

MANIPUR AT THE CROSS-ROAD OF EMPIRES IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

The second half of eighteenth century in Manipur is characterized by political turmoil both internal and external. Succession rivalry and recurrent Burmese raids were a common feature of this period. Coinciding mostly with the reign of Bhagyachandra, the period witnessed an expansive Burma commonly known to the Manipuri as Ava from the east. An equally expanding British empire was taking shape in the western part of Manipur. It was between these two imperial entities viz. Burmese empire and the British empire that Manipur negotiated its way during this period. An attempt is being made in this article to situate the social and political changes in Manipur in the latter half of eighteenth century in light of the larger developments that are taking shape across the frontier.

Keywords: Manipur, Eighteenth Century, Burma, British, and Raids.

Introduction

The kingdom of Manipur has a long-recorded history going back to 33 A.D. From relatively scanty records of the exploits of reigning kings in the royal court chronicle, tradition of recorded history is even more pronounced by the early modern period. Therefore, by the early eighteenth century, the chronicle also known as *Cheitharon Kumpapa*¹ is much more elaborate in its description of events.

The eighteenth century in Manipur is a period of great significance. It witnessed dramatic changes in the political and social sphere. The period is characterized by a more centralized system of administration indicating a shift in political command over large area. Not only were the regional principalities subjugated under the authority of Kangla, the tribals in the hills were also brought under tributary relationship. After a series of measures that resulted in the internal consolidation of power, king Garib Nawaz set out a series of expeditionary raids across the

Chindwin River into the Ava region. The Toungoo dynasty that ruled over Burma was unravelling quickly under internal strife and rebellion from Pegue. It was during such period of internal disturbances Garib Nawaz carried out raids inflicting huge loss of manpower and resources. However, these raids were ephemeral without any systematic strategy of ruling over the conquered domain. It was during this period that Vaishnavism flourished in Manipur under the patronage of the king. Socio-cultural organization of the time was under heavy influence of Vaishnava cult and brahmins from western region. Prevailing religious customs were either absorbed under Vaishnavism or prohibited. King Bhagyachandra continued the same state patronage of Vaishnavism although he endorsed a softer strand of Gaudiya Vaishnavism.

By the second half of the century, the falling Toungoo dynasty that ruled over Burma was replaced by a more aggressive Konbaung dynasty under Aulangpaya. He carried out an expansive drive towards the western Shan kingdoms and subsequently toward Manipur. This expansive drive was followed by his successors causing huge upheavals in socio-political condition of Manipur. Besides, the British East India Company was eventually establishing its dominion after defeating the Nawab of Bengal in the battle of Plassey in 1757. The Company was equally taking on an expansive drive towards the east. It was precisely in this conjuncture that the kingdom of Manipur negotiated its way in between the two imperially oriented entities namely the Burmese in the east and the British in the west. Scholars with research interest in Manipur have emphasized the significance of eighteenth century in the history of Manipur with especial focus on the introduction of religious changes.²This article attempts to unravel the socio-political orientation that took shape in Manipur at the crossroad of empires.

1.The rise of an aggressive Burmese empire

The Burmese empire that emerged as a formidable power in southeast Asia in the nineteenth century has its root in the second half of the eighteenth century. Burma as understood in the modern lexicon is completely different from what it was in the pre-modern time. The core region also commonly known as Ava in upper Burma attained significance much later in the history of Burma. As a matter of fact, Burma as argued by Thant Myint-U is by and large a creation of colonial encounter.³ Pre-modern Burma is characterized by the presence of several autonomous principalities under perpetual conflict seeking to exercise authority upon one another. Few notable principalities include the Shan, Arakan, Karen, Pegu, Chin and Ava. Ava principality under the Pagan rulers was responsible for consolidation of Irrawaddy valley and expansion to peripheral regions. Anawrahta, the greatest of Pagan kings carried out huge reform in order to strengthen the Ava principality. Although small in territorial extend, his principality organized his dominion into graded system where each village and townlets were arranged in the order of levies they could render.⁴ Besides he carried out expeditionary raids across the region bringing in

