

Bir Tikendrajit Singh: The Unsung Hero Of Northeast India

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Abstract

The paper is a humble attempt to delve into the role and contribution made by the people of Northeast India in freedom struggle against the British rule. The tales of fortitude and indomitable spirit come alive only in the teachings of classrooms, but failed to reach the consciousness of the people in the rest of the country. The people living in the rest of the country are not even aware about the sacrifice of these noble people from northeast, who laid down their lives for their motherland fighting against the British. Unfortunately, the brave daughters and sons from the soil of Northeast are yet to get recognition from the people of India for the courageous leadership in the battle of freedom against the British. Tikendrajit Singh, one of the unsung heroes of Northeast (Manipur) was born on Saturday the 29th December, 1855, as the fourth and only son of King Chandrakirti's fourth queen Chongtham Chanu Kouseshwari Devi. He holds a unique position in India's freedom struggle. With the inborn nature of a patriot, he boldly challenged the aggressive acts of the British. He was a champion who did oppose the expansion of colonialism and fought fearlessly against the British. For his patriotism, Tikendrajit is immortal. He has been called Manipurgi Nongsa, the Lion of Manipur. The Manipur state celebrates this day, August 13, as Patriot's Day to remember his role in the freedom struggle. The people of Manipur would always cherish him as a symbol against tyranny.

Key words: *Tikendrajit Singh, Northeast, Unsung hero, British, colonial rule, freedom Struggle*

Introduction

The people of Northeast, too, played very important roles in freedom struggle against the British. The stories of those people are alive only in the classrooms teachings, but could not reach to the people in the rest of the country. The people in the rest of the country are not even aware about the sacrifice of the noble people of Northeast. Unfortunately, the brave daughters and sons of Northeast are yet to get recognition from the people of India for the courageous leadership in the freedom struggle from the British. In study of Indian freedom struggle against the British, we cannot neglect the role of the Northeast people. Tikendrajit Singh, one of the unsung heroes of Manipur, holds a unique position in India's freedom struggle. With the inborn nature of a patriot, he bravely defied the violent acts of the British colonial power. He was a crusader who did resist the expansion of colonialism and fought fearlessly against the Britishers. For his patriotism, he has been called the Lion of Manipur.

Manipur had enjoyed sovereign status until it was occupied by the British in 1891. Through a long historical process the British imperialists had established a strong foothold in Manipur. The internal crises and the seven years devastation (1819-1826) caused the British to intervene in Manipur. As an ally of Prince Gambhir Singh, it tasted victory over Burma in the first Anglo-Burmese war (1824-1826). Consequently, Manipur recovered from the devastation and Gambhir Singh was made the titular King of Manipur. But, the effective powers were in the hands of the British Colonial officers. The King could not resist the British interference which was more pronounced in external matters. Their interference increased much more during the reign of Maharaja Surchandra Singh who succeeded Chandrakirti Singh. The consequence was the Anglo-Manipuri war in 1891. Tikendrajit Singh raised the banner of resistance against imperialism when the British Empire attempted aggressively to incorporate independence state of Manipur. Manipur fought valiantly against the British imperial forces. Manipur soldier gave a sterling demonstration of courage and sacrifice in all the engagement against the British Empire.

Early life of Tikendrajit

Tikendrajit also known as Koireng was born on the 29th December 1855, Saturday as the fourth and only son of King Chandrakirti's third queen Chongtham Chanu Kouseshwari Devi.¹ As a mark of the auspiciousness of his birth, a *Jeighya (yajna)* was performed at the precincts of the *Hiyangthang Lairembi* (Kamakhya Devi), with milk from 108 cows offered to the goddess on 30th December.² As a youth he reared in the highest traditions of the classical polity, he was offered the best values and experiences of the Manipuri nobility. He was trained in the fighting arts of the warrior race, in the study of the *Huyen Lallong* (Art and strategies of war). At the age of twelve, he became a champion horse-rider and a devoted *Sagol Kangjei* (Polo) player. The relevance of the cavalry was gradually reduced due to the increasing importance of gunpowder and musketry. But upkeep and management of the equine population were still necessary, since the horse was a status symbol of the ranked nobility, which had been institutionalized since the 7th century. Again the game of *Sagol Kangjei* which had its mythical origin in the state was still a vital spiritual engagement for

