

## Significance of Kuki Uprising

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### Introduction

As a part of introducing the subject, it will be appropriate to know why the state of Manipur has been named as the ‘Home of the Braves’ and here is a pen-picture of the same:

To the poet laureate of Manipur, it was –

*Chingna kuoina panshaba;*

*Haona kuoina pan-ngakpa;*

*Manipur Sana Leimayol!*

To the Imperial British Colonial Power, it was –

*A Little paradise on Earth*

*And that must be colonised and preserved as keeps!*

To the Invading Imperial Japanese Army, it was –

*A Flower on the Lofty Height*

*That must be conquered for the sake of the  
Advancement of Eastern Brotherhood!*

To the Defending Allied Forces of WW II, it was –

*A Strategically and Tactically vital place for*

*“A Springboard to Victory”, and therefore  
Must be held at all cost and launch offensive  
Against the Advancing Enemy!*

To the Indian National Army of Subhas Chandra Bose, it was –

*“A foot-hold that must be regained,”*

And begin physical occupation of the land of Free-India, and must therefore be recaptured as beach-head of Op Free India Campaign.

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To the first Prime Minister of India, it was –

*“Kashmir of the East” and it must be so preserved!*

To the Christian Missionaries, it was –

*A land of Precious Souls that must be won over to Christ,*

And convert them as Soul Hunters for Christ from their head hunting pride or/and idolatry obsession!

To the sons of the Soil, it was –

*An Ancient Land of Liberty and Freedom,*

*And they must fiercely defend its integrity;*

*And multiple identities!*

And this Land had become the land of many shootings and killings!

Therefore, the land that once was peaceful and prosperous in its own little way and right, has become a land of mourning; and the land of peaceful co-existence was shattered and the “Home of the Braves” has become the “Home of the Mourners”; and untimely Widows.

Before we proceed, the term used in connection with this historical incident is intriguing in that the official records project it as “Kuki Rising” and the British administration was careful in the kind of words or languages used are marked either by intentional disdain, or of unwillingness to accede too much importance. And according to Annual Reports of the Government of Manipur, this rebellion has been referred to as “Kuki Punitive Measure”, or simply KMP. And some individual writer or authority simply calls it Kuki Rebellion or Thadou Rebellion. Of course, we of today’s generation stuck to naming this and other similar instances of rebellion as “War”. Thus we have (i) the Khongjom War of 1891, and (ii) Kuki War of Independence, 1917-19. Be that as it may, a “rebellion”, or an “insurrection” or “war”, the results of such armed action always brings destruction and dislocation of normal life in the affected areas and sometimes brings fresh idea in the administration and socio-political scenario of the same. And of course in the context of the Kuki rebellion, the prime objective was a matter of fighting for their liberty, conscience and prestige, rather than of anything else will be borne out by various documentary proofs pertaining to this. And now back to the pre-Independence period relating to our story.

## **Naga Nationalism and Change of Guards in the Naga underground movement**

In the trend of rising crescendo of Indian Independence in the horizon also brought about a new political awareness among the Nagas since the later part of 1946 from mainland Nagaland (earlier called the Naga Hills) under the charismatic and revered leadership of A.Z. Phizo of Khonuma claiming independence from free India in line with that of Pakistan in 1947.

As Naga nationalism gained snow-balling effects across the Northeast India and beyond, it was already a political-gargantuan in the making in the wake of which the Kukis were found napping, or some prefer to call it as a deadly sleep of “haughty socio-political slumber of Kuki leadership”. Such a socio-political faux pas allowed the Naga nationalism to buttress right through the very heart of the Kukis when large segment of small tribes belonging to the Old Kukis such as Anal, Aimol, Khoibu, Lamkang, Maring, (to name a few) decided to follow their leaders who had their self-interest in joining the ever increasing and enlarging edifice of the Nagas in view of some disdainful behaviour of the Kuki leaders and thus helped in chipping away of the Kuki edifice that was the over-riding scene in Manipur. And divisive forces within the Kukis continued to grow even to these days. In other words, with chipping away of the Kuki edifice, there have been disturbances in the socio-politico-equilibrium with the Naga edifice growing. The Naga brethren happily and with far-sighted political wisdom took them in their fold despite having no affinities in terms of facial look, customs, costume and cultural imports, languages and historical perspective which of course they share aplenty with their forsaken Kuki brethren. No wonder, when well known authority in history of Manipur, Gangmumei Kamei who himself is a Naga, described them as “Politically Nagas but culturally Kukis” and needless to say, for speaking out the truth, some of his books were reportedly consigned to flame.

