

# Politics of remembering

**Although the Manipur uprising of 1891 has been widely commemorated in the state, the Kuki uprising from 1917-1919 still has no place in public memory**



## THONGKHOLAL HAOKIP

Two political occurrences were considered to be the “most significant” during the British rule in Manipur — the Manipur uprising of 1891 and the Kuki uprising from 1917 to 1919. The Manipur uprising had its origins in the murder of five British officers at Kangla, the palace of the Manipuri kings, on 24 March 1891 who were intervening in the internal strife of the kingdom. On the other hand, the Kuki rebellion was triggered by an attempt at forcible recruitment of labour corps for France from various Kuki clans.

The Manipur uprising is locally termed the “Anglo-Manipur War” and accorded state remembering through the declaration of not one but two public holidays — Khongjom Day and Patriots Day. Khongjom Day is observed on 23 April to commemorate the historic battle between the Manipuris and British forces at Khongjom.

On the other hand, Patriots Day is commemorated on 13 August, to remember the sacrifice made by Manipuri fighters in the war. A Khongjom War Memorial Complex was built at the expense of state’s exchequer, and has become a prominent tourist site.

## ■ Labour recruitment and hill-men

In February 1917, labour corps was raised by the British government for France among the Nagas, Khasis, Manipuris and Lushais. In March 1917 more labour corps was needed and it was necessary to draw from “the various Kuki clans inhabiting the hill regions of the native state of Manipur”. Despite the Maharaja of Manipur’s obligation to prepare 2,000 labourers he “had no direct control over the hill mass, which he had over his own Manipuri subjects in the matter of labour recruitment”.

In March that year, a series of meetings of the Kuki chiefs was held at different places. The first of such meetings was held at Aisan in which Chengjapao killed a *mithun* and “sent round the flesh to other Kukis, inciting them to swear an oath, sealed by eating the flesh, of not to go to France”. An account of the time says that in the meeting at Jampi, the Kuki chiefs “have taken an oath after killing a *mithun* that none of them would go to France or send any of their people there”.

Despite such a decision to wage war against the British Raj rather than supply labourers, the room for peaceful negotiation was still kept open. The chiefs of the western hills attended a

meeting called by the Political Agent of Manipur at Oktan on 10 October 1917. Sensing the general hostile attitude, the Political Agent reported, “They persisted that they feared to go so far from their homes and that if they had to die they preferred to die in their own country and would be prepared to meet force with force”. The meeting ended with an informal agreement that another meeting would be convened by the Political Agent possibly in the near future.

## ■ The historic burnt village

The officiating Political Agent of Manipur, JC Higgins, took 50 riflemen to Lonpi after two days of the Oktan meeting and reached that deserted village on 15 October 1917. After camping for a day, he burnt down the village on the morning of 17 October as the village chief Ngulkhup and his followers deserted the village and did not turn up for negotiations. This violent action did not only surprise the Kukis but also broke the trust they had on the Political Agent. Since then passive resistance to “supply of labour” and “surrender of guns” ended.

The burning of Lonpi provoked the Kukis so much, as Colonel LW Shakespear remarked, that “they closed their country to us” and took a warpath. As official tour diaries would

record, Ngulkhup “sent a message to Pachie chief of Chassad saying that if an officer visits Mombi again, he will be shot and begged Pachie to adopt the same attitude”.

The burning of Lonpi was a watershed event, in that it ended the period of passive resistance and marked the beginning of an active armed resistance. It provoked the Kukis who still believed in peaceful negotiations until then. Soon after, several war councils of the Kuki people were held in different parts of their hills. Unlike the previous meetings, the sole agenda was to wage a war of resistance against the British Raj.

Around the end of November or beginning of December in 1917, Pachie, chief of Chassad, summoned a “big meeting” in which 150 Kuki chiefs of Assam, Manipur and Burma participated. This meeting resolved “not to obey any orders or summons from the Government and to fight if the Government tried to enforce orders”. Subsequently, an indigenous war communication (*thingkho-le-malcha*) was sent to prominent chiefs to resist any forcible attempt to recruit them or to burn their villages. The war of resistance was fought until they were suppressed in May 1919.

## ■ Vernacular remembering

The Kuki rising was largely obscure except a few and largely unnoticed and insufficiently researched academic literature and an annual in-house commemoration. In 2016 when the centenary bell rang, the Anglo-Kuki War Centenary Commemoration Committee was formed to organise commemorations during the three centenary years.

The first centenary commemoration was organised at Lonpi on 17 October 2017, exactly 100 years after the village was burnt down by the British officer. This historic village is today still located at a remote corner of the state and very much developmentally deprived. During the commemoration ceremony, the heroes of this war were paid a fitting tribute.

## ■ What’s in a date?

During the early days of Indian independence, the Kuki Political Sufferers’ Association of Manipur demanded a war memorial in Imphal to commemorate the Kuki uprising. The Kuki Independence War Memorial Committee was formed to manage the piece of plot given, on which Kuki Inn has been built. This Committee

chose 19 December as the annual commemoration day, the day the Kuki fighters attacked forest toll station at Ithai in 1917. Those members of the Committee who share a different opinion on the commemoration date formed the Anglo Kuki War Patriots Memorial Foundation and Trust in 2001. This Foundation observes 17 March as their annual commemoration day — the date of the Jampi meeting. During the centenary years of the war, Kuki Research Forum mediated between the two groups in order to bring about a commonly acceptable date for this commemoration. After several consultations and meetings, 17 October was unanimously agreed upon — the date Lonpi village was burnt down. However, the KIWMC pulled out of this agreement and reverted back to their previous commemoration date a few months later.

## ■ Demand for official memory

Since 2017, the AKWCCC has been demanding 17 October to be declared as “Anglo-Kuki War” day. The reluctance of the Chief Minister of Manipur, N Biren Singh, to attend the commemorations can imply two things. First, the apathy underlines the unwillingness of the state to accord “official memory” to the event through the declaration of the aforesaid date as a public holiday. Second, he is signalling an attempt by the state to enforce forgetting of this subaltern uprising through the process of sidelining.

The erstwhile deputy inspector general of the Assam Rifles, LW Shakespear, who was also the commanding officer of the Indian side of those operations against the Kukis, remarked that the uprising was the “largest series of military operations conducted on this side (North-east Frontier) of India”. It cost a whopping Rs 28 lakh during that time to quell the uprising.

The Kuki rebellion, as the official colonial version would so regard, was “The most serious incident in the history of Manipur and its relations with its hill subjects”. However, despite being the largest occurrence of anti-imperialist struggle in the North-east frontier of British India, the Kuki uprising is largely invisible and still has no place in the public memory of Manipur.

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