captives who were skilled in various crafts. One such expedition is the expedition against the Thaton, a port city in the southern part of Burma. After successful conquest of Thaton, Anawrahta brought as captives the population including Monks and many relics and scripture.⁵ Such influx of population was of great help for the emerging monarch as they provided both manpower and skill while remaking his core region. With the subsequent conquest of Arakan and exacting tributes from the Shan king and marrying a Shan princess, Anawrahta initiated a process of expansion and consolidation of Ava from the mid eleventh century. What is remarkable in this period is the interaction across the ocean between Ceylon and Burma. This interaction was largely shaped by religious affinity highlighting the Buddhist influence in the court of Burma. Moreover, this period witnessed increasing construction of Pagodas and shrines housing Buddhist relics. There was a gradual entry of many Indian origin scholars who performed various rituals in the Pagan court, a process that intensified under latter dynasties. The proximity to the revered Buddhist sites in India seemed to be one major factor for the high demand and accord rendered to the Indian scholars in the Pagan court. Consequently, the major achievement of the Pagan reign was in aesthetic and religious sphere exemplified by the construction of numerous Pagodas, introduction of script, a vibrant literary tradition and as custodian of Theravada Buddhism.⁶

The relative stability of the Pagan kingdom was however disturbed by the Mongol invasion in the later part of thirteenth century. Partly a failure in diplomacy, in some ways it was a result of the Pagan king Narathihapate's obstinacy and pride that led to the invasion. After the Mongol depredation, the Pagan kingdom fragmented into several dominions one of which was the Shan dominion during which period saw the rise of Ava as political center. The northern Shan chiefs were major adversaries during the fourteenth and fifteenth century. With a weakened core region, Shan principalities asserted their autonomy and carried out numerous raids in Ava.⁷ Moreover, the Talaings of Pegu in the southern part posed a serious obstacle in political consolidation attempt by Ava. Such fragmentation and political upheaval were a major theme in Burmese history. As Victor Liebermann argued most of southeast Asian history follows a cycle of fragmentation and reintegration⁸ it was the Toungoo dynasty that restored the Burmese kingdom. The Toungoo rulers considered themselves world rulers or *chakravartin* imbibing the idea of Dharma-rajā in search of legitimacy from the monks and common people alike. It is precisely this idea of *chakravartin* that influenced future Burmese kings. However even this restoration was fraught with internal challenges as the emperors' absolutist posturing was not backed by administrative firmness while elite officials were consolidating their positions with local people at the cost of king's monopoly. As mentioned above, it was during the reign of later Toungoo dynasty that numerous raids from Manipur was launched and eventually the Pegu uprising sacked Ava and Toungoo dynasty ended its tumultuous reign.

It was during such political turmoil that the Konbaung dynasty under Alaungpaya in 1752 rose from a remote confederacy to one of the greatest rulers of Burma. Alaungpaya had in his early life witnessed the repeated Manipuri raids and the Burmese kingdom crumbling under external and internal upheaval. While most of earlier generals and military lords had rendered allegiance to Pegu, he steadfastly held his remote confederate in northern Ava. After repelling repeated Pegu attacks under his command and seized their weapons which drew him many men who wanted to defeat the Talaing. In this way he was successful in securing the loyalty of other chieftains. Eventually he was declared as the king of Ava after conquering it and built a new palace at Swebo. He strictly followed the rituals associated with royalty which helped him draw support and allegiance from the neighboring war bands including the tribes.⁹ Having consolidated his position in Ava, Alaungpaya exacted levies from the surrounding Shan principalities. The Shan levies were instrumental in his campaigns against the tribals and set out on a conquest process across the whole Irrawady peninsula into lower Burma region. After successful expedition and conquest of Pegu in 1757 Alaungpaya returned to upper Burma placing his loyal governor in charge of Pegu. Thus, a region of considerable political fragmentation was unified under Aungmye Thon during a very short time.