With the change of guards in the overall leadership of the Naga underground group, the rein of power squarely rested on the shoulders of the Nagas from the soil of Manipur, and in order to sustain their baton of

leadership, the “Kukis”, once again became a ready-made scapegoat and a foil to further their narrow objective of wreaking vengeance of whom they considered to be their main adversary for their supposed old wounds inflicted by the Kukis. Meanwhile, the Naga nationalism brought in a surge of the spirit of a strong bond of kindred brotherhood in their rediscovery of being dynamics of Nagas wherever they happened to inhabit. And the Kukis, once again became the prey to being a foil to the strengthening of their growing nation-hood by raking up old dead issues. Needless to say, this had brought about changes in the political scene and demographic structure in the social fabric of the state of Manipur.

### **Presentation of historical incidents: the way it was not and the way it was**

The paradigm of this presentation of historical incidents will take the form of (i) “the way it was not” based on the propaganda materials of the adversary of the Kukis and (ii) “the way it was”, based on official records and justifiable bases and both will be conjointly discussed as they are the two sides of the same coin although the second one occupies more of leading details as per given subject; and some heart-searching clarification has to be offered so that the reality of the same can better be relived, digested and appreciated. As this presentation is more of historical-facts-oriented rather than of being moulded on an attempt to a malicious and smearing campaign against its adversary, and therefore sometimes it may not sound too pleasant and palatable. Hence, the saying *absit invidia*, meaning “may there be no ill will”, is the bane of this article.

The “way it was not” is mainly based on the psychological warfare stuff as conceived and made public by the leadership of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim, Isak-Muivah, NSCN (IM), through their propaganda leaflets signed by top leadership Isak Swu, President, and Th. Muivah, the General Secretary in the local English newspaper called *The Freedom* in Manipur. The title of the propaganda is called – “The New Phase of Indian Terrorism in Nagaland”, Nagaland, September 18, 1993; “Statement of the NSCN on Indian backed Kuki and the Naga public clashes”, and “Statement on Kuki atrocities against the Nagas” as

published in *The Freedom* dated October 29, 1993. And the same was repeated and authenticated by the second rung of their leadership namely Rh. Raising, the then Kilo and Chaplee Kilonsher, Angelus Shimrah, Information and Broadcasting Kilonsher and Brigadier V.S. Atem the then Chief of the Naga Army. Hence, these charges cannot be dismissed as something mischievous only. The quotes below are from the above mentioned sources:

(i) “There had been traditional rivalry between the Nagas and the Kukis”

In fact there had been more of rivalries amongst the Tangkhuls themselves than with the Kukis; and the same is true of the Kabuis (now Zaliangruongs). The propaganda materials of the following incidents were attempts to project that in whichever the Kukis had killed the Tangkhuls and the Kabuis; it was because of their old traditional rivalry.

(ii) The attack on Kohima on February 11, 1851 where 300 Nagas were killed

This of course is a historical fact that took place in Kohima. The write up says, “The British with the help of the Kuki mercenaries and the Meitei Royal Force attacked Kohima....” This was during the reign of the British Empire. But why singled out the Kukis alone when it was the handy work of the British who had taken help from their allies. Is it fair to heap the blame on the Kukis except for the purpose of churning up sentiment against the Kukis of Old onto the New?

(iii) Raiding of Chingshui by the chief of Chahsat (Chassad) on March 15, 1878 killing 45 and 3 taken as hostage

The correct name of the chief is Tonglhu, and not Tonghoo as spelled in their article. The background story of the incident is that the Kuki chief had one Tangkhul helper who lived in Chahsat itself. He fell in love with one Tangkhul girl of Chingshui and got married. After some-time the couple quarreled and the wife went back to her village. On the repeated

request of the boy, the chief sent his emissary with a request to the Khulakpa to send her back. The Chingshui villagers complied with the request by sending her back to Chahsat. After this there had been a number of quarrels between the husband and the wife, and there came a stage that the wife had gone back to her village. The husband who started missing his wife pestered on the chief to get her back again. The chief accordingly sent a number of requests to the Khulakpa but was ignored. And a final warning was served for the return of the girl. The Khulakpa was adamant, and the Chief had to send a raiding party, and inflicted the casualties as reported. It has nothing to do with old rivalry but it was loyalty to and piety towards his man that he had to raid the village. Evidently there is no room for any traditional rivalry.

