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## **The Anti-imperialist movement of the Kuki Hill Tribes of northeast India**

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### **Abstract**

Historians have taken up the study of various types of resistance movements and rebellions against the British Raj, since this new tendency in historical inquiry has added a new dimension to understanding the nature of interaction between the British administration and its people. This paper discusses the anti-Imperialist struggle led by the Kuki tribes of Northeast India. The term 'Kuki' is a generic term covering a large number of tribes whose unique identity is based on their common culture, customs and traditions, linguistic affinity and method of cultivation. The conflict with the British had its origins in the clash between traditional and contemporary governmental mechanisms, as well as the colonial encounter with the self-governing Kuki tribes. It examined the different circumstances that led to the fight against British control, as well as the socio-political impact the conflict had on the Kuki Tribes during and after colonialism.

**Keywords:** Resistance, northeast, Kuki tribes, British raj, colonialism & imperialism

### **Introduction**

Historians have taken up the study of various types of resistance movements and rebellions against the British Raj, since this new tendency in historical inquiry has added a new dimension to understanding the nature of interaction between the British administration and its subject people. A study of resistance or rebellion movements becomes significant in today's approach of the study of the past (Tarasankar Banerjee 1985:233) <sup>[2]</sup>. Self-assertion has been an important phenomenon in modern India. Such developments have brought about new elements of thoughts particularly in understanding the political nature of the period under study. The conflict with the British had its origins in the clash between traditional and contemporary governmental mechanisms, as well as the colonial encounter with the self-governing tribes. The lack of contentment of the peasants and the tribal populace had given rise to aggressive actions. Their resistance movements were motivated by the people's discontent against the multiplicity of impositions by the British in their way of life (Shobhan N. Lamare 2017:127) <sup>[23]</sup>. If there be any one sentiment powerful in Indian mind over all others, it is the sentiment of affection with which the native views the soil he inherits. The policy of the colonial rulers was so obnoxious to the people of North East India who had really felt the British policy of exploitation of its subject people. Here, Gautam Basu writes, "Independence and freedom is a natural instinct of human being. To achieve the most coveted thing the subject people have fought against the foreign rulers" (Gautam Basu 2009:122) <sup>[11]</sup>. Some movements went beyond mere resistance to administrative measures to press for the end of the British rule over their specific geographical areas. The Kukis of North-East India were no exception on this regard. Indian history, as we know it, has flourished through centuries of imperialism, division, struggle, unity and traditions.

However, there are so many battles that have significance in our history which remain merely a footnote in mention. The marginalization of communities does not stop to the present day and it can be seen in the way these regions' history is depicted. By not mentioning or giving importance to the struggles of communities outside the mainstream regions (especially the North-Eastern regions), it isn't just disregarding a struggle, it is jilting legacies. As time passes by, India and its people evolve, but its depiction of history continues to have the issue of selective narration, which proves to be harmful to communities and their leaders who aren't represented and honoured the way they should be.

If the history is revisited with the approach to make amends and reconciliation, one then might be able to say that it is the first step towards building trust and instilling a sense of

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habitation in harmony and peaceful living. This paper's focus is to discuss the anti-colonial struggle led by the Kuki tribes of Northeast India.

The term 'Kuki' is a generic term covering a large number of tribes whose unique identity is based on their common culture, customs and traditions, linguistic affinity and method of cultivation. The Kuki tribe is spread across states of the North East, parts of Myanmar and the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. They were a tribe that traditionally lived in small settlements in the jungles, each ruled by its chief. While a sense of community had been deeply ingrained within them, they were also incredibly independent beings, who wouldn't accept listening to/being led by anyone other than their chieftains (P.S. Haokip 2018:2-55)<sup>[17]</sup>.