With the interiors relatively unified, Alaungpaya laid his aggressive policies across the frontier. He set out expeditionary force against Gwes who raided the northern Shan states. In 1755 he proceeded further west into the Chindwin and attacked Manipuri villages. His raiding party crossed the Khumbat and entered Manipur valley plundering and looting it for few days. It was in many ways a retaliation to earlier Manipuri incursion and depredation that was inflicted on the Burmese particularly in Ava by Garib Nawaz. This raid was the precursor to a series of incursion into Manipur valley which resulted in near desertion of the valley. Another raid followed in 1758 which led to tremendous human suffering in Manipur returning to his base only because of Talaing attack in Ava. The following years marked significant shift in Manipur Burma relation. Previously, raids and counter raids were a regular feature in Manipur Burma encounter. By the second half of eighteenth century, Manipur was no longer in a position to launch counter raids across the Chindwin. Alaungpaya's expansive policy was further followed and even intensified by his successors.

Hsinbyushin second son of Alaungpaya inherited his father's imperial outlook. Taking the reign from his older brother Naungdawgyi in 1763, he immediately set out raids across the western hills into Manipur valley. In 1764, Hsinbyushin invaded Manipur with a large force in an attempt to repopulate Ava which was in ruin due to repeated Talaing raids, his raiding party was looking for captives to be carried away in order to populate his new capital. Inhabitants of the valley had to either accept deportation or leave for the surrounding hills. Subsequently, he turned his

expansion toward Siam. Siam with its open seaports was a thriving city and their treasure attracted the fortune seeker Burmese hordes. Moreover, Burmese claim over Siam was based on the fact that it was previously occupied by Toungoo king Bayinnaung exacting tribute. The Burmese laid siege on the Siamese capital Ayuthya and built pagodas. However, the siege could not result in conquest because of unfavorable weather condition with the onset of rain. Besides, Siamese were well equipped in repelling the Burmese with the help of their foreign mercenaries. Yet, the invading forces took away numerous captives, established Burmese garrisons and returned after years of plunder because of serious threat posed from Chinese invasion in the north. Hsinbyushin was succeeded by Singu who attacked Manipur on many occasions between 1775 to 1782. His reign was relatively peaceful as Burmese were wary of long, drawn-out wars on several fronts. He emphasized on building pagodas devoting much of his time in prayer and rituals.

The real imperial architect of Burmese empire was arguably Badawpaya who took over the reign in 1782 until his death in 1817.¹⁰ It was during his reign that the Burmese developed hostility with the English East India Company.¹¹ After defeating a formidable Talaing uprising in 1783, Badawpaya's imperial gaze turned to Arakan. Located at the western coast bordering Bengal, Arakan had interacted with the Burmese mainland for ages. However, this region owing to its location had a considerable Bengali and Muslim influence due to trading activities between the two regions. Campaign against Arakan was led by badawpaya's son with a 30,000 strong army. Since the Arakanese court was weakened due to factional rivalry, the conquest was carried out swiftly without much resistance. After occupying the capital Mharaung, prince Thado Minsaw son of Badawpaya who led the invasion took with him the Mahamuni image along with thousands of captives. These captives were settled down in Badawpaya's new capital Amarapura. Badawpaya's imperial plan was emboldened after the conquest of Arakan with relative ease and fancied occupying China and India. Eventually, he set forth to annex Siam attempting to project himself as a keeper of conquering tradition his predecessors initiated. However, Siam expedition was a failure with huge loss of men on the Burmese side.

Badawpaya's reign was marked by production of numerous literary works under royal patronage.¹² His litterateurs were splendidly rewarded. The emphasis on literary production highlighted his interest on various fields. He was also projecting himself as a great patron of literature and culture befitting a world conqueror. Installation of mahamuni image in his new capital Amarapura was marked as a dawn of flourishing new age. His revenue inquest was so meticulous that it percolated down to headman of every village under his dominion. He built several pagodas the largest being the Mingun pagoda. He also received many embassies including the Chinese, Cingalese from Ceylon many other on religious visit.