(iv) Raiding of Chingjaroi in 1879 causing 272 deaths

The date of this incursion is shrouded with uncertainty as some put it sometime in 1882. Be that as it may, it hardly matters as long as the relevant details of the incident tally. The background of the story is as follows:

One Tukah (not Tukei as spelled by the propaganda leaflet) whose full name was Nungjapao Lupheng of Nongdam started a new settlement with the permission of the Khulakpa in the vicinity of Chingjaroi which has not less than 400 houses. In due course, one widow from the main village joined the new settlement, Machet. As time passed by, some cattle of the main village grazed into the fields of the new settlement causing a bit of damages to the standing crops. He complained and asked for appropriate compensation for the losses. The Khulakpa promised that he would be compensated. In spite of repeated reminders, the request had fallen on deaf ears, and as a last resort, he sent one Keishing, the son of the widow to remind the request. He never returned. In desperation, the widow requested Tukah to take revenge for the death of her son.

As he was not able to take revenge for the widow son's death he has been nicknamed as TUKIH – the one who could not take revenge. “Tuh” means “hit” and “Kih” means “refrained or prevented from”. And he wanted to redeem the pledge he made to the widow and he went down

to Imphal and was reportedly to have obtained permission for killing 5 people. It is not clear from whom the so-called authority had been obtained. He went to his old village and organised a raiding party of 30. A war council was later held at Shokpao (Shokvao) and he disclosed that they could take 5 casualties only. And the story goes that the party was about to break up as most of the volunteers said that the party was too big for 5 only. Sensing the tempo of the party and that the mission was about to be aborted, one Vumkhokai Haokip (and not Yangam as mentioned in the leaflet) stood up and pacified them that the matter could be decided according to the situation pertaining to the spot. Thus, when the marauders reached the village, there was so much of panic and confusion, and in the aftermath of the confusion 272 were found dead, and not necessarily in the hands of the marauders; of course, there is no denying the fact that many had died in their own hands, and quite a number of them died in the stampede that followed. The cause for this raid is made abundantly clear, and it has nothing to do with any age old enmity.

(v) Raiding of Awang Kasom in 1919

A quotation from William Shaw's *Notes on the Thadou Kukis* will help us to answer questions on the raid. "...during the Thadou Rebellion referred to Thangam, brother of the DOUNGEL chief Chengjapao, and acting probably under his instructions, joined with one of the Haokip chiefs from Somra to punish the Tangkhul village of Kasom for failing to supply the rebels with rice..." Question of so-called-age-old traditional rivalry evaporates and apparently is, therefore, not the cause is quite evident. Subsequent paras will also testify to this fact.

(vi) Atrocities towards the Kabuis, etc.

All alleged atrocities meted out to the Kabuis were mostly during the period covered by the Kuki rebellion; and Tamenglong being the main area of operations and most of all, the area also housed the top leaders of the rebellion such as Khuotinthang Sitlhou, Chief of Sangnao, the de-jure and de-facto elder amongst the Thadou clans, in whose village the

traditional war rite of the Thadous was performed sometime in March 1917; and the operational commander Tintong, Chief of Laijang, himself an ex-army man took oath of leading out the rebellion by a symbolic cutting of the tail of the mithun being sacrificed for the occasion. After subjugation of the rebellion, the village was renamed as Tamenglong by the then British Administration as we know it today.

### **The hot-bed of Kuki Rebellion**

The hot-bed of the Kuki Rebellion centered around Tamenglong. Therefore, the main activities were confined within this sub-division though all the outlying hill areas were also affected. Some of the terrifying incidence of killing committed by both sides needs to be given proper balance coverage as below:

(i) Writing about the incidents in his seminary paper title “Thadou War” the writer, Khaikhotinthang Kipgen, has this to comment: “The Kabuis too did the same (refusing demand for rice) which resulted in the burning of 3 Kabui villages viz. Natop, Khungakhun and Chaloi by Tintong and Enjakhup. These impudent acts of the Thadous alienated the Tangkhuls and the Kabuis.”

(ii) The Manipur Administrative Reports of 1918-1919 relates to the fact that Akhui village which had a non-aggression pact with the Chief of Khotum over a pig did not respect the agreement and killed all the villagers except a father and son who were fortunately out of the village at that time. The vengeful action also did not spare the very hamlet Natjang of Tintong from being raided by Akhui Kabui village.

