

# AN IMPERIAL CRISIS IN BRITISH INDIA

THE MANIPUR UPRISING OF 1891

CAROLINE KEEN



BLOOMSBURY



**Caroline Keen** holds a PhD from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. She is the author of *Princely India and the British: Political Development and the Operation of Empire* (I.B.Tauris).

‘This is an exciting story and it is well told by a confident and engaging author. The Manipur incident, though small scale, is important, because it shows that it was impossible to work out a “one size fits all” pattern for the government of India in dealing with the Native States, that is, those not under direct Government of India rule. In its dealings with Manipur, the government got it wrong on all counts – it was a classic British fudge of ignoring the man nearest to the situation, Frank Grimwood, and getting boxed into a corner from which there was no retreat. Grippingly told, this is a valuable addition to the story of colonial India.’

– Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, author of *The Last King in India*

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# CONTENTS

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	vii
<i>List of Maps</i>	viii
<i>Family Tree: Descendants of Garib Niwaz</i>	ix
<i>Dramatis Personae</i>	x
<i>Manipur Uprising Time Line</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xvi
Introduction	1
1. The Road to Manipur	3
2. Manipur in the Nineteenth Century	12
3. Cast of Characters	17
4. The Abdication of Sur Chandra Singh	29
5. The Government of India	37
6. The Chief Commissioner's Escort	44
7. The Arrival of the Chief Commissioner	53
8. Hostilities	64
9. The Retreat	75
10. The Soldier's Account: Lieutenant Charles Grant	86
11. The Civilian's Account: Signaller C. Williams	98
12. The Three Columns	106
13. The Court of Enquiry	124

14. Reaction at Home	133
15. The Trial of the Princes	146
16. The Aftermath	162
Conclusion	177
Glossary	179
<i>Notes</i>	182
<i>Bibliography</i>	206
<i>Index</i>	210

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

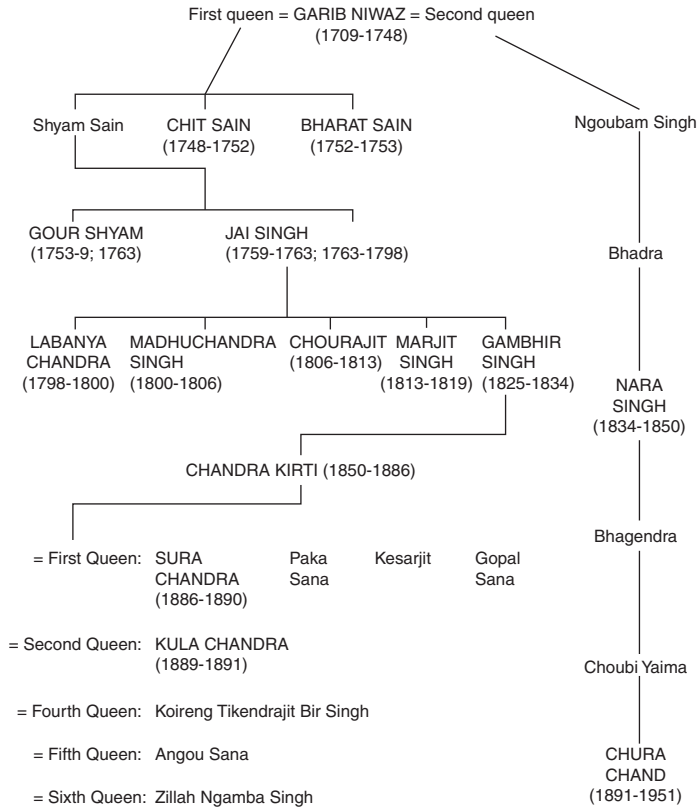
Figure 1.1. The Irang river on the Cachar Road from Manipur (The Alkazi Collection of Photography)	8
Figure 3.1. Frank St Clair Grimwood from a photograph by Vandyk, reproduced in <i>My Three Years in Manipur</i>	18
Figure 3.2. Ethel St Clair Grimwood from a photograph by Vandyk, reproduced in <i>My Three Years in Manipur</i>	20
Figure 3.3. Prince Tikendrajit Bir Singh (Pictures from History)	25
Figure 4.1. South Wall of the citadel showing the maharaja's palace through the domed gateway (The Alkazi Collection of Photography)	32
Figure 7.1. The Manipur residency with escort and two sons of James Johnstone (The Alkazi Collection of Photography)	56
Figure 12.1. The Lion Gate leading to the durbar room and polo ground (from a private collection)	120
Figure 15.1. Kula Chandra Singh, Regent of Manipur, and Thangal General, after their capture (Pictures from History)	157

