

British Rule In Manipur: Opening Of Pandora Box?

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Abstract: *Manipur was an independent princely state ruled by the Maharajas before the arrival of the British. Despite the fact that the relationship between the Meiteis and the hill tribes was complex, there was no strong division between the Meiteis and the hill tribes. However, with the British control of the state through the Manipur State Durbar and the Political Agent, there had been a sharp division between the Meiteis and the hill tribes in the political and territorial imaginings.*

Keyword: *British Rule, Manipur State Durbar, Political Agent, Kuki Rebellion, Nupi Lan*

Introduction

The signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo on February 24, 1826, between the East India Company and the Burmese, was a landmark in the political history of Burma and 'North East India'. The Treaty was signed after the First Anglo-Burmese war, where the Burmese were defeated by the British. The Treaty was remarkable as Assam, Manipur, Arakan, and Taninthai were ceded to the British. The British conquest over the Burmese, in fact, deprived the Burmese expansion in Assam, Manipur, Cachar, and Bengal and therefore expanded their administration in Assam and Manipur. The British established their administration in Manipur after the defeat of Manipur in the Anglo-Manipuri war in 1891 and the subsequent creation of the Manipur State Durbar in 1907. Despite having control over the valley of Manipur, the British introduced a system of indirect rule over the hill tribes largely settled by the Nagas and Kukis. The colonial administration did not encounter centrally organized polities in the surrounding hills of North East India. However, the colonial administration attempted to organize these stateless societies of tribes socially, culturally, and politically. The collapse of the Burmese military might, in fact, brought Assam, Manipur, and various hill tribes, including the Nagas and Kukis surrounding the plains of Assam and Manipur, into their control.

Before the arrival of the British colonial power, the valley of Manipur ruled by the Maharaja often come into conflict with the Burmese forces. However, there were

hardly any conflicting territorial claims with the hill tribes, particularly the Nagas. In fact, 'the hill tribes were neither under the control of the Maharaja of Manipur nor were they ever a part of the princely state of Manipur' (Piang 2019: 54). Historically, 'the hill tribes were never ruled by the Maharaja of Manipur, and no attempt had ever been made to set up a regular administrative arrangement. The Maharaja only forcibly wrest portions of the harvest of the hill people in the form of tax. In fact, it was the British who engaged the hill tribes indirectly through the Political Agent from 1835 till the Kuki Rebellion (1917-19)' (Piang 2019: 54). The boundaries were fluid as there were wars with Burmese, and also there were internal troubles and differences among the royal families. James Johnstone observed that the territorial boundaries of Manipur change according to the bravery and determination of the rulers; as such, sometimes the rulers held a sizable territory, at other times only a small portion of the territory (Johnstone 2010: 87). The fluidity of territorial boundaries is also reflected in the surrounding hills of Manipur. The Zeliangrong Nagas, for instance, inhabiting the western hill of Manipur, shared a contiguous territory with their other fellow tribes of the Naga Hills and Cachar Hills of Assam.

British Rule: Hill-Valley Divide?

The British brought the valley and hills of Manipur together for their administrative convenience and military strategy. However, the British separated the administration of the hills and valley, and 'never made the hill tribes the subject of the Maharaja' of Manipur, and therefore, the construction of 'state by bringing together the hills and valley were never a united political, social, cultural or geographical entity (Johnstone 2010: 54-55). Dhanabir Laishram stated that "naturally the British always administered their occupied territories by divide and rule policy in order to control them. So during the British colonial rule, the tribes of the hill areas were administered under a common administration system separated from the valley. And the valley was ruled by the native king" (Laishram 2013: 179). Therefore, the identity consciousness based on group identity only began to gradually evolve, culminating in ethnonationalism after the arrival of the British. The colonial policy of divide and rule between the hills and valley on the one hand and between communities



was responsible for the rise of ethnic conflict in post-independent India.

