression the people were subjected to with the advent of Hinduism in Manipur, the British colonial rule and the emergence of armed movement in the aftermath of the controversial merger in 1949, and the violent political climate thereafter.

A History of Modern Manipur 1826-2000 (A Study of Feudalism, Colonialism and Democracy) by Gangmumei Kamei has three different subsections titled, The Feudal Era, The British Colonial Rule, and The Emergence of Democracy consecutively. The first part deals with the post-Seven Years Devastation (1829-1836) rule of Gambhir Singh, Nar Singh, Chandrakirti Singh, and his successors till the outbreak of the Anglo-Manipur War and the subsequent conquest of Manipur. The second part lays an extensive study on the British rule in Manipur and the reign of the British appointed king, Chura Chand Singh. Peoples' movement in the form of the *Nupi Lan* (1904, 1939), the Kuki rebellion of 1919, and the Naga Raj movement of Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu is dealt with here. The third part deals with the post-independence with the emergence of modern democracy and the consequent constitutional monarchy established in 1948, the "merger" of 1949, and the thereafter Indian democratic setup till 2000.

Lectures on History of Manipur, by Gangmumei Kamei is a collection of lectures on different topics – Manipuri historiography, feudalism, colonial policy, and ethnonationalism. He categorically divides Manipuri historiography into

traditional Meitei historiography, colonial historiography, post-colonial historiography, and tribal historiography. The chapter on feudalism argues that feudalism, as it existed during the medieval period in Europe, did not exist in Manipur. Without outrightly rejecting elements of feudalism in Manipur, he asserts that the social, political, and economic setup of Manipur was feudal in nature characterised by the *lalup* system.

Manipur: Past and Present - Vol-1, ed., Naorem Sanajaoba, is a volume that deals with the history, law, and polity of Manipur. It has chapters on Anglo-Manipur relations, the event of the Anglo-Manipur war, Meitei identity, the economic condition of Manipur during the British rule, etc. As the first of its kind in the academic historical writing of Manipur, the book in itself is a pioneering scholarship that remains relevant even today.

The Emergence of Meitei Nationalism by Rajendra Kshetri provides a thorough insight into the formation of the Meitei identity in the first half of the twentieth century that laid the foundation of a radical armed movement in the nineteen-seventies. It traces the various political and social causes that led to the search for a new cultural assertion that posed a serious challenge to the status quo of the existing exploitative social organisation and relationships amongst people.

Perry Anderson's *The Ideology of India* which is a harsh take on the Indian National Congress, its freedom movement, and the integration of the newly formed nation, provides the very fragility of the newly emerging nation, where it was very much inevitable for the makers of the new nation to use force in carrying out the task of the nation-building, as evident in the integration of Manipur to the Indian Union where the constitutional monarch was summoned at Shillong, "surrounded by the troops and cut from the outside world, at gunpoint made to sign his kingdom into oblivion."

Domination and the Arts of Resistance by James C. Scott is an elaborate exposition of the politics of power relation, of domination and resistance, of the dominant and the subordinate. It argues against the generally assumed notion that

what counts as resistance is the very act of overt disobedience and the defiance of the powerful. It provokes us to explore and consider the hitherto ignored vast landscape where possibilities of resistance to power exist. In a power-laden atmosphere, the subordinate plays two roles. One is more of an “acting” or can be called a survival tactic where they submit to power and follow the rules laid down by the hegemonic social and political structure. This “public performance” of the subordinate is what is called a “public transcript”.

Infrapolitics is real politics that takes place at a level of the subordinate group rarely recognised as the political. It is the “disguised, low-profile, undeclared resistance.” In looking into the realities of an infrapolitics we should at first critically reconsider the generally accepted concept of the political as something that transpires in the realm visible to the public. Because each form of disguised resistance exists as a “silent partner” of a loud form of public resistance. The logic of this symbolic resistance is similar to the everyday forms of resistance as much as small acts of defiance inspire a public breaking of the actual ritual of subordination. From infrapolitics of the hidden transcript the final stage of an open rebellion is the “public declaration of hidden transcript.”

The Anthropology of the State, edited by Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta is an anthology that consists of various chapters by a wide range of scholars who have interrogated the concept of the state. By analysing the chapters, it can be argued, as Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta do, that new insights into the state could be obtained by thinking about states as cultural artefacts and their transnational dynamics. They argue for a deeply cultural nature of states where people interact and power relationships are developed within a “state culture,” how people perceive the state, how their understanding is shaped by the location and encounters with the state processes and officials. Drifting away from the concept of the state in institutional terms, states are now to be investigated of their cultural moorings. While the Marxist functional approach sees the state as the instrument of capitalist rule, and the state-centered approach resurrected the state as a distinct, unitary, and fixed discrete social fact, the chapter by Louis Althusser seeks to bring together the ideological and

material aspects of state construction. Timothy Mitchell, argues that the appearance of the state as a discrete and relatively autonomous social institution is itself a reification that is constituted through everyday social practices. Michel Foucault deals with the nature and role of power in the state formation process, role that may appear mundane in the first instance, such as the collection of taxes, distribution of subsidised food, healthcare system or the issuance of passports, etc.

The structural and functional approaches view the state as a set of institutions that perform specific functions related to governance and security, as Max Weber argues of the state as possessing a monopoly over violence in a given territory.

Overall, the text delivers an anthropological perspective of the state (Akhil Gupta) and its formation that helps to examine and understand how the state and its boundaries are culturally constructed, the conditions in which the state successfully represents itself as a coherent and singular entity.

From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay provides a historical narrative of the British. This also includes the downfall of Mughal rule, the slow and steady expansion and strengthening of British rule, the emergence of Indian nationalism, and the partition. It provides the ideological streams that underpin colonial expansion in the Indian subcontinent, from liberal political philosophy of early thinkers like James Mills to latter writings of thinkers like Henry Maine whose proposition of the native society as in perpetual state crisis, degeneration and dissolution provided the fundamental basis for indirect rule. The book covers the revolt of 1857 that shocked the British Empire and the causes, and then the after reflection of what the British did to avert this kind of uprising in the future. It goes on to narrate the rise of Indian nationalism with discussion on the various debates surrounding Indian nationalism, and further till the partition of 1947. The book is an expansive study of two hundred years of colonial rule and provides a solid introduction to Indian modern history.

Religious Revitalisation Movements in Manipur by Naorem Joykumar gives a historical narrative of the gradual Hinduisation (colonisation) of Manipur, the

extensive oppressive Brahminical social and religious control during the time of Chura Chand, and the Meetei “revitalisation” Sanamahi movement that arose in the first of the twentieth century. This book presents an extensive narrative of Meetei anti-Brahminical movement which was one of the many aspects of rising political consciousness of the people in the first half of the twentieth century. The movement had its intricate relation with other movements like the *Nupi Lan* and demand for responsible government in the end phase of colonial rule.

Manipur: A British Anthology edited by Naorem Sanajaoba is an extensive presentation of British historical and ethnographic accounts of Manipur and the hills. The book gives a wide and diverse knowledge and information about British civil and military officials. They collectively form the data and information of the colonial subject, its culture, language, topography, etc. whose information played a vital role in the expansion of the colonial empire in the Northeastern frontier.

Founding an Empire on India's India's North-Eastern Frontiers – 1790-1840: Climate, Commerce and Polity by Gunnel Cederlof explores the early difficult phase of British EIC's expansion in the Northeastern frontier. The British subjugated all the major kingdoms of the region from 1790 to 1830. The Jantias, the Khasi, the Cachar, the Manipuri kingdoms were gradually reduced from autonomy to dependence to subordination in the last phase. It narrates the commercial interest of the Company as the primary moving force behind this expansion, driven by the motive to capture and control commercial trade routes connecting India, Burma, and China. The section on Manipur provides a clear picture of the nature of relationship Manipur had established with the British years before the First Anglo-Burmese war. “Caught between two giants,” Manipur by now had been forced gradually to give up its independence in establishing any external relations except with that of the British. To the British, Manipur had to be brought under its control to secure the borders with Burma.

Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism by Karuna Mantena explores the ideological origins of British indirect rule in India. In this study, the event of 1857 marks the decisive “turning away” from earlier liberal,

reformist ethos that had furnished the empire in the nineteenth century as its most essential moral justification of imperial expansion. The book deals with the manner in which imperial administration in the spot was heavily influenced and shaped by political philosophy of the idea of justice, rule, and government taking roots in the metropole. This imperial ideology that strengthened British rule in the Indian subcontinent came about with the discarding of earlier liberal philosophy as proposed by thinkers like James Mill. Indirect rule as a system of rule came with the British infiltrating the native traditional structures of rule. This was a result of the idea proposed by Henry Maine according to which native society can never be “improved” and thus left to its degeneration. Native society was to be ruled, but never civilised.

India's Princely States: People, Princes and Colonialism, edited by Waltraud Ernst and Biswamoy Pati contains chapters by various authors like Amar Farooqui who argues that the British interest in the Sindia state (Gwalior) was driven by the contest for the control of abundant opium in the region. In this study of indirect rule in Gwalior, Farooqui shows that even over two decades following the subjugation of the state, the EEIC's control remained ill-defined and superficial. However, with the military offensive in 1843/44 the state was fully brought under control. It narrates the early British encounter with princely states that were characterised by military action and control over resources. In another chapter by Fiona Groenhout, where it is argued that the degree of British intervention in cases of alleged misrule by native rulers was largely contingent upon how the measure was expected to affect the British in India more broadly. She narrates this by studying the cases of Indore and Rewa assessing the nature of indirect rule and the relationships between the British and the princes that underpinned it.

India 1885-1947: The Unmaking of an Empire by Ian Copland narrates the story of how from a phase of a wide network of collaboration sustained by indirect rule with more than 600 princely states, the British grip on India began to slowly loosen in the late nineteenth century. The First and Second World War paced up the process of abandoning the subcontinent. So long as the colony remained an efficient

property, London was prepared to invest heavily in it. Once the value decreased, the British presence in the subcontinent became hugely unsustainable. By the late nineteenth century, the illusion of British permanence had started to crumble.

The Princes of India in the Endgame of Empire -1917-1947 by Ian Copland explores the political landscape of the last fifty years of British rule where the princes negotiated, pushed, retreated in a bargain to keep their status quo alive in the wake up of the British departure. It narrates how the rules of the princely states were influenced by tactical considerations. They understood that if they were going to keep anything from the past, they had to have friends in the new administration, and this meant making peace with their old foe, the Congress Party which seemed committed to secularism. For the British in retreat, they could not also afford to estrange relationship with the Indian Dominion which consisted of nearly 3/4th of the Indian subcontinent for the sake of the princely states. And therefore, in the final stage, they chose to sever all alliances with the princely states.

Indirect Rule in India: Residence and the Residency System – 1764-1858 by Michael Fisher provides one of the earliest and deepest studies into the system of indirect rule the British employed in the Indian subcontinent from the early stage of imperial expansion. He studies the three groups within this system – residents, Indian rulers, and Indian assistants at the residents, and seeks to study this system from the perspective of those who implemented it on the ground. The residents helped formulate British policy and at the same time, it endeavored to enforce itself through Indian rulers. The book explores the nature in which indirect rule had some marked advantages of both practice and policy over direct rule. It argues that local conditions were always taken into account, and adjusted, rather than a smooth execution of the policies from the metropole. The local condition and the policies went hand in hand.

1.8 Statement of the Problem:

Since the nineteen-eighties, there has been a wide range of historical writings on Manipur under British paramountcy. From social, political, and economic dimensions, Lokendra, Manimohom, Joykumar, Gangmumei, Lal Dena, Sanajaoba, John Parrat, etc. elaborately discuss the historical development of British colonial

rule in Manipur. However, these existing works of literature merely narrate the historical events without much consideration of the ideological underpinnings of British imperial expansion in the northeastern frontier. Moreover, the emergence of a new order of statecraft under an appointed “Raja” through British policy of indirect rule remains unexplored in historical research. This study attempts to analyse the assimilation and convergence process of the western imperial political orders in Manipur through the Raja and the State Durbar. Public responses to colonial intervention in Manipur in the first half of the twentieth century need to be redefined by analysing the institution of Manipur State Durbar as an apparatus of legitimation of British Raj, which led to the establishment of the Manipur State Constitution. This is achieved by employing a critical study of the concept of British indirect rule in Indian princely states in general and Manipur in particular.

1.9 Area of Study

The research primarily focuses on Manipur valley covering the first half of the twentieth century with analysis of pre-colonial varied relations of interference, intervention, and alliance. The hill areas are excluded from the present study for two reasons: first, research time constraints, and second, the hill areas were beyond the direct jurisdiction of the Durbar in the first half of the twentieth century.

1.10 Objectives

- To examine the emergence of a new political dimension under British paramountcy.
- To highlight the public response towards the Durbar and the Raj.
- To historically analyse the period of colonial Manipur within the context of the British policy of “indirect rule.”

1.11 Research Methodology

The research primarily relies on sources available in Manipur State Archives and Manipur Secretariat Archive (Imphal) and other non-governmental private archives. It employs both narrative and qualitative methods. Besides these primary archival sources, other secondary sources such as books, journals, etc. are also used in the

research work. British ethnographic works by civil and military officials are examined to understand how and why the British gathered vast topographical, cultural, and linguistic surveys of the region since the eighteen-twenties. Existing works on the concept of “indirect rule” are used to bring out the commonalities and variations of Manipur’s relationship with the British with that of other princely states in the Indian subcontinent.

1.12 Chapterisation

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter lays a brief introduction to the pre-British political history of Manipur, and concludes with the political and social milieu of the late nineteen-forties. Existing literature on the area is analysed to build a new narrative for the research work.

Chapter 2: The Residency System in Colonial Manipur

This chapter deals with the concept of indirect rule and the very nature of Manipur’s relationship with the British from the early nineteenth century. It highlights the historical precedence of the varying nature of relationships – sometimes cordial, and at other times, unfriendly – that led to the eroding of external sovereignty and independence of the kingdom.

Chapter 3: Establishment of Manipur State Durbar and its conflict with the British Paramountcy

This chapter discusses the formation of a new state Durbar under the British Raj and various accounts of direct and indirect confrontations between two political entities, the Durbar having merely a nominal power.

Chapter 4: The Resistance Movements in the Valley

The rise of a democratic people’s aspiration which manifested itself in the form of mass women’s uprising is examined here. Both the women’s agitations (*Nupi Lan*) served as an ultimatum to the Raj that the people would no longer accept government policies. The exact nature of these uprisings and their contribution to the demand for a democratic responsible government is discussed here. This chapter does not only

throw light on the establishment of Manipuri Nikhil Mahasabha but also attempts to highlight the emergence of a radical politics that aimed at a harsh critique of the existing social and political structure under the figure of Hijam Irabot.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This chapter summarises the findings of the research taking into account the Sanamahi revivalist movement that arose in the nineteen-thirties. All the arguments and interpretations made in the previous chapters are highlighted here.

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CHAPTER 2

THE RESIDENCY SYSTEM IN COLONIAL MANIPUR



Fig. 2.1 - Major H.S. John Maxwell

Source: M.K Binodini Collection



Fig. 2.2 - Raja Chura Chand Singh

Source: Dr. R.K. Nimai Collection

Chapter 2

The Residency System in Colonial Manipur

The evolution of the historical writings in Manipur is unnecessarily sluggish by its nature, and it would not be harsh to state that empirical narratives of events overwhelmingly overrode the theoretical and philosophical analysis of British colonial enterprise in Manipur in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. Of course, the empirical narrative is a fundamental domain in historical writings, however, in the case of Manipur historical study, it is high time to jump out from that domain and devote it to the theoretical exploration of historical accounts. This is an alternative historical inquiry of the British colonial policy towards Manipur - both in practice and in theory - that sheds new light on the study of modern Manipur.

2.1 Earliest Contact with the British

It is worthwhile mentioning that an analysis of the colonial history of princely Manipur (1891-1947) would at the same time require a glimpse of the historical processes of Manipur's interaction with the British as early as 1762 when it first sent a representative to the British Resident in Sylhet, Harry Verelst, seeking assistance against the incursions of the Burmese on the eastern border. This treaty between Raja Jai Singh and the EEIC gave Manipur the right to lease British troops in military engagement with the Burmese, and the Company was to receive full military support in their battles with the Burmese. They both agreed each other's enemies as their own. In any circumstance of the British conquering Burma and thereafter handling the land to Jai Singh, he was to compensate for all the British losses. With this treaty, the Company had the right to choose rent-free land within Manipur suitable for the construction of a factory and forts, all to be secured by Manipuri troops. Company trade conducted passing through and in Manipur was to be free from all duties and attack. If, on the part of Manipur, an apprehension of Burmese incursion was the reason behind this treaty, for the EEIC, concerns for commercial interests dictated

the treaty - its factory and port at Pegu in the eastern Irrawaddy delta had to be secured against a looming threat from Ava.¹⁷

At the very crux of European colonialism was a powerful element - before utilitarianism and the doctrine of lapse - called the subsidiary alliance system which was first introduced to the southern peninsular India by the Compagnie Française des Indes Orientales governor Joseph François Dupleix in the late 1740s. The EEIC adopted it long before they first signed the subsidiary alliance with Hyderabad Nizam in 1798. The EEIC and Manipur Treaty of 1762 was an example of the gestation of the subsidiary alliance system in the EEIC as colonial mechanism in the Indian subcontinent.

It is, however, to be argued that at this time there was no conscious effort or plan for territorial expansion towards the easternmost frontier. As P.J. Marshall argues that until the passage of the Pitt's India Act in 1784 there was no deliberate and consistent British policy for political conquest in India.¹⁸ It was, despite the absence of any policy directives from London metropole in favour of conquest and colonisation, the Company officials in the field and the man on the spot operating in local conditions in India who shaped and moulded the course of British expansion. And in the case of the treaty of 1762, as Gunnell argues, the commercial motive of the British cannot be ignored. Marshall also acknowledged that the obvious connection between trade and empire in the early phase of British expansion was hard to ignore. By the seventeen-seventies, the Company agreed to pay £400,000 annually to the British state exchequer for its Indian territorial possession and revenues earned since 1765. Thereupon, the Company received an official endorsement of its position in India. Then, the Regulating Act of 1773 established the right of the British government on all territorial acquisitions overseas.

As Lal Dena argues, a clearer study of the clauses of the treaty reveals that the British established themselves in a more advantageous position than Jai Singh.¹⁹

¹⁷ G. Cederlof, *Founding an Empire on India's North-Eastern Frontier, 1790-1840*, p. 163.

¹⁸ P. Marshall, *Problems of Empire: Britain and India, 1757-1813*, London, George Allen and Unwin Limited, 1968.

¹⁹ L. Dena, *British Policy Towards Manipur, 1762-1947*, Imphal, Jain Book Shop, 2014, p. 10.

Moreover, it was a treaty between two unequal powers. In Manipur's effort to fight and defend itself against one power, Manipur invited another European empire in search of conquest. More than anything, the treaty paved the way for British interference in the external affairs of Manipur. This aspect of control is one of the most fundamental components of indirect rule.

As a follow-up of the treaty, the British authorities at Fort William, Calcutta undertook to send six companies of sepoy – four from Calcutta and two from Chittagong. The British Resident at Sylhet, Harry Verelst, led the troops which left Chittagong in January 1763 and reached Khaspur, the then capital of Cachar in April of the same year.

The immediate need for Manipur for British military support did not materialise as the agreed troops dispatched never reached Manipur due to excessive rainfall and epidemic. Consequently, Manipur did not gain anything from the treaty other than exposing itself to a foreign imperial power.

During the signing of the Anglo–Manipuri treaty of 1762, the British were engaged with the French in the Seven Years War (1756-1763). By this time, competition for colonial expansion had reached an unprecedented height, especially in the Indian subcontinent and South East Asia. During the war, Alaung-paya, king of Ava (1752-1760), at the instigation of the French destroyed the English settlement at Negrias, an island at the mouth of the Irrawaddy River on the charge that the British had supplied arms to the Mons, one of the war-like tribes in Upper Burma.²⁰ In the attack, ten British officials and one hundred Indians were killed. With the treaty, the British found an opportunity to be exploited from Manipur. While Gunnell finds the treaty as solely motivated by commercial interest on the part of the British, for Lal Dena, the treaty was motivated both by political and commercial concerns: commercially, the expulsion of the Burmese from Manipur soil was to enable the British to establish direct trade relations with Chinese merchants, and politically, an alliance with Manipur would enable the British to repel any Burmese or French

²⁰ Dena, *British Policy Towards Manipur*, p. 8.

hostilities in the eastern frontier.²¹ Thus both commercial and political factors represented the “prime movers”²² of the Company’s expansion. For the Company, commerce provided the will to conquer and the political disunity and factionalism in the Manipuri court provided the opportunity. The British policy, as Gallagher and Robinson argue, can be summed up as “trade with informal control if possible; trade with rule when necessary.”²³

2.2 Manipur Torn Between Royal Disputes

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Manipur entered a critical phase propelled by internal political instability and the presence of two foreign powers at its western and eastern border. This situation bestowed upon the British an opportunity it had never failed to exploit in its imperial expansion. With the death of Jai Singh in 1799, fratricidal conflicts amongst his sons emerged. His eldest son, Labanyachandra, ascended the throne but was assassinated by Angom Chandramani, probably a henchman of Gambhir Singh. Soon, Modhuchandra, the third son of Jai Singh ascended the throne in 1801. He then, to strengthen his position, offered the post of jubaraj (heir apparent) to Chaurajit and the post of senapati (commander in chief of army) to Marjit. His endeavour did not last long and soon he was overthrown by Chaurajit with the help of Marjit, and the latter was appointed the dual posts of jubaraj and senapati. Marjit, no longer able to tolerate his inferior role in the whole political affair, soon went to Burma to seek help of king Badawpaya (1779-1819) to place himself in the throne. The Burmese readily complied and a large Burmese force invaded Manipur. With this successful campaign, Marjit became a king.

From 1812 to 1819 Manipur became a vassal state of the Burmese with Marjit as the puppet king. In 1819, the new king of Burma, Bagyidaw, removed Marjit from the throne, and their nominee Jadu Singh, son-in-law of Garibniwaz, and Shubol Singh, brother of Nar Singh were put on the throne as puppet rulers. This event marked the first complete subjugation of Manipur by a foreign country. By this

²¹ Dena, p. 9.

²² C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World: 1780-1914*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2004, p. 5.

²³ J. Gallagher and R. Robinson, ‘The Imperialism of Free Trade’, *Economic History Review*, Vol. 6., no. 1, 1953, p. 1-15.

time, the Burmese had already managed to establish themselves in Cachar and the Brahmaputra valley as well. The British soon realised the threat posed by the Burmese on its eastern frontier of the Bengal province. An attitude of indifference towards its easternmost frontier now turned into an attitude of grave alarm. They soon looked out to handle the situation with care. Their first mission was to drive out the Burmese from its frontier and second, to establish a strong alliance with Manipur which can withstand and defend against any future Burmese incursion. If these two missions were accomplished, Manipur could be from then on, an eastern buffer state between the British Empire and the Burmese. By the eighteen-twenties, the Company had come to realise the strategic importance of both Manipur and Cachar for the security of the north-eastern border.²⁴

The First Anglo-Burmese broke out in 1824. A combined force of British and Manipuri troops under Gambhir Singh inflicted a heavy defeat on the Burmese near Silchar. The Burmese retreated eastward to Manipur. Gambhir Singh was now acclaimed Raja of Manipur. He together with Nar Singh who was appointed the senapati asked for British help to recapture his country from the Burmese. The British troops were led by Captain R. Boileau Pemberton. However, as in 1762, his troops were unable to advance through the swamp and jungle into Manipur. Then, Gambhir decided to attack the Burmese on his own. He pursued and pushed the Burmese from Manipur as far as the bank of the Ningthee River in Kabaw Valley. In 1826, the Anglo-Burmese war ended and the treaty of Yandabo declared Manipur an independent kingdom, with Gambhir Singh as the Raja. Cachar became a British protectorate.

2.3 Gambhir Singh and the First Political Agency

One year after the death of Gambhir Singh in 1834, by a minute of Governor-General Lord Bentinck on 7 February 1835, the EEIC established its first political agency, and Lieutenant George Gordon became the first political agent in Manipur. He was put in charge of any communication between Manipur and Burma, and on any

²⁴ J. Parratt and Saroj Parratt, *The Anglo-Manipur Conflict of 1891: Queen Empress vs Tikendrajit Prince of Manipur*, New Delhi, Har-Anand Publications, 1992, p. 11.

occasion, the political agent was to prevent border feuds and disturbances that might lead to hostilities between the two neighbouring countries. Gordon's appointment in Manipur marked the formalisation of the relationship between an imperial giant and the small kingdom of Manipur in the extreme eastern frontier. Though established in nature of an embassy in theory, the residency, as happened in other princely states, would gradually interfere in the external affairs of Manipur eventually offering serious unrest in 1891.

Michael Fisher argues that the system of residency or the political agency was unique because it was not to be found anywhere in existing imperial political tradition and was drastically different from the Mughal system of *wakils*.²⁵ While the latter was employed by the client states and Mughal courts to represent them before the imperial court, the former involved a definition of sovereignty that was encoded in the new terminology of "paramountcy." Under this, the Indian states were left with domestic sovereignty, while beyond the border sovereignty lay with the EEIC as the superior imperial power. This new form of sovereignty is what is generally defined as subordinate sovereignty. The development of this process of subjugation may vary from case to case, depending on the status and power of princes and the conditions under which relationships with the British were formally established through certain treaties. However, the British "practice often reduced some of these very 'sovereigns' to the de facto status of puppets or virtually confined them within their own palaces."²⁶

The establishment of the residency in 1835 was an immediate necessity for the British because another turmoil over the succession of the throne was not affordable, and the security concerns of the imperial frontier had become of utmost importance. The Company's obsession with a stable and secure frontier was driven by its concern for a smooth trade. The two-year-old heir apparent Chandra Kirti's mother attempted a plot to assassinate the regent Nar Singh. After she was implicated, she fled to Cachar with her son, leaving Nar Singh to ascend the throne

²⁵ M. Fisher, *Indirect Rule in India: Residents and the Residency System, 1764-1858*, New Delhi, OUP, 1991, p. 67.