From the above collection of instances, it will be evident to draw following conclusions:

(i) Most of the incidents related to Ukhrul area established the fact that there was no traditional enmity as such being magnified in the propaganda. And the Kabuis have shown more of their “teeth” against the Kukis because of some social grudge in some form or the other.

(ii) Every incident, in both the areas had had cause(s) and effect(s); but not on the basis of having grudges against the Tangkhuls as a whole in Ukhrul, whereas in Tamenglong area it is more on the basis of breaking of agreements between two parties and vengeful action.

(iii) Had there been traditional rivalry in Ukhrul as propaganda attempted to project, it is hard to believe that the Kuki marauders who had to criss-cross the length and the breadth of the area did not come across any counter assault on their way home. Take the case of Chingjaroi for which the marauders had to cross-back not less than 6 big villages such as Shokvao, Hundung, Sangshak, Ukhrul, Siroi, and Phungcham and unless they are people of no spine, or people who were concerned only with their own villages, there is no explanation and it has no bearing at all of having a traditional rivalry.

(iv) Citing of the burning down of Anal Khullen, is not only mischievous but also erroneous as they were till then a part of Old Kukis. Their being under the wing of Naga is only of recent origin. One unmistakable fact that stand out as their being not Nagas can be gauged from their facial cuts, habits, lingos, customs and costumes, historical background, migration and history, etc. Of course there are instances of burning down of the Kuki villages by the Kuki rebels such as Dulen, Buning etc.

(v) There are ample proofs of the fact that the Kukis had been utilised as go-between amongst the Tangkhuls by themselves, and it was also the policy of the Government to make use of the Kuki settlements as some kind of buffer zone amongst the warring Naga villages and of keeping the peace in general.

The Manipur Naga Baptist Christian Leaders Forum (MNBCLF) regarded the Kuki Rebellion of 1917-1919 as an “attempt to crush the Nagas especially the Tangkhuls in the East and the Kabuis in the West.” Coming as it does from the pen of MNBCLF, forgetting the fact that they are a religious body and not a socio-political forum having multifarious influence, it is essential that this propaganda is given an appropriate clearance and explanation to counter such misleading mindset propaganda that exists in writing fomenting erratic, dangerous and venomous concept amongst the spiritual and earthly brothers, some thought deserves to be instilled in this important forum. It is all the more important because of the fact that this imaginary propaganda was manufactured during height of the ongoing operation of the ethnic cleansing war of 1993-96 against the Kukis as unleashed by the United Naga Council (UNC) with unstinted

support from the NSCN(IM) and most of other Naga accredited organisations.

It is also not unknown fact that during the height of ethnic cleansing period, one of the ordained pastors who had shown the general trend amongst the reverends/pastors their mettle by symbolically lifting a gun in his hand saying I am now in this business. And the mainstay of their involvement also included preaching from the pulpits of churches on the Biblical chapter 33, verse 55 of Numbers as if it was God-sent opportunity and the text reads: “But if you do not drive them out of the land before you, then it shall be irritants in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land where you dwell.”

Such action on their part only added to the burning-fuel already reaching a conflagration point. And having recounted some of the historical facts as above we will recount some augmenting historical facts as below. Before we add anything to the above, it must also be stated that all these incidents occurred before the emergence of Christianity and a strong and cohesive Naga polity and Naga nationalism, which are the product of 1946/47 Naga independent movement, was not there. Therefore, relevant statement as of now is that the Nagas of today are not the same as that of yesteryears holds true.

(i) During the British time, the Liangmei and those in the west of Manipur were known as Kacha Nagas, and those belonging to other Nagas were reluctant to accept the Kabuis (now Zeliangrongs) within their fold of the genus Naga around 1950s. But as already alluded to their practical and political wisdom dispensed things for their advantages. And to date they have been able to convert some of the tribes even of the Old Kukis such as Anal, Maring, and Lamkang etc.

(ii) The Kuki Rebellion, as later it was called, in the beginning was not purely a Kuki affairs but that of all Hill Tribes (Kukis and Nagas) of Manipur. The situation may be obvious from the excerpts of telegram sent by Lt. Col. Cole of the Government of Manipur to the Assam Government as quoted by T.S. Gangte’s Book *Anglo-Kuki Relationship from 1849* and other sources; and the widespread discontentment was not only in the case of Kukis alone will be an eye opener.

