



Colonial Recruitment and Indigenous Resistance: The Northeastern Hill Men in the Indian Labour Corps during the Great War, 1917–1919

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the recruitment of men from the hill regions of Northeast India into the Indian Labour Corps (ILC) during the First World War, 1917–1919. It explores the colonial government's recruitment strategies, the initial opposition of hill communities, and the eventual mobilisation of labour for service in France. The study demonstrates that recruitment was neither voluntary nor uniform across the region. Fear of death, rumours that labourers would be forced into combat, attachment to village life, and resistance from traditional chiefs significantly hindered recruitment in areas such as Manipur, the Naga Hills, and the Lushai Hills. In response, colonial authorities combined persuasion, monetary incentives, tax exemptions, administrative pressure, threats, and, in some cases, coercive force. The article argues that the eventual recruitment of hill men resulted from the interaction of economic inducements, political authority, colonial coercion, and the weakening of local resistance. It thereby highlights the complex relationship between wartime mobilisation and colonial power in Northeast India.

Introduction

In January 1917, the Chief Commissioner (CC) of Assam received a telegram from Government of India (GoI), informing that the War Office 'urgently' needed 50,000 labourers for France.

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The demand for manpower was so high that the hill men from the Northeast frontier tracts were eyed in place of the Assam tea planter at last. The fact was that, the war was so intense that despite their defiance, the allied powers were on the brink of defeat. An ironic couplet doing the rounds in Punjab indicates the fact:

Kadam German ka badhta hai, (the Germans advance) *Fateh*
English ki hoti hai (But the British claim victories)

The CC was asked ‘to complied with at once’ and to inform ‘how many labourers of the required numbers could be provided by Assam’. Inspite of the Assam’s Chief Commissioner Archdale Earle fulsome response to offer some eight to ten thousand able bodied men, the recruitment of the hill men from the Northeast frontier did not yield any fruitful result.

Initially, the recruitment was kept under voluntary submission, however, their well calculated plans about them to be willingly submitted at the first call had culminated into total confusion among the hill men from all corners of the hill districts of Assam. This led the recruitment to a complete failure. Jangkhomang Guite states that ‘The recruiter did not immediately realize the psychological terrains that blurred the mind of the hill-men and this rough psychological blockage was the first terrain that had to be smoothened and proven wrong before any hill men could be registered in the ILC’.

Notably, the method of recruitment was designed to be enrolled as non-combatants labelled under the Indian Army Act while the form of extra civil law, the Indian Army Act (Act VIII of 1911), was also put in place. Radhika Singha points out that, theoretically, they might be recruited to be engaged for general service, but could be sent anywhere indicates that their offering themselves was specifically for the European theatre. It is also evident from the men (South African Kaffirs) whom they would replace that, they could be engaged in more or less the same as whom they were intended to replace, in case of more severe escalation of the war situation than ever now in Europe.

Parwanas: First call for Labour

Before *Parwanas* (order) were issued in all the hill districts of Assam, careful precaution was made about the terms to be used during the recruitment to ensure the hill men that they were meant to be recruited as non-combatants and not to be stationed in war fronts. Careful use of the word about them being under military discipline was suggested as this could discourage the hill men from enrolment in the ILC. General Bingley (Secretary to GOI, Army Department) suggested that, the term ‘gratuities’ would be well to use it instead of the term ‘wound and injury pensions’. Subsequently, instead of the terms ‘wounds and injury’



which is being calculated as that could frighten the men to be enrolled, it was suggested to use the term 'Gratuities'. Besides, utmost care was also taken to suggest that the men are not being used in a military capacity.

Accordingly, *Parwanas* were issued throughout the hill districts of Assam through the native agents like the Circle Inspector, the *Lambus* and the *Lam Subadar* etc. Apart from the above appeasement and aggrandizement policies, another policy was the monetary inducements by way of good pay and allowances and service conditions to those volunteered for the ILC. Following the circulations of the *Parwanas*, the government had introduced different kinds of appeasement and aggrandizement policies such as liberal pay and allowance, pensions, gratuity to the next of kin in case of injury or dead, etc.