## LIST OF MAPS

- |  |       |
|--|-------|
| Map 1. Map of Manipur and the Naga Hills, James<br>Johnstone, 1896 (Pictures from History) | xviii |
| Map 2. Diagram of Manipur fort adapted from<br>R. E. Survey, 1891                          | 63    |

# FAMILY TREE: DESCENDANTS OF GARIB NIWAZ

## APPENDIX V. DESCENDANTS OF GARIB NIWAZ (main lines only)



# DRAMATIS PERSONAE

## The Palace

Angao Senna, prince of Manipur

Bhairabjit Singh, Pucca Senna, prince of Manipur and commander of the horse

Chandra Kirtee Singh, maharaja of Manipur 1850–86

Chura Chand, maharaja of Manipur 1891–1941

Gopal Senna, prince of Manipur and Dooloroi Hengeba or commander of the doolies

Jatra Singh, keeper of the maharaja's stores

Kesarjit Singh, prince of Manipur and Samoo Hengeba or commander of the elephants

Kula Chandra Singh, Jubraj or crown prince; known later as regent

Mia Major, army commander

Nilamani Singh, Ayapurel or officer in charge of the maharaja's escort

Samoo Singh, the Luang Ningthou, high-ranking official and member of the Top Guard

Sur Chandra, maharaja of Manipur 1886–90

Thangal General, formerly army chief and minister of state

Tikendrajit Bir Singh, alias Koireng, prince of Manipur and Senapati, or commander in chief

Usurba, guard attached to Quinton's party

Zillah Singh, youngest prince of Manipur

### The Residency

Frank St Clair Grimwood, political agent in Manipur 1888–91  
 Ethel St Clair Grimwood, wife of Frank  
 Col. James Johnstone, political agent in Manipur 1877–86  
 Lt. W. H. Simpson, 43rd Gurkha Light Infantry, visiting detachment  
 at Langthobal  
 Rassik Lal Kundu, head clerk to Political Agency

### The Chief Commissioners' Escort

Capt. T. S. Boileau, 44th Gurkha Rifles (GR)  
 Lt. L. W. Brackenbury, 44th GR  
 Capt. G. H. Butcher, 42nd GR  
 Surgeon J. T. Calvert, medical officer 42nd GR  
 Lt. J. B. Chatterton, 42nd GR  
 W. Cossins, assistant secretary to chief commissioner of Assam  
 Capt. J. W. Cowley, 43rd GR, commanding detachment from Cachar  
 Durga Dutt, *jemadar* 44th GR  
 Gunna Ram, bugler 44th GR  
 Lt. P. R. Gurdon, assistant commissioner of Assam  
 Lt. E. J. Luard, 42nd GR  
 J. W. Quinton, chief commissioner of Assam  
 Col. C. McDowall Skene, 42nd GR commanding escort  
 Lt. C. S. Williams, 43rd GR, in Cowley's detachment  
 Signaller C. S. Williams, telegraph officer  
 Lt. Albert Woods, assistant commissioner of Assam

### Field Force

Birbal Nagarkoti, *jemadar* of 43rd Gurkha Rifles in charge of  
 Langthobal detachment  
 Brig.-Gen. H. Collett, commanding officer of Assam District and  
 commander of the Manipur field force (Kohima column)  
 Capt. F. M. Drury, commanding reconnaissance party, 4th Gurkha Rifles