What is even more relevant for the current discussion is that during the reign of Badawpaya, there were no recorded Burmese incursions to Manipur. Considering the duration of his reign which lasted over a quarter century and a tradition of recurrent raids, absence of Burmese incursion in Manipur is striking. One way of assessing the halt of incursion toward Manipur was the fact that the Burmese court was mobilizing its resources to invade Siam after the conquest of Arakan. Another possible reason could be that Manipur after repeated attack and plunder by the Burmese was no longer considered attractive. A more pertinent question is how is Manipur kingdom viewed by the Burmese court in its larger imperial design? What transpired repeated Burmese attack to Manipur from the latter half of eighteenth century?

To answer these questions, we need to unravel Burmese political orientation in the second half of the eighteenth century. As mentioned above, the Konbaung dynasty exhibited considerable departure from the preceding Toungoo dynasty in terms of political strength owing to internal reforms carried out by Konbaung kings. Acknowledging their parvenu status and rustic origin in the obscure terrain of upper Burma, Konbaung kings were ruthless in their expansive drive to instill both awe and legitimacy to their subjects. Carrying forward the traditional belief of the Burmese court that they were destined to be world conqueror, they were particularly unforgiving toward internal rivals. The Talaings who posed as serious contender to Burman supremacy were brutally repressed although Talaings of Pegu remained a major source of internal threat for the Burmese court. Raids across western frontier in Manipur was a common undertaking amongst the Konbaung kings. Frequent raids into Manipur partly explains the prosperity of Manipur kingdom in the eighteenth century. It was partly because they were attempting to reestablish Burmese authority over Manipur, an endeavor on which their preceding dynasty had failed and partly as an act of revenge for the depredation Burmese suffered due to Manipuri raids which was a recurring feature in the first half of eighteenth century. Apart from these symbolic reasons there were more immediate practical reasons for raids. the rise of Konbaung dynasty was possible after a huge loss of people in war. This necessitated fresh demography to populate the land. Perpetual conflict and strife also required skilled manpower to defeat hostile groups. Manipur was one such region. Owing to close interaction between the two regions, Burmese were aware of skilled craftsmen and versatile Manipuri ponies which constituted an important arm of warfare for Manipur. successive Burmese kings sought Manipuri horses which formed an elite cavalry unit called Cassey horse. Manipuri captives also played an important part of Burmese army. Hence, there is a palpable shift in Manipur Burma relationship by the late eighteenth century. In other words, Manipur was viewed as a source of manpower and materials serving the larger Burmese imperial goal of world conqueror.

2. East India Company and its imperial designs.

East India company was formed in 31st December 1600 with a decree from the queen empress Elizabeth I.¹³ From a humble beginning in the eighteenth century, the Company emerged as a powerful politico-economic entity within a short duration of about five decades. Initially the Company had struggled to establish a foothold in India owing to the rigorous competition with the fellow Europeans like the Portuguese, French, Danish etc. The Company equally struggled to gain dominance in the Burmese court as their service was not in great demand since pioneer Europeans like the French, Dutch and to some extent Armenians had provided the Burmese court with trading commodities. However, through a series of concerted effort involving both deceit and military superiority, the Company eventually gained dominance over the rival Europeans. It was only a matter of time that the interest of the Company comes into conflict with the royal courts it was dealing with.