(a) “Surprised at the fast developing grave situation in the Hills

where the Kukis lived and the wide-range spread of their influence even in the Naga Hills, it is a great disappointment to Higgins and myself hearing from various sources that practically all the villages in the Tangkhul Lams have refused to come in, .....we felt partly confident that the Tangkhuls would be the last to take up the attitude.... I fear that this being so, it is more than probable that the Kuki villages will not turn up....Things were going badly for us. The action of the four Kuki chiefs (i) Chengjapao, Chief of Aisan, the Piba (Upa) of the Kuki Tribes, (ii) Khuotinthang alias Kilkhuong, Chief of Jampi, a youth of 19 years with great influence, Head of the Sitlhou clan, (iii) Lhukhomang (commonly known by his nickname, Pache) Chief of Chahsat, Head of the Haokip clan, (iv) Tonglhu has led up to the present situation which it will take time to rectify.”<sup>1</sup>

(b) “On receipt of information that the Kukis were determined to oppose the British Government, the Tangkhuls who have been hitherto remained reluctant to concede to the request of the British Indian Government, held a meeting at Huining on 21<sup>st</sup> of March, 1917 and decided not to oblige the British’s request and took oath to do so under the circumstances that may come about hereafter by killing pig.” (Porom Singh’s letter dated 21<sup>st</sup> Mar 1917- Ibid).

(c) And another piece of information that the rebellion was not only of the Kukis will be evident from a letter dated 12 October 1917 in his continued effort that failed to appease the rebellious elements. J.C. Higgins later wrote: “The Assembly of chiefs and representatives which met at Oktan on the 12<sup>th</sup> October 1917 when I met them for negotiation.”<sup>2</sup> (Ibid)

(d) “The Kukis were to be joined by the Angami (Khonuma) in the attack. However having received an intelligent report that their attempt to attack on Imphal got leaked across the enemy camp, they abandoned the proposed attack on Imphal on tactical ground.” (Ibid)

(e) The Deputy Commissioner, Kendeth, Burma Fowler intimated to the Assam Government that “Pache, son of Sempu in the independent country took an oath and killed a mithun and said none of them undergo .....this spread through the hills and...it has even extended to Naga Hills” (Ibid).

(f) “Since the beginning of March 1917 there occurred many events including a meeting of the Kuki chiefs from 11 to 15 September 1917 at Hengjao on the southernmost side of Burma’s border under the leadership of Tungzal (Tongjang) of Moltam village wherein it was decided the fight should continue until the Britishers were driven away from their homeland. They were in possession of 700 guns at their command as per information collected by Supdt. of Police of Chin Hills from SDO, Tiddim” (Ibid).

Therefore, the first legitimate conclusion that one can draw from the above is that Kuki Rebellion has nothing to do with the Nagas at all but of a loftier objective of freeing themselves and their brothers from the foreign yoke. And in this effort, all hill tribes of Manipur, Naga Hills and bordering areas of Burma were involved in the beginning. Despite having been discouraged within their own ranks in the glaring facts of challenging the might of the British Empire, a reigning world power in whose “empire there was no sunset” only presaged a sure defeat was a foregone conclusion; and despite having been left by their Naga brethren on whom they reposed trust and confidence, the Kuki chiefs resolved to fight on for the sake of their love of liberty, freedom and their self-pride and prestige.

The second can be that the Nagas having stirred themselves up with what the Kukis had done to them in the past generations, who were still non-Christians, were fully charged with the idea of taking vengeance on their children and grand children when the Nagas including the NSCN, UNC and all the rest of them had already become Christians; and in the name of Nagas, they indeed, inflicted horrendous spectacle of displaying a most Unchristian character of killing helpless women, children and the aged, and glorified in them. Of these, the newly converted Nagas from the Old Kukis had also to show Naga-likeness of being ferocious killers as reborn neo-Nagas by indulging in the kind of heinous crime. The killing spree could not be stopped on Sundays, nay even within the premises of the church itself.