- Brig.-Gen. T. Graham, commanding officer of Myingyan District of Burma and commander of the Tammu column
- Lt. C. J. W. Grant, 12th Burma Rifles, stationed at Tammu
- Major H. St John Maxwell, deputy commissioner in Cachar and president of the court for trial of senior Manipuri officers; political agent in Manipur 1891–3, 1895–6, 1899–1902 and 1904–5
- Lt.-Col. St John F. Michell, in Cachar column and president of the court for trial of princes
- Lt.-Col. R. H. Rennick, commander of Cachar column
- Major R. K. Ridgeway, 44th GR in Kohima column and member of court for trial of princes

### Others

- Viscount Cross, secretary of state for India
- A. W. Davis, assistant political officer in Kohima and member of court for trial of princes
- Capt. du Moulin, correspondent of *The Allahabad Pioneer*
- Col. H. M. Evans, 43rd Gurkha Rifles, and president of military Court of Enquiry
- The Marquess of Lansdowne, viceroy of India
- Mano Mohun Ghose, advocate of the High Court in Calcutta
- W. B. Melville, superintendent of the Telegraph Department in Assam
- J. O'Brien, telegraph officer
- Sir Frederick Roberts, commander in chief in India

# MANIPUR UPRISING TIME LINE

May 1886:

Maharaja Chandra Kirtee Singh dies; succeeded by his son, Sur Chandra Singh.

Mid-1888:

Frank St Clair Grimwood first promoted to political agent in Manipur.

September 1890:

Abdication of Maharaja Sur Chandra Singh.

22 March 1891:

Chief Commissioner's party arrives in Manipur. First *darbar* postponed.

23 March:

Second *darbar* postponed.

24 March:

4:45am: Brackenbury proceeds to north gate of fort.

5am: Butcher and Simpson depart with assault party to Senapati's residence.

8am: Simpson reports Brackenbury party surrounded.

9am: Chatterton takes main gate of fort.

10am: Skene's detachment joins Butcher's assault party.

10:30am: Calvert reaches Senapati's temple.

- 12pm: Skene returns to residency. Counter-attack on residency from Naga village.
- 4:30pm: Butcher's party and Skene's detachment return from Senapati's residence.
- 4:45pm: Simpson and Calvert return with wounded to camp; Chatterton ordered to retire from main gate.
- 5pm: Repositioning of enemy; incessant rifle fire on residency until 8pm.
- 8pm: Ceasefire sounded; wounded moved into residency cellar.
- 9:30pm: Chief Commissioner and party proceed to main gate of fort.
- 11:30pm: Chief Commissioner and party enter fort.
- 25 March:
- 2am: Survivors leave residency.
- Jemadar Birbal Nagarkoti leaves Langthobal for Tammu.
- Melville and O'Brien attacked at Myangkhang by Nagas.
- 26 March:
- 8am: Survivors reach main Cachar road, and at noon meet up with Cowley.
- 27 March:
- Signaller Williams captured between Sengmai and Kohima.
- 28 March:
- 5:30am: Grant leaves Tammu for Manipur.
- 31 March:
- Grant reaches Thobal.
- 3–5 April:
- Negotiations between Grant, Williams and Manipuri commanders.
- 7 April:
- Williams released from jail.
- 9 April:
- Grant ordered to retire.

10 April:

Grant meets up with Presgrave.

25 April:

Grant and Nagarkoti wounded outside Palel.

27 April:

Three columns reach Manipur.

30 April:

Funeral of murdered officers.

7 May:

Thangal General surrenders.

9 May:

Regent arrested.

23 May:

Senapati arrested.

1–2nd October:

Gurkha Rifles leave for India.

November:

Mountain battery leave for Burma; 44th Gurkha Rifles leave for Shillong.

9 March 1892:

Expeditionary arrangements cease at Manipur.