²⁶ Fisher, *Indirect Rule in India*, p. 444.

by popular acclamation and British recognition. When Nar Singh died in 1850, Chandra Kirti assumed the throne with much British support. Emblematic of any state under British indirect rule which did not rise in rebellion in the 1857 Great Revolt, Manipur under Chandra Kirti “helped the British capture fugitive mutineers, and later provided troops to support Col. James Johnstone for the relief of Kohima following the rising of the Angami Nagas.”²⁷

As the EEIC’s expansion deepened in the north-eastern frontier, it preferred to keep Manipur under indirect control. This could be of reasons such as financial and military factors. This position of the British depended on other factors as well. Manipur was not in a position to challenge the British militarily and thus the British found it expedient to keep the country as it is without the administrative and financial burden of direct control.

2.4 Concept of Indirect Rule

According to Michael Fisher, there are three distinct phases of the evolution of indirect rule in India. He traces this evolution till the Great Revolt of 1857. The first phase, i.e., from 1764 to 1797, begins with initial appointments of the Company’s residents at the courts of Murshidabad, Awadh, and Hyderabad after the Battle of Buxar in 1764. He identified this phase as undecisive on the part of the Company, lacking in confidence and vision, and therefore, the role of the residents as restricted and cautious. The second phase, i.e., from 1798 to 1840, was marked by aggressive expansionism championed by Lord Wellesley (1798-1805) under his policy of “subsidiary alliance”. This phase of rapid expansionist tendencies had a hiatus with the coming of Lord Cornwallis with a mandate to follow a policy of non-interference. After his death, the Company again embarked on a mission of territorial conquest. In this phase, many of the recently conquered territories were left under indirect rule controlled by the residents. The third and final phase of this evolution, from 1841 to 1857, marked a complete shift in policy towards consolidation rather than expansion. Territorial expansion had now reached its physical limits. The policy

²⁷ Parratt and Parratt, *The Anglo-Manipur Conflict of 1891*, p. 13.

shift towards direct annexation was spearheaded by Lord Dalhousie's forward policy of "doctrine of lapse."

The British diagnosed that direct annexation policies had contributed to the Great Revolt. Interestingly, they also saw those territories under indirect rule were less affected and even helped the British in the crushing down of the Revolt. Although Fisher's study does not go beyond 1857, his conceptual analysis of the evolution of indirect rule as a process of British colonial conquest and expansion can be used to scrutinise the gradual development Manipur-British relations after 1857.

If expediency and opportunism guided the political agent's action and other British policy towards Manipur, the most favourable climate for interference in the internal affairs of Manipur was provided by the persistent deceit and betrayal amongst the princes to capture the throne. It was under the suggestion of the political agent that the queen and her son were kept in a far-off place outside Manipur. And it was on his proposal that the Governor-General in Council formally recognised Nar Singh as king of Manipur in September 1844.

2.5 Streamlining of the Role of Political Agent

With the recognition of Nar Singh as the Raja of Manipur, the power dynamic between Manipur and the European empire had considerably shifted towards the direction of the latter. In the political turmoil that emerged after the death of Nar Singh in 1850, Devendra Singh was recognised as the new king. William McCulloch, soon realised that political stability and good order was the primary concern of the British, and strongly advocated for a permanent British troop in Manipur. Under McCulloch, the role of the political agent was streamlined from mere communication and ambassadorial duty to that of a dominant representative executive officer who can influence the internal affairs of the kingdom. The rule of Devendra lasted only months and he was dethroned by Chandra Kirti in 1850 with mass military and public support. McCulloch wasted no time in asking the EEIC Governor-General in Council to formally recognise Chandra Kirti as the new king of Manipur. The Company government thus instructed in its letter to McCulloch in Manipur dated 3 October 1851 to "make a public avowal of the determination of the British

government to uphold the present Raja, and resist and punish any parties attempting hereafter to dispossess him.”²⁸ The Court of Directors of the Company in a dispatch on 5 May 1852 also confirmed the stand of the EEIC government highlighting that the political agent was both protector and guide to the Raja, and that he was under obligation to protect his subjects against oppression on his part.

Thus, the British slowly consolidated its power in Manipur. Manipur’s communication now with any neighbouring country passed through the office of the residency. As the British gained more confidence in the submission of Manipur to its various schemes, Manipur willingly participated in the British military mobilisation to suppress the mutineers that had spread as far as Cachar. Chandra Kirti dispatched four hundred and ten soldiers to the western border at Jiribam. After the successful suppression of the rebellion, Chandra Kirti and eight soldiers were honoured by the British government.

When Lord Dalhousie (1848-1856) took over as the Governor-General of Bengal, the entire policy of the EEIC shifted towards an aggressive expansionist imperial conquest. Using his “doctrine of lapse”, i.e., the policy of annexing territories of Indian rulers who died without a male heir, he took over Satara (1848), Sambalpur, and Baghat (1850), Udaipur (1852), Nagpur (1853) and Jhansi (1854). In the eastern frontier, the Second Anglo-Burmese war (1852-1853) resulted in the annexation of Pegu. Thus by 1857 the EEIC had annexed about 63 per cent of the Indian subcontinent and had successfully subordinated 73 per cent of its population.²⁹ The remaining territories, including smaller territories like Manipur, were left in charge of princes who were relied upon after 1858 for ensuring the loyalty of their people to the British raj. Its policies by now had shifted from that of annexation to those of indirect rule.³⁰

With the transfer of Company rule to the Crown rule in 1858 after the Queen’s Proclamation on 1 November made a commitment to “respect the rights,

²⁸ As cited in Lal Dena’s *British Policy Towards Manipur, 1762-1947*, p. 29.

²⁹ M. Fisher, *The Politics of the British Annexation of India*, New Delhi, OUP, 1993, pp. 21-24.

³⁰ T. Metcalf, *The Aftermath of Revolt: India, 1857-1870*, Princeton, Princeton University Press (PUP), 1965.

dignity and honour the native princes as our own,” there was a fundamental shift in how the princely states should be kept under the British rule. Now, Ian Copland argues, the British, “dedicated to grooming the princes as ‘natural allies’.”³¹ This policy change was the primary reason for the gradual development of a cordial relationship between the Crown and Chandra Kirti. The dominant presence of the political agent also made the kingdom stable as the British always wanted. At the same time, the keeping of the traditional Manipuri leadership, i.e., the Raja, gave legitimacy to the perpetual hegemonic presence of the British in Manipuri soil. The relationship further incorporated Manipur into the imperial system with the introduction of the Durbar.

Owing to the above changes and financial constraints on the part of the British government, the Civil Financial Commission proposed the abolition of the agency in Manipur in its February 1861 report. William McCulloch was informed that the government no longer intend to continue the post. He submitted a memorandum on 18 July 1861, emphasising his analysis of the political situation in Manipur and the surrounding hills, and argued for the continuing need for the political agent for peace, and tranquillity, and most importantly, for the prosperity of Manipur. Another officer R. Brown who would later succeed McCulloch too advocated for retaining the office of the agency.

In a correspondence of 18 August 1861 from the Manipur government to the Viceroy sent through McCulloch, the king of Manipur also insisted on keeping the post of the political agent. When Stewart, the superintendent of Cachar, was informed of his opinion on whether his office could be handed over the duty of the agency in Manipur, he boldly suggested to the British government that “the peace of Manipur and eastern frontier required that a European officer should reside at Manipur.”³² Thus, all officers at the spot shared a consensus over the continued presence of a British officer in Manipur. By this time, the political agent had assumed a crucial role in the internal politics of Manipur. Various series of military

³¹ I. Copland, *The Princes of India in the Endgame of Empire, 1917-1947*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press (CUP), 1999, pp. 16-17.

³² Dena, *British Policy Towards Manipur*, p. 29.

expeditions were carried out against the bordering tribes of the Soktes, the Mizos, the Chasads. The British, through the office of the political agency, took all the decisions in carrying out the expeditions. The governor of Bengal instructed the political agent in Manipur in 1871 that he should see to it that no aggression could be permitted on the part of Manipur and that the Raja of Manipur also take effective steps to make its subject, i.e., the Kukis understand this, and to punish rigorously any disobedience of this instructions.³³

2.6 James Johnstone and British Expansion

When James Johnstone became the political agent in 1877, the “interference” of the British government reached its zenith. Practically, all critical decisions on Manipur were taken by him or rather carried out only after his approval. He carved a new boundary between Manipur and the Naga hills to settle the long-standing boundary dispute. When he found himself unable to resolve it because of continued raids from the Angami Nagas, he mobilised an army of 2,000 under the command of Surchandra and Tikendrajit. He also set up a commission to resolve a boundary dispute on the eastern border following the Kongal Thana incident, in which the Shans of the Kabaw Valley attacked the Manipur outpost situated at the banks of the Namia River that formed the boundary between Manipur and Burma. Thus, by the late nineteenth century, the British gained control over almost every aspect of Manipur politics. The Raja ruled Manipur but the British political agent governed it.

Manipur, caught between two neighbouring giants, the British and the Burmese, had become strategically important to the British in the nineteenth century. The British policy towards the country was primarily based on two factors – Burma phobia and commercial interest. A stable frontier was always desired for the smooth operation of trade and commerce. The challenge to this stability was always posed by the continuing threat and attack from Burma. By the time of the conquest of Burma in 1885 (Third Anglo-Burmese War), British commerce had penetrated deeply into Burma on the one hand, and Assam on the other. For trade and commerce to flow

³³ Dena, p. 31.

from the Indian subcontinent to the South East Asian market, the frontier regions of Assam and Manipur had to be subjugated to British power.

The event of 1891 can be understood as the logical culmination of the unequal relationship between Manipur and the British which developed over decades, especially since the appointment of the first political agent in 1835. Over the years, Manipur recognised the EEIC and later the Crown as the suzerain imperial power. It also relinquished its right to enter into diplomatic relations with any neighbouring states or wage war against them. All communications with the outside world were only to be carried out through the office of the political agent. Manipur was to recognise any enemy of the British as its own. These processes built up to finally subjugate Manipur completely under the Raj. The complete subjugation of Manipur in 1891 was a logical conclusion that was waiting to happen at any time when Manipur does not recognise the authority of the paramount power. As the situation demanded, Manipur had to be violently reminded of the grandeur of British authority.

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CHAPTER 3

ESTABLISHMENT OF MANIPUR STATE DURBAR AND ITS CONFLICT WITH THE BRITISH PARAMOUNTCY



Fig. 3.1 – Kanglasha inside the Kangla Fort in front of which five British officers including chief commissioner, Quinton was executed in 1891

Source: Somi Roy Collection



Fig. 3.2 – Manipur State Durbar Hall, 1944

Source: G.F. Heaney

Chapter 3

Establishment of Manipur State Durbar

In 1891, the nature and function of the political agent in which Maxwell was the first to hold the office after the subordination of the Manipur was not merely a representative of the Raj. He had now become the executive and administrative head of the state. With a native Raja kept on the throne to rule the state on behalf of the paramount power, now the political agent governed the state.

The role and function of the political agent when the office of the residency was first founded in 1835 was for the “preservation of a friendly intercourse, and as a medium of communication with the Manipur government, and, as occasion may require, with the Burmese Authorities on that frontier, and more especially to prevent border feuds and disturbances which might lead to hostilities between the Manipurians and the Burmese.”³⁴ By 1870, the duties of the political agent had become larger, and the government of India defined it as consisting primarily of insisting on a strict fulfilment of duties that the Raja of Manipur was bound to perform by treaty established between the paramountcy and Manipur.

Lord Lansdowne believed that it would be undesirable to restore the deposed Raja, and therefore the choice fell upon the minor. The new *sanad* was supposed to put an end to the succession of brother-by-brother, which in his opinion was a system fraught with trouble. The Viceroy under suggestion from H.M. Durand (the secretary to the government of India) decided that the new ruler should be given the “Raja” instead of “Maharaja” and a salute of eleven guns. The *sanad* declared that the Raja shall pay an annual tribute to the British government and all his “faithful” successors approved by the paramount power. The Viceroy declared a Proclamation on 21 August 1891, in which it was notified that Manipur had become liable to the penalty of annexation. It went on to say that Her Majesty the Queen, Empress of India, was pleased to forgo her right to annex Manipur and “graciously” assented to the re-establishment of the native ruler under conditions which the Governor-General in

³⁴ Manimohan, *Hijam Irabot Singh and Political Movement in Manipur*, p. 5.

council might consider desirable, the choice of the ruler falling upon him. The British found it essentially justified in holding the state as a whole guilty of rebellion and thus it had forfeited its right to exist as a state. This circumstance was an opportunity for the paramount power to get rid of “bad law of succession” which had always, again and again, led to disorder.³⁵

Many British officials including the chief commissioner of Assam, Mr. Ward, had argued in favour of annexation. The British needed to annex the kingdom for the maintenance of the prestige of the supreme paramount power. The annexation was intended to be a warning to all the native states of the British Indian subcontinent. The colonial authority also claimed that by being present in the state for more than half a century, it has protected the people of the state from oppression, and the necessary consequences of misrule and periodical upheaval, and it was the moral duty, obligation and right of the British to annex the state.³⁶

After the decision to put a minor on the throne as the new Raja, the British found it practical to re-grant the state and allow its existence as clemency of the forgiving benevolence of the Queen, the Empress of India. The British now had removed all ambiguity about the nature of relationship between the government of India and the kingdom, placing the latter in a position of “distinct subordination.” There came a whole different redefinition of sovereignty. This sovereignty was encoded in the paramountcy, under which the princely state was left with “domestic sovereignty”, while sovereignty beyond the borders lay with the government of India as the superior imperial power. As has been shown by Michael Fisher in many cases, Manipur was “reduced to the de facto status of puppet or virtually confined them within their own palaces.”³⁷

3.1 Chura Chand, the British Appointed “Raja” of Manipur

Just four days after Major H.St.P. Maxwell was appointed the first political agent and superintendent of the state with full powers of the British-ruled Manipur on 13

³⁵ R. Reid, ‘Manipur State’, in N. Sanajaoba (ed.), *Manipur: A British Anthology - Vol. 1*, New Delhi, Akansha, 2003, p. 200.

³⁶ Reid, *Manipur: A British Anthology - Vol. 1*, p. 195.

³⁷ Fisher, *Indirect Rule in India*, p. 67.

September 1891, on 17 September, he visited Chura Chand's house to inform his family of the orders of the government of India to appoint the child as the new Raja of Manipur. Maxwell presented the 6-year-old boy to a congregation as the newly chosen king. Later that year in the "Administration Report of the Manipur Political Agency, 1891-92," he described the feelings of those present at the event as such:

The news was received with some amazement and disappointment. The selection of a collateral branch for the chiefship of Manipur came like a bombshell, and, further, the choice falling on the youngest of the five brothers made still less explainable. The people have now realised that the minor Raja's right to the succession rests solely on his selection by the government of India and have loyally accepted the decision, and I doubt whether any attempt, even in distant future, will be made by disappointed partisans to alter the succession.

On 29 April 1892, the investiture of the minor was carried out with the ceremonial proceedings presided by the political agent, Major H.St.P. Maxwell. The government of India took this occasion as its first step towards administrative control over the state. Maxwell announced the abolition of the *lalup* system, a forced labour system, for which was substituted a house-tax system in the valley of ₹2 per annum, and the imposition of a land revenue assessment of ₹5 per *pari* or two and a half acres. A house tax of ₹3 per annum was imposed in the hills. These measures carried out swiftly with no opposition may seem minor at first glance but were telling of the power that the government of India exercised at this early stage. The changes also revealed the immediate colonial economic interest of the British to collect revenue.

3.2 Establishment of British Supremacy

The changes in the overall hill and valley land revenue system were followed by drastic changes brought in the judicial system. The Indian Penal Code (IPC) was now extended to cover all Manipuri subjects. A "Rules for the Administration of Justice and Police in the Manipur State" was proclaimed by Maxwell in 1892. Though it was decided to maintain the old Manipuri courts, numerous other special courts for adjudication of particular descriptions of matters were abolished. The Cherap Court, which had always been the highest court below the Durbar was maintained with

reduced strength to only five member magistrates who were bestowed the title *angamba* (noble man). It was authorised to try all civil cases exceeding ₹100 in value and all other criminal cases except murder, and offenses against the state. Article 28 of the “Rules” listed punishment for criminal offenses like an attempt to commit murder, dacoity, or robbery, willfully causing hurt, rape, petty theft or receiving stolen property, and adultery. It heard appeals from all lower courts and would sit on weekdays.

A new court, subordinate to the Cherap, called the Town Panchayat (Sadar Panchayat) was instituted on 15 November 1891 consisting of five magistrates. The peculiar characteristic of this new court was that it had jurisdiction only in the capital city and only tried minor criminal and civil cases from the Manipuri (Meetei) population, with power to fine up to ₹100. Just below it was the Rural Panchayat Court with powers of fining up to ₹50 and of disposing civil suits of ₹50 or less. It was divided into circles in the rural areas of the valley and each circle’s jurisdiction would be over 100 houses. It had at least one session per week.

Another court called the Mohammedan Court was also established having jurisdiction over the Manipuri Muslims (*pangals*) subjects residing in the valley. It consisted of five members and would sit twice a week. All these courts were collectively called the Panchayat Courts and dealt with both civil and criminal cases. They did not have jurisdiction over the British and Indian subjects residing in the protected reserve areas. Originally the members of all the courts were remunerated entirely through free land grants. It was only in 1906 that a system of cash payment was introduced with a salary of ₹25 per month for each Cherap member and ₹15 per month for each Sadar Panchayat member, all of which was sanctioned in addition to the free land grant.

Apart from all these different levels of juridical institutions, there was the court of the political agent and the court of the superintendent of the state. The former could try all civil and criminal cases involving European British subjects and the Bengali or Marwari Indian subjects. However, all sentences of death and

imprisonment exceeding seven years were subject to confirmation by the chief commissioner of Assam. Just below the court of the political agent, was the court of the assistant political agent. In the court of the political agent, an appeal against the order of the assistant political agent passing a sentence exceeding six months imprisonment or a fine exceeding ₹500 could be made. The highest judicial authority of all cases before the courts of Manipur was with the court of the chief commissioner of Assam. It exercised judicial supervisory and revisional powers in all cases.

The next intervention in the administrative structure of the state was in executive reform. The whole reorganisation of the security apparatus was essential to the very logic of colonial administration of a newly conquered territory. Manipur occupies one of the most strategic locations of the British Empire in southeast Asia. To its west was the center of British rule, Bengal, and to its east was the ever-looming threat of the powerful Burmese invasion. It was also located between the newly subjugated Naga and Lushai hills of Assam. Therefore, it was decided to station the 44th Gurkha Rifles in the valley. This was based on the understanding that the police establishment was not a substitute for a military base.³⁸ Maxwell's comment is telling of the severity of British concern in the security aspect of its rule:

Take away the British support, the country would be involved in a revolution tomorrow. Peace and security of the state depend entirely on the political agent and the Raja and the latter must be for many years completely under the guidance of the former.

Soon after the conquest, the British created a "reserve" territory at the heart of the capital known as the British Reserve. The area consisted of the main Kangla Fort area, the Khwairamband Bazaar, and the surrounding villages. Over time, this area became the seat of colonial power from where all decisions of the entire state were taken. It became the central repository of British political and military power. The political agent's residence and all the other branches of the administration,

³⁸ Kamei, *A History of Modern Manipur*, p. 13.

residencies of the British officials, and cantonment of the British army were located within the British Reserve.

A Civil Police for the capital city was established in 1893. It consisted of one sub-inspector, one head constable, and eleven constables. Its strength was raised to another thirty police men under one sub-inspector and two head-constable. By the end of colonial rule, the number had reached up to 125 police men.

Apart from the Civil Police whose jurisdiction covered the urban areas, a Rural Police under the “Rules of Administration of Justice and Police, 1892” was established. It introduced the chowkidari system in Manipur. Under this system, one chowkidar for about every hundred houses was appointed. The duty of the chowkidar was to keep himself informed and cognizant of the happenings of his circle of villages. He was not to interfere in the domestic and private life of the people and report any crime or unnatural death or existence of the epidemic of sickness, the state of the crops, and the welfare of the people. He lived in that circle and received from the house owner payment of 10 pots of paddy, and from the state one-half hectare of paddy field free of rent. He was elected by the people of the area subject to confirmation by the political agent.³⁹

A Military Police Battalion of fourteen native officers, forty-nine non-commissioned officers, 400 sepoy were raised in the following year in 1894, and Mr. M.L.F Crawford assistant to the political agent was appointed commandant of the battalion. This was created out of the need to have well-armed military police to deal with the internal security of the princely state. They were armed with muzzle loading carbine and bayonet, and dhoti with brown leather accoutrement. They were paid in cash, and a subedar received ₹30, zemadar ₹20, havildar ₹12, naik ₹9, sepoy and bugler ₹7 per annum. Earlier they were paid partially in cash and partially in grant of cultivable land.⁴⁰ These new standardised and modernised forces were instituted in replacement of the ill-trained and undisciplined sepoy of the pre-colonial era whose positions had become hereditary and duty performed on the

³⁹ Kamei, p. 14.

⁴⁰ Manimohan, *Hijam Irabot Singh and Political Movement in Manipur*, p. 6.

corvee system after the government of India stopped paying the Manipuri Levy in 1835. Acknowledging the security threat from the surrounding hills and proximity to Burma, in 1896 the government of India spent ₹475,000 on building forty-five rooms in cantonment areas as its first huge expenditure in the princely state. Over the next year, the military police were posted in different strategic areas of the state:

1. Five non-commissioned officers and eighteen sepoy at Kohima road. (Three posts – Sekmai, Mayangkhang, and Mythiphum)
2. Two non-commissioned officers and eleven sepoy at Burma road (Two posts)
3. One non-commissioned officer and sixteen sepoy at Cachar road. (Four posts – Bishenpur, Nungba, Kala Naga and Jirighat)
4. One non-commissioned officer and six sepoy in Sugnu
5. One native officer, four non-commissioned officers, and twenty-four sepoy at Tangkhul hills. (Two posts – Nungbi and Ukhul)

Seizing ample opportunity in the absence of any native sovereign head, the hills were divided into five divisions called *lam*. The five *lams* were Mao Lam in the north, the Tangkhul Lam in the northeast, Tammu Lam to the south of the Tangkhul Lam, Moirang Lam in the southwest corner of the state, and the Kabui Lam west of the valley. An official called the *lam*-subedar was placed in each division on the payment of ₹15 with seven *lambus* on ₹7 each to assist him. A house tax of ₹3 per household per annum was introduced. These *lambus* were so effective in their function that they became the eyes and ears of colonial rule.⁴¹ The chiefs or the headmen of the villages were entrusted with the administration of each of their villages. He had several tasks to carry out, namely, to collect the house tax and submit to the state for which he got certain commission, to maintain law and order and administer justice according to their customary laws, to render labour to the authority for the construction and maintenance of bridal paths, roads and bridges, and to provide hospitality to the touring British officials and other employees of the state. In practice, the *lalup* system that was recently abolished in the valley was de facto

⁴¹ Kamei, p. 21.

reimposed on the hill tribes in a more stringent form.⁴² By 1906, the new political agent, J. Shakespear had withdrawn all matters concerning the hills from the state office and instead formed a special office with two clerks who would manage all matters related to the hills.

Manipur was made to pay a penalty of ₹250,000 payable in five years for its rebellion against the Queen Empress, above an annual tribute of ₹50,000. The entire population was disarmed, and the defense and security of the state were taken over by the government of India. From a mere representative and ambassadorial role of the Crown, the duty of the political agent was converted to a governing authority who exercised complete power over the whole administrative affairs of the state. Though its existence as a state was not forfeited by the investiture of a Raja, the political agent was entrusted with the powers and functions of a judge-magistrate, the executive head of the administration, and the chief of the police.

The presence of a native ruler on paper gave a semblance of independence to the state and legitimacy to the presence of unquestionable British power. The colonial paramountcy with its decades-long experience of subordinating rebellious native states, considered it politically prudent to appoint a chosen Raja groomed and trained under strict British watch who would later execute the wills of the raj. This would undoubtedly reduce the risk and complexities of direct rule which could stir up resentment against an obvious foreign rule.

3.3 Establishment of the Durbar

It was only when all major administrative changes were carried out without any hindrance and with utmost accomplishment, that the government of India found it timely for the administration of the state to be handed over to the Raja and the Manipur State Durbar established on 15 May 1907. By this time, all major changes in the economic, administrative, and military spheres had been completed and it was only time that the new Raja, whose existence depended solely on his loyalty and submission to the paramount British power, was kept in place to handle the affairs of

⁴² Kamei, p. 22.

the state. These initial and swift measures were policies which the raj identified, at this stage, as the most important actions to solidify and establish firmly its rule over a newly conquered territory.

The selection and investiture of a minor Raja to the gaddi was a calculated decision that foresaw the future possibilities of unhindered British actions that could be carried out in the absence of any native ruler. During Chura Chand's minority, the whole administration of the state was vested in the hands of the superintendent of the princely state. Though separate offices of the superintendent and political agent were maintained with separate buildings, the duties of both the offices were overlooked by a single individual.

There could be many reasons why the British chose the minor specifically out of all the five princes. First, an appointment of a king whose descendant was not directly of royal descendants was meant to disappoint the established royal family which had been now removed of all favour from the British. Secondly, Chura Chand's young age made it possible for the government of India to send him out of the state for education during which period the British paramountcy could be firmly established in Manipur. Thirdly, the overall educational responsibility of the Raja fell directly into the hands of the political agent who now would groom the young minor in English education, opinion, and outlook.