Thirdly, there was not a word coming out from the top leadership of both underground and overground, and religious and social groups to show at least, their crocodile-tears and sympathy for the victims where they might have been victims of excesses on the part of Nagalim Guards

(NLG) and All Naga Volunteer Force (ANVSF) making use of the letter head of the All Naga Students Association, Manipur [ANSAM] which were manned by the Naga Christian students and youths in doing their business such as the incident of Tamei killing of 87 Zoupi and Janglienphai villagers wrongly known Zoupi Killing. The NSCN propaganda alleged the presence of Indian armed Kuki National Army (KNA) and the army. The fact is that none was present; otherwise how could such big crime in the heart of the town take place in broad daylight? Personnel of the Manipur Rifles, due to its class composition, were as good as zero as the incident had shown. Even years after the ethnic cleansing, the reconciliatory move from Tamei with their Kuki brethren was scotched by the Christian leadership of the UNC. This is the degree of hatefulness they harbour.

### **Causes of the Kuki Rebellion**

Before we come to the main subject, we must first survey the grounds, or in other words, the causes of the Rebellion for which they dared and challenge the might of the mighty British Empire.

Without much ado we can now summarise the grounds or reasons for the Kuki Rebellion as below:

(i) Having been subjugated by the British administration, the Kuki Chiefs lost much of their authority in their own tiny limits of governance impairing their authority. And the main culprit in this regard is the institution of Lambus who had become de-facto authority due to their being the important link between the ruler and the ruled. The Lambus had become not only essential but also imperative to enable the ruler to have some form of contact with the people in general who are scattered all over difficult terrain of the state. During the British heydays, this institution was vested with much authority; and before the coming of modern form of governance there used to be 4 Lam-Subedars and 37 interpreters and Lambus as quoted in the Thadou War from Foreign & Poll, Department of External Affairs 1915. It may also be noted that majority of Lambus come from the Kuki tribes.

(ii) Confiscation of fire-arms: Generally their love for fire-arms has become, as it were, their trade mark and similarly, spear has been the

trade mark for the Nagas. It was reported that there were over 3000 shot guns in the Kuki areas alone, and with the outbreak of Anglo-Manipuri-conflict in 1891, the British administration suspected the hand-in-glove connection with Tikendrajit Singh, which shook Manipur Administration, took preventive action by confiscating all the guns from the Kukis. The *Manipur Administration Report- 1918-19* (p. 12) recorded that “During the period of ten years from 1907 to 1917, at least, 1195 guns were confiscated. And again, during the rebellion 1,000 (one thousand) more were also confiscated from the Kukis.”

This action has also enhanced fear amongst the chiefs that their wings of authority were being clipped further and arouse more anger against the British Rule and it was in marked contrast to what the earlier British policy concerning the Kukis who were encouraged to establish new settlements to act as some form of buffer-area near the recalcitrant villages of Tangkhul and Kabuis. The Naga-propagandists against the Kukis in their write up titled “An introduction to the Ethnic problem in Manipur—reportage on Naga-Kuki clash” attempted to justify their vengeful offensive action wrote:

The British finding it difficult to subjugate the Nagas brought the Kuki tribe to Manipur and the Naga Hills in 1840 and let them loose in the Naga territories to destroy the Nagas and their villages. With fire-arms supplied by the British and the Kingdom of Manipur, the Kukis continued to decimate the Naga population and destroyed their wealth.

Unhistorical and illogical as it is but a handy propaganda tool for an unction for them! It is self-contradictory in that the British government would withdraw fire-arms which had been purportedly given to control the uncontrollable-Nagas and yet the same have been confiscated as summarised above.

(iii) Another one nagging system that they abhorred much was this “Pot-thang” system, a compulsory-turn of labour for the villages thereby affecting every single able-bodied individual – whether one was inclined or not.

(iv) With the elimination of the Yubaraj Tikendrajit Singh from the scene of Manipur palace, the main link with the Kuki chiefs also got snapped. Even before the beginning of open hostility, the chiefs had a meeting with the Maharajah; and soon after, serious incident of killing of a British Officer by the Chief of Loikhai and brought the head to the Chief of Jampi, the scion of the Thadous while he was away to meet the Maharajah. Thus hostility had already begun.

(v) Despite confiscation of fire-arms as already mentioned, there still remained sizeable guns with the Kukis and it is estimated that not less than 700 odd guns were readily available and the same number in Myanmar ; and secret arrangements had been laid on for the production of more and more guns. The service of one Lenkhokam Chongloi from Haflong, Assam who was reportedly metallurgy expert was also commissioned. Production of other weapons including field-guns and gun-powder and bullets had begun in earnest.