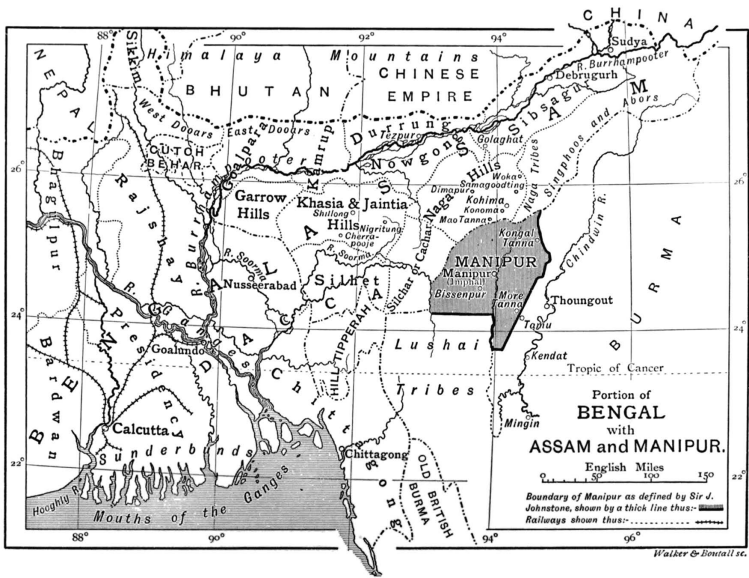
29 April 1892:

Installation of Chura Chand as raja.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As I was sifting through India Office records some years ago in search of nineteenth-century material on the Indian princely states, the hair-raising accounts of news unfolding in the small north-eastern state of Manipur in 1891 succeeded frequently in luring me away from pedestrian governmental reports. I was determined to return at a later stage to explore more deeply what was obviously a remarkable story of the violent uprising which occurred against the backdrop of a beautiful, remote corner of India in the spring of 1891, and this book is the result of research undertaken between 2004 and 2009. Since Manipur and the events of 1891 were largely unknown territory in England, I was to a great extent working in a vacuum; however I owe a huge amount to the help of Professor John Parratt who, with his wife, Saroj, wrote an excellent book in 1991 to commemorate the centenary of the Manipur revolt, and is a fund of knowledge on the state and its history. Miles Taylor's help in spurring me on to publication has yet again been invaluable, and I am most grateful to Rosie Llewellyn-Jones for ploughing through the manuscript, to Neil Faulkner for his comments and to Richard Mead and Lieutenant Colonel Moirangthem Ranjit Singh for their expert advice on military matters. The staff of Asian and African Studies in the British Library were, as always, unfailingly helpful. Azmina Siddique of

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Map 1 Map of Manipur and the Naga Hills, James Johnstone, 1896 (Pictures from History).

# INTRODUCTION

At the end of the nineteenth century, two-fifths of the Indian subcontinent consisted of states governed by hereditary princes of varying rank who recognised British sovereignty. Attached to these rulers in an advisory capacity were a minimal number of British officers in the Indian Political Service. When matters ran smoothly, in accordance with the well-defined terms of treaties drawn up between the British and individual princes, indirect rule proved a cheap and fairly undemanding system of imperial control. Nevertheless, the Indian princes proved to be a constant thorn in the flesh of the British. Not on the whole an acutely painful problem, but a niggling irritation for which, due to the complexity of Indian royalty and the relationship between ruler and ruled, it was hard to find a lasting solution.

In the half century up to 1857, the majority of princes had been placed firmly under the British thumb, many defeated in battle and their states swallowed up into the territory of an expanding British India. However the events of the Indian Mutiny were to change this dynamic. The loyalty of the reigning princes during the revolt demonstrated clearly the potential of the Indian states as a political force in support of British rule, counterbalancing anti-imperialist elements. Although gross princely misrule was never tolerated after 1857, the British were forced to walk a tightrope of diplomacy as far as the Indian states were concerned until Independence in 1947. The tentacles of the Political Department of the Government of India might squeeze the princes tighter from time to time, and viceroys differed in their approach to

individual rulers, but there was a constant awareness of the need to maintain the bulk of royal support for the British cause.

However government officials were always highly sensitive to any development or incident within princely territory which might injure its prestige or infringe its rights. Not surprisingly, the task of attempting to formulate a single policy with which to deal with the vagaries of over 600 individual states proved an impossibility. When faced with a crisis the Government of India frequently vacillated, acting too little and too late in its attempts to avoid rocking the princely boat while maintaining a tough imperialist stance. The story of the uprising of exceptional violence and intense anti-British feeling which occurred in the small north-eastern state of Manipur in 1891 illustrates clearly this lack of decisiveness.