martial training, health as well as chivalry. The training in horsemanship and related games were for enhancement of the culture for development of the codes for war and chivalry in the act of war. Tikendrajit Singh was physically strong that he could lift very heavy weight and throw long distance.³ He was a good friend of Mr. and Mrs Grimwood. According to Mrs Grimwood, “The Senapati in particulars was our very good friend. There was something about him that is not generally found in the character of a native. He was manly and generous to a fault, a good friend and a bitter enemy. We liked him because he was much more broad minded than the rest.”⁴ But, Sir James Johnstone, the political agent of Manipur always looked upon Tikendrajit with suspicion and he maintained that Tikendrajit was a dangerous man. “*Kotwal* Koireng had always been a bad character, and had for years been under a cloud. Had I –remained in Manipur I should have turned him out when the Maharaja his father died and reported the matter to Government. He was allowed to remain, and proved the ruin of the state. His blood-thirsty nature soon showed itself, and he half- roasted to man after a most cruel flogging, the Maharaja was asked to him out of the state and would probably have consented, but just at the time a European sergeant should a cow, the secret animal of the Hindu, and outrage far exceeding any that our imagination can paints, and the Raja in his wrath flatly refused to punish his brother, while such a fearful crime as cow killing, was allowed to pass unnoticed...”⁵

Tikendrajit Singh though he inherited the best traditions of royalty in the continuity of the concept of the golden country in the worldview of kingship, was not personally ambitious for power and exercise of power. He was simply raised in the ranks of post-holders within the families of the royal household, that he was given the post of *Kotwal*,⁶ a sort of jurisdiction over the cases of crimes and keeping of the peace.⁷ Yet as a prince warrior always ready to extend his hand over military affairs, he joined the expeditions of the Manipur army in its support to the high officials of the British empire to gain experience in war and statecraft where he became associated with the experienced elder statesmen and warriors like Thangal, Balram and other distinguished veterans of the Manipur army. His association with Thangal was evident in the latter period of Maharajah Chandrakirti’s life, when he became more and more concerned with the rapid acceleration of the powers of the British Empire amongst the princely families in India. The promises of the British crown no longer to annex territories in South Asia were suddenly overturned when the opportunity arose, and the post-mutiny overtures of the British to secure more effective control over the tribal inhabited territories surrounding Manipur, and their hunger for bigger control in the affairs of Burma after the accession of lower Burma in the second Anglo-Burmese war of 1852 became critical matters of geo-politics of the time. Though Manipur was an Asiatic country in alliance with the British Empire, the Manipur monarchy extended full hearted support to the extension of the British imperial geography in the north and the south of Manipur. The settlement of the boundaries of the Manipur territories in the north which became contiguous to the British territories (which came into existence in the 1860s) created irritations in the relationship between the two entities. The Manipur monarchy was suspicious of the land hunger of the imperial power and their meticulous insistence on sheer graphic knowledge of the hills, mountains and rivers, their hunger of conquest of routes, villages and ethnic settlements to ensure security and safety to the future health of the empire, their

postures and manners of their military officials towards the native aristocracy of Manipur became indeed sour notes in the relationship between the powerful empire and their officials with the elder warrior statesmen of Manipur. Though in the later stages of Maharajah Chandrakirti's rule in 1870s, most of the tribes like the Angamis and the Lushai were being pacified through force of arms as well as renewed pledges of trust and ritual. Even though in 1874, there was a historic moment of British and Manipur friendship through the famous meeting with Lord Northbrook by Maharajah Chandrakirti over a yacht on the Barak River at Cachar. The latter days were not healthy days for Manipur-British relations. A political agent like Sir James Johnstone could utilize the service of the Manipur Army for his pacification of the Angamis in 1878, as well as help in the final conquest of Burma in 1885, it could be noticed that the martial energy of the Manipur army and the service of men like Thangal, Balram and Col. Shamu Singh were utilized to suppress the hill tribes, clear jungles and routes for the imperial army for the ultimate conquest of Burma, and the last few years in the life of Maharajah Chandrakirti Singh, the services of the native army were maximally utilized for the cause of the British empire without any substantial returns for the cause of the state. The enormous tribal migrations from Burma to Manipur in latter periods of the 19th century were sympathetically settled in the southern and south western hills of Manipur. In 1878, the Angami *Monju* village was suppressed by the Manipur army under the command of Major Thangal and Major Shamu. Tikendrajit also participated in the expedition.⁸ In 1886 after twelve years of his service as *Kotwal*, Tikendrajit Singh became the Senapati of Manipur.

