

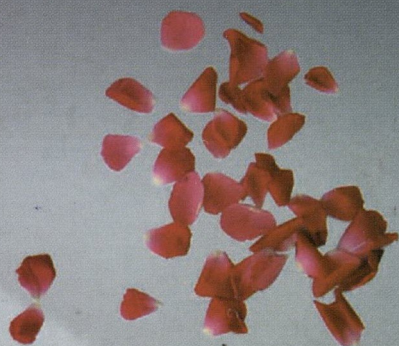


Kuki Uprising in Manipur 1919-1920



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N. Chishti



After the Manipuri uprising of 1891 against the British Government in India, the Kuki Rebellion of 1917-1919 was one of the most significant political occurrences. The Kukis, who constituted one of the most powerful tribes of Manipur, had revolted against the foreign domination. However, the immediate cause of the uprising was the partial recruitment of forced labour from the Kuki tribes, for services in Mesopotamia (present day Iraq) as the first Labour Corps.

The book details the punitive military operation in order to suppress the uprising and depicts the trial and punishment of the Kuki Chiefs involved in the Rebellion. Finally by the middle of 1919 the active and punitive military operation was over. Then followed a period of soul-searching by the British officers, as also the finalization of the compensation to be made to those innocents who had suffered. This also brought about the need for extensive Administrative Reforms.

Finally the concluding chapter of this handy book provides an overview of the causes and effects of the Kuki revolt which is an important landmark in the history of the region.



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**THE KUKI UPRISING IN
MANIPUR: 1917-1920**

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INTRODUCTION

The losses in the First World War were heavy on the part of the British. The British Government found much difficulty in managing and conducting the war. Also as the British largely depended on the resources of the colonies, the loss in the war was not just a simple matter. Being established rulers the British imposed rights and could ask any one of the colonies to be prepared for any kind of service whenever it was called for. As India was then under the British colonial rule, she was asked to contribute in men and material for conducting the war. Manipur as a part of British India was ready to offer assistance as far as possible. The Raja contributed a Double Company of Infantry, four or five ambulances to the St. John's Ambulance Red Cross Fund, and Rs.2,81,860 plus Rs.22,500 (in instalments) for purchasing an aeroplane.¹ Moreover, the Raja was prepared to offer the whole resources of his State and a company of 120 sappers and miners as well as 500 Naga labourers.

In response to an appeal from the Government of India, the Assam administration offered to raise five labour corps of two thousand men each. The Naga Hills Corps and Khasi Corps were raised and left for France after being fully equipped. The other wings of the Khasi Corps, the Lushai Hills Corps and the Garo Hills Corps were raised thereafter.

¹ Home Department, Political File I No. 444, 1917, NAI, New Delhi.

The Raja also expressed his desire to raise two more labour corps for services in France, in addition to the earlier one. But for sometime, he was unable to keep up the commitment because of size and frequency of the drafts required for the first corps of hill men. However, he was ready to recruit Meitei valley labourers, if necessary for the second corps,² but wished to command and accompany them up to France.³ Incidentally his proposed visit had to be dropped because "The Chief Commissioner had not heard that in difference to the opinions expressed by leading men in the State, that the Maharaja could not be away to a distant foreign country when a large number of the hill tribes subjected to him were in active rebellion and while military operations against the rebels were in progress . . . But for this rebellion among the Kuki subjects, the Maharaja would have been delighted to have accepted the temporary honorary rank of a Captain and to have availed himself of the opportunity given to him of visiting the Double Company in Mesopotamia (sic)".⁴

2 Foreign and Political Department, File No. 54, 1917, NAI, New Delhi.

3 Cole, who was Political Agent when the offer was first made, and his successor Higgins, who had been for several years in Manipur, both recommended the acceptance of the offer, and considered that the Raja would be benefited by seeing a little of the world. But they had the feeling that the conservative prejudice of the Manipuri Brahmins might not permit the Raja for visiting Europe except in time of war. Letter from J.E. Webster, Secretary to the Governor of Assam to J.B. Wood,

4 Letter from J.E. Webster, Secretary to Assam Government to R.E. Holland, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India. Foreign and Political Department. File No. 40, 1918, NAI, New Delhi.