After receiving a *farman*, royal decree from the reigning Mughal emperor Farrukhshiyar in 1717 which provided free trading rights to the Company, the East India Company succeeded in establishing a fort in Calcutta known as Fort William from where their trading activities were conducted. Eventually, the company officials annoyed the Nawab of Bengal because of their misuse of royal *farmanin* trading commodities beyond the ascribed jurisdiction. Besides, prohibited articles of trade were willfully circulated by the Company leading to shrinkage in revenue causing much resentment for the Nawab. Such conflict of interest along with militarization of fort William led to full blown war between the Company and Nawab of Bengal. After the defeat of Bengal in the battle of Plassey in 1757, the Company under Robert Clive began an expansion drive towards the east. The British were seeking overland trading routes as far as the Yunan province in China. China had been for long time a target for the British to conduct trade. Owing to its strategic location on the route to China via upper Burma, Manipur drew the interest of the Company.¹⁴ Besides, overland route passing through mainland Burma was dangerous because of hostile attitude of the Burmese court. Therefore, British expansion in the north eastern region of India was primarily shaped by trading interest especially trading route to China. Moreover, constant apprehension of Burmese attack on the frontier of British empire i.e., the north eastern India led to the British colonizing policies in the region. Constant expeditionary raids by the Burmese in Manipur from the second half of eighteenth century led to Manipur court's outreach to the British for assistance. One of the major advantages of the Burmese beside numerical superiority was the use of fire arms against the Manipuri armies whose primary weapons were traditional swords, cavalry and bow and arrows. Therefore, primary motive of the Manipur court in the treaty of 1762 with the British was the supply of fire arms from the British.

Simultaneously, the Company was gaining dominance in the coastal region of Burma. Syriam was one such region where the British had established its trading posts from early seventeenth century.¹⁵ Anglo-French rivalry that played out in Europe percolated in both south and southeast Asia. Having established its trading posts in the coastal region of Burma, both France and Britain competed against one another to gain favor from the royal court. This resulted in Burmese court estranging the British favoring the French. Moreover, after the conquest of Arakan by the Burmese in 1785, the Company came into direct contact with the Burmese.¹⁶ With the rise of an aggressive Burma, the Company in order to protect its trading interest increased its security and eventually resulted in Anglo-Burmese war of 1824.

3. Manipuri royal court's response

Manipur had a long history of interaction with its eastern neighbor Burma.¹⁷ Considerably larger in both territorial extent and demography, Burma considered the kingdom of Manipur as a backward polity carrying out raids at every opportune time. With the consolidation of the kingdom and having largely subjugated the warring principalities under the Ningthouja dynasty's suzerainty, Manipuri kings started defending the intermittent Burmese raids. By the time Garib Nawaz occupied the throne he had laid out an elaborate plan for expedition against the Burmese. His plan as claimed by many scholars was driven by the proselytizing zeal of Vaishnava faith while some claimed it as revenge for the insult incurred upon the Manipuri princess married to the Burmese king.¹⁸ He carried out numerous raids far into the territory of Burma as far as the Sangaig region, near Ava. But these raids were ephemeral without any systematic intent of ruling over the conquered region.

Garib Nawaz after an eventful reign abdicated the throne in 1748 in favor of his son Chit Sain.¹⁹ Manipur witnessed succession rivalry amongst the princes and it was with the ascension of Bhagyachandra in 1759²⁰ that relative stability was established in the kingdom. He inherited a kingdom full of internal upheavals due to contested nature of political rivalry and externally, expeditionary raids from a much-transformed Burmese polity posed an omnipotent threat to the security of the kingdom. Yet, Bhagyachandra continued as well as introduced a series of measures in keeping with the prevailing socio-political condition. He established cannon and musket manufacturing smithy, built roads and bridges to facilitate movement of people. Improvement of the road leading to Assam which was primarily used for expedition enabled trade and commerce across the border. Salt-wells were developed along with dredging of rivers and markets were built for commercial activities. Besides, the king maintained a cordial relationship with the neighboring hill chiefs and the latter paid obeisance to the king with tributes.