Conflicts among the Princes

Chandrakirti Singh was succeeded by his eldest son Surchandra, a good, friendly man with plenty of ability, but very feeble. After his succession to the throne, the royal household was divided into two opposing groups: one group was led by Paccasana, a uterine brother of the Maharaja and the other group was led by Tikendrajit Singh, a half brother of the king. The differences reached its peak in September, 1890 and in the night of 22nd September, the group led by Tikendrajit sealed the palace walls and fired guns resulting in the taking of shelter by the Maharaja along with Paccasana and their supporters at the residence of Mr. Grimwood, the British Political Agent. The immediate cause was the order issued by the Maharaja on young prince Zilangamba not to sit in the durbar as result of his quarrel with Paccasana, the arch rival of Tikendrajit Singh.⁹ "The King himself was a peace loving man, but Tikendrajit, who had, already during his father's reign, distinguished himself by his prowess and military skill, suppressed all the uprisings occasionally with British help. All this made Tikendrajit the most powerful and prominent member of the court, and he offered a refreshing contrast to his elder brother, the King, who was weak and vacillating."¹⁰ Since Surchandra Singh insisted on abdication of the throne and expressed desire to go to *Brihandaban*, Mr. Grimwood made arrangements for his trip.¹¹ However, when Surchandra reached Calcutta, he requested the Chief Commissioner of Assam to restore him to the throne and contrary to the argument of abdication accused the Political Agent for colluding with the other group. But, the pioneer newspaper report strongly defended the action of the Political Agent and even charged Surchandra as a very weak king, incapable of resolving the long drawn out political crisis in the state.

Calcutta based newspapers namely *Bharat Mitra and Sanjivani* expressed concern with the event although they had different approaches to the problem. *Bharat Mitra* pointed out that Surachandra was very popular among his subjects. It also condemned the British Indian Government for refusing to support the former king.¹² *Sanjivani* on the other hand, reported that the people of Manipur were happy at the abdication of the *gadi* by Surchandra and it was pointed that there was no possibility of the former king to enter Manipur without facing resistance.¹³ On the whole, however, majority of the Calcutta based newspapers supported the re-instatement of the former king throughout the first half of 1891. It seems that most of the eastern based newspapers had easy access to Surchandra and they sympathized with his cause.

The British Indian Government formulated a policy which was suited to their imperial interests despite such demands from the Indian Press. It was decided that Kulachandra who was already put on the throne should be recognized whereas Tikendrajit who had been alleged to have anti-British attitudes should be banished from Manipur. For reasons unknown, such a policy was kept strictly confidential for 5/6 months. Meanwhile, in March 1891, Mr. Quinton, the Chief Commissioner of Assam proceeded to Manipur along with a force of 400 personnel. Lt. Gurdon had already arrived at Manipur on 15th February to inform Mr. Grimwood of the Chief Commissioner's visit. The details of the execution of the Government policy were however, kept secret. The pioneer report focused on the attitudes and policies of the ruling group of Manipur during those days. It was pointed out that a rumour, *a big tiger would be arrested in Manipur*¹⁴ was being circulated in the state. It seems that the Manipuri ruling class was suspicious of an aggressive British policy. It was further reported that a Manipuri force led by Tikendrajit burnt a wooden bridge near *Sekmai* when Mr. Quinton and his party was passing the place on the way to Imphal on 22nd March and suspicions were expressed that the Manipuri force might put-up a strong resistance.¹⁵ The Manipur Durbar had decided to oppose the Britishers, was reported by the *Daily Telegraph and Decan Herald*. The idea was, however, strongly opposed by Mr. Grimwood as a rash decision and ultimately stalled.¹⁶ In fact meticulous preparations made by the armed soldiers at the residency are an indicative of the British intention to use force. The report pointed out that when three attempts to hold a Durbar on 22nd and 23rd March failed on grounds of ill nature of Tikendrajit Singh, the British officers approached the Maharaja to handover Tikendrajit. It argued that when all peaceful means to arrest Tikendrajit failed that Mr. Quinton decided to resort to military operations in the early morning of 24th March.