The Nupi Lan of 1939, which is also known as the 'Great Second Women Agitation of Manipur', the Kuki Rebellion (1917-19), the Naga Raj, which is also known as Zeliangrong Movement (1930-32), Hijam Irabot Singh's revolutionary movement, and the combined attack of Captain Jenkins and Maharaja Gambhir Singh against the Nagas in 1832 were the most significant events in the history of British rule in Manipur. Before the arrival of the British, inter-village feuds were common among the hill tribes. However, there were no significant uprisings that took place. The Meiteis, on the other hand, often come into conflict with the Burmese. However, there was no interference in the internal affairs of the State. The arrival of the British administration created the Manipur State Durbar, during which the administration of the hills was separated. The hills were inhabited largely by the Nagas and Kukis tribes. The separation of hill administration from the Maharaja had been considered as the beginning of the deep divide between the Meiteis and the hill tribes. In 1913 the Manipur State Durbar was reorganized. The Maharaja ceased to be the President of the Durbar, and a British civil servant had been appointed as the President of the Durbar. In the administration of the hills, there was no direct control of the hill tribes by the Manipur State Durbar. The President of the Durbar was, in fact, overburdened with the additional in-charge of the affairs of the hill tribes.

The objective policy of the British was to prevent the traditional operation and exploitation of the hill tribes by the Maharaja and his government (Kamei 2012: 81). Despite the fact that the Political Agent was a colonial officer, contact with the hill tribes was made through the *Lambus*, who was recruited by the colonial rulers from the valley. Before the arrival of colonial rule, the *Lambus* were the petty officials assigned to rural areas. In the Naga Hills, those petty officials or interpreters were known as *Dobashi*. The British policy to protect the hill tribes, therefore, failed as direct or immediate contact was made through the *Lambus*, who was oppressive towards the hill tribes. The feudal mindset and nature of the *Lambus* often come into conflict, particularly with the chiefs or village headman of the hill tribes. The British considered the hills tribes as different from the Meiteis in terms of socio-cultural, language, and religious aspects, and therefore often considered them as different people.

Before the arrival of the British, the hills had been largely inhabited by the Naga tribes. The British expedition and conquest of the Naga inhabited territory, in fact, facilitated the arrival of the Kuki immigration. The migration of the Kukis from the Chin Hills of Myanmar to the neighboring hills of Assam, Manipur, and Naga Hills began

in the 19th century. The 'Kuki exodus and their settlement, particularly in Manipur, North Cachar Hills of Assam and Naga Hills' is significant (Khangchian 2019: 47). The Kukis attacked and raided many Naga villages with their arrival and settlement. However, the British followed the policy of non-interference and did not interfere in the inter-tribal feuds of the Kukis and Nagas. Gangmumei Kamei stated that 'the British partiality towards the Kukis was quite well known, and also the Meitei friendliness towards the Kuki immigrants' which facilitated the Kukis settlement in the Zeliangrong territory (Kamei 2004: 146). Gangmumei Kamei further stated that "*the lenient policy of the British towards the Kukis in general, and the Kuki rebel leaders brought further alienation. Instead of capital punishment, the rebel leaders of Tamenglong, Tingling, and Enjakhup and the chief of Loibol or Jambi were just exiled. The Meitei attitude towards the Zeliangrong Naga was one of despise and contempt, and they had not cared to build up friendly relation despite the Zeliangrong help at the time of crisis in their history*" (Kamei 2004: 147). Earlier, the Burmese had invaded Manipur in 1819, in which 'the Manipuri princes and a large number of the Meiteis took shelter in Zeliangrong territory' (Kamei 2004: 65). The Burmese were greatly opposed and harassed by the Zeliangrong Nagas.

The non-interference policy (1851-1865) was introduced under Lord Dalhousie, the Governor-General of India. The colonial policy of non-interference, in fact, facilitated the Kukis expedition into the Naga territory and 'established many villages in the hills of Manipur before the Kuki Rebellion (Khangchian 2019: 47). The British divide and rule policy had been responsible for the deep divide between the hills and valley of Manipur, and their policy of non-interference towards the hill tribes, particularly in times of inter-tribal feuds, had been responsible for the deep divide between the hills tribes. The colonial state took undue advantage of the inter-tribal feuds. The colonial state mediated the settlement of Kukis, and it reinforced the animosity between the Kukis and Nagas and were frequently used against each other by the colonial power in order to serve their interest (Thomas 2016: 64).