Though the political and strategic reasons for the changes are apparent, there might be other intentions as well. Dragging out Manipur from its feudalism and the constant chaotic fighting between the princes was an action which the British saw as benevolent on their part, and also to bring a modern era of western enlightenment and governance and stability. However, this stability could be enforced and achieved only through complete British control, and thus at the expense of autonomy and integrity of the kingdom. For the whole scheme to be carried out, Chura Chand was groomed to be a ruler in the British image.

In 1895, Chura Chand and his brother Digendra Singh were sent to Mayo College, Ajmere, where he was put under the care and tutelage of Colonel Loch, the

Principal of the college. For a brief period, he also joined the Imperial Cadet Corps at Dehra Dun which was established to give military training to the princes of the native states. In 1901 he was recalled to the state by the chief commissioner of Assam, Henry Cotton, to be trained by the political agent. As soon as he returned, he received the Viceroy, Lord Curzon, who held a Durbar in the presence of Chura Chand. Next year, in 1902, a tutor, Captain J.R. Nuttall of the 44th Gurkha Rifles was appointed on September. When he was twenty-one of age in 1907, he was recognised as eligible to be crowned the new Raja, and on 15 May 1907, he was handed the administration of the state and the Durbar to be managed per a “Set of Rules” sanctioned by the government of India. The coronation ceremony was performed in February 1908 by Lancelot Hare, Lt. governor of East Bengal and Assam. It was not conducted in the traditional pattern of the kingdom’s enthronement called *Phampan Kaba*, but rather followed a pattern of English model of enthronement. This was one of the first instances where the legitimacy of the accession of the new Raja was put to misgivings from the part of the people.⁴³ The “Set of Rules” which was approved by the Judicial Department of the government of Eastern Bengal and Assam on 9 April 1907 was officially called “Rules for the Management of Manipur State” and contained some of the following points:

1. The Raja will be assisted by a Durbar, of which he will be the president. The Durbar will consist of a gazette officer of the Eastern Bengal and Assam government, whose services will be lent to the Durbar, who will be vice-president, and of at least three Manipuri members.
2. The Manipuri members of the Durbar will be appointed by the government on the recommendation of the Raja and the political agent.
3. The administration of the state will be carried on by the Durbar.
4. Three additional members may be appointed, who will have no special duties.
5. The Raja will have direct charge of the armed State Police or Bodyguard. He will appoint all village officials and title holders.
6. Records of the proceedings of the Durbar will be kept in English and Manipuri and copies in English submitted regularly to the political agent, who

⁴³ Parratt, *Wounded Land: Politics and Identity in Modern Manipur*, p. 14.

may request the Durbar to reconsider any decision arrived at, and if necessary, refer the matter to the government. He is also empowered to refer to the Durbar for any matter which comes to his notice.

7. The Durbar is the highest Criminal Court in the State and will try all cases which are beyond the jurisdiction of the Cherap. It will also hear appeals of all sorts from the Cherap's orders except as regards hills tribes.
8. British subjects will be solely under the jurisdiction of the political agent, who will try all cases to which a British subject is a party.⁴⁴

As this "Rules" made it evident that the central responsibility of the overall administration of the state was vested in the hands of the political agent, it was revised in 1910 after Chura Chand sought to determine his position more clearly. The political agent, Lt. Col., J. Shakespear, immediately informed the government of Eastern Bengal and Assam that keeping Chura Chand any longer in suspense would likely discourage him seriously. However, the government did not consider it necessary at all to change the "Rules" any further. After six months, Shakespear submitted a revised draft approved by Chura Chand himself. The government having approved the revised draft of "Rules", the political agent was instructed to enforce the same. According to the revised "Rules", the responsibility of the state was transferred from the Durbar to the Raja. The "Raja" in the earlier "Set of Rules" was now replaced by "His Highness." In contrast to the earlier "Rules" where the government would appoint members of the Durbar on the recommendation of the Raja and the political agent, the Raja now had the power to appoint the "ordinary and "additional members" of the Durbar which cannot be removed without the consent of the political agent. The roles of the vice-president as regards the administration of the hills were clearly defined to make room for consultation of the Raja but only so far as is consistent with the orders of the government. As time went on, the role of the Raja as the president of the Durbar would only gradually become nominal and a mere supervisory control without any administrative or executive power. And thus in 1913, a British ICS officer was appointed as the president of the Durbar.

⁴⁴ Manimohan, *Hijam Irabot Singh and Political Movements in Manipur*, p. 9.

In the year Chura Chand was put on the throne, the Durbar was also reconstituted to enable strict British control where his role was to “assist” the Durbar as mentioned in the first point of the “Set of Rules.” There were now five unelected members appointed jointly by the Raja and political agent, together with the ICS British officer, who was designated vice-president of the Durbar. Originally the Raja served as the president of the Durbar, but soon withdrew and the post was taken over by the vice-president. The overall administration of the hills was now excluded from the jurisdiction of the Durbar and fell under the vice-president through the authority of the Foreign Department (letter No. 1081 E.C., of 18 March 1908) and above this, he also controlled the state budget.

The political agent had utmost control over the Durbar members and they could be removed with his consent. Besides its administrative and financial function, the Durbar acted as the highest judicial institution, though its power was limited as it had no jurisdiction over Europeans, British Indians, or the hills people, who were tried in the court of the political agent, and capital punishment had to be confirmed by the chief commissioner of Assam.

3.4 The Raja as Mere Nominal Head of the State

The powers of Chura Chand, as nominal head of the state, were drastically reduced. In the *sanad* issued by the government of India, Foreign Department, on 18 September 1891, it was notified that the Governor-General in Council had selected Chura Chand, son of Chaobi Yaima, and great-grandson of Nar Singh, as the Raja of Manipur. Whether the new title would be “chief” or “Raja” depended solely on the pleasure of the British. The title “Raja” thus decided, would be hereditary and will descend in the direct line by primogeniture, provided that in each case the succession was approved by the government of India. He was assured protection and favour as long as he remained loyal to the Crown and followed all orders given by the raj concerning the administration of Manipur territories, the control of the hill tribes, the composition of the armed forces of the state, and any other matters in which the government may be pleased to intervene.⁴⁵ The *sanad* issued made it very clear the

⁴⁵ Manimohan, p. 2.

position and situation in which Chura Chand found himself. From a once-mighty kingdom that subjugated neighbouring tribes and even kingdoms and established relations with the Burmese and the British, Manipur was now completely at mercy of the raj.

As made apparent in the terms of the *sanad*, Manipur, for the first time in its history, would be administered under close control of the British. And until 1907, the state would be administered completely by a British ICS officer.

The Durbar was founded not as an exercise of benevolent political action of giving internal sovereignty or autonomy to the state, but rather for carrying out smooth functioning of the British rule. The event of 1891 was a case of conquest of a rebel state which waged war against the Crown, and this for the British was a premise on which future relations would be depended entirely on the will and pleasure of the conqueror. The chief commissioner of Assam was instructed to make it clear to all that the rights of the Raja depended solely upon his selection by the government of India and would not allow that right to be called into question in any circumstance.⁴⁶ Manipur now entered a new phase in history in which its political and administrative power was defined by complete control of the British.

One very important and apparent fact of the princely state's subdued position was the separation of the administration of the hills from the valley. In an effective measure, 90 per cent of the land area of the state and some third of the population were removed from the direct control of the king with the justification that the Raja might exploit the tribal population for his own advantage. The administration of the hills was now under the control of the vice-president of the Durbar who was an Assam ICS appointee. The provision stated that "His Highness shall be consulted in all matters of importance," and also that the political agent and the president of the Durbar should seek to accommodate the Raja's wishes concerning the hills. However, the final decision was vested in the chief commissioner of Assam. In the revised "Rules for the Management of Manipur" approved in 1919, there were no substantial changes that would allow more autonomy to Chura Chand in his day-to-

⁴⁶ Manimohan, p. 4.

day administration. The administration of the hills remained under the president of the Durbar, with only policy decisions being referred to Chura Chand. Within the valley too, his power was curtailed. After the complete occupation of the Kangla Fort, the new “reserve” areas in the heart of Imphal came under direct British jurisdiction. It included the old palace complex that was turned into a cantonment after 1891 which now was occupied mostly by Indian Marwari merchants and other Indians. With this protection given to them, the British made sure that their economic interest was kept intact.

The British policy towards Manipur was marked more by consolidation of its control rather than direct control of the state. Three decades earlier, the British had already diagnosed that direct annexation of states like Awadh, Jhansi, Nagpur, Satara, and several Punjab states under Lord Dalhousie’s forward policy (doctrine of lapse) had directly contributed to the Great Revolt of 1857. The British also found that territories under indirect rule were less affected by the revolt than those under direct British control. Though the Proclamation of 21 August 1891 had “graciously” announced the continuation of native rule in the state, it did not mean that the state would be left with no interference or unreformed. The British assumed greater responsibility for the welfare of the subjects of the state. As Ian Copland argues, the British was now dedicated to grooming the princes as “natural allies.”⁴⁷

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⁴⁷ I. Copland, *The British Raj and the Indian Princes*, Bombay, Orient Longman, 1982.

CHAPTER 4

THE RESISTANCE MOVEMENTS IN THE VALLEY



Fig. 4.1 - T.A. Sharpe, ICS, President, Manipur State Durbar

Source: Karam Manimohan



Fig. 4.2 - Women agitators at the Imphal Telegraph Office, Dec 12, 1939

Source: Manipur State Archives

Chapter 4

The Resistance Movements in the Valley

A decade into the British rule of Manipur, in 1904, Manipur for the first time in history saw its biggest political mobilisation. More than a 5,000 men and women participated in an agitation against the Raj's decision to resuscitate the *lalup* system. The reintroduction meant that all men of the valley should participate in rebuilding the colonial officers' bungalows destroyed by fire – probably a well-planned arson attack. The decision to reintroduce the old feudal practice of state force labour came from the political agent H.St.P. Maxwell. In an order issued on 12 September 1904 and submitted to the Cherap Court for its promulgation to the inhabitants of the Imphal, he wrote:

On the night of 15 March 1904, the assistant superintendent of state's bungalow was burnt down and incendiarism was suspected. On the night of 4 August 1904, the bungalow lately belonging to Mr. Mitchell, executive engineer, which had been purchased by the State and was occupied by the assistant superintendent of the state, was again burnt down, and this time there can be no doubt that an incendiary set it on fire. A reward of ₹500 was offered for the information leading to the conviction of the guilty person or persons, but without any clue being obtained. As a preventive measure and proper punishment, I consider it necessary to temporarily resuscitate *lalup* in the town of Imphal for the purpose of rebuilding the house burnt down.

After the fire incident in March, three and half months later, on 6 July, the Khwairamband Bazaar which contained twenty-eight sheds with a seating capacity for 3,000 market women was destroyed by fire. Next month, on 4 August, the bungalow recently purchased by the government from Mr. Mitchell, executive engineer, and in occupation again of Captain Nuttall and Mr. Dunlop was destroyed

by fire.⁴⁸ If the British officials were not able to establish definite proof of incendiarism in the previous two cases, the government was able to find positive evidence in the third incineration as a bamboo with an oil rag attached was found in the ruins.

The order of the political agent H.St.P. Maxwell to resuscitate the *lalup* as a punishment to all the inhabitants of the Imphal was evident of how the Raj looked at its colonial subject. Every one of the populations was, in his own words, “full of deceit and intrigue,” and therefore to be treated as suspect of rebellion against an imperial power that only wished to bring civilisation to this part of the empire. On 5 October, as soon as he returned to his residence, the political agent found some 3,000 women gathering around the compound of his residence. In no time, the mobilisation of the women was carried out swiftly, and the women were joined by 2,000 or more number.⁴⁹ An anti-British feeling had swept across the valley, ignited by the political agent’s decision to punish the whole Imphal town population. Whether or not the decision was wisely carried out needs lesser attention. The decision of the political agent in itself is telling of the characteristic feature of colonial rule which was devoid of any hesitation in using force.

After several hours of confrontation with the women, Maxwell, with the help of thirty additional armed police, was able to persuade them to return. Soon after, the British went on with a secret search for the leaders of the agitation. In the Imphal town, all the cantonment roads and other roads leading to the British Reserve were closed. By 5 October, the leader of the agitation, Rajkumar Kala Sana with other leaders were rounded up and arrested, and removed to the police *thana*.

4.1 The Nupi Lan of 1904

After the advent of the British “indirect rule”, the royal princes had now lost their old privileges and traditional positions in state affairs. It was not surprising that under this circumstance, they would be the ones to fight back against a foreign rule that had

⁴⁸ Captain J.R. Nuttall of the 44th Gurkhas was appointed tutor to Raja Chura Chand and he joined the post on 1st September, 1902. Mr. J.G. Dunlop took up his appointment as assistant political agent and assistant superintendent of the State on 8th November 1903.

⁴⁹ Manimohan, *Nupi Lan*, p. 50.

taken away everything from them. Being discarded into the periphery of a new order brought by colonial rule, they now sought ways to fight back. Unlike the old days when a prince vying for the throne could go to the neighboring kingdom of Cachar and collect a band of army in his support for the throne, the new condition of British consolidation in the frontier state provided no such opportunity. In this situation, a stealth attack of midnight incendiarism was what was left to them.

An outright mobilisation of direct mass agitation against the government and its appointed Raja was not an option available to them. With the radical modernisation of the police, the military and the judicial system, the British had consolidated its power firmly in the country. It had also established a new class of loyal collaborators who were now entwined in the colonial administrative structure.

The women boycotted the market on the condition that they would open the Khwairamband Bazaar if the political agent canceled his orders to build the bungalows and the use of punitive police force against the agitators. On 2 October, Dumbra Singh, the eldest brother had arrested a Brahmin and brought him to Maxwell. On further inquiry, it was found that the Brahmin had mobilised the market women of Moirangkhom for a total market shutdown. The new salaried collaborator middle class of the Cherap and Panchayat Courts intervened on behalf of the government. They informed the political agent that people were ready to follow the order passed by the government but it was the various princes who were threatening the people and the women to agitate. With this, the rajkumars were isolated.

Towards the evening of 7 October 1904, the agitative mood of the women subsided as the government came down heavy on the agitators and more arrests were made. People started collecting materials for the bungalow and the construction began. By the middle of October, the environment assumed a peaceful air. Maxwell wrote to the chief commissioner of Assam on 10 November that it was “important that the revolutionary tendencies of the Manipuris should be checked and they should thoroughly understand that any irregular attempt to resist authority which may entail

loss of life or property to others will be thoroughly suppressed.”⁵⁰ For the chief commissioner, Mr. J.B. Fuller, it was very much essential for the Raj that “during the Raja’s minority we (the British government) are bound to protect his interests.”⁵¹ The protection of a native ruler who is appointed to rule on behalf of the Raj as a legitimization of colonial enterprise naturally meant protection of the Raj itself.

On 13 November, after being tried in the colonial judicial system in the “Arson Case,” the political agent ordered the banishment of the six leaders of the agitation. They would be exiled to Lakhipur in the Cachar district of Assam. The chief commissioner of Assam ordered that the exiles should be given ₹100 each at Jirighat to enable them to live till they could provide for themselves. This would get rid of potential trouble makers that could disrupt the colonial established order.

The whole series of events leading upto the banishment of the rajkumars is referred to as the First *Nupi Lan* in Manipuri historiography. To better understand these events and subsequently the Second *Nupi Lan* of 1939, it is worthwhile to elaborate first on the position of women in Manipuri society in the early twentieth century.

4.2 Role of Women in Manipuri Economy

From the onset of British “indirect rule” in Manipur, the women had shown that they were capable of organising themselves as a political force ready to take up mass action when occasion demanded. Because of the economic position they acquired for themselves, women in Manipur held a high and free status. The high social and economic status of the women of the valley was often remarked upon by British colonial officers and ethnographers.⁵² According to Saroj N. Arambam Parratt and John Parratt, despite the dominant prevalence of Hinduism in the valley, the Meetei

⁵⁰ Manimohan, p. 61.

⁵¹ Letter from the chief commissioner of Assam to the political agent of Manipur, No. 13, Confidential 482 p, dated Shillong, the 30th January 1905 (J.B. Fuller recorded the Note on 23rd January 1905.

⁵² W. McCulloch, *An Account of the Valley of Munnipore and the Hill Tribes*, Calcutta, 1858; R. Brown, *Annual Report on the Munnipore Political Agency*, Calcutta, 1874; J. Shakespeare, *The Religion of Manipur*, Calcutta 1913.

woman suffered none of the humiliating oppression of their sisters elsewhere in the subcontinent.⁵³

The domestic trade of the country was managed by women. This trade included items like rice, vegetables, fish, tobacco, salt, oil, baskets, locally produced fabrics, and other numerous items. The main activity of this market economy was carried out at the Khwairamband Bazaar located on the western side of Kangla fort. The market is believed to be established during the reign of Khagemba in the medieval period, probably around 1580.⁵⁴ Thousands of women occupied the various regular stalls and sheds while an even larger number of women occupied the spaces around the sheds.

According to the assessment of the political agent, Christopher Gimson,⁵⁵ over 2,000 women traded in Khwairamband Bazaar beneath the covered sheds. Double the number here, there were women in the open air outside the sheds and stalls.⁵⁶ Legally, there were no “reserved” seats in the market. The women in the regular market sheds and stalls had their own individual places. These seats were passed down from mother to daughter, or any chosen person, and attempts by outsiders to occupy these places were always resisted. Apart from the economic activities carried out solely by women, the market space was also an important arena for social and political interactions and discussions. The British in its entire rule over Manipur for half a century had never been very successful in strictly controlling and imposing “order” in this market. The Khwairamband Bazaar was located within the British Reserve, and therefore it was administratively under the control of the political agent rather than the Raja or the Durbar.

⁵³ S. Parratt and J. Parratt, ‘The Second “Women’s War” and the Emergence of Democratic Government in Manipur’, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2001, p. 906.

⁵⁴ T.C. Hudson, *The Meitheis*, London, 1908, p. 23.

⁵⁵ A Cambridge graduate, he was an experienced officer in the Indian Civil Service. He arrived in India in 1911 and had worked for most of his career in Assam. In 1918, he was posted in Manipur for the first time as the president of the State Durbar. He later became the political agent in 1933.

⁵⁶ According to an oral tradition, preserved in H. Bhuban Singh’s *The Merger of Manipur*, Imphal, 1988, and verified by Saroj N Parratt and John Parratt with their meeting with Christopher Gimson in the early nineteen-seventies, Gimson used to venture into the market at night, hidden beneath a huge shawl and stealthily listen to what the market women were talking related to current affairs. He also engaged them in conversation and listened to their problems and complaints.

With this social and political character of the early twentieth century Manipur in the background, it became only a matter of time before an organised anti-colonial movement emerged from within the women of Manipur. The chief commissioner of Assam, Robert Reid, once remarked that “Manipuri women are notorious for their independence and their proneness to take direct action to get their own way.” In a letter to the political agent, Christopher Gimson on 16 December 1939, he recalled that when a previous officiating political officer had attempted to introduce stricter regulations on the Khwairamband Bazaar, it resulted in the officer being surrounded by the women and threatened with a ducking in the river unless he withdrew those orders.⁵⁷

4.3 The Question of Rice

Rice played an important role in the social and economic relations in Manipur. As a staple food, it provided means of livelihood to the people. In this, men were mostly the producers who worked in paddy fields engaging in the production process of ploughing, sowing, harvesting, etc. Women on the other end of this economic activity were the ones who sold the final product. Therefore, the relationship between the farmers as producers and the women as sellers was a traditional one in the agrarian economy. Rice as one of the main ingredients of commercial items, played a crucial role in the regulation of the agrarian market economy. Apart from this, women being the main component of market activities, formed an integral social and economic group in Manipur. Therefore, a boycott of the market, that is, the Khwairamband Bazaar would mean a virtual blockage of the whole agrarian economy. This would explain why the women were such a force in the agitation of 1904 when the political agent H.St.P. Maxwell forced the people of the Imphal town as a collective punishment to rebuild the burnt-down residences of the assistant political agent.

On another end of the spectrum of women’s role in society, their social status could not be argued as entirely unhinged. This fact is despite their high economic independence. Post the 1817 Manipuri-Burmese war, during the seven years of occupation of the kingdom, the male population of Manipur was drastically reduced.

⁵⁷ The officer was C.G. Crawford, who was the political agent for six months in 1928.

This brought about a new social milieu in the society in the form of sanctions given to the practice of polygamy. This practice meant that women, despite their positive contribution to the society, also needed to look for a husband to gain social status and security, and hence their condition cannot be termed as entirely emancipated. The Anglo-Manipur war of 1891 also further reduced the male population of the country resulting in the greater acceptance of the practice of polygamy.⁵⁸ This was also accompanied by the increased dependence on women for the upkeep of the family.

The swallowing up of Manipur into British colonial extractive market economy in 1891 had drastic economic implications for the agrarian economy. The valley was alluvial soil rich and fertile for wet rice cultivation. Rice naturally was the main product of agrarian activity. Though there was a strong commercial relationship between Manipur and Assam from early times, it was only after 1891 that large-scale export of rice began. Soon after the British conquest of the territory, it was absorbed into the colonial market with unrestricted export of rice to Kohima.⁵⁹ By 1894 some 8,000 maunds of rice were exported to Kohima.⁶⁰ In this colonial exploitative market driven by profit and extraction of revenue, there was no system of import of food grains at times of scarcity in the valley. With this in mind, the Raj kept the export of rice regulated and checked. There were always apprehensions on the part of the government that excessive unregulated export of rice would have a severe effect on the society. Maxwell expressed his apprehension about rice scarcity stating:

I still think that when thousands of people are on the verge of starvation and there is no means of importing food to the valley, the export of rice, however small, should be prohibited. Let me express the hope that the occasion may not arise to fight this disputed point.

Despite this fear of the political agent and his reluctance to stop the excessive export of rice, export for that year (1898-99) was 36,430 maunds.⁶¹ Soon after motor vehicles were introduced to transportation networks, colonial rice trade assumed a

⁵⁸ S. Yambem, 'Nupi Lan: Manipur Women's Agitation', 1939, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 11, No. 8, 1976, p. 325.

⁵⁹ Administrative Report for the State of Manipur, Manipur State Archives (MSA), 1892-93, p. 6.

⁶⁰ Administrative Report for the State of Manipur, MSA, 1894-95, p. 5.

⁶¹ Administrative Report for the State of Manipur, MSA, 1898-99, p. 2.

different character. Before the introduction of these modern machines, rice was carried mainly in bullock and hand carts. Now, with the opportunity of more free and faster vehicular transportation, the Marwari immigrant business class captured rice trade at a relentless pace. All this was not at all a big challenge to the traditional rice traders, the women, in normal times of good harvest. A good harvest would mean that there would be enough rice for both local consumption and export. However, in the years of poor yield, there was great risk factor and apprehension that the Marwari merchants would buy up more in excess even to the condition of hoarding. The shortage of rice from hoarding would create an artificially induced famine-like situation that would seriously affect the livelihood of the people as rice was the basic staple food. Above this, there would be economic distress as rice was also one of the main items of trade.

Table 1: Marwari Rice Contractors and destination of export for the year 1920

Name of Contractors	Station Supplied	Quantity per month in maunds
Sudasukh	Kohima Battalion	1,000
Sooresh Chunder	Sadiya Battalion	1,000
Sanairam	Dacca Battalion	500
Badri Narayan	Dacca Battalion	300
Kularam	Piphima PWD Coolies	80
Kularam	Kohima Hospital	50
Murlidhar	His own shop	30
Ganesh Lal	Sadiya PWD Coolies	980 (one time only)
Ganesh Lal	Sadiya PWD Coolies	360 (for two months)
Jibanram Premsukh	Piphima shop	200 (July only)
Sudasukh	Kohima Civil	800
Kularam	Piphima PWD Coolies	900
Kularam	D.C. Kohima	3000 (one time)
Deven Narayan Tiwari	Piphima PWD Coolies	450

Source: Administrative Reports for the State of Manipur, 1920-21.

As rice trade fell under the hands of the foreign Marwari immigrant business class, the whole export took a monopolistic and exploitative character.⁶² Resentment

⁶² Persons other than the original inhabitants of Manipur were categorised as foreigners. A separate office to deal with them was maintained by the state. All foreigners resided in the British “reserved” area that fall under the jurisdiction of the political agent. They could not be tried in the Durbar, and had to be dealt with only in the court of the political agent.

against colonial extraction of rice began to take firm root in the women rice traders. The price of rice increased drastically and in 1925 the export of rice was permitted only for six months.

By February next year in 1926, export was completely stopped.⁶³ There was only one instance in the early twenties when rice export had to be stopped. While the earlier embargo was due to genuine scarcity, the embargo of 1925-26 was due to the rise of price caused by increased over export aided by motorised transport.

Table 2: Export of Rice from Manipur, 1922-23 to 1939

Year	Area under rice cultivation (acres)	Quantity of rice exported (maunds)
1922-23	1,69,537	80,000
1923-24	1,72,893	1,81,370
1924-25	1,74,215	1,99,710
1925-26	1,75,537	1,55,014
1926-27	1,77,058	40,729
1927-28	1,77,670	47,499
1928-29	1,78,118	1,65,983
1929-30	1,78,473	1,64,510
1930-31	1,78,291	1,51,725
1931-32	1,80,116	2,05,287
1932-33	1,79,648	2,77,389
1933-34	1,79,841	2,23,523
1934-35	1,79,346	2,54,619
1935-36	----	----
1936-37	1,83,486	2,40,624
1937-38	----	2,61,716
1938-39	1,85,213	3,72,174
1939-40	1,85,859	46,359

Source: Administrative Reports for the State of Manipur for the years cited.