However, this stability did not last because of the persistent Burmese raids that picked up momentum after the death of Garib Nawaz. As a matter of fact, Bhagyachandra had to deal with internal challenges mounted by his half-brothers for the throne while simultaneously facing the renewed Burmese hostility throughout his reign. On several occasions he had to vacate the throne escaping the challenges of his contending kinsmen and Burmese invasion. On one such occasion he took shelter in the kingdom of Ahom.²¹ While in the Ahom court he developed cordial relation with the king SwargadeoRajeshwar Singh and betrothed his niece princess Kuranganayani to the Ahom king. It is important to point out that Manipuri kings in search of stable ally with the neighboring kingdoms made several marriage alliances giving away their princess to the royal families.²²Such strategic arrangement proved useful for the embattled Manipuri king Bhagyachandra as his request for Swargadeo's help in trying to regain his throne in Manipur was readily accepted. And it was with the help of Ahom army that Bhagyachandra regained Manipur from the Burmese in 1767.²³ The cordial relationship between Ahom and Manipur court continued when Bhagyachandra returned the favor by helping the Ahom court in quelling the Mayamaria rebellion. Such interaction was slowly penetrating the social relation between Manipur and Assam. Although begun a couple of centuries earlier, it was during this century that movement of people across these regions had intensified. In many ways eighteenth century witnessed a westward orientation of Manipur's socio-cultural interaction. It was in this period that enormous migration of brahmins into Manipur was recorded. It was also a period of revival of Vaishnavism in Manipur after a lull during the brief reign of Chit Shai 1748-52, immediate successor of Garib Nawaz, who tried to revive the traditional religion. While Manipuri kings had turbulent relation with the eastern neighbor Burma, they had shared a long history of mutual interaction, competition and co-operation. Now, this interaction was gradually shifting toward Assam and Bengal. The arrival and embracing of Vaishnavism certainly played a major part in such shift in cultural affinity. Nonetheless, the political development that was building up in the latter part of the nineteenth century in Burma pushed Manipur toward its western neighbors.

Earlier, Burmese kingdom was an amalgamation of several tributary principalities namely the Mons, Shans, Chin, Karens. Its political center at Ava in upper Assam could maintain control over these various groups on very few occasions. with the consolidation of power under the Konbaung dynasty, Burma envisaged an imperial design seeking to control and subjugate its surrounding kingdoms. After successful subjugation of the Mons/Talaing in the Pegu region and having repelled repeated Chinese attempt of conquest, Burma considered itself as the champion of Indo-China peninsula.²⁴ Occasional raids and expedition gave way to systematic political control and infliction of depredation upon the conquered. A grander court required the services of multi-skilled craftsmen which were provided by captives from the vanquished kingdoms. In

other words, Burma was attempting to showcase its place in the larger context of south east Asia. This threat from Burma was equally anticipated by the British and the reigning kings of the smaller kingdoms west of Burma.

While scholars argue that with the introduction and state patronage of Vaishnavism by the beginning of the eighteenth century, Manipur experienced a considerable Bengali cultural influence even more starkly during the reign of Bhagyachandra²⁵ this was made possible because of the realignment in political set up in the region. Implications of such realignment can be gauged from the changing pattern of marriage alliance that the Manipuri kings made by the last quarter of eighteenth century. Earliest marriage alliance between Manipur and Burma was recorded in the eleventh century though its veracity is shrouded in obscurity.²⁶ From a more accessible past, it has been recorded that by sixteenth century, the Pagan king of Burma had asked for Manipuri princess for marriage. Garib Nawaz and his predecessor gave their daughters in marriage to the Burmese kings. The fact that marriage diplomacy was possible between the two kingdoms indicates a vibrant social interaction and contact. Moreover, marriage alliances were kept particularly between equals in terms of social and political stature which was even more appropriate for royalties. However, by the latter half of the eighteenth century, records of marriage alliance are mostly silent between the two kingdoms. What does it say about the relationship between the two kingdoms? While records are available of enthroning the rival contenders on Manipur throne who were in favor of the Burmese even to the extent of harboring political claimants in Burmese court, marriage alliances stopped by this time. One way of perceiving this shift in relationship is that by the late eighteenth century Burma had stopped considering Manipur as a political equal in terms of stature and thereby considered it unfit to have marriage alliance with the Manipur court. As mentioned earlier, after successful subjugation of internal rebellion, Burmese court was confident enough to harbor imperial ambitions. While Manipur court was struggling to maintain its own internal order, Burmese aggression was only gaining pace. One such aggression was the Burmese invasion of Manipur in 1758 where king Alaungpaya himself was involved in person.²⁷ Unable to defend the kingdom against the well-armed and organized Burmese contingent, Bhagyachandra along with the residents went into hiding in the hills. Alaungpaya stayed in the capital of Manipur for thirteen days and left only due to the uprising of in Pegu and carried with him many skilled people as prisoner. Burmese expedition of 1764 is remarkable in that the reigning Manipuri king Bhagyachandra had to leave the throne imposing self-exile in Cachar while fleeing the Burmese incursion.