Immediate Causes

At the first instance, the Kukis who generally inhabited the east of Manipur, were alarmed and agitated at the demand made on them for a quota of labourers to be sent to France. The Kuki Chiefs being out of touch with the British officers, instead of coming in for explanations, prepared to resist by force the recruitment policy of the Raja. Fear and ignorance, and the absence of those close and friendly relations that subsisted in the neighbouring British frontier districts between the rulers and the ruled, brought about a rebellion. As a sign of resistance to the recruitment policy at the end of the year 1916, four influential Kuki Chiefs sent round flesh and blood to all the minor Chiefs, ordering that no one should go to France. Their examples were followed by the headmen of the Tangkhuls, a large tribe in the east. Eventually the objections of the Tangkhuls and the south-western Kuki clans were overcome, and the corps had proceeded to service since the end of the year 1916. But two of the four Kuki Chiefs who were initiators of the movement had shown a defiant attitude towards the authority.

Chengjapao, who was the head or *piba* of all the Thadou Kukis, had sent orders to all the leading Thadou Chiefs to resist recruiting with force if necessary. On the other hand the authority sent messages to the Kuki Chiefs that they should come forward and discuss the matters. But they did not obey the orders. In the

meanwhile, the President of the *Durbar*, Higgins,⁵ made several short trips to various parts of the hills, and in the latter half of March 1917, at the request of the Political Agent, a small force was sent from Aijal (Aizawl, present day capital of Mizoram) to the Manipur border to prevent the local Chiefs from interfering with recruitment. These measures were met with some success. The opposition among the Nagas and certain sections of the Kukis could be overcome thereafter. In the beginning of April 1917, Colonel Cole was able to report that he had enrolled 736 men and when the recruitment was proceeding steadily, the Adjutant General informed the Chief Commissioner that a second corps might be raised. The local officers considered that it would be possible to do so. On 21st May, the Raja also offered to raise and command a third corps composed of people mainly from the valley. Eventually, after sometime it was decided that neither the second nor the third corps was required. However, in the meantime, the recruitment of the first corps was completed and dispatched towards the end of May 1917.

Not later than two months, the decision of the abandonment of the recruitment of second and third corps had to be revoked.⁶ Accordingly, Higgins,

⁵ Higgins was Junior Officer of the Indian Civil Service who had served in Manipur since 1910.

⁶ This was the result of the follow-up action of a conference which took place in Shillong to consider how the drafts should be raised for the labour corps. Higgins, who on Colonel Cole's departure for France had become Political Agent, agreed to do his best and hoped that it would be possible to raise a fair number of recruits.

Political Agent, proceeded to the hills in order to meet a deputation of the tribal Chiefs. But the prolonged discussion between them was futile. The Chiefs turned down Higgins's proposal for raising a labour corps but they accepted to give money instead. The Political Agent warned the village Chiefs of dire consequences if they did not pay heed to his order. On his return to Imphal he learned that a few of the old Kuki tribes inhabiting northeast of the Manvum village of Mombi, had expressed their willingness to comply with his order. But Ngulkhup, the Chief of the Monvi threatened to burn down their houses and kill their women and children if they give cooperation to the authorities in raising labour corps. This caused a serious administrative and political concern. Higgins left the headquarters for Mombi, with an escort of Fifty Rifles under a British Officer, in order to study the situation, while reaching the village, he found it deserted. But he endeavoured to get into touch with Ngulkhup the village Chief. As Higgins failed to meet him, he ordered his men to burn down the village. Immediately the village was burnt on the 17th October 1917. However, this action did not change the minds of the Kuki Chiefs. On the reverse, the Chiefs adopted a still more contumacious attitude.

The State Government sought suggestions from the Government of India, when the matters became serious. As instructed by the Central Authority, the State Government immediately stopped recruiting labourers. But they had to submit to punishment for their organized resistance to the demands of the State. The preparations

were made to send out a column to arrest the Chiefs who failed to appear in compliance with the summons.⁷

⁷ Foreign and Political Department, File No. 4-12, 1920, NAI, New Delhi.