A constant clash is seen to have festered over a number of years between the British and the Kukis, beginning from their response to the Bengal movement in 1857, to when thousands of them responded to the call from Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, where the British kept firing shots, and the Kukis rose to the occasion every time. Late nineteenth-century India witnessed the Kukis vehemently resist western ideals and the British influence. The most serious movement by the Kukis was seen between 1917 and 1919 which popularly came to be known as the Anglo-Kuki war of 1917-1919 to the general Kuki population and the modern historians while the colonial archives describe it as the Kuki Rising or the Kuki Rebellion. When other parts of India were busy collecting combatants, non-combatants, labourers, funds and materials for the Great War, the Kukis of the Northeastern frontier of India declared war against the British. Initially (March 1917) provoked by the 'forcible' recruitment of labour corps for France, the opposition turned into an armed resistance which went on until May 1919 (Jangkhomang Guite and Thongkholal Haokip 2019:2-3)<sup>[12]</sup>. Where the most immediate reason stood to be that of the British government attempting to recruit people from among the hill tribes for the Labour Corps (British Army unit formed in 1917 for manual and skilled labour on the Western Front and Salonika) to dispatch to France to help their allies during WWI, however, that was merely the tip of the iceberg; One, the Anglo Kuki War can be seen to have had its roots in emotion and tradition (Priyadarshni M Gangte 2010:642-647)<sup>[10]</sup>: The emotion being that they did not appreciate the Britishers attempting to infringe upon their rights; the tradition was that of the shaking of the institution of chieftainship, of how the Kukis then grew afraid of Christianity as they felt it undermined their social values, culture and tradition. Two, the British had implemented a policy towards the hill tribes to control them with the force of arms; Three, the exploitative house tax implemented on the hill people at the rate of three rupees per house since the occupation of Manipur in 1891; Four, the constant torture and exploitation of the people. Five, these refusals also came from a place of superstition, where the idea of an "unfortunate death" (Bezbaruah 2010:165-175)<sup>[11]</sup> (unnatural deaths away from home) played into the worry of deprivation in the afterlife due to the lack of proper posthumous rituals. This eventually led to what would be known as "one of the toughest wars fought by the British after the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857." It is one of the major freedom uprisings by Indians against the British. It was the greatest war that the Kukis had ever fought against colonialism. The war spread across 7000 square miles of

rugged mountain. It was the 'largest series of military operations' in the eastern frontier of India. An extract from the proceeding of the Chief Commissioner of Assam described the 'Kuki rising of 1917-1919' as 'the most formidable with which Assam has been faced for at least a generation' spreading across the rugged hills 'surrounding the Manipur valley and extending to the Somra Tract and the Thaugndut State in Burma'. Many battles had been fought between the British forces and the Kuki warriors during the course of the War such as Battle of Mombi (Lonpi), Battle of Chahsad, Battle of Gotangkot, Battle of Aisan, and many more. The Anglo-Kuki War was no doubt a people's war against elevated discontent under colonialism aimed at achieving a clear objective of freedom from colonial yoke.

Throughout the course of the war casualties on British troops were 60 dead, 142 wounded and 97 dead due to diseases. The whole Kuki country had been occupied by the military, divided up into six areas (J. Guite and T. Haokip 2019:106-109)<sup>[12]</sup>: Northwest (Jampi Area), Southwest (Henglep Area), Southeast (Mombi/Lonpi Area), South (Manlun and Lenacot Area), East (Burma Road Area), Northeast (Aishan Area), each area encircled by a military outpost as blockhouse to encircle Kukis, and with each area several powerful mobile columns were fielded 'to do all damage possible' and hunt them from pillar to post. This military tactic popularly known as 'cordoning and raking' or simply 'blockhouse' tactic was considered to be the best tactic to suppress a major 'guerilla warfare', the tactic used in Boer wars 1899-1902 and in the French colonies. With this most advance and drastic tactic of the time, the Kuki rising was brutally suppressed by 'force of arm'. While the Kuki patriots were hunted down deep to the jungles, thousands of civilians were put inside the various 'concentration camps' in inhuman conditions. Human casualties were less because of the 'guerilla' war tactic adopted by the Kukis but the amount of properties destroyed by the British forces was enormous. Official estimates of the Kukis killed by the troops were 120 persons and 576 mithuns along with large numbers of goats, pigs, fowls, etc. were destroyed. A total of 126 Kuki villages were burnt to the ground, 16 villages were permanently declared 'barren' and deserted, and 140 villages were coerced to surrender (Shakespear 1929:236-237)<sup>[26]</sup>.

To suppress the rising, military operations were carried out for almost two years by the combined forces of Assam and Burma Military Police: 6234 combatants, 696 non-combatants, 7650 transport carriers, etc. The operations cost the government a whopping rupees twenty-eight lakh in total. It was not just a military operation against local uprising, the Anglo-Kuki war was part of the First World War mainly fought in European war theatres. This is evident from the award of the two First World War medals, the British War Medal 1914-1919 and Victory Medal, not only to the combatants and non-combatants who fought the Kuki 'guerillas' but also to coolies, clerks, dhobis, and down to the sweepers, barbers, etc. who came within range of the enemy's [Kuki] rifle fire' (J. Guite and T. Haokip 2019:16-22)<sup>[12]</sup>.