The British policy towards the Nagas had been hostile, and in fact, had been responsible for the anti-colonial struggles. H. Srikanth & C.J. Thomas stated that "*in some areas, the British consciously encouraged the settlement of the Kuki tribes adjacent to the village inhabited by the British subjects and pitted them against the Naga tribes. The British also used the King of Manipur and the chief of North Cachar Hills to contain the Nagas*" (Srikanth & Thomas 2005: 59). The British also designated some tribes as 'buffers which were made instrumental in frontier defense, and therefore, they were given settlement rights in the territorial spaces around the frontier through various legal instruments' (Chakraborty & Ray 2015: 71). James Johnstone stated that

“Colonel McCulloch’s policy of planting Kuki settlements on exposed frontiers, induced the Government of Bengal to try a similar experiment, and a large colony of Kukis was settled in 1855 in the neighborhood of Langtang, to act as a barrier for North Cachar against the raids of the Angami Nagas” (Johnstone 2010: 45). The Naga-Meitei relations would have been different ‘had the British followed the policy of Maharaja Gambhir Singh of confrontation and repulse of the Kuki immigrants’ (Kamei 2004: 131).

Despite the fact that the Meiteis had converted to Hinduism before the arrival of the British, the Meitei Maharajas did not attempt to convert the hill tribes. In 1929, Maharaja Churachand Singh encouraged the Hindu missionaries to start Hindu conversion in the hill areas of Manipur. However, the Political Agent and the President of the Manipur State Durbar did not encourage the Hindu missionary work in the hills (Kamei 2015: 51). In fact, the Maharaja wanted to maintain a cordial relationship with the hill tribes and did not interfere in their socio-cultural and religious aspects. Before the arrival of the British, the Maharaja did not interfere in the affairs of the hill villages. Occasionally tribal villages in the hills were used by the ‘Maharaja for undertaking public works; straightening of the course of rivers and digging of canals’ (Kamei 2012: 79).

However, during the short rule of Gambhir Singh, various hill tribes were brought under his control, particularly those that declared their freedom when the Maharaja had troubles with the Burmese (Johnstone 2010: 93). Gangmumei Kamei stated that “*Raja Gambhir Singh was successful in these military campaigns as the Manipur Levy, originally raised by him as a guerilla force of 500 men was increased to 3000 strong force commanded, equipped and paid by the British. Raja Gambhir Singh won the respect of the British by his military power, personal leadership, and support he received from the people. Anglo-Manipur relations during the next sixty-five years after 1826 was one of friendship and alliance till the British conquest of Manipur in 1891*” (Kamei 2004: 83). The British also did not interfere in the socio-cultural and religious life of the hill tribes. However, the British interfered in the political affairs of the hill tribes by following the divide and rule policy. The social and cultural changes of the hill tribes took place only after the Christian proselytization.

Despite the fact that the British followed the divide and rule policy, the Hinduization of the Meiteis and their superiority complex accompanied by taxation and forced labor towards the hill tribes had also further divided the people between the valley and the hills. Nevertheless, during the reign of Maharaja Churachand Singh, the Maharaja maintained a very cordial relationship with the hill tribes, especially the chiefs and the headmen of the villages known as Khullakpa (Kamei 2015: 51). The Maharaja also encouraged the tribal people like Tangkhuls, Anal, Kabui,

Mao, Thangal, and Kukis to follow their traditional faith and customs. Maharaja Churachand Singh appointed his son Bodhchandra Singh as the succeeding Maharaja of Manipur in 1941. The Maharaja Bodhchandra Singh signed the Instrument of Accession on 11th August 1947. With the declaration of Indian independence, the Maharaja ‘acceded the State of Manipur to India in which the Maharaja agreed to hand over subjects of defense, external affairs, finance and communication’ (Kamei 2012: 96). The British rule lasted for 56 years in Manipur. The State of Manipur is headed for democratic transition.

Conclusion

The British rule from 1891 to 1947, in fact, controlled the administration of the State through the Manipur State Durbar, and the Maharaja had been granted relaxation only in the religious and cultural domain. The introduction of the State Durbar and the appointment of a Political Agent, in fact, subjugated the sovereignty of the Maharaja in the pretext of protecting the State. The Political Agent, in fact, controls the Manipur state. The office of the Political Agent was so powerful that when the Nikhil Manipuri Hindu Mahasabha demanded constitutional reform, the Political Agent strongly objected to the demand and recommended administrative reform in order to increase the efficiency of the colonial administration. The Manipur State Durbar also did not favor the establishment of the Legislative Council as demanded by the Mahasabha. The hill areas of Manipur were also subdued under the direct control of the Political Agent. Therefore, the British controlled and administered the state of Manipur through the Political Agent.

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