The Manipur revolt was a unique event in princely Indian history in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and proved during that time to be the greatest single military challenge to British rule after the Indian Mutiny. Although there were extreme cases of misgovernment within states, which warranted royal depositions – as in the cases of the Gaekwar of Baroda in 1875 and the Maharaja of Jhalawar in 1896 – such disciplinary action by the Government of India was by and large accepted by the local population and provoked no violent response. In Manipur, where no such misgovernment was evident, the armed rebellion which followed British intervention in royal affairs was without precedent at the height of the Raj, and disastrous consequences followed the ill-considered British use of intimidation and the cavalier underestimation of fierce native loyalty to princely rule.

This account of the Manipur revolt is told almost entirely by those who were involved in the events of 1891 and their repercussions. As with all historical accounts, there are many sides to the same story, portraying the fortitude and flaws which formed an essential part of the fabric of empire.

# CHAPTER 1

## THE ROAD TO MANIPUR

At the end of the nineteenth century, the British official heading for the first time towards a posting in the north-east of India would have undoubtedly been lulled into a false sense of security. Calcutta, the port of disembarkation, was a city which at first sight left no doubt as to the power and ability of the British Raj. Having negotiated the bizarre currents and numerous sandbanks of the Hoogly River, from all accounts the view was most imposing. The Strand in the foreground bristled with masts of ships from every corner of the world, with a background of substantial white buildings, their windows enlivened by bright green sun shutters. The city extended for several miles along the banks of the river and contained a large number of remarkably fine edifices, notably Government House, the residence of the Viceroy of India, the Cathedral, the High Court, the Medical College, Post Office and Museum. A prominent feature of Calcutta was the Maidan, a large grassy area lying between the city and the river. In this space stood Fort William, the largest and most important British fortress in India, covering a space of about 2 square miles. On the land side the Maidan was bounded by Chowringee Road, the site of many of the most opulent houses in Calcutta. East of Chowringee Road were streets consisting chiefly of European residences, and to the north of Government House lay the business quarter of the city, with handsome shops, large hotels, and palatial banks and business houses of every description. The principal thoroughfares of the city were broad, well kept and watered. However beyond these, and largely out of sight of new arrivals, were filthy, badly drained alleys and the

large and densely populated native city with its crowded lanes and busy markets.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the impressive proportions of the city, for the British traveller passing through Calcutta there was only one reasonable hotel, the Great Eastern, the lower section of which was fitted up as a huge store in which last-minute purchases could be made before departing up-country. A journey to Upper Assam from any part of India was a considerable undertaking in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The simplest route was to leave Calcutta at night by train in order to strike the Brahmaputra at Goalundo early next morning to board a steamer which visited three main ports of call: Gauhati, 200 miles upriver, in order to disembark for Shillong; Nigriting, a further 150 miles, to disembark for Kohima in the Naga Hills and the princely state of Manipur; and yet another 100 miles to Dibrugarh, further up the valley. Until 1891, Shillong and Dibrugarh were the British military stations of Assam. Travelling by the Eastern Bengal Railway from Calcutta to Goalundo was easily accomplished in eight or nine hours, however the line was so badly laid, the rattle of the trains passing over the shaky wooden bridges so painful, and the cars so stuffy that a journey on this line was not a happy experience. The first-class carriages were fitted with sleeping bunks in double tiers, as in a cabin on board ship, but the constant vibration made sleep an impossibility. The stretch of country was flat and uninteresting, although at night bizarrely illuminated by a multitude of fireflies.

Goalundo consisted of a collection of small huts erected on the banks at the meeting of the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers. It was the terminus of the railway and, as the tea planter and seasoned traveller George M. Barker observed upon arrival at the benighted place, 'the confines of the whole civilised world'.<sup>2</sup> The inhabitants of the town were frequently flooded out, a somewhat depressing situation to which they had become reconciled, and twice in the course of the year were forced to move house, according to the dry or rainy season when the river fell or rose to a significant degree. Under these variable conditions there was little point in constructing a house of any substance; for half the year it would be uninhabitable. Even during the dry season the width of the river at Goalundo was considerable, with a huge volume of water flowing at a rapid rate.

An army of natives surrounded the railway station, acting as porters to transport luggage from train to steamer. From contemporary illustrations,