The export of rice fell under two categories. First is the cart tax which allowed free movement of rice where the exporter paid a levy known as the cart tax. This provided sizeable revenue for the state. The second is the lal pass under which rice was exported under a contract between the princely state and the government of Assam. Under the latter category, rice was exported to the Kohima Civil Station, the Assam Rifles posted at Kohima, Sadia, and other parts of Assam. The cart tax fell

⁶³ Administrative Report for the State of Manipur, MSA, 1925-26, p. 5.

under the monopoly of the Marwari capitalist business class, while the *lal pass* was a state monopoly. In 1912, authorisation for the export was delegated to a trading company for a fixed payment. It was this change in the export system which during the nineteen-twenties the Marwari capitalist merchant class began to exploit by drastically increasing the amount of rice export.

Rice yield in the valley had been declining steadily since the beginning of the twentieth century. There were greater demands as the population increased; however, very little land had been released for cultivation. In 1898-99 only 36,436 maunds of rice were exported, by 1925-26 this had risen to 1,55,014, and in 1938 had escalated to 372,174 maunds. By 13 December 1939, 463,590 maunds had already been exported. The area of rice cultivation in the valley increased merely 18,838 acres between 1921 and 1939, while the volume in the export of rice increased by 292,174 maunds in the same period. The export of rice reached an all-time record in 1938 with 372,174, just one year ahead of the women's agitation in 1939. The colonial economic logic of extraction had reached its exhaustive limit and any failure in harvest was meant to create a severe artificial shortage.

As early as the nineteen-twenties, there had been protests and large demonstrations against the exploitative monopoly of the Marwari foreigner traders. They had strict monopoly in the import and export trade. Their influence and powers had increased so much that by the nineteen-thirties, they were bribing Chura Chand for their own advantage. There were frequent complaints and petitions against them for their removal from the princely state.

4.4 The Second Nupi Lan

In 1939, when the British were fighting in the Second World War, the state of Manipur was entering a phase of women's movement unseen in its modern history. Excessive rain during July-August of that year had seriously damaged the crops and there was flood in many parts of the valley. There was further excessive rain in September-October and it had severe effect on the paddy harvesting. To add more to

the already worse situation, in mid-November hailstorm destroyed most of the crops almost ready for harvesting.⁶⁴

In anticipation of the looming bad harvest of the season, the state Durbar passed a resolution on 13 September 1939 that the export of rice be stopped. The Durbar gave this matter priority as reflected in this resolution being kept above all other resolutions. The Raja had to give assent for the resolution to be carried out into an order. He pointed out that the export ban would not apply to the government contract with the Assam Rifles in Kohima and Sadiya.

The Durbar again met on 23 September and agreed to the request of the political agent for the export of rice to the Kohima Civil Station. At the same time, it reserved the right to stop this export anytime expressing apprehensions about famine. The session also approved a scheme whereby no rice could be exported from Manipur without the permission of the political agent. The term “export” was also defined to mean only the movement of rice along the Manipur-Dimapur Road to any place beyond Sekmai. An appeal from the Chura Chand for allowing export of rice to the Dacca Battalion was also refused. A lot many applications from individuals asking for the re-opening of the rice export were also refused by the Durbar.

The Durbar by this time had even considered the idea of having rice trade as a sole state monopoly. All these resolutions taken by the Durbar didn't have any effective influence on the whole condition of scarcity created, as on 9 November 1939, the Durbar reversed all its earlier resolutions. It was resolved that export of rice would resume from 24 November. With an order from the Raja, the export was resumed on 21 November. He was under heavy pressure from the cart tax monopolists and other Marwari merchants. Secondly, he was against the Durbar's idea of gaining state monopoly of the rice export as a measure of control. These decisions by Chura Chand would contribute directly to the outbreak of the *Nupi Lan* on 13 December 1939.

⁶⁴ Administrative Report for the State of Manipur, MSA, 1939-40, p. 5.

Just before the December upsurge, the price of rice was ₹two per maund. Earlier the price had been ₹1.12 per maund.⁶⁵ The prevailing condition made it apparent that a near-famine situation was just around the corner. Of all the class of people hit hard by the rapid rise in the price of rice, it was the peasants that were affected the worst.

The peasants had no other source of livelihood and their precarious conditions forced them to sell their stocks of rice to the foreigner Marwaris. Apart from this, the women who ran the trade in rice had been deprived of their commodity and therefore their means of livelihood. In this situation, the available stocks of rice in the valley were all bought and hoarded by the Marwari merchant class. They had a considerable amount of control over the trade aided by the numerous rice mills they owned. Only three mills were owned by the inhabitants of Imphal.

The fast-worsening economic condition of the late nineteen-thirties in the valley was not the sole catalyst of the movement. The situation had been deteriorating from the previous decade. Added to the near mass starvation condition were added the oppressive measures of the misrule of Chura Chand.⁶⁶ He was now the “most loyal and absentee Maharaj of Manipur.”⁶⁷ There were non-stop frequent tours outside the state and his long pilgrimages caused distress amongst the people as no Durbar resolutions in connection to the public could be taken in his absence. In addition, there were heavy expenses incurred from the state’s exchequer for the Raja’s personal Civil List. Each year more money was spent on the List than on the state’s developmental works.

On the other hand, there was an increasingly oppressive Brahminical social order imposed, especially the use of outcasting member/s of society as a means of social, political, and religious control, and also as a means of personal financial accumulation. There was forced labour and forced guard duties, and also the reintroduction of *amin senkhai*. It was a system of forced hospitality and portering for

⁶⁵ Administrative Report for the State of Manipur, MSA, 1940-41, p. 2.

⁶⁶ Parratt and Parratt, *Modern Asian Studies*, p. 909.

⁶⁷ Manimohan, *Nupi Lan*, p. 120.

the land revenue officers and other colonial officials visiting the villages and countryside.⁶⁸

Table 3: Expenditure of Chura Chand's Civil List and State Works, 1920 to 1930

Year	Raja's Civil List	State Works
1920	1,67,262	1,51,801
1921	1,65,610	1,59,579
1922	1,58,746	1,12,685
1923	1,48,598	1,25,413
1924	1,52,258	1,24,785
1925	1,48,694	2,16,361
1926	1,50,031	1,36,143
1927	1,54,071	1,38,919
1928	1,56,192	1,37,679
1929	1,55,113	1,47,333
1930	1,65,405	1,26,264

Source: Administrative Reports for the State of Manipur.

By the first week of December 1939, many women had started to take matters in their own hands. They started preventing bullock carts carrying rice from reaching Marwari storehouses. Anti-Marwari feelings had further started to rise up when one women leader, Rajani Devi, was insulted by Juriya Chand Serogi, the son of one of the Marwari shop owners, saying that that year the Manipuri women had to eat broken rice and that the following year they would be fed on *chengkup*⁶⁹ mixed with the dust from under his feet.⁷⁰ The insult aggravated the situation and the political agent had to intervene by making the father of the accused submit a written apology. Gradually, more women joined the agitation and it became more militant in its character. Bullock carts were seized and many of them overturned. The loads were scattered and destroyed. At night women started a vigilante group and roamed around the streets to check and prevent clandestine delivery of rice to the Marwari traders.

On 11 December, just two days ahead of the outbreak of the agitation, many small traders arrived at the Khwairamband Bazaar only to find that there was not

⁶⁸ N. Lokendra, *Unquiet Valley: Society, Economy and Politics in Manipur, 1891-1950*, New Delhi, 1998.

⁶⁹ *Chengkup* is the powder resulting from the husking of rice. It is used for feeding live stocks such as chickens, pigs and cows.

⁷⁰ The personal eye witness account of the event is found in Rajani Devi's Nupilal, Imphal, 1995.

even a *meruk*⁷¹ of rice for sale. Fifty to sixty women retailers present on the day also found that there was no rice available in the whole market. The women decided to start an agitation the next day. There were other mobilisation and campaigns against the unavailability of rice. L. Kanhai and L. Babun campaigned for a boycott of cinema halls.

A rumour had spread that some bullock cart drivers who tried to sell rice to the Marwaris were being rounded up by women agitators and handed over to the police. As had been decided the previous day, on 12 December, thousands of women marched and gathered around the Durbar office and petitioned for the urgent stoppage of the rice export. They had earlier marched towards the bungalow of the political agent. However, Christopher Gimson was some 60 miles south of the capital on tour, and also it was his 53rd birthday. The women asked the president of the Durbar to ascertain the quantity of rice available in the market, and also the average quantity of rice being exported.⁷² The women surrounded the Durbar and detained the president, T.A. Sharpe, while the other members escaped through the back door.⁷³ He immediately sent the assistant superintendent of police with orders for a complete survey of the rice stocks. He persuaded the Durbar to start an inquiry, and facing the women agitators all by himself, he told them that the orders for a ban on the export of rice could not be issued without the sanction of Chura Chand who was away at Nawadeep to perform *asti*⁷⁴ for his late mother. This reply failed to satisfy and calm down the agitators. In reality, no help could be expected from Chura Chand because

⁷¹ One *meruk* is almost equal to one seer.

⁷² According to the report submitted to the state Durbar by the Land Settlement Officer and Land Revenue Officer on the size of the harvest of the year 1939, there were approximately 7,400 paris of land under rice cultivation in Manipur, (One pari is approximately 2.5 acres. The number of paris destroyed by flood was 900. The average yield per pari was 29 pots (one pot is approximately 65 seers) therefore the amount of paddy available to the population for consumption was about 17,50,000 pots. Putting the population of the State at 3,00,000 (1931 census figure being 2,84,843), and the per capita consumption per year at 6 pots, the minimum requirement was less than 18,00,000 pots. Considering the fact that already a large quantity had already been exported, the Durbar didn't rule out the possibility of rice scarcity in Manipur before the following harvest. (Manipur State Durbar Resolution No 1 of December 12, 1939, Memo No. 1973-G/IB-1 of December 15, 1939.) cite 34, 35)

⁷³ A Cambridge graduate like Christopher Gimson, he was an inexperienced officer who had come to India only a couple of years before. He was too young and only 26 years of age when he was appointed assistant political agent. He was captured by the invading Japanese forces and shot dead in 1944.

⁷⁴ *Asti* is the Manipuri Hindu ritual of depositing the frontal bone the Ganges.

when he was not out of the country for his pilgrimage, he had virtually secluded from the people due to the illness of one of his daughters. The people were also convinced that he was hand in glove with the Marwari traders accepting bribes from them.⁷⁵ Apart from this, the people also had lost confidence in Durbar which consisted only of Chura Chand's hand-picked henchmen.⁷⁶

The number of agitators had by now reached a swollen number of around 4,000. They took T.A. Sharpe to the telegraph office. After he had dispatched his telegram, it was found that Chura Chand was not then in Nawadeep. One of the palace officials, Khaidem Nongyai, managed to find out the whereabouts of the Raja and sent him a telegram describing the situation. Two senior military, Major Bullfield and civil surgeon Major Cummins, managed to convince their way to the president of the Durbar in the hope of rescuing the young officer. But instead, they found themselves confined with Sharpe. They resolved to not leave the telegraph office until they received orders from Chura Chand for the stoppage of rice export. The commandant of the 4th Assam Rifles who reached the agitation site was also prevented from rescuing the confined men.

It was at around 2.45 in the afternoon that a platoon of the Assam Rifles arrived. Captain Stone, Bullfield's second-in-command was becoming increasingly worried about his superior officers. A full-on physical confrontation between women agitators and the troops started. The troops, amidst a fusillade of stone, were able to clear the agitators from the compound of the office using lathi, guns, and bayonets.⁷⁷ By midnight the troops were rescued from the women agitators, and the compound was cleared.

On 13 December, at around 1.30 p.m. the president of Durbar received a message from the Chura Chand ordering the political agent to stop rice export. Gimson had returned to the capital from his tour at around 3 a.m. An order banning

⁷⁵ Christopher Gimson reported to Mills on 25th

⁷⁶ Parratt and Parratt, *Modern Asian Studies*, p. 915.

⁷⁷ Christopher Gimson reported that there were no serious injuries or bayonet wounds. However, around half a dozen women were detained in the hospital after the violent confrontation and over twenty others were treated on the spot by Cummins and his medical assistants.

the export was promptly issued without any delay. The Durbar on 15 December had a session where they discussed whether the telegram from Chura Chand implied a ban on rice export to Kohima Civil Station and Assam Rifles at Kohima and Sadiya. In this meeting, it was resolved to dispose thirty state military police and fifteen *dolai pabas* in the hands of the police member of the Durbar.

The agitation now took a new form where a large number of women swelling up to 10,000 in number went from one rice mill to another forcing mill owners to give a written assurance that they would not run their mills. During this campaign, a rumour spread that one of the largest mill owners had soaked rice and boiled paddy to convert it into flattened par-boiled rice, *chengpak*. This led to some 10,00 women marching at night towards the mill, and electrical connection to the mill was removed shutting it down. Gimson had heard of the plan of the agitators and himself reached the spot at Mantripukhri outside the British Reserve before the women. Having personally removed the electricity connection to the mill, he subsequently took the same action with all mills owned by the Marwaris, and also instructed the Hydro-Electric Board to suspend supplies to the mills.⁷⁸

Male political activists and leaders started to join the movement of 14 December when a large crowd of women gathered in the Police Bazaar. The revolutionary leader Hijam Irabot was out of state at this time, and one of his colleagues, Kulabidhu Laishram, addressed the gathering. The colonial authority had now arrested eighteen women and this further flamed the passion of the women. The crowd was heavily charged with lathis, and several arrests were made including Kulabidhu. Several people were injured, and it was reported that three women were killed.⁷⁹

4.5 Hijam Irabot in the Second Nupi Lan

Irabot arrived in Imphal on 16 December. His arrival in the scene had a huge impact in the political landscape of the movement, and the *Nupi Lan* entered a new phase.

⁷⁸ L. Ibungohal Singh and N. Khelchandra Singh, *Cheitharol Kumpaba*, Imphal, 1987, entry for 14th December 1939.

⁷⁹ Parratt and Parrat, *Modern Asian Studies*, p. 913.

Now the movement gained new momentum with more male support pouring in. Just a day after he arrived from Cachar, Irabot called a meeting of the working committee of the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha. Until the outbreak of the Second *Nupi Lan*, the influence and activities of the organisation can be argued to be not very significant.⁸⁰ In this meeting, the way forward of the movement was hotly debated amongst the members. Sharp differences between Irabot's group which declared their solidarity with the women's movement and other members who were opposed to the movement arose. This led Irabot to opt out of the Mahasabha. After leaving the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha, on 24 December 1939, he formed a new political organisation called the Manipur Praja Samelini at a meeting held at Police Grounds.⁸¹ Large public gatherings were organised at different places of Imphal where Irabot addressed the crowd.

The Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha was founded in 1934 as a cultural organisation with Chura Chand as its president, and until 1938, its name remained Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha. The fourth session known popularly as the Chinga Session held in Imphal in December 1938 made a radical departure in the organisation's aims and objectives. With this session, "the political history of Manipur entered a new era."⁸² Several important decisions with huge political implications were taken. The word "Hindu" was dropped from the name of the organisation. Secondly, Irabot was elected as the president replacing Chura Chand who had been inactive the whole time. A proposal for a common administrative system for both the hills and valley of the state was made. Lastly and most importantly, a demand for setting up of a Legislative Council based on a representative form of government elected by adult franchise was raised. A few months later, the Durbar put out a statement declaring that since the organisation had now become political, no government employee was permitted to be its member or to assist it in any way.

⁸⁰ N. Joykumar Singh, *Social Movements in Manipur*, Delhi, Mittal, 2005, p. 122.

⁸¹ The faction of the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha which remained after Irabot's group left to form the Praja Samelini subsequently became the Manipur Congress Party.

⁸² Manimohan, *Hijam Irabot Singh and Political Movements in Manipur*, p. 74.

Under his new leadership, the movement received an impetus with more men joining the movement. The movement, from a mass discontentment over colonial rice trade policy, became a direct assault on the whole feudal administrative system. At a meeting held at the Police Bazaar on 7 January 1940, he called in the male population to join the movement. Further, he called upon the crowd to avenge the blood of the Brahmin woman who was kicked on the forehead by a police officer on 28 December.⁸³ Two days later, Irabot was arrested under section 124 of the Indian Penal Code. He was charged with making inflammatory speech, and on 22 March the Durbar took a resolution to imprison Irabot for three years. The Durbar also passed another order prohibiting all public gatherings in the Police Bazaar from 13 January.

After his arrest, the movement took the form of civil disobedience. People began to refuse to pay feudal dues and taxes like the *Panchanapet* (five annas) tax. And in May 1940, the members of the Praja Samelini built a bamboo bridge at Naharup defying the ferry tax order.

The boycott of the Khwairamband Bazaar which had started on 13 December continued and this had started to worry the government since the economy of the state depended hugely on the free conduct of trade and commerce in the market. As the situation did not improve throughout the whole year, the governor of Assam, J. P. Mills, demanded a full report of the situation from the political agent, Gimson.⁸⁴

In August, the political agent issued an order that he would allot the seats in the market to anyone he chose. This came out as Khwairamband Bazaar had remained empty for so long. The women remained firm in their agitation and Gimson failed to make any allotment as he knew the situation and the mood of thousands of women who had risen up against the government. Gimson noted in his reply to the governor of Assam that “economic distress or political excitement may lead the women of Manipur to take up other forms of agitations, as they had done in the past.” Meanwhile, the immediate grievances of the women remained unaddressed. However, it can be added that they made themselves felt. The whole movement came

⁸³ The police inspector, Dhanachandra, was son-in-law of the Raja.

⁸⁴ Mills, secretary to the governor of Assam to Gimson political agent of Manipur, Confidential, DO No. 710C Shillong, dated 13th November 1940.

to a sudden end as most of the population of Imphal started to flee for safety as the Second World War approached Manipur's doorsteps.

4.6 From Economic Demand to Political Demand

The Second *Nupi Lan* of 1939 started as an agitation against colonial extractive economic policies through its Marwari business monopolist class. Though it started as a women's anti-colonial movement, it took the form of a movement for democratic constitutional and administrative reform in Manipur. The nature of the movement made it obvious that political consciousness had grown amongst the people of Manipur. A movement for constitutional reforms had already been initiated by 1938, and the *Nupi Lan* gave it fresh life. By the late nineteen-thirties, it had become clear that the frequent rise in the price of rice due to exploitative British trade policies, the market boycott, and the dissatisfaction of the women were all but symptoms of a much deeper political malaise.

From a purely economic concern of colonial economic exploitation, the movement now turned its direction towards democratic and constitutional changes. The agitation had succeeded in bringing about a public debate and consciousness around colonial exploitations which had previously been the concern only of the small emergent political elite. The incompetence, nepotism, and corruption of the rule of Chura Chand had been laid bare in the eyes of the public.

It can be argued that had Irabot not joined the movement under his leadership, the Second *Nupi Lan* might not have achieved its political maturity of going further than the concerns for rice export to demands for political reforms. Also, it might not have received the immense participation of men and might have remained purely a women's movement. The boycott of the market for more than one and half years seriously crippled the economy.

Movement for constitutional reform started in Manipur as early as the nineteen-thirties with the neo-traditional Sanamahi movement which harshly attacked feudal social relations and Brahminism the Chura Chand used as a mechanism of

political and social control.⁸⁵ In his presidential address to the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha in 1938, Irabot made an explicit call for full responsible government and a legislative assembly. By early 1939, pressure had mounted on the Durbar to submit reform plans. Chura Chand, however, was reluctant to do so. The movement had shattered all respect for him. To the common people, he had become the most unpopular king, who remained on the throne only because of British patronage. The correspondence between the political agent, Christopher Gimson, and his superiors contained many severe criticisms of the rule of Chura Chand, and he frequently expressed hope that he would abdicate the throne. He wrote to the governor of Assam J. P. Mills, "They (the people) cannot believe his promises, and I too have lost all faith."⁸⁶

In November 1939, plans were put forward by the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha for a legislature with 80 per cent of its members elected by direct adult franchise. To the people, Chura Chand and the Durbar which consisted of his personal appointees had lost all credibility. In contrast to the popular aspiration of the people, Christopher Gimson, in a manner typical of colonial disdain for its subject population, wrote that "Manipur has no tradition of democracy," and therefore was convinced that democratic constitutional reform was impossible in Manipur. He nevertheless, had no objection to proposals for the election of the Durbar members and proposed that the unpopular Raja should surrender direct control over the state affairs and spend less time outside Manipur.

The revolutionary leadership of Irabot was not only what made it possible for the political and constitutional reform movement to jump on the bandwagon of the women's agitation of 1939, it also seized control of the movement under Irabot anti-feudal and socialist agenda. His arrest on 9 January two days after his speech did not affect much the movement that had now gained mass support. The *Nupi Lan* had generated popular political awareness and it acted as the catalyst for the eventual displacing of the old regime by bringing universal adult franchise.

⁸⁵ S. Parratt and J. Parratt, 'Reclaiming the Gods: A Neo-traditional Protest Movement in Manipur', *Archiv Orientalni*, Vol. 67, No. 2, 1999, pp. 241-48.

⁸⁶ The British government eventually removed him into exile, and he was succeeded by his eldest son, Bodhachandra, in 1941.

After he was arrested and charged with sedition, Irabot came out of Sylhet Jail only in 1943. Inside the jail, he became acquainted with two prominent communist leaders, Brihesh Misra and Jyotirmoy Nanda. According to Rajendra Kshetri, this is where Irabot was introduced to the revolutionary ideas of Marxism, the jail becoming a revolutionary training centre.⁸⁷ His entry to Manipur was prohibited for three years and could enter the princely state only in March 1946. His immediate attention was on democratic reforms.

The Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha leaders came under the huge influence of the Indian National Congress and demanded what it called a “united kingdom of the whole of India” with a central government which has control over defense, finance, trade, communications, roads and transport, taxes, and foreign policy. This was going far ahead of what the Standstill Agreement with the British government envisaged.⁸⁸ By late 1946, it became clear that they advocated a future where all the political parties in Manipur were subsumed into the Manipur State Congress. The political scenario was now polarised into two rival camps – the Manipur State Congress on the one hand and the alliance of Manipur Praja Sangha and Manipur Krishak Sangha.

4.7 Manipur State Constitution and the “Merger” to India

Towards the end of 1946, on 12 December, Bodhchandra announced the constitution drafting committee. As the British retreated from the Indian subcontinent, India was declared independent on 15 August 1947. In September 1947, the constitution drafting committee proposed elections to a legislative assembly with full adult franchise with voting rights given to all regardless of educational qualification or land ownership. Under the Manipur State Constitution Act 1947, election was conducted in 1948 after it was delayed till June and July. John Parratt argues that the reason for this was that the Raja wished to organise a viable alternative to the Congress Party which advocated a policy of complete integration with the Indian Union and the removal of the Raja himself.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ K. Rajendra, *Emergence of Meitei Nationalism*, New Delhi, Mittal Publications, p. 30.

⁸⁸ Wounded Land, p. 95.

⁸⁹ Parratt, *Wounded Land*, p. 97.

The Congress won only 14 seats, while the Praja Shanti and the Krishak Sabha won 12 and 6 seats respectively. The remaining 18 seats went to the hill areas. Soon, India's plan to form a "Purbanchal Pradesh" consisting of Cachar, Manipur, and Tripura, with Bengali and Manipuri as its languages came under heavy opposition from both the Praja Shanti and the Krishak Sabha. At a protest rally on 21 September, the police lathi-charged the protestors and began firing, and in the resulting scuffle, a police sub-inspector was killed. This incident at Pungdongbam led to the hiding of Irabot. The brother of Bodhachandra, R.K Priyobarta as the chief minister of the Interim Council declared both the Praja Shanti and Krishak Sabha illegal organisations and put a price of ₹10,100 on Irabot's head. When the first elected legislative assembly convened next month in October, the ban on both the political parties remained, even though the elected members took their seats. Irabot's seat was declared vacant as he did not resurface, effectively putting his public career to an end.⁹⁰

In September 1949, India's Deputy Prime Minister, Sardar Vallabhai Patel, who was in charge of the overall integration of princely states, summoned the Raja to his Shillong Redlands residence.⁹¹ When Patel received reports that the Raja might be reluctant to merge with the Indian Union, he responded saying, "Isn't there a brigadier in Shillong?"⁹² The Raja found himself virtually imprisoned in his residence with telephone and telegram disconnected, surrounded by soldiers and police. Isolated from his advisors, council of ministers, and public opinion, he was told that Manipur was to become part of the Indian Union.⁹³ On 21 September 1949, he signed the agreement merging Manipur with India.⁹⁴ A few weeks after the Shillong incident, on 15 October, a chief commissioner, Maj-Gen. Rawal Amar Singh was

⁹⁰ Parratt, p. 104.

⁹¹ The Governor of Assam, Sri Prakasa, accompanied by his advisor for Tribal Areas, Nari Rustomji flew to Bombay to inform Patel of the situation developing in Manipur. Patel and other Indian senior officials seemed to never have thought that a tiny and remote princely state like Manipur might hesitate about fully joining India.

⁹² N. Rustomji, *Enchanted Frontiers: Sikkim, Bhutan and India's North Eastern Borderlands*, Calcutta, Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 109.

⁹³ S. Baruah, *Durable Disorder*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 59.

⁹⁴ The controversial agreement is known in the popular discourse as the Merger Agreement. The draft of the agreement is available at http://manipuri.itgo.com/archives/the_manipur_merger_agreement.html

posted in Manipur to take over the whole administration of the state. On this occasion that marked the transfer of power, a battalion of the Indian army was in place to guard against possible trouble.⁹⁵ They occupied the ancient palace complex, the Kangla. With the occasion marking the integration of the princely state into the Indian Union, an era of heavy military presence also began.⁹⁶ The chief commissioner's first act was to issue an order abolishing the Council of Ministers and the Legislative Assembly.