(vi) Then came the last straw of the drowning situation in forcing on them recruitment for Labour Force. The authority had failed to understand the ego and the psyche of the Kuki chiefs who were used to being carried in make-shift chariots, and used to being heard and obeyed, were asked to be a part of such Labour Force. Had the authority asked them rather to fight as militia group with latest guns, they would have willingly joined the British authority in their war effort. Such a miscalculated adventure misfired and ignited the undercurrent bad feeling to come out in the open. The Maharaja had failed them after the removal of the Yubaraj Tikendrajit Singh who had had good rapport with the Kuki Chiefs. And there was no return from their decision to fight on, as they swore, till the last bullet.

(vii) With the tempo of the rebellion gaining momentum, attempts to mediate continued, and even Mrs. Cole, the wife of the Political Agent as late as in September, 1917 as a friend of the two stalwart chiefs namely Ngulbul of Longya and Ngulkhup of Mombi met them at Sugnu but failed in her mission. Unintended disclosure by her that her husband had gone to France and that she too would be following him had been misconstrued that after all the White people were leaving Manipur. This must have encouraged them to accelerate their war effort.

## **Significance of Kuki Uprising**

The significance of the Kuki Rebellion may be considered in two phases i.e., before and during the rebellion - as Phase 1, and after the rebellion as Phase 2.

### **Phase 1**

The seriousness of the rebellion can be gauged from the fact that the British Government used their un-characteristic and undemocratic method of dealing with the rebellion by burning down villages indicating that the matter they were dealing with had become very serious one indeed in the backdrop of the gathering storm of World War I. Thus, some of the few important villages that had been burnt down are Longja, Mombi, Taloulong, Dulen, Longin, etc.

A letter that had been reportedly to have been intercepted from Moreh allegedly written by one HUN (German) caused concerned in the British Government. Coming as it did at that time of the World War I hysteria the Government did not take it lightly. In any case, it was already so serious and concerned that all the subdivisinal headquarters had been withdrawn and concentrated functioning only in Imphal.

During this developing situation, one Sanachaoba Singh, a pretender to the throne of Manipur raided Ithai Toll Police Station on December 19, 1917 and carried off cash and a gun with the assistance of some Kukis. And this was soon followed by an intelligence that over 2000 strong rebels was on the march towards Imphal.<sup>3</sup>

The British Government officially declared the handling of this rebellion as a part of the overall strategy of the World War I.<sup>4</sup>

### **Phase 2**

The immediate impacts that this rebellion have brought about as summarised by T. Kipgen has this to comment:

The Indian Sepoy Mutiny of 1875, now called India's First War of Independence, was a watershed in the Administration of India.

So was the Kuki Rebellion of 1917-1919 in the Manipur Administration. Prior to 1876, the Indian Administration was guided more for the larger profits to the East India Company than the welfare of the governed. It was only after this Mutiny that the British Crown took over the Indian administration and the process of gradual transfer of power to the Indian people started. The process, at times, was halting, slow and full of difficulties but it ended on 15 August, 1947 giving full independence. In the same way, the administration of the Hill areas was transformed till we achieved what we have today.

Prior to 1917, there was no Field staff maintained by the Maharajah was more known for causing trouble to the tribal people which led to the disreputation of the Maharajah's Rule. The system came to an end after the Rebellion. Three sub-divisions had been opened at Churachandpur, Tamenglong and Ukhrul. Officers from the Assam Civil Service cadre had been brought on deputation to man these posts. Local people available were recruited to help these officers.

At Imphal there was a Hill Office for the Hill Areas. The President, Manipur State Durbar, usually a member of the Indian Civil Service (ICS) or of Indian Police Service (IPS), was in sole charge of the said Hill Office. This Office was the agency for to clear all problems affecting the Hill areas as a whole, to guide the SDOs in their respective works and to act as an Appellate Authority over any decision of the SDOs for all Judicial, legislative and executive purpose. At the top, there was the British Resident who was called the Political Agent who, besides his other duties, was responsible for the welfare of the tribal people. He was responsible to the Governor of Assam. Thus the Maharajah and the State Durbar were completely eliminated in the administration of the Hill areas... They (the Tribals) for all practical purposes, felt that they were the same as their kinsmen in the then Lushai Hills District and the Naga Hills District of Assam. This was demonstrated when they claimed way back in the thirties that the amount of house tax they paid should be Rs 2/- only as in the Hill Districts of Assam, not Rs. 3.

In the Hill areas, law and order was naturally given topmost priority.