But, shortage of ammunitions and evasive nature of the Manipuri warfare made the Britishers withdraw and insist for a truce. Although the Britishers could still fight they were more interested in a politico-diplomatic settlement and therefore they insisted for a truce. Around 9 p.m. when five British officers led by Mr. Quinton and Mr. Grimwood met their Manipuri counterparts at a Durbar inside the palace enclosure. The Manipuris demanded to hand over the arms, a move not acceptable to the Britishers. Since the parties could not come to an agreement the Britishers came out of the hall where they were attacked by a mob and two of them including Mr. Grimwood were seriously wounded. The officers were subsequent

executed under the instruction of the Manipuri authority. The incident had been characterized by the Englishman as an act of Manipuri treachery and unprovoked murder; it was reported that the images of the two Dragons inside the palace was painted by the blood of the Britishers. Mrs. Grimwood and her party on 25th March escaped to *Cachar*; and a detachment of 30 British soldiers under Jamadar B. *Nagarkoti* escaped to *Tamu* where the group was met by Lt. Grant and his 50 soldiers. The report praised the bravery of 80 soldiers who held the entire Manipuri force for about 10 days and criticized the Manipuris' lack of marksmanship.¹⁷

The *Dainik-o-Samachar Chandrika* in its issue of 2nd April 1891 critical analyzed the whole incident and defended the Manipuris. It was stated that the people of Manipur were aware of the British imperialistic policies after they had seen the annexation of Burma and further observed that it was wrong on the part of the British Government to attempt the arrest of *Tikendrajit* when they had already recognized *Kulachadra*, a supporter of the former as the ruler of the state. It was also suggested that the murder of the Britishers might have been the result of a strong sense of fear and anxiety among the Manipuri rulers.¹⁸ *Daaca Prakash* called the proposed Durbar on 22nd and 23rd March as a trap and argued that the killing of the British officers was because of the massacre of a number of children and women and also destruction of palace temples following the attack of the Britishers.¹⁹ The Anglo Indian papers countered such arguments by stating, that since the Gurkha sepoys were Hindus they might not have dishonored the temple and also that *Rashik Lal Kundu* who had earlier written to the British government charging the British soldiers for destroying a temple, later conceded that he did under pressure from the Manipuri authorities.²⁰ The native newspapers, however, classified that even the British sepoys who had come along with Mrs. Grimwood approved that in the process of fight many of the Manipuris died. The native papers further argued that the *Gurkhas* must have destroyed the temples under the British officers.²¹ Even *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the royal chronicle of Manipur records that three localities, namely Shaikhom Leikai, Yambem Leikai and Usham Leikai were burnt by the Britishers.²²

On 27th March, the news of the British disaster in Imphal reached *Tumu*, but the British did not know the death of British officers. Lt Grant volunteered the British prisoners. He started on 28th March with thirty soldiers of the 43rd Gorkhas and fifty of the 12th Madras infantry.²³ On 31 March, he reached Thoubal, he encountered about 800 Manipuri soldiers stretched on a long front. The Manipuri brought down heavy fire on them, but they eventually pushed the Manipuris to the bank of the Thoubal River. The British did cross the river and take defensive positions in a village. Having been possibly reinforced the Manipuri strength went up to around 2000 with two guns (cannons). The Manipuris were very determined and relentlessly attacked the British force over a period of ten days till 9th April. Lt. Grant was equally as determined and demanded release of the prisoners. A civilian named Williams handed over to Grant informed that no other European was held at Imphal. Grant withdrew as Captain Presgrave with seventy five men relieved him. As Grant withdrew he closely pursued by the Manipuris.²⁴

To avenge the murder of British officers in Imphal, the British Government of India declared war on Manipur and subsequently columns of troops were sent from (a) Kohima column under General Collett with 1200 soldiers, (b) Silchar column under Col. Rennick with 1600 soldiers and (c) Tamu column under General Graham with 1800 soldiers left their respective posts for Manipur and the three columns decided to meet at Imphal on 27th April 1891. General Collett was the leader of the combine Manipur field force.