The "merger" was not only opposed by the old royals but was also unpopular amongst large sections of the population. After he went underground, Irabot organized revolutionary cells with the aim of establishing an "Independent Peasant Republic" in Manipur. He formed the first armed group in Manipur called the Red Guards in March 1950. He died of typhoid at his headquarters in Kabaw Valley on 26 September 1951. With his death, the first Meetei revolutionary movement died.⁹⁷

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⁹⁵ Rustomji, *Enchanted Frontiers*, p. 109.

⁹⁶ Parratt, *Wounded Land*, p. 119.

⁹⁷ B Lintner, *Great Game East India: China and the Struggle for Asia's Most Volatile Frontier*, India, Harper Collins Publishers, p. 146.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION



Fig. 5.1 – Raja Chura Chand in Coronation gown

Source: M.K. Binodini Collection



Fig. 5.2 - Members of the interim Council, 1947-48

Source: Dr. R.K. Nimai Collection

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The British government used different administrative policy regimes in various parts of the Indian subcontinent. Within this heterogeneity, the Indian rulers negotiated with the British different kinds of allegiances that were contextual to regional political variations. There were many treaties and agreements, and within this variation different kinds of “indirect rule” were adapted or adjusted. It is a matter of how much different Indian princely states were autonomous and sovereign, or subordinate and subservient. It can be argued that far from being puppet regimes, some of the states maintained extensive autonomy and preserved existing social and political order. They could also modify the existing order to fit into the new political climate and economic rationales.

However, there is also a different narrative related to this phenomenon. Once the British had executed some form of treaty with a princely state, the freedom of the rulers became increasingly constrained by the dictates of the British colonial regime. There would be a change in existing land ownership and revenue collection based solely on the western notion of private property. Above this, the ruler’s freedom to exercise external political relations was drastically constrained.

While the British advocated a policy of “non-interference”, this was merely rhetorical theatrics that matched with the less explicitly colonial militaristic and aggressive language following the Great Revolt of 1857. This rhetoric of “non-interference” marked a shift in the hegemonic presence and continuation of colonial rule. There was now an emphasis on measures that appeared less interventionist. However, they had structural consequences in the political, social, and economic spheres of native societies.

The Great Revolt of 1857 proved to be one of the largest indigenous independence movements against a European empire in the nineteenth century. It temporarily shattered the imperial edifice across vast part of northern India

provoking a violent and brutal response from the British. It was a terrible awakening of the British Empire that shook the rapidly growing confidence of the imperial mission. As a deeply disillusioning affair, it reconfigured metropolitan attitudes towards colonial subjects. The uprising gave rise to colonial nightmarish anxiety about the nature, meaning, character, and future trajectory of the British Empire.

This political juncture marked the turning point in the transformation of British imperial ideology, thus turning away from earlier liberal, reformist ethos to a definitive view of the traditional and unchanging nature of native Indian societies. This new shift in imperial ideology formed the theoretical foundations of indirect rule. This new ideology of “late imperialism” was hugely drawn from British writers and political theorists like Henry Maine. Maine’s portrait of the customary basis of native traditional society was a society whose foundations were diametrically opposed to those of modern society. With this proposition, he called into question the theoretical and practical underpinnings of liberal imperial agenda.⁹⁸

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the “white man’s burden” of justification of imperial expansion in India had shifted from metropole to colony; in the language of H.St.P. Maxwell, the political agent of Manipur, to the people who are “full of deceit and intrigue”.⁹⁹ Their moral question of prolonging its stay in the Indian subcontinent no longer lay with the British. It was the colonial subject themselves who sought the protection of the Raj. The colony was in a whirlpool of perpetuating crisis within, entwined to the endemic forms of internecine conflict between savage tribals, sectarianism, and religious conflicts. As Lord Cromer put it – “the real India question was not whether the English were justified in staying in the country, but whether they could find any moral justification for withdrawing from it.”¹⁰⁰

As the nineteenth century progressed, the Raj lost much of its earlier confidence about the malleability and changeability of Indian society. This put an

⁹⁸ K. Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism*, Princeton, PUP, p. 148.

⁹⁹ Maxwell to the chief commissioner of Assam, Letter No. 408, dated 14th October, 1904.

¹⁰⁰ Mantena, *Alibis of Empire*, p. 149.

end to the belief in the feasibility of Macaulayesque mission to turn Indian subjects into brown Europeans. According to the British, Indians were not interested in reformation and were slaves to caste and customs.¹⁰¹

Indirect rule functioned concretely to shift the burden of imperial legitimation from the metropole onto native societies. This way, the native societies were constituted as “alibis of the empire.” This shift had two benefits for the British Empire. First, the moral foundation of the empire was transferred to the unchanging and inherently crisis-ridden nature of native society. Secondly, the overt face of the structure of colonial domination was transferred to native princely societies through the transfer of authority to native structures of rule. Colonial domination was systematised and disseminated through pre-existing native institutions such as the Durbar.

The Queen’s proclamation of 1857 had pledged no more annexations and this saved the Indian princes some six-hundred in number from falling into oblivion. Though Lord Canning’s *sanads* of 1862 allowed the princes to adopt heirs without restriction, Manipur as a rebellious state was denied it and a minor prince had to be chosen. The British project of indirect rule brought the princes into the political mainstream. They were invited to Durbars at Delhi and honoured with titles and other privileges. As in the general philosophy of indirect rule, maintaining a frontier state relieved the British from direct administrative responsibility. This had important cost-saving implications. One-third of the subcontinent was brought under British control through this policy.

As obvious with the wide alliance formed, princely states became admirable loyal forces at times of need to the empire. Princely alliance with Manipur connected the Raj to Manipuri traditions. The kings of Manipur were descendants of the serpent god *Pakhangba* and therefore any king on the throne carried bloodlines of divine beings. Having a king who was trained in English-established educational institutions gave an English touch to the traditional prince. All this gave the British rule much-needed scope for legitimacy.

¹⁰¹ Copland, *The Princes of India in the Endgame of Empire*, p. 21.

The British rule in the Indian subcontinent lasted nearly 200 years. It started in 1757, and all areas of present-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Burma were brought under control by the end of the nineteenth century. All of the territories brought under control were divided into “British India” and “native states” or “princely states.”¹⁰² The former was defined as “all territories and places within Her Majesty’s dominations which are for the time being governed by Her Majesty through the Governor-General of India.” The latter category which the British assumed Manipur was part of since the early second half of the nineteenth century and which Manipur became officially in 1891, was ruled by hereditary rulers approved or appointed by the British.

Since the establishment of the office of the political agent in Manipur on 7 February 1835 by a minute of Lord William Bentinck, very often internecine royal disputes and wars of succession had provided the British an excuse for interfering in the internal affair of Manipur. The appointment of George Gordon as the first political agent marked the formalisation of the relationship between the kingdom and the British Raj. This was executed to keep the Burmese at bay using Manipur as the first line of defense. For the British, it was always militarily strategic to have a friendly ally at the frontiers. Manipur remained in the service of the Raj while successive Rajas maintained their place on the throne with British support and favour. This continuity made a sudden rupture in 1891 when Manipur revolted against the British extensive intervention. The British fully subjugated the country in 1891 and established an officially indirectly ruled state with the appointment of a minor prince and the creation of a Durbar. This marked the beginning of the period of total restructuring of the economic and political structure of the princely state, simultaneously leading to rising political consciousness as the Raj struggled to keep its imperial enterprise alive.

The British rule in India and also in Manipur did not come into being all of a sudden. It was built over a hundred years, slowly and persistently, often employing

¹⁰² Interpretation Act of 1889.

trial-and-error method.¹⁰³ By the end of the nineteenth century, the empire had reached full maturity having recovered from the shock of the Great Revolt of 1857, and to the British Crown everything appeared under control. By 1887, over 20,000 people were drawing government salaries above ₹75 a month. And several hundred thousand more worked in menial jobs, in the postal service, the army, the police, and the public work department.

The majority of Indians in the late nineteenth century paid taxes and obeyed the laws. This was an astonishing achievement to observers. Not only was it a remarkable feat for the British rule, but also for a foreign European government which was racially different and consisted of relatively few white men on the spot. In 1887 there were more than 6,000 Europeans in the public service, about 1,000 in the elite Indian Civil Service (ICS). In 1921 the entire white population was only 156,000. This was roughly one European for every 1,500 Indians.

The question now is, how did the British maintain such massive control over a racially different and diverse population when they were so vastly outnumbered? The British response to this question was usually found in terms like “good governance” provided by the colonial regime, as Lord Curzon remarked, “Efficiency has been our gospel, the keynotes of our administration.”

On the other hand, there is the element of power and threat. The British Empire was defended by a well-equipped, professional standing army of large number. This standing army was what proved decisive and useful as the last resort in capturing Manipur in 1891. At times, this force could be reinforced by the regiments of the British regular army. At the dawn of the twentieth century, when nationalist mass agitation became an order of the political landscape, some fifty battalions of the Indian Army, supplemented by artillery, armoured cars, and aircraft, were specifically designed to put down insurrections. They were also again backed up by some 200,000 police. Some of them were equipped with guns, while most of them had steel-tipped bamboo sticks (*lathis*) which could crack open a skull and bones.

¹⁰³ I. Copland, *India 1885-1947: The Unmaking of an Empire*, Essex, Longman, 2001, p. 3.

It was not only this military and manpower might that was enough to keep the rule intact. In most times, the knowledge of this might which could be called out at any time the British wanted and wished was enough to rule such a vast subcontinent. This knowledge, and the knowledge of the threat, was much simpler and complicated than actual coercion by force.¹⁰⁴

The new colonial regime was built on “collaboration” rather than outright violent subjugation. Loyalty to the Crown was secured through honours, titles, money, and concessions of territorial claims distributed flamboyantly in Durbars and other official gatherings with the British administrators.¹⁰⁵ Since eighteen-seventies, many educational facilities were established, such as Rajkumar College at Rajkot and Rajpur, Mayo College at Ajmer (where Chura Chand was educated), Atchison College at Lahore, and Daly College at Indoor. These institutions became the main force for “education” from where loyal followers of the Raj were supplied. The systematic indoctrination of rulers by European private tutors and English education system at this “chiefs’ college” with educational trips abroad helped the British to fashion rulers who bore little or no resemblance to the colonial stereotype. In September 1902, Captain J.R. Nuttall of the 44th Gurkha Rifles was appointed as Chura Chand’s private tutor.

This fact presented itself as the mode in which the British ruled over the subcontinent not merely by pure force or threat of force. In addition to the wide array of bureaucratic and administrative mechanisms, educational institutions, medical facilities, etc., were more subtle aspects of coercion at the disposal of the Raj. Educational institutions were meant not just to impart knowledge, but to inculcate obedience to British authority on a large scale.

On the issue of Indian collaboration with the British imperial project, it could be asked, “Why did they collaborate?” Ian Copland offers two hypotheses on this question – a negative reason and a positive reason.¹⁰⁶ The negative reason for the factor of collaboration had to do with how the way British government service was

¹⁰⁴ Copland, *India 1885-1947*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁵ T.R. Metcalf, *The Aftermath of the Revolt: India 1857-1870*, Princeton: PUP, 1964, pp. 222-3.

¹⁰⁶ Copland, *India 1885-1947*, p. 7.

perceived or how it was not perceived, by the Indian population. According to this argument, until late in the life of the British Empire, most Indians thought there was nothing much strange in the very fact that India was part of a European empire. During this time, much of the civilised world was made up of polyglot empires. Apart from this, India itself had an extensive imperial tradition. The racial aspect of the ruler and the subject was not very disconcerting as the previous rulers in Delhi were Mughals from Central Asia. In this way, service to British Empire was not unpatriotic in the eyes of many.

On the other hand, the positive reason for the factor of Indian collaboration was multiple. It was habit and custom, admiration for British culture, or simply a need for a decent job. By the eighteen-thirties, middle class and elite competition for jobs in English education had grown up so much that senior members of the British government like T.B. Macaulay were convinced that it was only a matter of time before there immersed in India “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.”

In the late nineteenth century, this would be reversed. The English educated Bengali *bhadralok* (respectable men) began to question the benevolence of the British rule and asked, “Was British rule designed for India’s benefits or Britain’s?” By this time the British had realised that western-educated Indian elites in the British Indian subcontinent had begun fanning the flame of anti-British politics. To prevent the isolation and alienation of the princely rulers from British governance and institutions, the princes were integrated into institutions such as The Imperial Legislative Council (from 1861 onwards) and the Chamber of Princes – a consultative and advisory body set up in 1921 to counter the increasing anti-British sentiments.¹⁰⁷

These various measures were part of a hegemonic strategy of the Raj to encourage Indian rulers to conceive they were independent states, against their fact of political impotency and degeneration. Over the course of its expansion, the British

¹⁰⁷ B Ramusack, *The New Cambridge History of India: The Indian Princes and Their States*, Cambridge, CUP, 2004, pp. 126-7.

employed policies such as “subsidiary alliance”, “doctrine of lapse” and from 1857 onwards control by means of hegemonic incorporations. These were drastic policy shifts from direct military subjugation and annexation. This shift in policy explains why some rulers considered themselves “independent” and “autonomous” as in the case of Manipur, which led to the invasion of 1891.

Manipur as a princely state, like all other princely states of the British Indian subcontinent, was a creation of the British Empire. The assimilation of the princely state and the British administrative structure with the establishment of the Durbar in 1907, and before that during the minority of Chura Chand, marked a sudden rupture in the traditional continuity of state formation in the country. The presence of the British Raj on the Indian soil gradually and steadily wore out the existing status quo and power balance. Manipur, sandwiched between two big powerful states, Burma and the British, was gradually drawn into the political climate created by the British Empire on its western border. The princely state was gradually unable to retain the kind of political potency and independence it enjoyed in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Once the state began to negotiate treaties with the colonial power, it found itself as the party that did not have much say in the terms and conditions of the treaty. This condition was worsened by the setting up of the residency of the political agency in the capital. Once a ruler was appointed in the state and the Durbar established, a basis for “indirect” exploitation was created through the Raja who constantly had to prove his loyalty to the colonial power as his legitimacy solely rest on the approval and acceptance of the Raj.

British rule in Manipur post-1891 as a “princely state” was contingent on the philosophy of the empire that had drastically shifted towards an exercise of hegemony rather than direct political rule. In theory, the state continued to exist preserving its earlier political form, but in this new condition, the strings were pulled by the ever-present hands of the British Empire. This way, the British were able to govern Manipur while the Raja ruled the state. The empire in the Indian subcontinent

had reached its physical limit and focused more on the consolidation of the conquered territories rather than expansion to newer terrains.

A new system of revenue collection, judicial and bureaucratic system was introduced, as in parts of the other regions where *ryatwari* and *mahalwari* settlements were introduced respectively. As a system of salaried bureaucracy was introduced, though most of the higher official posts were occupied by members of the aristocratic class and the newly emergent elite favoured by the Raja. This was allowed by the British as it strengthened its hold on the state by creating a new group of collaborators.

On the other hand, the British did not have to directly create new social elites, as in the case of the Brahmins; the emergence of these social groups was contingent on the pre-existing social differentiation and hierarchy. These new social groups emerged out of historical continuity given impetus and catalytic push by the Raja for his legitimacy and as means of seeking acceptance from the people, especially the Hindu elite groups. However, the British did reconfigure the role of these elites, including the Raja, by imposing restrictions on their roles and activities, restructuring the whole agriculture economy, introducing a land and house revenue system, and at last, confining the role of the Raja as a mere appointee of the Raj.

This appointee had to rely on wide measures to ensure that he remained acceptable to the people, and far more, to the British officials watching over the administrative affairs of the state. These included measures to Sanskritise the Meetei¹⁰⁸ people to integrate them into the preferred social and religious structures. Other measures came along with this – the imposition of a strict social order based on the Hindu varna system with the help of the Brahma Sabha, emphasis on the Raja's divine character as the incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu to mark him out as the natural ruler legitimated by religion and history, the manipulation of religious practices, and lastly, extensive loyal collaboration for the provisions of resources and military personnel during the First World War. These measures were the options

¹⁰⁸ The term *Meetei* originated in Cachar from the theory proposed by Naoria Phulo, while *Meitei* is the spelling that has been used by those in Manipur. Often both are written with a slash in between.

available to the Raja when all doors to direct confrontation with the British had been closed.

As stated earlier, British rule in Manipur did not come into existence suddenly in 1891. It was a slow and gradual process. With many trial and error means to subdue a country for decades, the event of 1891 was the culmination of all the historical processes that have been played out earlier. By the eighteen-eighties, the British Empire in India had acquired a certain form of maturity. The entire bureaucratic machine, the “steel frame” of the empire, was done through extensive and rigorous competitive examinations, revenue collection had been systematised, there also began a separation of the executive and the legislative by the Council Acts of 1861 and 1892. While all this was happening, the British Empire had not stopped its territorial consolidation.

Manipur had come in contact with the British for the first time in 1762. The British resident in Sylhet, Mr Verelst, has received a representative from the king of Manipur seeking his aid against the invasion of the Burmese on Manipur’s eastern border. The British at that time had little knowledge about the small kingdom to the east of Cachar. The name of the country was uncertain.¹⁰⁹ The British sent a detachment of sepoy in aid of Raja Gour Shyam and his co-regent Jai Singh. When the British sepoy failed to advance further from Kanpur, the capital of the independent kingdom of Cachar, Manipur was left to defend itself.

On the other hand, Manipur’s contact with Burma had been a long one. The relationship came to a climax during the reign of Jai Singh’s grandfather, Garib Niwaz. He was one of the greatest kings of Manipur, or arguably the greatest, during whose rule had taken advantage of the weakness of the Burmese. Much of his time as the king was devoted to devastating and plundering upper Burma and destroying successive Burmese armies sent against him. The relationship between these two neighbouring kingdoms would have been different if he had attempted conquest. But

¹⁰⁹ Captain R. Boileau Pamberton wrote in 1835 that the country was variously called Kathe, Moglie, Meklee, and Cassay.

this could not be executed as Burma was a bigger kingdom with more extensive military power.

Vaishnavism was adopted as the state religion during the reign of Garib Niwaz (1709-1748). As early as the fifteenth century, Hindu Brahmins had started migrating to Manipur, most of them from Bengal. There was opposition to the imposition of this foreign religion. In the first half of the twentieth century, this would become a feature of the many resistances against the Raja who consolidated his power through the patronage of the British government.

William McCulloch had observed in the eighteen-sixties that Hinduism in the Meeteis was largely a matter of fashion than conviction.¹¹⁰ However, by the early twentieth century, it had spread wide and far amongst the Meeteis and was followed devoutly. The reign of Chura Chand saw a dramatic increase in the influence of the Brahmins. In the previous centuries, a gradual symbiosis between the Meetei ancient religion and Hinduism had emerged. The Meeteis retained their faith and practice of the ancient religion, while at the same time accepting the rituals of Vaishnavite Hinduism. The hold of Hinduism was never very strong. The Indian Hindu caste system was also virtually non-existent as all Meeteis were regarded as *Kshatriya* caste. During the time of Chura Chand, this social and religious order was interfered with to a great extent. The reasons for this are religious as well as political. And therefore, resistance against this was both religious and political.

The growth of Gouriya Vaishnavism of the Bengal school of Vaishnavism had a tremendous influence on every aspect of the life of people. Bengali culture took deep root in the social and cultural milieu. It brought changes in the food habit, dress code, and the practice of religious rites and rituals. Such type of new social order brought with it increased power and domination of the Bengali Brahmins in the Manipuri society. Since they were “upper caste” in the Hindu social order, they were exempted from any state labour such as the *lalup* duty. They were also exempted from any agricultural activity and lived off the grants of land and other privileges

¹¹⁰ W. McCulloch, *An Account of the Valley of Manipur and the Hill Tribes*, New Delhi, Akansha Publishing House, 2016.

from the ruler and the people. They started practicing their religious activities in villages, temples were constructed in many places. These temples were used as a centre of Hindu religious propagation and feudal control under the Raja.¹¹¹

His power solely dependent on the favour of the British government, Chura Chand found his political authority circumscribed by the continuing presence of the political agent. In the situation, he saw religious control through Hinduism as a means to consolidate and assert his power in the state. The attempt to assert Brahminical control took place on two fronts – the philosophical and the legal.¹¹² At the level of philosophy, a desperate attempt was made to bring Meeteis within Hindu Aryan tradition. This happened through a concerted effort explicitly identifying traditional Meetei *lais* as Hindu gods and goddesses. Traditional Meetei ancient religion centres around the *lais* (deities). Rituals in honour of these deities were carried out through traditional priestesses and priests called *maibi* and *maiba*. There was a deliberate attempt to absorb Meetei *lais* within the Hindu religion. This led to the loss of the separate and distinct identity of Meetei traditional deities.¹¹³ A historical basis for this Hinduisation was the identification of Manipura of Mahabharata with Manipur, especially with the voluminous writings of Atombapu Sharma, one of Chura Chand's Brahmin pandits. This philosophical mask was used in the enactment of oppressive Brahminical legislations.

One of the fundamental bases for Brahminical legislation rested upon the concept of *mangba*, which translates to “unclean.” A consequence of a person declared as *mangba* was ex-communication and charges for readmission into society. The legislation also introduced many taxes for religious rituals. *Chandon senkhai*, a tax for Vaishnavite mark and *Shraddha* was introduced. Declaration of a person, or groups of persons, as *mangba* and consequent outcasting was used by Chura Chand and the Brahmins arbitrarily and indiscriminately.¹¹⁴ The victims of legislation were

¹¹¹ Kamei, History of Manipur, Pre-colonial Period, 1991, p. 279.

¹¹² Parratt and Parratt, *Archiv Orientalni*, p. 245.

¹¹³ The absorption of ancient traditional deities had started from the previous century. Now, this process of forceful Sanskritisation had become rigorous. *Pakhangba*, the serpent deity was identified as the Hindu god Vishnu; *Panthoibi*, the supreme Mother Goddess, with Durga.

¹¹⁴ According to Sairem Nilabir, a person could be outcasted for using soap to wash clothes, eating in a hotel, going to the cinema or theatre, speaking English, and wearing trousers. According to the

cut off from their families and also from society. Payment could be made for readmission of the excommunicated into society. But the charges were heavy – ₹500 if outcasted by the Raja, ₹83 if by the Brahma Sabha, and ₹50 if by a Brahmin. *Mangba* legislation was a mechanism of social and political control. The Brahma Sabha, an institution of Brahmins, and a tool of Chura Chand, also approved Chura Chand's claim that he was an incarnation of Vishnu. This was to add more credibility to his exercise of power and control. In line with Sanskritisation of ancient traditional deities, he identified Vishnu with the Meetei royal ancestor deity *Pakhangba*. This was a bold move from Chura Chand since Meetei kings were traditionally regarded as reappearances of *Pakhangba*, though not in the sense of an avatar.

Resistance to Chura Chand's and the Brahmins' control was a reaction to existing social and political order. People were unused to the extensive and oppressive use of religious power by Brahmins backed by Chura Chand. There was also a conscious effort to do away with Hinduism altogether and revive the ancient religion.

This “neo-traditionalist” movement became to be known as the Sanahami Movement, after the name of the traditional Meetei household deity, *Sanamahi*. The origin of the movement was during a time when political consciousness had started to gather momentum in the nineteen-thirties. Naoria Phulo, a Meetei born in 1888 in Cachar, toured widely in Manipur and studied Meetei culture in depth.¹¹⁵ And in 1930 he founded the Apokpa Marup in Cachar.¹¹⁶ By the early nineteen-thirties, the organisation's activities had spread in the Imphal valley. Phulo had gained the attention of Chura Chand and the Brahmins, and in 1936 he was excommunicated.

Four years after his death in 1941, a branch of the Apokpa Marup was established in Imphal under the name Manipur State Meetei Marup. It had eighteen members with Takhellambam Bokul as president. Various aims of the organisation

Cheitharol Kambaba, in the month of *Sajibu* 1940, 40 men were excommunicated for socialising with *Yaithibis*, non-Hindus who ate beef.

¹¹⁵ The archaic Meetei script was at the time not widely known. He studied the script in detail and even invented a script of his own.

¹¹⁶ *Apokpa* – ancestor, *Marup* – association, thus “society devoted to ancestral religion.”

included the revival of the Meetei culture, reintroduction of the archaic script to the population, study of ancient Manipuri literature, and using only Manipuri language in worship and rituals replacing the Bengali language.

The Brahma Sabha opposed the organisation violently. They were now being challenged openly for the first time. And in 1947, the Sabha formally outcasted a group of thirty-eight members of the Manipuri State Meetei Marup. Other members of the organisation were refused access to traditional religious sites.

The movement can be described as “de-Sanskritisation” of the Meetei religion. It sought to reclaim the traditional *lais* from Hinduisation and was not anti-Hindu as such as it did not seek to convert non-Meetei Hindus. The Meetei people were to reclaim and be saved from a foreign and exploitative religion. They were to reclaim the space which was denied to them. Youths were encouraged to discard *sankirtan*.¹¹⁷ The generation of youth had to be healed from the influence of Hinduism that discouraged education and focused on Hindu ritual performances.¹¹⁸ They were encouraged to renounce Hinduism altogether for *Sanamahism*. These all were carried out by rigorously debating and discarding theories that attempted to Sanskritise Meetei religion, encouraging studies and research in Manipuri history.¹¹⁹ The movement was directed against the oppressive power of Chura Chand and his administrative and religious institutions. It was part of the complex political currents that eventually called for widespread responsible democratic government in the late nineteen-thirties and nineteen-forties.

The movement started by Naoria Phulo was a significant contribution to the process of maintaining the distinctive identity of the people. It aimed to recall the glory of the past and her distinctive historical tradition.¹²⁰ Phulo demanded that Meetei students should be given education in Meeteilon (Meetei language). This was

¹¹⁷ *Sankirtans* are Hindu ritualistic and devotional songs.

¹¹⁸ Bipin, T., ‘Rethinking Emancipation: Meetei and Naoria Pholo’, *Prabuddha: Journal for Social Equality*, Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 68.