The SDOs were made to keep extensive tours in a year. They were to spend at least 200 days a year on tour. They picked up more important tribal languages like Thadou and Tangkhul besides the Meitei language. Collection of house tax was a great source of information to the Government. This was carried out on the spot and it contained details such as widows, men who went to France, Government pensioners including those in the Assam Rifles. Repairs and maintenance of the bridle paths, on nominal payment was the responsibility of the people. Annual clearance of inter-village paths without payment, up to the point of their respective boundaries was compulsory. Issue of the gun-license was restricted, more so to the Kukis connected with the Rebellion, remotely or otherwise. Reliable chiefs were marked and recognised by awarding red blankets and in very rare cases by grant of gun licenses. The authority of the chiefs had been enhanced and strengthened and they became the spokesmen of the villagers. Nothing could be given to and taken away from the villagers without the knowledge and concurrence of the chiefs. The houses of the chiefs were the venues of the Village Courts. No disputes civil or criminal were raised before the SDOs unless the same had been raised in the village courts. The local customs were allowed full play even in murder cases. Though there is no capital punishment in the tribal customary laws, the local customs were found more helpful in the long run. The rights of the chiefs to get certain customary dues in kind from their villagers were given full protection. With the protection of chiefs' right went the protection of the land, of forests and other products in their lands. There was no land survey as it was known in other states defining village boundaries. Things were accepted as stated by the village chiefs.

The migratory nature of the Kukis was checked. They could not move about freely and settle anywhere they liked. Kukis having less than 20 houses for three years consecutively were penalised; firstly they were to pay double house tax but in the second and final stages the villagers were destroyed by burning. The Nagas were however exempted from the penalty even if they have less than 20 houses for years. This was one crude method adopted to settle down the Kukis permanently.

By extensive tours, the presence of the administration was felt by the people at their very doors. The officers were known for their honesty, punctuality, discipline and integrity in their works. Changes of decision once made were practically unknown. Bribery and corruption rampant and accepted almost as normal way of life in the valley was completely absent in the hill areas. Any person found guilty had been summarily and heavily dealt with. The strong Hill administration after the Kuki rebellion was the visible impact of the rebellion on the administration. The rebellion also highlighted the need for a separate autonomy. The Manipur Hill Peoples Regulation 1974, the Manipur Hill Village Autonomous Act, 1956, the statutory body called Hill Area Committee, the Manipur Land Revenue and Reforms Act, 1960 are all pointers in this direction. It is however necessary to mention that even with the sad experience during the World War I, the Maharajah suggested raising of the Labour Corps again during the World War II and it was the British Officers who rejected this proposal outright.

## **Conclusions**

In the fitness of things following conclusions can be drawn now. Firstly, the Kuki Uprising was not meant to crush or destroy the Tangkhuls and the Kabuis as some of their adversaries attempted to project it. But it was a fight, though unequal, but prodded by their love of liberty, freedom, self-respect and prestige. Secondly, if Kukis are a part and parcel of the inhabitants of State of Manipur, the majority people of Manipur residing in the Valley, and the intelligentsia must recognise this historical fact that after all the Kuki Uprising of 1917-19 was, indeed, the Last Battle of Freedom for Manipur, and not the Khongjom War of 1891 which, of course, can be renamed as the First or the Second depending on Anglo-Manipuri confrontation other than this.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Telegram of 19.3.1917, Spl. Office, Assam Letter No. 2469.

<sup>2</sup> Oktan is a Kabui Naga village hosting the meeting.

<sup>3</sup> It is altogether wrong and below dignity to take cognizance of this date the day of December 19, 1917 as the day of the beginning of the Kuki rebellion. The Kukis did not require being instigated by any other agencies to rebel against the mighty British Empire as already accounted earlier but purely on their own whim and accord alone.

<sup>4</sup> And the first date of intimation of the rebellion from state Government to the British Indian Government was dated March 17, 1917 in details of belligerent decision taken by them. Therefore, in the context of difficulty in locating the exact day of rebellion as the day of the Kuki Rebellion letter is far more appropriate and authentic. T. Kipgen, who as the sole initiator of this movement for erecting a memorial to this important historical event merely recommended for observance of the day till a more authentic date could be found by some researchers amongst the younger generation. This fact may be noted that in most of the wars in world history, all such wars or confrontations are reckoned from the day of declaration of war or hostility, and not necessarily from the instance of first gun shot.

## **References**

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