The colonial barbarity caused almost everything the Kukis had acquired generations including their houses, properties, grains, livestock, standing crops, and so on. They were all burned to the ground. After the rising was brutally suppressed, all the principal Kuki chiefs and war leaders

were transported to Sadiya (Assam) and Taunggyi (Burma) and detained there for three years or so. The general Kuki population was given 'collective punishment' with communal penal labour and also imposed with rupees one lakh seventy-five thousand as war reparation. They worked under this notorious communal penal labour for about five years after the rising (P.S. Haokip 2018:195-198) <sup>[17]</sup>. Kuki country, the hills of Manipur and Thaugdut States and the Somra Tract, were finally brought under direct British administration to prevent future uprising.

The brutality of British colonial armies was criticized by the New India newspaper, the mouthpiece of India Home Rule Movement, as the 'brute force in all its hideous nakedness', 'barbaric' and a 'tragic inhumanity', similar to what the Germans had committed in France and Belgium. Yet, the Anglo-Kuki war was not much known at the time by the Indian and European public partly because the Great War in Europe had taken up the attention of people and partly because of the colonial government policy of scaling the operation in darkness as it has the potential to defame the British Empire. Even the British officers who made a 'hard show' against the Kuki guerillas were appalled for their invisibility in the public arena. Col. Shakespear, for instance, ridiculed the only press report of the operations as belittling their 'hard show' as a mere 'outings of political Officers and their escorts'. Hence, the Kukis had fought in darkness and the military operations were carried out with impunity outside the purview of Indian public and humanitarians. The various reports of brutality were destroyed and few that remains were kept in the darkness of colonial archives.

In post-war, the great Kuki chiefs have been targeted (J. Guite and T. Haokip 2019:293-297) <sup>[13]</sup>; their traditional power over several villages have been abolished. For instance, it was said that Pi Nemjavei lamented what darkness had taken over the Chassad power which enjoyed the position of a 'King' previous to the war. She said to her son, 'none of your younger brothers have cared to visit us anymore and no one care to cross the boundary of our village'. Darkness loomed across the Kuki hills. Due to the general disarmament, their power had gone down to the ground and those tribes who used to give great respect to them does not care them anymore. Chiefs who used to travel by palanquins, have to cultivate in the jhum field for their bare subsistence. Worst, the colonial 'divide and rule' policy brought up new leadership among the Kukis whose vested interest finally broke the unity so far facilitated by the traditional powerhouses of the principal chiefs.

### Conclusion

Discontented, disenchanting, but their spirit was not broken yet. William Shaw who had conducted an official ethnographic survey among the kukis after the war was surprised to discover that, despite being materially ruined, the kukis 'do not consider themselves beaten yet' and believed that 'they are destined to be rulers of their earth and not to be submissive to anyone'. He said: 'their tails are not down and I have heard them said that they hope to become a 'Raj' someday'. The Kukis had not at any stage of their relationship with the British accepted the latter domination though they are forcibly subjugated. In spite of their untold sufferings during and after the war and the subsequent defeat in the hands of the British their love of freedom and the instinct to fight for it had never died in them. This shows

that they are undoubtedly nationalists. They never lost sight of the Indian National Movement that was going on simultaneously in the mainland. To prove the fact that they are freedom loving, having inherent nationalist character it is significant to note that they were quick in responding to the call of Subhash Chandra Bose for liberation of India from the yoke of British Imperialism by joining hands with I.N.A. soldiers when they arrived at the frontiers of Manipur in 1944. This spirit of discontentment, finding the only opportunity to free themselves from colonial yoke, let them joined the Second World War on the side of Japanese army and Indian National Army (INA) (P.S. Haokip 2018:215-236) <sup>[17]</sup>. This was yet another reaction of the Kukis to the opportunity to fight against the onslaught of British colonialism. They actively joined the struggle in large numbers and laid down their lives. Many of them died of diseases, hunger and thirst, and in action, and many more got arrested at the hands of the British troops. Some of the arrested persons were sent to I.N.A. Prisoners' Jail in Calcutta (Paokhohang Haokip 1985:4-6). This could be evidenced from the significant fact that they were among the largest numbers in the whole North-East India who were in receipt of 'Tamra Patra' in recognition of their sacrifice as 'Freedom Fighters'. In connection with this, a booklet was issued by the I.N.A. Committee and names of the recipients were given. And then the present KUKI INN located in the heart of Imphal City is also symbolizing the heroic war against the British Indian Government by the Kukis. Obviously, this is a living testimony and ample evidence to prove the close linkage of the Kukis fight for freedom with that of Indian Freedom struggle or the Indian National Independence Movement. Thus, the anti-colonial resistance movement led by the Kukis of Northeastern frontier of India during the First World War (Anglo-Kuki War) and Second World War (Japan Gal) marked a critically important stage and undoubtedly would be one of the most remarkable experiences in the history and progress of anti-imperialist struggle in modern Indian history.

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