¹¹⁹ S. Nilabir, ‘The Revivalist Movement of Sanamahism’, in N. Sanjaoba (ed.) *Manipur Past and Present*, New Delhi, 1991, p. 119.

¹²⁰ N. Joykumar Singh, *Religious Revitalisation Movements in Manipur*, Akansha Publishing House, Delhi, 2012, p. 175.

connected with his larger emphasis on the production of students with scientific temper and sound education over Hindu religion. For him, education was an important tool for reviving Meetei history and past, culture, and religion.¹²¹ At the beginning of the twentieth century (western) education was seen as antithetical to premodern customs and traditions. However, Naoria Phulo saw education as an important weapon for the revival of Meetei tradition and history. In education, he found freedom from what he called the clutches of Hinduism, its religious superstitions, from *sankirtana*, from holi, from *pung cholom*, from economic exploitation of Meetei by the Brahmins.¹²²

As in the case with other forms of resistance against abuse of power by Chura Chand, here again, he proved a loyal ally to the Crown and remained an active supporter of the British in its fight to contain forces of Indian nationalism that were not taking deep root in British India. When huge tracts of lands inhabited by hundreds of millions of people crossing oceans came under the sway of British conquest, it was because the British enjoyed a decisive military edge over local rulers and were ruthless in their coercion of those who dared to resist them as in the case of Manipur in 1891.

In another case, it was also because British rule was actively supported by significant sections of the aristocratic, intellectual and religious elites.¹²³ In the *Nupi Lan* of 1904, and again during the gaining momentum of dissent against Chura Chand in the nineteen-thirties, he proved himself useful and loyal friend of the political agents. In the context of the Indian subcontinent, this was the general case of all “indirectly ruled” princely states. A web of extensive collaboration was forged by the British with an alliance between them and 600-odd surviving descendants of the subcontinent’s former ruling dynasties.

¹²¹ T. Bipin, ‘Revivalism and/as Resistance: The Meetei Movement in the Twentieth Century’, PhD Thesis, University of Hyderabad, 2017, p. 125.

¹²² Phulo explores the economic exploitation of the Meeteis by the Brahmins in his book, *Eigi Wareng*, written in 1940 and republished in 2010.

¹²³ I. Copland, *The Princes of India in the Endgame of the Empire – 1917-1947*, Cambridge, Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1997, p. 269.

The widely encompassing network of colonial hegemonic alliances had never failed the British in its entire colonial history in India. In the Great Revolt of 1857, during the anti-partition agitation of 1905, during the crisis of the First and Second World War, during Quit Indian movement of 1942, princely money, princely military and labour forces, and more importantly, moral support played a vital role in keeping alive the imperial cause. It was based on this loyal conduct in service of the empire during the war that Chura Chand was decorated and honoured with Knight Commander of the Star of India (K.C.S.I) in 1934, the special order – Star of India - that was created solely for the princes of the subcontinent.

A decade earlier, during the time of Chandra Kirti's rule, a relationship more than cordial had emerged with the British. For the British, the Raja of Manipur had become the most trusted and loyal ally in the eastern frontier. During the time of the Great Revolt of 1857, Chandra Kirti helped the British capture fugitive mutineers. He then later provided troops to support Col. James Johnstone for the suppression of Nagas in Kohima following the rising of the Angami Nagas. During the third and the last Anglo-Burmese war, he provided the British with Manipuri troops for the occupation of Kendat in Kabaw Valley. In exchange, the British offered him help against any attempt to overthrow him, mostly from within the princes. And in 1880, the British took the bold step of awarding Chandra Kirti with the Order of Knight Commander of the Star of India. The fact of Chandra Kirti's long and internally peaceful rule can only be explained by this help and alliance with the British. The British gained more from this alliance than Manipur could. Chandra Kirti became instrumental in the suppressing and capturing of the vast hills of Assam.

During the First World War, Chura Chand, in addition to his personal subscriptions to various war funds, presented four motor ambulances at the cost of ₹28,000 to the British war effort, and a Manipur Labour Corps was established which was sent to France. A Double Company for active service was also drafted and attached to the 3/39th Garhwal Rifles for training. The first draft of one hundred and eighty-two men left on 11 December 1916, and the second draft of fifty-seven men on 5 February 1917. Above this, he also purchased an airplane for ₹22,500. During

the war, he invested ₹100,000 of the state funds in the Indian War Loan and another ₹33,800 in the British Terminal Loan of 1915-1916.¹²⁴ In recognition of his untiring service in the war effort and his role in suppressing the Kuki rebellion, he was invested with the title Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in 1919 during the visit of the chief commissioner of Assam, Nicholas Dodd Beatson Bell. A year before, a *sanad* was issued where Lord Chelmsford declared the title “Maharaja” as heredity to Manipuri prince. The *sanad* read:

I hereby confer upon Your Highness the title of Maharaja as a hereditary distinction for your services in connection with the war.

1st January 1918

Chelmsford

Viceroy

The British Empire expanded and established itself largely through the incorporation and integration of existing indigenous political structures. What makes the case of Manipur unique is the military confrontation in 1891. If not for that the structures of “indirect rule” remained in place – the residency, a native prince, the Durbar, the modification of existing legal institutions et al. Before 1891, with the permanent presence of the political agent, the power of Manipuri Rajas had been gradually shrinking to the extent that no external relationships or treaties with neighbouring kingdoms could be undertaken without the consent of the British authority. A single British officer, that is the political agent, gradually managed to control the state through “advice” given to the Raja. This was much the norm throughout the empire.

From the mid-eighteenth century, the British devised and employed the system of indirect rule. Finding it extremely successful in expanding the empire, this became what Michael Fisher calls the “conscious model” for later imperial policymakers who wished to expand the empire without the economic and political costs of direct annexation. In Manipur’s case, the direct military assault was not to “annex” but a

¹²⁴ Manimohan, *Nupi Lan*, p. 97.

military response to a failed diplomatic relation the British had built with Manipur for decades. For the administrators in the field and policymakers at home, the Indian “conscious model” of indirect rule became a justification for later imperial expansion in Malaya, East, and West Africa.

Developed way before the Great Revolt of 1857, the system of indirect rule found its efficiency until the late stage of the empire. It was an abstract concept that heavily depended on the knowledge and shrewdness of the “man on the spot”, what Michael Fisher calls the “political line.” The administration was heavily concentrated in Calcutta under the Governor-General and later the Viceroy. It relied extensively on a mass of precedent and accumulated reports and ethnographic writings by its officials in the fields. Through the knowledge and experience it gathered from the field the British expected its officials to execute on practical grounds the abstract system of indirect rule. Once, a “prince” had been established in a state, the system sought to maintain the loyalty of the princes through an illusion of autonomy and independence, and through these princes, the sizeable populations of the states were incorporated into the colonial system. During the *Nupi Lan*, the British were able to divert the anger of the people to the Raja. The political agent argued that it was Chura Chand who had the sole power to stop the export of rice. This was the very nature of indirect rule, the ability to provide an illusion of autonomy in the internal administration of the state. When it came to the use of force to suppress the agitation, it was the political agent who called in the Assam Rifles to the capital.

The title given to the king by the British at first glance seems ambiguous. However, at close introspection, it was a deliberate colonial categorisation. Many British records and correspondence referred to the king as chiefs or princes. As Edward Haynes argues, it was part of the British effort to create Indian rulers as a subordinate category, thereby delegitimising the ruler’s claim to sovereignty and power.¹²⁵ At the same time, an extensive number of historians working on the “princely states” seem to conform to this colonial nomenclature, or they either take it for granted. At its worst, it could be that the historians look at the category of the

¹²⁵ Edward Haynes, ‘Rajput Ceremonial Interactions as a Mirror of a Dying Indian State System, 1820-1947’, *MAS*, n. 1, 1990, p. 459.

“Raja” from the perspective of the colonial administrators themselves. After the British paramountcy was established in Manipur, whether the title of the king would be “chief” or “Raja” or “Maharaja” depended solely on the pleasure of the British. The king was stripped of the title “Maharaja” and the title “Raja” was bestowed, a title that would be hereditary and descend in the direct line by primogeniture, with succession approved by the government of India. After the Kuki rebellion, Chura Chand was awarded the title Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in 1919, and Knight Commander of the Star of India (K.C.S.I) in 1934. As mentioned earlier, a *sanad* was also issued in 1918 where Lord Chelmsford declared the title “Maharaja” as heredity to rulers of Manipur. This stripping and bestowing of titles reveal how categorisation of subjugated rulers played an intricate part in the colonial enterprise.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX - I

Translation of the conditions entered into by Rajah Gambhir Singh of Manipuries on the British Government agreeing to annex to Manipur the two ranges of Hills situated between the eastern and western bends of the Barak, dated 18th April 1833.

The Governor-General and Supreme Council of Hindoostan declare as follows:- With regard to the two ranges of Hills, the one called the Kalanaga Range, and the other called the Noon-Jai Range which are situated between the eastern bend of the Barak and western bend of the Barak, we will give all claim on the part of the Honourable company thereunto, and we will make these Hills over in possession to the Rajah and give him the line of the Jeeree and the western bend of the Barak as a boundary, provided that the Rajah agrees to the whole of what is written in this paper; which is as follows:

1. The Rajah will, agreeably to instructions received without delay remove his Thanna from Chundrapore, and establish it on the eastern bank of the Jeeree.
2. The Rajah will in no way obstruct the trade carried on between the two countries by Bengali or Manipuri merchants. He will not exact heavy duties and he will make a monopoly of no articles of merchandise whatsoever.
3. The Rajah will in no way prevent the Nagas inhabiting the Lalanaga and Noon-Jai Ranges of Hills, from selling or bartering ginger, cotton, pepper and every other article, the produce of their country, in the plains of Qachar, at the Banskandee and Ovtharbun bazaars, as has been their custom.
4. With regard to the road commencing from the eastern bank of the Jeeree and continued via Kalanaga and Kowpoom, as far as the Valley of Manipur – after this road has been finished, the Rajah will keep it in repairs, so as to enable laden bullocks to pass during the cold and dry seasons. Further, at the making of the road, if British officers be sent to examine or superintend the same, the Rajah will agree to everything these officers may suggest.
5. With reference to the intercourse already existing between the territories of the British Government and those of the Rajah, if the intercourse be further extended, it will be well in every respect, and it will be highly advantageous to both the Rajah and his country. In order, therefore, that this may speedily take place, the Rajah, at the requisition of the British Government, will furnish a quota of Nagas to assist at the construction of the road.
6. In the event of war with the Burmese, if troops be sent to Manipur either to protect that country, or to advance beyond the Ningthee, the Rajah, at the

requisition of the British Government, will provide Hill porters to assist in transporting the ammunition and baggage of such troops.

7. In the event of anything happening on the Easter Frontier of the British territories, the Rajah will, when required, assist the British Government with a portion of his troops.
8. The Rajah will be answerable for all the ammunition be received from the British Government and will for the information of the British Government, give in every month a statement or expenditure to the British Officer attached to the levy. Signed and sealed in my presence.

F. J. Grant,
Commissioner

I, Shree Joot Gambhir Singh of Manipur agree to all that is written above in this paper sent by the Supreme Council.

Shree Joot Rajah Gambhir Singh

Dated 1st April, 1833.

APPENDIX - II

Agreement Between Rajah Gambhir Singh and Commissioner F.J Grant, 1835.

The Governor-General and the Supreme Council of Hindoostan declare as follows: With regard to the two ranges of Hills, the one called the Kalanaga Range, and the other called the Noon-jai Range, which are situated between the eastern bend of the Barak and the western bend of the Barak, we will give up all claim in the part of the Honorable Company thereunto, and we will make these Hills over in possession to the Rajah, and give him the line of the Jeeree and the western bend of the Barak as a boundary, provided that the Rajah agrees to the whole of what is written in this paper, which is as follows:

1. The Rajah will, arable to instructions received, without delay, remove his Thanna from Chudrapore, and establish it on the eastern bank of the Jeeree.
2. The Rajah will in no way obstruct the trade carried on between the two countries by Bengali or Manipur merchants. He will not exact heavy duties, and he will make a monopoly of no articles of merchandise whatsoever.
3. The Rajah will in no way prevent the Nagas inhabiting the Lalanaga and Noon-jai Ranges of Hills, from selling or bartering ginger, cotton, pepper, and every other articles, the produce their country, in the plains of Cachar, at the Banskandee and Oodharban bazaars, as has been their custom.
4. With regard to the road commencing from the eastern bank of Jeeree and continued via Kalanaga and Kowpoom, as far as the Valley of Manipur-after this road has been finished, the Rajah will keep it in repairs, so as to enable laden bullocks to pass during the cold and dry seasons. Further, at the making of the road, if British officers be sent to examine or superintend the same, the Rajah will agree to everything these officers may suggest.
5. With reference to the intercourse already existing between the territories of the British Government and those of the Rajah, if the intercourse be further extended, it will be well in every respect, and it will be highly advantageous to both the Rajah and his country. In order, therefore, that his may speedily take place, the Rajah, at the requisition of the British government, will furnish a quota of Nagas to assist at the construction of the road.
6. In the event of war with the Burmese, if troops be sent to Manipur, either to protect that country, or to advance beyond the Ningthee, the Rajah at the requisition of the British Government, will provide Hill porters to assist in transporting the ammunition and baggage of such troops.
7. In the event of anything happening on the Eastern Frontier of the British territories, the Rajah will, when required, assist the British Government with a portion of his troops.
8. The Rajah will be answerable for all the ammunition he receives from the British Government, and will, for the information of the British

Government, give in every month a statement of expenditure to the British Officer attached to the levy.

I, Shree Joot Gambhir Singh of Manipur, agree to all that is written above in this paper sent by the Supreme Council.

(Sd/-) Geo, Gorden, Lieut.,
Adjutant, Gambhir Singh's Levy
Sd/- and sealed in my presence

Sd/-
F.J. Grant
Commissioner

Sd/-
Shree Joot
Raja Gambhir Singh

APPENDIX - III

Rules for the Management of the Manipur State – 1907

1. *The Durbar*

The Raja will be assisted by a Durbar, of which he will be the President. The Durbar will consist of a gazetted officer of the Eastern Bengal and Assam Government, whose services will be lent to the Durbar, and who will be Vice-President, and of at least three Manipuri members. In the absence of the Raja, the Vice-President will preside. Of the Manipuri members at least three must be present. Except with the Political Agent's consent and for the transaction of such specific business as he may approve, the presence of the Vice-President is obligatory, except when only criminal or appellate business is being transacted. The presence of either the Raja or the Vice-President is obligatory, except during transaction of criminal appellate business, when, provided five members are present, work may be carried on under the presence of the Judicial member.

2. *Method of Appointment*

The Manipuri members of the Durbar will be appointed by Government on the recommendation of the Raja and the Political Agent, and will be removed only by an order of the Government.

3. *Division of Duties*

The administration of the State will be carried on by the Durbar, the member of which will have charge of the several departments. The Vice-President will have charge of the Hill Tribes, Finance and Revenue of all sorts.

An ordinary member will have charge of Judicial matters. The distribution of other departments among ordinary members will be made by the Durbar in consultation with the Political Agent and subject to the approval of the Local Government. The Raja is not debarred from holding charge of a department.

4. *Individual Responsibility*

Each member will be responsible to the Durbar for the administration of his departments, and will dispose of all ordinary business, but should bring important matters before the Durbar.

5. *Additional Members*

Three additional members may be appointed, who will have no special duties. They will be appointed in the same manner as the ordinary members and will be removable only by order of Government.

6. *The Raja*

The Raja will have direct charge of the armed State Police or Body Guard. He will appoint all village officials and title holders. The Raja is expected to take an interest in all branches of the administration, and he may call for any case either pending or disposed of (except as regard hill tribes), and if he sees fit, lay the matter before the Durbar, which, after due discussion, will pass orders.

7. Powers of Reference of Raja, Vice-President, and Members in Charge of Departments

Should the Raja, the Vice-President, or member in charge of the department concerned, not approved of the orders passed, he may have the matters referred to the Political Agent, who may request the Durbar to reconsider such matters. If the Durbar adheres to its former orders, the Political Agent may refer the matter to Governments for orders. In such cases action shall be stayed after the reference, till final orders are passed.

8. Political Agent's Power

Records of the proceedings of the durbar will be kept in English and Manipuri and copies in English submitted to the Political Agent, who may request the Durbar to reconsider any decision arrived at, and if necessary, refer the matter to Government as prescribed in Rule 7. He is also empowered to refer to the Durbar any matter which comes to his notice.

9. Finance

The annual budget will be drafted by the Vice-President and submitted to the Durbar. When the durbar has approved the proposals, the budget will be submitted to the Government through the Political Agent. Once approved by the Government, the budget must be adhered to, but the durbar may, with the Political Agent's approval, make re-appropriations as long as the total amount of the budget is not exceeded.

10. Custody of State Funds

The State funds will continue to be kept in the Government Treasury.

11. Audit of Accounts

The Accountant General, Eastern Bengal and Assam, will continue to audit the accounts of the State.

12. Duties of the Vice-President

No bills on the treasury will be cashed, nor any payments made, without the counter signature of the Vice-President. It is the special duty of this officer to see that the budget grants are not exceeded, and the unauthorized payments are not made. In order to allow him to carry out his important duty, he is allowed to refer to the durbar any order which will either increase the expenditure or diminish the revenue, and if he considers it necessary, he may take a further reference to the Political Agent as provided in Rule 7.

13. Administration of justice; Duties of Judicial Member

The Judicial Member will supervise the working of all the courts and inspect them from time to time. He will receive all appeals from the Cherap Court and all petitions relative to the administration of justice, or miscellaneous matters not referring to departments in charge of other members, and also appeals to the Durbar against the orders of other members.

In cases where two courts have arrived at the same conclusion, he may decline to submit the appeal to the Durbar, but every such cases must be reported to the Durbar, which may hear the appeal if it sees fit.

This member will be responsible for recommending to the Durbar proper persons to fill vacancies which may occur in the several courts.

14. Jurisdictions of Courts

The Durbar is the highest Criminal Court in the State and will try all cases which are beyond the jurisdiction of the Cherap. It will also hear appeals of all sorts from Cherap's order except as regards Hill Tribes.

The Durbar may pass sentences of death or imprisonment for life, but sentences of over five years' rigorous imprisonment must be reported to the Political Agent, who, if he sees fit, may refer to case to Government for orders. Sentences of death must be confirmed by the Local Government.

The power of pardoning offenders and remitting punishments shall rest with the Durbar, provided that when the sentence has been approved by the Local Government or the Political Agent, the sanction of the approving authority shall be obtained to the pardon or the remission. The Durbar will appoint the members of the Cherap and panchayat Courts (both Sadar and Rural). The jurisdiction and powers, both original and appellate of all other courts remain as at present.

15. Disposal of Cases in which British Subjects are Concerned

British subjects will be solely under the jurisdiction of the Political Agent, who will try all cases to which British subject is a party.

16. Claims of Old Servants of the State who are British Subjects

British subjects who have been employed for more than two years in the State shall not be dismissed until the case has been referred to the Government, whose orders as to gratuity shall be final.

17. Changes in the Administrative Procedure

No alteration shall be made in present procedure, except with the approval of the durbar, and every such alteration must be reported to the Political Agent.

(Sd.)

J.E. Webster

Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam

9th April, 1907

Judicial Department

APPENDIX - IV

Political Agents

Pre-British Period

1. Captain George Gordon	1835-1844
2. Colonel William McCulloch	1844-1862
3. Dr. Thomas Dillon	1862-1863
4. Colonel William McCulloch	1863-1867
5. Dr. Robert Brown	1867-1872
6. Colonel Mowbray Thomas	1872-1875
7. Captain Durand	1875-1875
8. G.H. Damant	1875-1877
9. Sir James Johnstone	1877-1886
10. Major W. F. Trotter	1886-1887
11. Frank St. Claire Grimwood	1887-1889
12. Heath	1889-1889
13. Frank St. Claire Grimwood	1889-1891

British Period

1. Major H. St. P. Maxwell	1891-1893
2. A. Porteous	1893-1895
3. Captain H.W.G. Cole	1896-1898
4. A. Porteous	1898-1899
5. Lieutenant Colonel H. St. P. Maxwell	1899-1902
6. Major Albert E. Woods	1902-1904
7. Lieutenant Colonel H. St. P. Maxwell	1904-1905
8. Colonel John Shakespeare	1905-1908
9. A.W. Davis	1908-1909
10. Colonel John Shakespeare	1909-1914
11. Lieutenant Colonel H.W.G. Cole	1914-1917
12. J.C. Higgins	1917-1918
13. W.A. Cosgrave	1918-1920
14. L.O. Clarke	1920-1922
15. C. Gimson	1922-1922
16. L.O. Clark	1922-1924
17. J.C. Higgin	1924-1928
18. C.C. Crawford	1928-1928
19. J.C. Higgins	1928-1933
20. C. Gimson	1933-1946
21. C.P. Stewart	1946-1947

APPENDIX - V

Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha 4th Session Held at Imphal 30th December, 1938

President – Sjt. Hijam irabot Singh, Sadar Panchayat Member

General Secretary – Sjt. Lalit Madhop Sharma

President Reception Committee – Sjt. Banka Sharma, Vyakaran Tirtha

Resolved:

1. This Mahasabha expresses its deep sense of sorrow at the premature death of Yendrambam Angangjao Singh, a delegate and prays to God that his soul may rest peacefully in heaven.
2. (a) This Mahasabha strongly condemns the repressive measures such as beating, incarnation, firing etc., adopted towards the Prajas who carried out agitations for the fulfilment of their demands in the States of Hyderabad, Mysore, Dhyankanol, Atgar, Rajkot, Kolapur and other Natives States in Orissa; and conveys its sympathy to all the bereaved members of the families of those heroes who sacrificed their lives in the struggle for freedom, and also prays to God for a peaceful rest of the souls of those heroes who thus sacrificed their lives. (b) This Mahasabha expresses its joy at the reforms being introduced in the two States of Mayurbhanj and Jodhpur for responsible Government.
3. This Mahasabha expresses its joy at the success and consolidation of the Congress Coalition Ministry in Assam and congratulates the Honourable Chief Minister Sjt. Gopinath Bordoloi on his success.
4. This Mahasabha has deleted the word “Hindu” in the name of this organization Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha that it may become an all-Manipuri Mahasabha.
5. This Mahasabha expresses its deep sense of sorrow at the incarnation of Rani Gaidilu of our Manipur hills who is still languishing in the Shillong Jail in the full bloom of her youth while all the political prisoners in Assam and many of them in the other Provinces have already been released, and the India Government and local authorities be approached for her immediate release.
6. That in order to remove the poverty of the Manipuri nation, to revive our cottage industry that has been lying in a decaying state for a long period of time, to improve our economic condition and to enable ourselves to control the market, an all-Manipuri *Khadi Sangha* be established by starting *Khadi Pratisthans* in the villages of Manipur and by propagating *Khadir*.
7. That not even one out of a hundred Manipuri people is literate. It will take many years before they will all become literate under the present conditions. Literacy Campaign be launched among the literate adults that most of them

may become literate within, at most, half of the period of time that will be required for the purpose at the present rate of progress.

8. This Mahasabha suffers a great handicap from lack of funds and finds it difficult to keep any concrete programme, therefore, it is resolved that in view of the urgent necessity to have a fund of this Mahasabha to enable itself to turn all its resolutions into practice, efforts be made to increase the funds of this Mahasabha.
9. That the Assam Government be moved to reserve seats in the Assam Council and Assembly for the Caste Hindu Manipuris in proportions to their populations in Assam.
10. That Manipur State comprises hills and valleys, the hills being eleven-twelfths and the valleys one twelfth of the whole area of the State. If the hill areas are excluded, the valleys are not greater than a Sub-Division. Moreover, the hill-men and we, the Meiteis have never been separated and cannot be separated in language, in culture and in commerce. The separation of the hills from the State is a great loss to the hill-men as well as to the Meiteis. So the Mahasabha lodges its strong protest against the separation of the hills. The India Government be approached for keeping the hills under the State administration.
11. This Mahasabha also demands the fulfilment of the claim of the Manipuri State subjects for the establishment of a Legislative Council for the attainment of the representative form of Government for which they have already submitted an application to His Highness the Maharajah of Manipur. Efforts be made by this Mahasabha for attaining this claim.
12. This Mahasabha conveys its hearty thanks to Sjt. N. Gourhari Singh of Saugaijam Leikai for his voluntarily rendering free boarding to all the foreign delegates coming to join the first sitting of the open session of the Mahasabha held in 1934, at Imphal, and also to those who came to join the 4th Session held on the 30th December 1938 at Imphal.
13. That there are no sound and well-established Sanskrit institutions worth the name for imparting education to the Manipuri Brahmins whose number is so large and who have to perform without commission of mistakes the functions of directing religious matters, making recitals at worships and *Sradha* ceremony and the like. There are in Manipur only three nominal Sanskrit institutions (a very small number.) Sic. Here again there is no systematic teaching of theology and philosophy – subjects no Brahmin can afford to eschew, except for a meagre portion on grammar and literature. There is, moreover, no institution for higher degree Sanskrit classes. State authorities be approached for establishing good Sanskrit Institutions where the Manipuri Brahmins may be given good education in Sanskrit, and also for taking steps

whereby the aforesaid subjects may be taught by appointing competent Sanskrit teachers.