With 1000 men, Rajkumar Khurailakpa confronted the force from Kohima, whereas the British force from Silchar was opposed by Rajkumar Kalasana with 1000 sepoys. In these battles the Manipuris forces were defeated by the Britishers. The first encounter for the Kohima column was on 21st, at Mao. Captain Macintyre and 200 soldiers overcame the Manipuri resistance. This short but sharp clash effectively opens axis (road) from Kohima to Imphal, enabling easy move. There was hardly any resistance till Imphal. Another minor action was also fought by Colonial Browne and 300 soldiers during the advance from Cachar at a point halfway to Imphal.²⁵

However, the field force under Brig. Graham from Tamu was very bitterly contested by the Manipuris. The British had intelligence report that a large force of Manipuris were had taken up defenses in and around Khongjom. The Manipuris had constructed an oval shape defense which basically trenches, ditches, snagers (parapets) along a stream full of water. Initially, Capt. Rundall, with 250 soldiers of the 2/4th Gurkhas, 50 of the 12th Madras infantry and another 43rd mounted infantrymen; a total of nearly 350 soldiers and four guns (cannons) were to lead the assault.

The British first used the guns to shell the Manipuris position, followed by concentrated aimed small arms fire. Believing the morale of the Manipuris would be sufficiently dented, the British infantry advanced, but they were surprised by the ferocity of the Manipuris resistance who fought very stubbornly and refused to abandon their position. Even after some parts of their defenses were captured by the British, the Manipuris did not give up instead continued to put up a very stiff resistance. This resulted in hand to hand combat. However, superior weapons and better training eventually ensured that the Manipuris could not longer resist the British and they broke. The mounted British infantry men pursued the withdrawing Manipuris.

The British force did not encounter any more resistance and reached Imphal on 27th. By then all Manipuris resistance had ended and the Union Jack was raised above the Kangla fort. The British effectively disarmed the Manipuris, seizing an estimated 4000 firearms.²⁶ Along with this the Manipuri leaders started to surrender. On 7th May, 1891 Thangal General surrendered, on 9th May, the regent Kulachandra Singh was captured and again on 23rd May Senapati Tikendrajit Singh was captured.²⁷

General H. Collet, commanding officer of Manipur field force, was instructed by the

Government of India to put on trial all persons suspected of murder or abetment of murder or of having acted as leaders or instigators of the revolt. Accordingly the regent his brother were tried by a court composed of the senior military officers aided by a civil officers with judicial experience. The other accused persons except the princes were tried by the chief political officer. The court awarded death sentence to regent Kulachandra Singh, Senapati Tikendrajit Singh and Angou Singh for waging war against the queen Empress.²⁸ The Governor General of India however, commuted the death sentence of Kulachandra Singh to transportation of life on the ground that he was a man of sober character and was under the influence of Senapati Tikendrajit Singh. His private property was, however, forfeited. The sentence passed on Angou Singh was also commuted to transportation of life and for forfeiture of property on the ground that there was no evidence that he abetted the murder of the British officers. The death sentence passed on Tikendrajit was, however, confirmed. The Chief political officer tried cases of sixteen other accused persons Thangal General, Kajao Manipuri, Niranjana Subedar, Shamu Singh, Nilamani Singh, Major Mia Singh, Major Lokendrabirjit Singh, Wangkheilakpa and nine others.²⁹ The death sentence passed on Thangal General was also confirmed on the ground that he had ordered the execution of British officers.³⁰ Death sentences of Kajao Singh who murdered Mr Grimwood and Niranjana Subedar (A former Sepoy British army) who revolted against the British were also confirmed. The other accused persons were sentenced to transportation of life along with the forfeiture of property.³¹ Tikendrajit and Thnagal General were hanged on 13th August, 1891. Thus, the British authority dealt with the rebellious ruling group of Manipur with heavy hand and the native state was brought under its control.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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