Having borne the wrath of repeated Burmese incursions, Bhagyachandra started reaching out to the western neighbors. Realizing the superiority of Burmese weapon and army organization, he

sought help from the British which culminated in the treaty of alliance both offensive and defensive on 12th September 1762.²⁸ It was the earliest recorded treaty between the British and Manipur. Under this treaty a contingent of British troop was promised whenever Manipur needed help to protect or regain its territory from the Burmese. In return Manipur agreed to grant land for establishment of factory and fort to the Company rent free and provide trading facilities between the Company and China. Records of interaction with the regions in the western frontier of Manipur is available from earlier times. By this time however, Manipur's relation with its western neighbors was gradually consolidating. Earlier interaction of limited nature confining to immigration of people such as Brahmins and Pangals that too on very few occasions shifted to a more circulatory movement of people indicating movement away from Manipur and subsequent settling across the western region. In other words, the latter part of eighteenth century was a precursor to the eventual expansion of Manipuri foothold over Cachar region and its subsequent conquest in the early nineteenth century.

By the time Bhagyachandra consolidated his position in the last quarter of eighteenth century, there is evidence of large migration of brahmins and other body of people from a more populous Bengal region to Manipur. Repeated Burmese incursion had depleted an already small population that inhabited Manipur. It was in many ways in attempt to resettle the deserted region that such migration of people into Manipur can be elucidated. These incoming body of people brought with them their distinct customs enriching prevailing Manipuri culture while simultaneously undergoing acculturation themselves. It is around this time that Vaishnavism as a belief system had expanded its root. Moreover, the militant Ramandi sect that was vigorously promoted by Garib Nawaz in the early part of the century was replaced by more moderate and accommodative form of Vaishnavism i.e., Chaitanya Vaishnavism. What explains this sudden shift in religious affiliation? To answer this question, we need to go back to the short and often neglected reign of Chit Sai who allegedly murdered his father Garib Nawaz and occupied the throne. What distinguished his reign from other kings of Manipur is that he attempted to revive the traditional religion as it were. It is astounding that there is dearth of research on his reign given the renewed attempt of present-day revivalism of Meitei religion. This attempt in revival of traditional religion in some way gave impetus for renewed efforts in revitalization of Vaishnavism albeit in a softer version of Chaitanya Vaishnavism as mentioned above. Realizing the shortfall of aggressively imposing a belief system upon the people a more accommodative Vaishnavism was in keeping with the political condition of the time. This also explains Bhagyachandra's emphasis on the aesthetical and cultural aspect of Vaishnava religion which culminated in the composition of the Ras Leela.

Conclusion

The eighteenth century was a period of great social and political experiment in the history of Manipur. From the introduction of Vaishnavism as state religion which subsequently led to 'Hinduisation' as is commonly referred to by scholars to political upheavals wrought by Burmese incursion, the century laid the groundwork for future socio-political trajectory of the kingdom of Manipur. Moving the gaze away from 'Hindu influence' and focusing on the imperial orientations taking shape in the frontiers, this article argues for contextualizing the political and social circumstances of the time in the light of larger developments that were unravelling and argues that the rise of imperial Burma and expanding British empire had tremendous implications for the kingdom of Manipur. It is a humble attempt in situating what has been primarily a 'regional' history along the manner of 'connected history'.²⁹

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