14. That some Manipuri Vaishnabas suffered much from the oppression of the Brahma Sabha by being declared "*Mangba*" without giving any reasonable ground. As it serves a strong bar to the Manipuri Vaishnabas' progress and consequently to that of all the Manipuris, so long as the personnel of the personnel of the Brahma Sabha remains unchanged, (so) it is not desirable to have the present members of the body as Guide in religious matters. The authority or authorities concerned be approached to form a new body to decide religious affairs by electing members from among Meiteis and Brahmins after dissolving the present body. It is therefore resolved that the Working Committee be entrusted with doing necessary redressing works in case the authority declines to do so by keeping the present personnel of the body the same.
15. That the State authorities be approached to permit the parties to appear in the Cherap and the Panchayat Courts with their shoes and not to kneel down on the floor when they give their statements; and to abolish the practice of taking "*Wakheisel*."
16. That most of the Manipuris migrated to Tippera and Assam end their lives in (clearing through poverty) the jungles for settlement. His Highness the Maharajah and the State Durbar be approached for giving them means of their livelihood by giving them arable lands in the State.
17. That Manipuri delegates be sent to the All-India Kshetriya Conference.
18. That in the Calcutta Museum an ugly statue meant to represent a Manipuri is placed among those representing the hill tribes. Formerly a photo of a male and female as representing the Hindu Manipuris was placed by the said statue. So the said ugly statue was clearly distinguished to be the facsimile of a Manipuri of the hill tribe, but not the Hindu Manipuri. Now by the removal of the said photo, all those visitors quite ignorant of the origin of the Hindu Manipuris are led regard the statue as the specimen representation of a Hindu Manipuri. The Superintendent of the Calcutta Museum be approached to make necessary redress.
19. That in the Calcutta Commercial Museum there are innumerable works of arts and crafts contributed by the various communities of India as marks of dexterity in this line. But nothing of the sort from Manipur has yet been contributed. This Mahasabha should make necessary arrangements to send some fine indigenous articles to the said Museum.
20. This Mahasabha conveys its thanks to His Highness to Maharaja of Tippera for His Highness' kindly exempting the Manipuris settling in Tippera State from paying their tuition fees in the schools in the State.

21. That the leaders of those Kritania Manipuri of the Tippera State be informed to do Sudhi in fifteen days for both the cases of birth and death, instead of the former practice of Sudhi of birth in ten days and that of death in fifteen days.
22. That the authorities be approached to introduce the Manipuri language by Calcutta University in the schools where only Manipuri boys read and also in those where Manipuri boys also read.
23. That the special concession granted to the Manipuri pilgrims proceeding upto Nabdwip-Ghat is due to this Mahasabha's efforts. The Agent, E.I.R. be approached to grant similar concession to the Manipuri pilgrims proceeding to Brindaban.
24. That the Political Agent and the Assam Government be approached to appoint competent Manipuris in higher grades in the Agency Court, as no Manipuris have as yet been appointed in higher grades though there is no restriction from appointing them.
25. This Mahasabha expresses its sorrow at the falling of Sjt. Tikendra Dhaja Maharajkumar, the son of the late Maharajah Kulachandra Dhajah Singh, in a sea of sorrow with his family. H.H. the Maharaja of Manipur, Political Agent in Manipur and the India Government be approached to fulfil his claim in order to remove his unbearable sufferings.
26. This Mahasabha condoles the death of some of the Manipuri Muhammadans who have long settled in Burma, in the recent riot between the Burmese and the Muhammadans.
27. That the State Darbar be approached for passing Orders to make the State Courts and the other State Offices use terms of civility in their summons and notices.
28. That the President of the Mahasabha be empowered to select members on the Working Committee.
29. That Sjt. Chingakham Pishak Singh [M.A.] be appointed the General Secretary of this Mahasabha.
30. That Sjt. Laishram Jogeswar Singh be appointed the Assistant General Secretary of this Mahasabha.

Sd./
Irabot Singh
President, Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha

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Abstract

On 19 April 1891, the sovereign authority of the regent Kula Chandra Singh of Manipur came to an end by the proclamation of Her Majesty the Queen, Empress of India. Following this, the administration of Manipur was taken over by the General Officer Commanding of Her Majesty's forces in Manipur. Almost a month before this, five British officers – J.W. Quinton, chief commissioner of Assam; Lt. Col. C McD. Skene of the 42nd Gurkha Rifles; F.St.C. Grimwood, political agent at Manipur (September 1889 - March 1891); W.H. Cossins, assistant secretary to the chief commissioner of Assam and Lt. W.H Simpson of the 43rd Gurkha Rifles, were sentenced to death for their excessive intervention in the independent state's internal politics of Manipur.

Now the kingdom was brutally suppressed, the British officials captured the main suspects in killing the five British officials and other architects of the Manipur Uprising and put on trial. Kajao Singh, who speared Grimwood, was hanged on 24 May 1891; Niranjan Subedar, a renegade ex-sepoy of the 34th Native Infantry of the Indian Army, was hanged on 8 June 1891; Senapati Tikendrajit and Thangal General were hanged in public on 13 August 1891 at Pheida-pung (Polo Ground), Imphal.

1.1 Debate on Colonial Historiography of Manipur

In the historical writings of Manipuri, there are varying narratives on the dilution of political sovereignty of Manipur before the Anglo-Manipur war of 1891, which eventually led to the emergence of two schools of historians. One postulates independent sovereign power while the other claims a declining power whose internal political matters had been interfered with by the British as early as the first half of the nineteenth century, even to the extent of losing its internal sovereignty.

Karam Manimohan argues that after the death of Raja Gambhir Singh in January 1834, William Bentinck considered it necessary for the British to establish a permanent office in Manipur, the office of the political agent, and Lieutenant Gordon was considered for the post. The English East India Company (EEIC) placed Chandra Kirti,

the late Raja's infant son, on the throne, and Nar Singh became the regent of Manipur. In 1844 the young Raja's mother attempted the regent's life and having failed, she self-exiled with the Raja in Cachar. After this incident, on 28 September 1844, Nar Singh was officially "recognised" by the Company as the Raja of Manipur. The second political agent, Captain William McCulloch, who was firm on establishing a paramountcy in Manipur, remarked in 1851 that "good order and the maintenance of authority in this (Manipur) country can be effected only by the British government. In a country which, like this, owes its existence, and owns that it does so, to the British government, the influence of that government ought to be paramount and capable of effecting this."¹

Gangmumei Kamei, on the other hand, asserts that "Manipur since Gambhir Singh had maintained the status of an independent kingdom. The king performed the customary *Phambalkaba* (coronation ceremony) which was a compulsory state ritual to be performed by a king. Manipur had its indigenous political and administrative systems, currency, flags, and royal insignia."² Accordingly, Manipur as a country, maintained relationship with the British as a sovereign kingdom and had its foreign minister (*Aya Purel*) in charge of Burmese affairs. Manipur, in a purely legal sense, was "*de jure* independent of and *de facto* dependent on the British."³ However, it can be noted that Manipur was only independent in the legal sense and had already lost its power as a sovereign country. As Gunnell argues, the British exerted suzerain control in all but name.⁴

In understanding this debate, however, it would miss the crux of the whole conception of British rule in Manipur if the concept of indirect rule as a historical process as proposed by historians like Michael Fisher, Ian Copland, Barabara Ramusack, Karuna Mantena, etc., is not taken into account. They have shown extensively that British imperial rule in the Indian princely states was heavily

¹ K. Manimohan, *Hijam Irabot Singh and Political Movement in Manipur*, New Delhi, B.R Publishing Corporation, 1989, p. 18.

² G. Kamei, *A History of Modern Manipur 1826-2000: A Study of Feudalism, Colonialism and Democracy*, New Delhi, Akansha Publishing House, 2016, p. 185.

³ Kamei, *A History of Modern Manipur 1826-2000*, p. 186.

⁴ G. Cederlof, *Founding an Empire on India's North-Eastern Frontier, 1790-1840*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press (OUP), 2005, p. 201.

influenced and shaped by the administrators' actions on the spot (“man in political line”), by political philosophy of the idea of justice, rule, and government taking roots in the metropole. They argue that residents helped formulate British policy and at the same time endeavored to enforce itself through Indian rulers. Indirect rule had some marked advantages in both practice and policy over direct rule. For smooth execution of administrations, local conditions were always taken into account and were adjusted. The local condition and the execution of policies from the metropole went hand in hand. In addition, “princely states” were not homogenous in its social, economic and political dynamics. While bringing these states under the umbrella of “indirect rule”, they presented their own characteristics of evolution, size, and assumed independence.

1.2 Establishment of British Paramountcy in Manipur

After the Anglo-Manipur War 1891, the British paramount power established itself as the indisputable authority in Manipur. They have thus started the era of “three-fold oppression” - colonial control, feudalism, Brahminism in Manipur history as John Parratt describes in *Wounded Land*. Manipur’s external affairs were now completely in the hands of the British and internal affairs, to various degrees, were administered through the political agent. Now colonial recognition of Manipur as a “princely state” brought her under “indirect rule” while being monitored closely and controlled by the representatives of the Raj. They established an independent office of political agent in the capital city and occupied a space of power at the royal court. Though “indirect” and out of the purview of directly ruled British India, laws and bureaucratic system sharing the same spirit and ideology of the British Raj were introduced.

The supremacy of the British was embodied in the *sanad* issued to the minor Raja Chura Chand Singh on 18 September 1891. The previous day, 17 September 1891, Major H.St.P. Maxwell (political agent of Manipur) visited the Raja’s house and handed over the official order of the British authority that the minor had been, henceforth, appointed as the new Raja. There could be two reasons as to why the particular minor was chosen. Firstly, the Raj had wittingly appointed this scion of an indirect heritage to disappoint the direct royal descendants which had rebelled against the imperial power. Secondly, the British could send him out of the state for his

education during which period the British paramountcy could establish firmly in Manipur.⁵

Now coming to the introduction of a new political order in Manipur by the British official in the nineteenth century. The position of the political agent was first sent to Manipur in 1835 for the “preservation of friendly intercourse, and as a medium of communication with the Manipur government, and, as occasion may require, with the Burmese authorities on that frontier, and more especially to prevent border feuds and disturbances which might lead to hostilities between the Manipurians and the Burmese.”⁶ Thirty-five years later in 1870 the duties of the political agent were more strictly defined reflecting further extensive British pressure on Manipur “primarily in insisting upon a strict fulfillment of the duties which the Raja was bound by treaty to perform, and in bringing his influence gently and gradually to bear upon the Raja ...”⁷

The appointment of George Gordon as the first political agent marked the formalisation of relationship between Manipur and the British. This was executed to keep the Burmese at bay using Manipur as the first line of defense. For the British, it was always militarily strategic to have a friendly ally at the frontiers.

1.3 Changes in Existing Administrative and Judicial Structures

As soon as the country was brought under the control of the British in 1891 numerous courts for adjudication of specific legal matters were abolished. The highest judicial institution, Cherap Court, which existed just below the Durbar, was kept intact after its strength was reduced to just five members. A new court called the Town Panchayat (Sadar Panchayat) was instituted on 15 November 1891 subordinate to the Cherap Court. It had jurisdiction only in the capital city of Imphal and dealt with minor criminal and civil cases and had the power to fine up to ₹100. A lower court called Rural Panchayat Court was also set up with fines up to ₹50 and handled civil suits of ₹50 or less. An interesting character of all these courts was that no trial of any British

⁵ Manimohan, *Hijam Irabot Singh and Political Movement in Manipur*, p. 3.

⁶ Manimohan, p. 5.

⁷ Manimohan, p. 5.

nationals was allowed here, meaning, the new judicial system introduced should deal with only the colonial subjects.

The Manipur Levy, founded in 1824 by Gambhir Singh with the help of the Company to fight Burmese occupation during the *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* popularly known as the Seven Years Devastation (1819-1826), was abolished in 1892. A new armed force called Military Police Battalion was set up consisting of 14 native officers, 49 non-commissioned officers, and 400 sepoy. Here, the need for a modern bureaucratic institution was realised, in the “only with the bureaucratisation of the state and the law in general can one see definite possibility of a sharp conceptual separation of the ‘objective’ legal order from the ‘subjective’ rights of the individuals...”⁸ The new military establishment was led by a commandant, Mr. Crawford, who was then the assistant to the political agent of Manipur. This force was paid partially in cash and partially by free grants of land and rations. By 1894-95 a precise cash payment was introduced. During the same period, a small Civil Police operational in the capital was established in 1893, consisting of a sub-inspector, a head constable, and eleven constables. The Rural Police was also established by appointing a chowkidar for about every hundred houses.

The most crucial aspect of British rule after 1891 was the direct control exercised over the hill areas of Manipur. In 1893-94 a paid staff of officials was instituted and the hills were divided into five divisions, each headed by an official called *Lam-Subedar* with a modest payment of ₹15 with seven *Lambus* on ₹7 each to assist him. Again in 1906, J. Shakespear, the political agent of Manipur, withdrew all matters concerning the hills from the State Office and a special office with two clerks was established. In 1907 the hills came under the direct administration of the vice-president of the Durbar subject to the general control of the political agent. While the administration of the entire state came under the purview of the Durbar of which the Raja was the president, the hill tribes were excluded from the jurisdiction of the Durbar itself.

⁸ M. Weber, ‘Bureaucracy’, in A Sharma, N. Gupta (ed.), *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. 67.

1.4 Establishment of the Durbar

On 15 May 1907, the administration of Manipur was handed over to the Raja and the Durbar by the colonial authority, thus started the tenure of a British appointed king who “having removed from the state for most of his formative years ... scarcely appreciated the finer points of the *Meetei/Meitei* culture and statecraft” and whose “exposure to the ways of the British seems to have affected him so little, and that he comes through a caricature of a lazy Oriental despot rather than the enlightened ruler the British no doubt had hoped for.”⁹ The Durbar was to be managed under a “Set of Rules” called “Rules for the Management of Manipur State” which was sanctioned by the government of India. The official ceremony of the installation of the young Raja to the throne was held in the next month of February and was presided over by Lancelot Hare, the lieutenant-governor of East Bengal and Assam. The formation of the State Durbar was supervised by Lancelot Hare, and it constituted Chura Chand Singh as the president, W.A. Cosgrave as the vice-president with the addition of three ordinary members namely, Rajkumar Dumbra Singh, Gokul Singh (*Naharup Lakpa*) and Ibungo Chaoba Singh. There were also three more positions of the additional members which included Bindhu Madhab Shastri, Ningombam Yaiskul Lakpa, and Maibam Tamro Singh.

The *Pothang* system was abolished in 1892, reintroduced in 1904, and after a widespread agitation was abolished again by a proclamation on 9 June 1913. Under this system of forced labour, each village was obliged to carry the baggage of touring state officials and to maintain roads, embankments and schools, and other duties. The rajkumars, the Brahmins, and the king’s and Govindajee’s honorary servants were also exempted from this compulsory labour.

At the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 the Raja of Manipur supported the British war effort earnestly. In addition to the subscriptions to various war funds, he presented the Raj with four motor ambulances at the cost of ₹28,000, and also an airplane which amount to ₹22,500. The fact of complete neglect of the hill tribes can

⁹ J. Parratt, *Wounded Land: Politics and Identity in Modern Manipur*, New Delhi, Mittal Publication, 2005, p. 18.

be judged by the amount (s) of expenditure which was merely ₹18,000, i.e., about a quarter of the house tax they paid. This was exacerbated by forced recruitment in early 1917 for the Labour Corps which were to be sent to France. Chura Chand had already offered to raise 2,000 labours and another 20,000 later on. Both Chura Chand and the political agent had not anticipated the difficulties in raising such a large number of recruits. As the recruitment process began Kuki chiefs began to oppose it. As a result, the British government started to send out notices to the principal chiefs “telling that recruits for labour corps would not be demanded, but they must submit to the punishment for their ‘organised resistance’ to the demands of the State and for their refusal to obey orders.”

As rebellions break out in 1918, there were numerous raids conducted by the Kukis in the valley that left more than 200 deaths. The British took a whole year to suppress it completely. By March 1919, all the leading Kuki chiefs were taken into custody, and around 1,000 guns were confiscated.

1.5 Early Discontent Against British Rule

The *Nupi Lan* of 1904 was the first people’s movement in modern Manipur. It was a mass demonstration triggered by the arbitrary nature in which lieutenant-colonel H.St.P. Maxwell issued an order to temporarily resuscitate the *lalup* system. The system which had already been abolished was restored to rebuild the assistant political agent’s bungalow which burnt down on the midnight of 15 March 1904. Again after three and half months, on 6 July the Khwairamban Keithel, a women’s market, which had 26 sheds with a capacity of 3,000 seats was completely burnt down. Later, on the night of 4 August, the bungalow owned by the political agent was destroyed in a fire. On 15 October more than 5000 women thronged the compound of the political agent against the resuscitation of the *lalup* system. Earlier on 30 September at the Pucca Bridge (Thong Nambonbi), a similar mass demonstration took place in which several disgruntled aristocratic rajkumars had made speeches and instructed the people to not give up and resist orders from the government. The leaders of the agitation were arrested later and finally banished to Lakhipur in the Cachar District by an order dated 13 November 1904.

Five years after the establishment of the British colonial rule in Manipur, Hijam Irabot was born on 30 September 1896 at Oinam Leikai near the Pishum Bridge. He became one of the most popular leaders in modern Manipur who took a pivotal role in establishing various organisations which later became the centers of modern political formations and freedom struggles. In the formation of the Nikhil Hindu Manipur Mahasabha on 30 May 1934, he became the founder member of the organisation. The formation of such an organisation was a consequence of the cultural movement that was emerging in the first half of the twentieth century. The organisation later developed into a political group that started questioning the existing social and political structures.

It is also important to understand the figure of Irabot by locating him in the renaissance of Manipuri literature as “an integral part of a much wider concern for the discovery of the Meetei/Meitei identity.”¹⁰ This cultural movement did not locate in isolation and has to be studied in its liberating dimensions as the gist of the larger development of a “national culture” which is imperative in decolonisation as Frantz Fanon argues. The search for a “cultured individuals” is essential as these men “demand for a national culture and the affirmation of the existence of such a culture represent a special battlefield.”¹¹

The cultural movement of the period cannot be overlooked as merely a process. It was, on the contrary, a search for the past, and the reinvention of a culture rooted in the Manipuri language. This is how various vernacular magazines began to be published in the valley. This was the first print culture that appealed to a wider public audience, with the establishment of magazines such as *Meetei Chanu* (1922), *Yakairol* (1930). When the first non-Bengali drama union, the Manipur Dramatic Union, was founded in 1932, various plays in the Manipuri language were released and were received with a tremendously positive response from the public. This was a radical departure from the earlier plays that were played in Bengali language with Hindu mythological themes. The stress on the local vernacular language can be interpreted as

¹⁰ Parratt, *Wounded Land*, p. 29.

¹¹ F. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, London, Penguin Books, 2001, p. 168.

resistance in itself as a language that is foreign and imposed on a people can take them further and further away from themselves to other selves, from their world to other worlds.¹²

1.6 The Late Days of Colonial Rule

The fourth meeting, the Chinga Session of the Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha held on December 29 1938 was a landmark in the political movement of Irabot, and for that matter Manipur. The Mahasabha evolved into a purely political platform that encompassed all the people of Manipur of both in the hills and the valley with the word “Hindu” being omitted from the name of the Mahasabha. In a very symbolic gesture, Irabot opened the Chinga Session by unfurling a flag embossed with *Pakhangba Paphal*, which was very similar to the Manipuri national flag used before the British conquest of Manipur. After the Second *Nupi Lan* broke out on 12 December 1939, Irabot was arrested on 9 January 1939 and sentenced to three years of imprisonment. He was released from Sylhet jail on 20 March 1943 but was not allowed to return to Manipur for the next three years. When he was finally allowed to enter Manipur in March 1946, he organised a new political party called the Manipur Praja Mandal. Two years later he was elected to the Manipur Assembly from the Utlou Constituency in the first election held in independent Manipur. He went underground after the Pundongbam Incident in which a police officer was killed in a mass demonstration against the proposed formation of the Purvanchal Pradesh comprising Manipur, Tripura, Cachar, and the Lushai Hills. This event led to the genesis of the first underground movement in Manipur in the post-British period with the formation of the Communist Party of Manipur on 29 October 1948.

The Second *Nupi Lan* happened in the last month of 1939. Before the galvanisation of a mass movement in full swing, there were dissatisfaction and resentment built up against the Raj and the existing economic condition from the early nineteen-thirties. The economic grievance emerged out of the massive rise in the price of rice due to excessive colonial practice of exploitative export. While there might be

¹² N. Thiong’o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers, 1986, p. 12.

several political implications in the history of Manipur, most importantly, the movement was the “galvanising effect on the political movement against British paramountcy.”¹³ The event was a catalyst for the demand for a democratic and constitutional monarchy in the state.

On 12 December 1939, a huge number of women thronged the State Office and demanded that the president of the Manipur State Durbar, Mr. T.A. Sharpe, stop exporting rice from Manipur immediately. The compound was occupied for a whole day by nearly 4,000 women and was cleared in the early evening when a platoon of the Assam Rifles arrived and dispersed the protestors leaving dozens injured. The movement lasted more than 10 months as the British government was unwilling to give in to a single demand. Meanwhile, the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha began to put pressure on the government with more intense demands of:

- A complete stoppage of rice export business from Manipur
- Trial of state officials and police who assaulted and wounded women
- Establishment of responsible government in the state

In another memorandum to the Raja they also demanded a Constituent Assembly, a Unicameral Legislature of 100 members out of which 80 were to be elected and 20 nominated by the Raja, the leader of the largest party in the Legislature to be the prime minister, etc.¹⁴

Whereas it can be said that the causes of the “Women’s War” were economic, there was overall discontent with the British rule in Manipur.¹⁵ It was because of this that there were persistent demands for a whole radical change in the administrative structure of the state with demands for a responsible government and a Constituent Assembly. It cannot be denied that the political environment of the nineteen-thirties gave rise to the reform movement which was a radical move towards a new beginning of a modern democratic polity.

¹³ Manimohan, p. 15.

¹⁴ Submitted on 2nd October 1939 to His Highness.

¹⁵ K. Manimohan, *Nupi Lan: Women’s War of Manipur*, Imphal, Karam Premlata, 2000, p. 264.

If the various movements of the first half of the twentieth century can be said to be the visible manifestation of actual conflict between the dominant and the subordinate, James Scott's theory on domination and resistance can shed new light on the different levels at which political confrontations are carried out in isolation yet inextricably in the unseen landscape out of the purview of the dominant and the subordinate in their own spheres.¹⁶ This unseen and un-surveillance nature of resistance is what is termed as "hidden transcript," which in the case of the subordinate is where their real politics of "infrapolitics" resides.

With this introduction to the British colonial modern Manipur history, the research looks into the British colonial rule in Manipur i.e., from 1891 to 1947, and the years after which saw the emergence of a Constitutional Monarchy in 1948 which lasted one year until the controversial Shillong "merger" of 1949 to the Indian Union. It reinterprets this period of Manipur history from the perspective of a colonial logic of domination, material exploitation, and control by employing the concept of "indirect rule." The intended purpose is to enquire about the British policies of law, police, administration, monetary taxation, and overall control. Consequently, it retraces the various aspirations of the people and the resistance meted out to the British rule, resistance that was obvious and visible in its practice.

1.7 Statement of the Problem:

Since the nineteen-eighties, there has been a wide range of historical writings on Manipur under British paramountcy. From social, political, and economic dimensions, Lokendra, Manimohom, Joykumar, Gangmumei, Lal Dena, Sanajaoba, John Parrat, etc. elaborately discuss the historical development of British colonial rule in Manipur. However, these existing works of literature merely narrate the historical events without much consideration of the ideological underpinnings of British imperial expansion in the northeastern frontier. Moreover, the emergence of a new order of statecraft under an appointed "Raja" through British policy of indirect rule remains unexplored in historical research. This study attempts to analyse the assimilation and convergence

¹⁶ J. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcript*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1990.

process of the western imperial political orders in Manipur through the Raja and the State Durbar. Public responses to colonial intervention in Manipur in the first half of the twentieth century need to be redefined by analysing the institution of Manipur State Durbar as an apparatus of legitimation of British Raj, which led to the establishment of the Manipur State Constitution. This is achieved by employing a critical study of the concept of British indirect rule in Indian princely states in general and Manipur in particular.

1.8 Area of Study

The research primarily focuses on Manipur valley covering the first half of the twentieth century with analysis of pre-colonial varied relations of interference, intervention, and alliance. The hill areas are excluded from the present study for two reasons: first, research time constraints, and second, the hill areas were beyond the direct jurisdiction of the Durbar in the first half of the twentieth century.

1.9 Objectives

- To examine the emergence of a new political dimension under British paramountcy.
- To highlight the public response towards the Durbar and the Raj.
- To historically analyse the period of colonial Manipur within the context of the British policy of “indirect rule.”

1.10 Research Methodology

The research primarily relies on sources available in Manipur State Archives and Manipur Secretariat Archive (Imphal) and other non-governmental private archives. It employs both narrative and qualitative methods. Besides these primary archival sources, other secondary sources such as books, journals, etc. are also used in the research work. British ethnographic works by civil and military officials are examined to understand how and why the British gathered vast topographical, cultural, and linguistic surveys of the region since the eighteen-twenties. Existing works on the concept of “indirect rule” are used to bring out the commonalities and variations of

Manipur's relationship with the British with that of other princely states in the Indian subcontinent.

1.11 Chapterisation

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter lays a brief introduction to the pre-British political history of Manipur, and concludes with the political and social milieu of the late nineteen-forties. Existing literature on the area is analysed to build a new narrative for the research work.

Chapter 2: The Residency System in Colonial Manipur

This chapter deals with the concept of indirect rule and the very nature of Manipur's relationship with the British from the early nineteenth century. It highlights the historical precedence of the varying nature of relationships – sometimes cordial, and at other times, unfriendly – that led to the eroding of external sovereignty and independence of the kingdom.

Chapter 3: Establishment of Manipur State Durbar and its conflict with the British Paramountcy

This chapter discusses the formation of a new state Durbar under the British Raj and various accounts of direct and indirect confrontations between two political entities, the Durbar having merely a nominal power.

Chapter 4: The Resistance Movements in the Valley

The rise of a democratic people's aspiration which manifested itself in the form of mass women's uprising is examined here. Both the women's agitations (*Nupi Lan*) served as an ultimatum to the Raj that the people would no longer accept government policies. The exact nature of these uprisings and their contribution to the demand for a democratic responsible government is discussed here. This chapter does not only throw light on the establishment of Manipuri Nikhil Mahasabha but also attempts to highlight the emergence of a radical politics that aimed at a harsh critique of the existing social and political structure under the figure of Hijam Irabot.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This chapter summarises the findings of the research taking into account the Sanamahi revivalist movement that arose in the nineteen-thirties. All the arguments and interpretations made in the previous chapters are highlighted here.

1.12 Findings

The British government used different administrative policy regimes in various parts of the Indian subcontinent. Within this heterogeneity, the Indian rulers negotiated with the British different kinds of allegiances that were contextual to regional political variations. There were many treaties and agreements, and within this variation different kinds of “indirect rule” were adapted or adjusted. It is a matter of how much different Indian princely states were autonomous and sovereign, or subordinate and subservient. It can be argued that far from being puppet regimes, some of the states maintained extensive autonomy and preserved existing social and political order. They could also modify the existing order to fit into the new political climate and economic rationales.

However, there is also a different narrative related to this phenomenon. Once the British had executed some form of treaty with a princely state, the freedom of the rulers became increasingly constrained by the dictates of the British colonial regime. There would be a change in existing land ownership and revenue collection based solely on the western notion of private property. Above this, the ruler’s freedom to exercise external political relations was drastically constrained.

While the British advocated a policy of “non-interference”, this was merely rhetorical theatrics that matched with the less explicitly colonial militaristic and aggressive language following the Great Revolt of 1857. This rhetoric of “non-interference” marked a shift in the hegemonic presence and continuation of colonial rule. There was now an emphasis on measures that appeared less interventionist. However, they had structural consequences in the political, social, and economic spheres of native societies.

The Great Revolt of 1857 proved to be one of the largest indigenous independence movements against a European empire in the nineteenth century. It

temporarily shattered the imperial edifice across vast part of northern India provoking a violent and brutal response from the British. It was a terrible awakening of the British Empire that shook the rapidly growing confidence of the imperial mission. As a deeply disillusioning affair, it reconfigured metropolitan attitudes towards colonial subjects. The uprising gave rise to colonial nightmarish anxiety about the nature, meaning, character, and future trajectory of the British Empire.

This political juncture marked the turning point in the transformation of British imperial ideology, thus turning away from earlier liberal, reformist ethos to a definitive view of the traditional and unchanging nature of native Indian societies. This new shift in imperial ideology formed the theoretical foundations of indirect rule. This new ideology of “late imperialism” was hugely drawn from British writers and political theorists like Henry Maine. Maine’s portrait of the customary basis of native traditional society was a society whose foundations were diametrically opposed to those of modern society. With this proposition, he called into question the theoretical and practical underpinnings of liberal imperial agenda.¹⁷

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the “white man’s burden” of justification of imperial expansion in India had shifted from metropole to colony; in the language of H.St.P. Maxwell, the political agent of Manipur, to the people who are “full of deceit and intrigue”.¹⁸ Their moral question of prolonging its stay in the Indian subcontinent no longer lay with the British. It was the colonial subject themselves who sought the protection of the Raj. The colony was in a whirlpool of perpetuating crisis within, entwined to the endemic forms of internecine conflict between savage tribals, sectarianism, and religious conflicts. As Lord Cromer put it – “the real India question was not whether the English were justified in staying in the country, but whether they could find any moral justification for withdrawing from it.”¹⁹

As the nineteenth century progressed, the Raj lost much of its earlier confidence about the malleability and changeability of Indian society. This put an end

¹⁷ K. Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism*, Princeton, PUP, p. 148.

¹⁸ Maxwell to the chief commissioner of Assam, Letter No. 408, dated 14th October, 1904.

¹⁹ Mantena, *Alibis of Empire*, p. 149.

to the belief in the feasibility of Macaulayesque mission to turn Indian subjects into brown Europeans. According to the British, Indians were not interested in reformation and were slaves to caste and customs.²⁰

Indirect rule functioned concretely to shift the burden of imperial legitimation from the metropole onto native societies. This way, the native societies were constituted as “alibis of the empire.” This shift had two benefits for the British Empire. First, the moral foundation of the empire was transferred to the unchanging and inherently crisis-ridden nature of native society. Secondly, the overt face of the structure of colonial domination was transferred to native princely societies through the transfer of authority to native structures of rule. Colonial domination was systematised and disseminated through pre-existing native institutions such as the Durbar.

The Queen’s proclamation of 1857 had pledged no more annexations and this saved the Indian princes some six-hundred in number from falling into oblivion. Though Lord Canning’s *sanads* of 1862 allowed the princes to adopt heirs without restriction, Manipur as a rebellious state was denied it and a minor prince had to be chosen. The British project of indirect rule brought the princes into the political mainstream. They were invited to Durbars at Delhi and honoured with titles and other privileges. As in the general philosophy of indirect rule, maintaining a frontier state relieved the British from direct administrative responsibility. This had important cost-saving implications. One-third of the subcontinent was brought under British control through this policy.

As obvious with the wide alliance formed, princely states became admirable loyal forces at times of need to the empire. Princely alliance with Manipur connected the Raj to Manipuri traditions. The kings of Manipur were descendants of the serpent god *Pakhangba* and therefore any king on the throne carried bloodlines of divine beings. Having a king who was trained in English-established educational institutions

²⁰ Copland, *The Princes of India in the Endgame of Empire*, p. 21.

gave an English touch to the traditional prince. All this gave the British rule much-needed scope for legitimacy.

The British rule in the Indian subcontinent lasted nearly 200 years. It started in 1757, and all areas of present-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Burma were brought under control by the end of the nineteenth century. All of the territories brought under control were divided into “British India” and “native states” or “princely states.”²¹ The former was defined as “all territories and places within Her Majesty’s dominations which are for the time being governed by Her Majesty through the Governor-General of India.” The latter category which the British assumed Manipur was part of since the early second half of the nineteenth century and which Manipur became officially in 1891, was ruled by hereditary rulers approved or appointed by the British.

Since the establishment of the office of the political agent in Manipur on 7 February 1835 by a minute of Lord William Bentinck, very often internecine royal disputes and wars of succession had provided the British an excuse for interfering in the internal affair of Manipur. The appointment of George Gordon as the first political agent marked the formalisation of the relationship between the kingdom and the British Raj. This was executed to keep the Burmese at bay using Manipur as the first line of defense. For the British, it was always militarily strategic to have a friendly ally at the frontiers. Manipur remained in the service of the Raj while successive Rajas maintained their place on the throne with British support and favour. This continuity made a sudden rupture in 1891 when Manipur revolted against the British extensive intervention. The British fully subjugated the country in 1891 and established an officially indirectly ruled state with the appointment of a minor prince and the creation of a Durbar. This marked the beginning of the period of total restructuring of the economic and political structure of the princely state, simultaneously leading to rising political consciousness as the Raj struggled to keep its imperial enterprise alive.

²¹ Interpretation Act of 1889.

The British rule in India and also in Manipur did not come into being all of a sudden. It was built over a hundred years, slowly and persistently, often employing trial-and-error method.²² By the end of the nineteenth century, the empire had reached full maturity having recovered from the shock of the Great Revolt of 1857, and to the British Crown everything appeared under control. By 1887, over 20,000 people were drawing government salaries above ₹75 a month. And several hundred thousand more worked in menial jobs, in the postal service, the army, the police, and the public work department.

The majority of Indians in the late nineteenth century paid taxes and obeyed the laws. This was an astonishing achievement to observers. Not only was it a remarkable feat for the British rule, but also for a foreign European government which was racially different and consisted of relatively few white men on the spot. In 1887 there were more than 6,000 Europeans in the public service, about 1,000 in the elite Indian Civil Service (ICS). In 1921 the entire white population was only 156,000. This was roughly one European for every 1,500 Indians.

The question now is, how did the British maintain such massive control over a racially different and diverse population when they were so vastly outnumbered? The British response to this question was usually found in terms like “good governance” provided by the colonial regime, as Lord Curzon remarked, “Efficiency has been our gospel, the keynotes of our administration.”

On the other hand, there is the element of power and threat. The British Empire was defended by a well-equipped, professional standing army of large number. This standing army was what proved decisive and useful as the last resort in capturing Manipur in 1891. At times, this force could be reinforced by the regiments of the British regular army. At the dawn of the twentieth century, when nationalist mass agitation became an order of the political landscape, some fifty battalions of the Indian Army, supplemented by artillery, armoured cars, and aircraft, were specifically designed to put down insurrections. They were also again backed up by some 200,000

²² I. Copland, *India 1885-1947: The Unmaking of an Empire*, Essex, Longman, 2001, p. 3.

police. Some of them were equipped with guns, while most of them had steel-tipped bamboo sticks (*lathis*) which could crack open a skull and bones.

It was not only this military and manpower might that was enough to keep the rule intact. In most times, the knowledge of this might which could be called out at any time the British wanted and wished was enough to rule such a vast subcontinent. This knowledge, and the knowledge of the threat, was much simpler and complicated than actual coercion by force.²³

The new colonial regime was built on “collaboration” rather than outright violent subjugation. Loyalty to the Crown was secured through honours, titles, money, and concessions of territorial claims distributed flamboyantly in Durbars and other official gatherings with the British administrators.²⁴ Since eighteen-seventies, many educational facilities were established, such as Rajkumar College at Rajkot and Rajpur, Mayo College at Ajmer (where Chura Chand was educated), Atchison College at Lahore, and Daly College at Indoor. These institutions became the main force for “education” from where loyal followers of the Raj were supplied. The systematic indoctrination of rulers by European private tutors and English education system at this “chiefs’ college” with educational trips abroad helped the British to fashion rulers who bore little or no resemblance to the colonial stereotype. In September 1902, Captain J.R. Nuttall of the 44th Gurkha Rifles was appointed as Chura Chand’s private tutor.

This fact presented itself as the mode in which the British ruled over the subcontinent not merely by pure force or threat of force. In addition to the wide array of bureaucratic and administrative mechanisms, educational institutions, medical facilities, etc., were more subtle aspects of coercion at the disposal of the Raj. Educational institutions were meant not just to impart knowledge, but to inculcate obedience to British authority on a large scale.

²³ Copland, *India 1885-1947*, p. 5.

²⁴ T.R. Metcalf, *The Aftermath of the Revolt: India 1857-1870*, Princeton: PUP, 1964, pp. 222-3.

On the issue of Indian collaboration with the British imperial project, it could be asked, “Why did they collaborate?” Ian Copland offers two hypotheses on this question – a negative reason and a positive reason.²⁵ The negative reason for the factor of collaboration had to do with how the way British government service was perceived or how it was not perceived, by the Indian population. According to this argument, until late in the life of the British Empire, most Indians thought there was nothing much strange in the very fact that India was part of a European empire. During this time, much of the civilised world was made up of polyglot empires. Apart from this, India itself had an extensive imperial tradition. The racial aspect of the ruler and the subject was not very disconcerting as the previous rulers in Delhi were Mughals from Central Asia. In this way, service to British Empire was not unpatriotic in the eyes of many.

On the other hand, the positive reason for the factor of Indian collaboration was multiple. It was habit and custom, admiration for British culture, or simply a need for a decent job. By the eighteen-thirties, middle class and elite competition for jobs in English education had grown up so much that senior members of the British government like T.B. Macaulay were convinced that it was only a matter of time before there emerged in India “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.”

In the late nineteenth century, this would be reversed. The English educated Bengali *bhadralok* (respectable men) began to question the benevolence of the British rule and asked, “Was British rule designed for India’s benefits or Britain’s?” By this time the British had realised that western-educated Indian elites in the British Indian subcontinent had begun fanning the flame of anti-British politics. To prevent the isolation and alienation of the princely rulers from British governance and institutions, the princes were integrated into institutions such as The Imperial Legislative Council (from 1861 onwards) and the Chamber of Princes – a consultative and advisory body set up in 1921 to counter the increasing anti-British sentiments.²⁶

²⁵ Copland, *India 1885-1947*, p. 7.

²⁶ B Ramusack, *The New Cambridge History of India: The Indian Princes and Their States*, Cambridge, CUP, 2004, pp. 126-7.

These various measures were part of a hegemonic strategy of the Raj to encourage Indian rulers to conceive they were independent states, against their fact of political impotency and degeneration. Over the course of its expansion, the British employed policies such as “subsidiary alliance”, “doctrine of lapse” and from 1857 onwards control by means of hegemonic incorporations. These were drastic policy shifts from direct military subjugation and annexation. This shift in policy explains why some rulers considered themselves “independent” and “autonomous” as in the case of Manipur, which led to the invasion of 1891.

Manipur as a princely state, like all other princely states of the British Indian subcontinent, was a creation of the British Empire. The assimilation of the princely state and the British administrative structure with the establishment of the Durbar in 1907, and before that during the minority of Chura Chand, marked a sudden rupture in the traditional continuity of state formation in the country. The presence of the British Raj on the Indian soil gradually and steadily wore out the existing status quo and power balance. Manipur, sandwiched between two big powerful states, Burma and the British, was gradually drawn into the political climate created by the British Empire on its western border. The princely state was gradually unable to retain the kind of political potency and independence it enjoyed in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Once the state began to negotiate treaties with the colonial power, it found itself as the party that did not have much say in the terms and conditions of the treaty. This condition was worsened by the setting up of the residency of the political agency in the capital. Once a ruler was appointed in the state and the Durbar established, a basis for “indirect” exploitation was created through the Raja who constantly had to prove his loyalty to the colonial power as his legitimacy solely rest on the approval and acceptance of the Raj.

British rule in Manipur post-1891 as a “princely state” was contingent on the philosophy of the empire that had drastically shifted towards an exercise of hegemony rather than direct political rule. In theory, the state continued to exist preserving its earlier political form, but in this new condition, the strings were pulled by the ever-present hands of the British Empire. This way, the British were able to govern Manipur

while the Raja ruled the state. The empire in the Indian subcontinent had reached its physical limit and focused more on the consolidation of the conquered territories rather than expansion to newer terrains.

A new system of revenue collection, judicial and bureaucratic system was introduced, as in parts of the other regions where *ryatwari* and *mahalwari* settlements were introduced respectively. As a system of salaried bureaucracy was introduced, though most of the higher official posts were occupied by members of the aristocratic class and the newly emergent elite favoured by the Raja. This was allowed by the British as it strengthened its hold on the state by creating a new group of collaborators.

On the other hand, the British did not have to directly create new social elites, as in the case of the Brahmins; the emergence of these social groups was contingent on the pre-existing social differentiation and hierarchy. These new social groups emerged out of historical continuity given impetus and catalytic push by the Raja for his legitimacy and as means of seeking acceptance from the people, especially the Hindu elite groups. However, the British did reconfigure the role of these elites, including the Raja, by imposing restrictions on their roles and activities, restructuring the whole agriculture economy, introducing a land and house revenue system, and at last, confining the role of the Raja as a mere appointee of the Raj.

This appointee had to rely on wide measures to ensure that he remained acceptable to the people, and far more, to the British officials watching over the administrative affairs of the state. These included measures to Sanskritise the Meetei²⁷ people to integrate them into the preferred social and religious structures. Other measures came along with this – the imposition of a strict social order based on the Hindu varna system with the help of the Brahma Sabha, emphasis on the Raja's divine character as the incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu to mark him out as the natural ruler legitimated by religion and history, the manipulation of religious practices, and lastly, extensive loyal collaboration for the provisions of resources and military

²⁷ The term *Meetei* originated in Cachar from the theory proposed by Naoria Phulo, while *Meitei* is the spelling that has been used by those in Manipur. Often both are written with a slash in between.

personnel during the First World War. These measures were the options available to the Raja when all doors to direct confrontation with the British had been closed.

As stated earlier, British rule in Manipur did not come into existence suddenly in 1891. It was a slow and gradual process. With many trial and error means to subdue a country for decades, the event of 1891 was the culmination of all the historical processes that have been played out earlier. By the eighteen-eighties, the British Empire in India had acquired a certain form of maturity. The entire bureaucratic machine, the “steel frame” of the empire, was done through extensive and rigorous competitive examinations, revenue collection had been systematised, there also began a separation of the executive and the legislative by the Council Acts of 1861 and 1892. While all this was happening, the British Empire had not stopped its territorial consolidation.

Manipur had come in contact with the British for the first time in 1762. The British resident in Sylhet, Mr Verelst, has received a representative from the king of Manipur seeking his aid against the invasion of the Burmese on Manipur’s eastern border. The British at that time had little knowledge about the small kingdom to the east of Cachar. The name of the country was uncertain.²⁸ The British sent a detachment of sepoy in aid of Raja Gour Shyam and his co-regent Jai Singh. When the British sepoy failed to advance further from Kanpur, the capital of the independent kingdom of Cachar, Manipur was left to defend itself.

On the other hand, Manipur’s contact with Burma had been a long one. The relationship came to a climax during the reign of Jai Singh’s grandfather, Garib Niwaz. He was one of the greatest kings of Manipur, or arguably the greatest, during whose rule had taken advantage of the weakness of the Burmese. Much of his time as the king was devoted to devastating and plundering upper Burma and destroying successive Burmese armies sent against him. The relationship between these two neighbouring

²⁸ Captain R. Boileau Pamberton wrote in 1835 that the country was variously called Kathe, Moglie, Meklee, and Cassay.

kingdoms would have been different if he had attempted conquest. But this could not be executed as Burma was a bigger kingdom with more extensive military power.

Vaishnavism was adopted as the state religion during the reign of Garib Niwaz (1709-1748). As early as the fifteenth century, Hindu Brahmins had started migrating to Manipur, most of them from Bengal. There was opposition to the imposition of this foreign religion. In the first half of the twentieth century, this would become a feature of the many resistances against the Raja who consolidated his power through the patronage of the British government.

William McCulloch had observed in the eighteen-sixties that Hinduism in the Meeteis was largely a matter of fashion than conviction.²⁹ However, by the early twentieth century, it had spread wide and far amongst the Meeteis and was followed devoutly. The reign of Chura Chand saw a dramatic increase in the influence of the Brahmins. In the previous centuries, a gradual symbiosis between the Meetei ancient religion and Hinduism had emerged. The Meeteis retained their faith and practice of the ancient religion, while at the same time accepting the rituals of Vaishnavite Hinduism. The hold of Hinduism was never very strong. The Indian Hindu caste system was also virtually non-existent as all Meeteis were regarded as *Kshatriya* caste. During the time of Chura Chand, this social and religious order was interfered with to a great extent. The reasons for this are religious as well as political. And therefore, resistance against this was both religious and political.

As in the case with other forms of resistance against abuse of power by Chura Chand, here again, he proved a loyal ally to the Crown and remained an active supporter of the British in its fight to contain forces of Indian nationalism that were not taking deep root in British India. When huge tracts of lands inhabited by hundreds of millions of people crossing oceans came under the sway of British conquest, it was because the British enjoyed a decisive military edge over local rulers and were ruthless in their coercion of those who dared to resist them as in the case of Manipur in 1891.

²⁹ W. McCulloch, *An Account of the Valley of Manipur and the Hill Tribes*, New Delhi, Akansha Publishing House, 2016.

In another case, it was also because British rule was actively supported by significant sections of the aristocratic, intellectual and religious elites.³⁰ In the *Nupi Lan* of 1904, and again during the gaining momentum of dissent against Chura Chand in the nineteen-thirties, he proved himself useful and loyal friend of the political agents. In the context of the Indian subcontinent, this was the general case of all “indirectly ruled” princely states. A web of extensive collaboration was forged by the British with an alliance between them and 600-odd surviving descendants of the subcontinent’s former ruling dynasties.

The widely encompassing network of colonial hegemonic alliances had never failed the British in its entire colonial history in India. In the Great Revolt of 1857, during the anti-partition agitation of 1905, during the crisis of the First and Second World War, during Quit Indian movement of 1942, princely money, princely military and labour forces, and more importantly, moral support played a vital role in keeping alive the imperial cause. It was based on this loyal conduct in service of the empire during the war that Chura Chand was decorated and honoured with Knight Commander of the Star of India (K.C.S.I) in 1934, the special order – Star of India - that was created solely for the princes of the subcontinent.

A decade earlier, during the time of Chandra Kirti’s rule, a relationship more than cordial had emerged with the British. For the British, the Raja of Manipur had become the most trusted and loyal ally in the eastern frontier. During the time of the Great Revolt of 1857, Chandra Kirti helped the British capture fugitive mutineers. He then later provided troops to support Col. James Johnstone for the suppression of Nagas in Kohima following the rising of the Angami Nagas. During the third and the last Anglo-Burmese war, he provided the British with Manipuri troops for the occupation of Kendat in Kabaw Valley. In exchange, the British offered him help against any attempt to overthrow him, mostly from within the princes. And in 1880, the British took the bold step of awarding Chandra Kirti with the Order of Knight Commander of the Star of India. The fact of Chandra Kirti’s long and internally

³⁰ I. Copland, *The Princes of India in the Endgame of the Empire – 1917-1947*, Cambridge, Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1997, p. 269.

peaceful rule can only be explained by this help and alliance with the British. The British gained more from this alliance than Manipur could. Chandra Kirti became instrumental in the suppressing and capturing of the vast hills of Assam.

During the First World War, Chura Chand, in addition to his personal subscriptions to various war funds, presented four motor ambulances at the cost of ₹28,000 to the British war effort, and a Manipur Labour Corps was established which was sent to France. A Double Company for active service was also drafted and attached to the 3/39th Garhwal Rifles for training. The first draft of one hundred and eighty-two men left on 11 December 1916, and the second draft of fifty-seven men on 5 February 1917. Above this, he also purchased an airplane for ₹22,500. During the war, he invested ₹100,000 of the state funds in the Indian War Loan and another ₹33,800 in the British Terminal Loan of 1915-1916.³¹ In recognition of his untiring service in the war effort and his role in suppressing the Kuki rebellion, he was invested with the title Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in 1919 during the visit of the chief commissioner of Assam, Nicholas Dodd Beatson Bell. A year before, a *sanad* was issued where Lord Chelmsford declared the title “Maharaja” as heredity to Manipuri prince. The *sanad* read:

I hereby confer upon Your Highness the title of Maharaja as a hereditary distinction for your services in connection with the war.

1st January 1918

Chelmsford

Viceroy

The British Empire expanded and established itself largely through the incorporation and integration of existing indigenous political structures. What makes the case of Manipur unique is the military confrontation in 1891. If not for that the structures of “indirect rule” remained in place – the residency, a native prince, the Durbar, the modification of existing legal institutions et al. Before 1891, with the

³¹ Manimohan, *Nupi Lan*, p. 97.

permanent presence of the political agent, the power of Manipuri Rajas had been gradually shrinking to the extent that no external relationships or treaties with neighbouring kingdoms could be undertaken without the consent of the British authority. A single British officer, that is the political agent, gradually managed to control the state through “advice” given to the Raja. This was much the norm throughout the empire.

From the mid-eighteenth century, the British devised and employed the system of indirect rule. Finding it extremely successful in expanding the empire, this became what Michael Fisher calls the “conscious model” for later imperial policymakers who wished to expand the empire without the economic and political costs of direct annexation. In Manipur’s case, the direct military assault was not to “annex” but a military response to a failed diplomatic relation the British had built with Manipur for decades. For the administrators in the field and policymakers at home, the Indian “conscious model” of indirect rule became a justification for later imperial expansion in Malaya, East, and West Africa.

Developed way before the Great Revolt of 1857, the system of indirect rule found its efficiency until the late stage of the empire. It was an abstract concept that heavily depended on the knowledge and shrewdness of the “man on the spot”, what Michael Fisher calls the “political line.” The administration was heavily concentrated in Calcutta under the Governor-General and later the Viceroy. It relied extensively on a mass of precedent and accumulated reports and ethnographic writings by its officials in the fields. Through the knowledge and experience it gathered from the field the British expected its officials to execute on practical grounds the abstract system of indirect rule. Once, a “prince” had been established in a state, the system sought to maintain the loyalty of the princes through an illusion of autonomy and independence, and through these princes, the sizeable populations of the states were incorporated into the colonial system. During the *Nupi Lan*, the British were able to divert the anger of the people to the Raja. The political agent argued that it was Chura Chand who had the sole power to stop the export of rice. This was the very nature of indirect rule, the ability to provide an illusion of autonomy in the internal administration of the state.

When it came to the use of force to suppress the agitation, it was the political agent who called in the Assam Rifles to the capital.

The title given to the king by the British at first glance seems ambiguous. However, at close introspection, it was a deliberate colonial categorisation. Many British records and correspondence referred to the king as chiefs or princes. As Edward Haynes argues, it was part of the British effort to create Indian rulers as a subordinate category, thereby delegitimising the ruler's claim to sovereignty and power.³² At the same time, an extensive number of historians working on the "princely states" seem to conform to this colonial nomenclature, or they either take it for granted. At its worst, it could be that the historians look at the category of the "Raja" from the perspective of the colonial administrators themselves. After the British paramountcy was established in Manipur, whether the title of the king would be "chief" or "Raja" or "Maharaja" depended solely on the pleasure of the British. The king was stripped of the title "Maharaja" and the title "Raja" was bestowed, a title that would be hereditary and descend in the direct line by primogeniture, with succession approved by the government of India. After the Kuki rebellion, Chura Chand was awarded the title Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in 1919, and Knight Commander of the Star of India (K.C.S.I) in 1934. As mentioned earlier, a *sanad* was also issued in 1918 where Lord Chelmsford declared the title "Maharaja" as heredity to rulers of Manipur. This stripping and bestowing of titles reveal how categorisation of subjugated rulers played an intricate part in the colonial enterprise.

³² Edward Haynes, 'Rajput Ceremonial Interactions as a Mirror of a Dying Indian State System, 1820-1947', *MAS*, n. 1, 1990, p. 459.