The initial response: Opposition

The initial responses of the hill people were mixed and at most negative. It differed from district to district. While the hill people of Manipur, Lushai Hills and Naga Hills opposed to the recruitment drive, there were apparent positive responses from the hills of the Khasi & Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills and Chin Hills. Yet, across the highland of Northeast India, one could see a simmering opposition to the recruitment due to some factors, including the fear of death and the idea of being recruited for the warfront combatants. This fear expressed itself in the form of opposition to the recruitment in Lushai Hills, Naga Hills and Manipur while in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills and the Chin Hills the fear of their chief's retribution deterred them from opposing the recruitments.

In Manipur, for instance, the opposition of labour recruitment was initially stiff; the recruiters could not receive any volunteers. This especially so among the Kuki tribes. Pu Chengjapao DOUNGEL, the Chief of Aisan and the *pipa* of the Thadou-Kuki tribe, killed a Mithun and distributed the meat (called *sajam* in Kuki) among the Kuki villages and instructed them not to send coolies to France and oppose the recruitment as much as they could. His order was followed by all the other Kuki chiefs who, in their turn, sent out order to all the Kuki villages under them not to send any coolie in the Manipur Labour Corp. Meetings of chiefs were also being held in different parts of the Kuki hills where it was decided not to send coolies to France. In no time, the whole Kuki population were opposed to the recruitment.

Reports from different *Lambus* (who were initially deployed to delivered the *parwanas*) show that they were not allowed to enter the Kuki villages and their *parwanas* were destroyed (burnt down) in some cases. Recruitment of labour among the tribes under the dominance of the Kuki chieftains also failed as the Kukis had threatened them of dire consequences if they send coolies to France. While some of the Kukis



(particularly from the southwestern hills) eventually gave in to the recruitment and sent 750 coolies to France, Kukis opposition to the recruitment eventually broke down into violent resistance against colonialism known as 'Kuki Rebellion' or 'Anglo-Kuki War' 1917-1919.

Among the Tangkhul-Naga tribe, recruitment was also initially unsuccessful. For instance, the Tangkhuls of Huining killed two pigs and 'took an oath not to go' to France. This was followed by others. S. Kanrei also stated that 'folks in every village were apprehensive about being sent to a war' and said that 'even if the government punishes us, we will not go. It is better to die at home rather than die in a war or in a distant place'. They insisted that, they would do everything they were asked to do in Manipur, but that France was too far away; they were afraid to go there, and would sooner die near their wives and children than in a distant Country. As a result, he said, there was a 'total refusal' from all corners.

Similarly, in the Lushai Hills, opposition to recruitment was initially stiff. Sainghinga's memoir testified that people were apprehensive of sending coolies to France. They 'kept saying that', he said, 'once they reached the place [France], the authorities would put them in the line of fire "make them shoot the enemy"' and hence refused to let 'their children be sent to die'. The refusal of the parents and women folks to send their beloved sons and darlings to France led to unrest in some parts of Aizawl.

Similar opposition came from the hill tribes of the Naga Hills. Here, the Angami Tribe was known to have opposed to the recruitment from the beginning although they later volunteered for the second batch that was however diverted to the Kuki punitive measure in 1918. While the Sub-Divisional Officer at Mokokchung proudly claimed that mere summon of the Naga Chiefs for a discussion had not only made them sent their men, but went along themselves or sent their relatives and it was not necessary to issue Parwanas in calling for recruits, J. P. Mills noted that the response from the Ao Christians to the labour recruitment was 'miserable'.

The cases in the Garo Hills and the Khasi Hills slightly differed. Although the common folks were reluctant to take a long march, it was due to the influence of the chiefs (Syiems) and the district administration that coolies were recruited without much opposition. Here, district officers as recruiters moved from village to village without sending Parwanas and with the help of the Syiems recruited the required numbers of coolies. The Syiems (Siems) held durbars and induced strong and healthy men that could volunteered for France. An anonymous petition from the Khasi & Jaintia Hills in fact accused the Chief Commissioner (CC) of Assam, Archdale Earle, of being the most violent CC of Assam for recruiting over 2000 coolies within a month. Patricia Miukhim states that some in fact went because they wanted to escape the harsh life as farmers.

**What caused them to oppose the recruitment?**

Intelligence reports from the region informs that there were some important factors that deterred the hill population from volunteering for the India Labour Corps. One serious factor high in the mind of the hill tribes was the rumours of death or the idea that those who go to France will never return back home alive. We have already noted the case of the Lushai Hills where parents were reluctant to send their sons for the labour corps for fear of death in the war fronts. They were influenced by the rumours that once they reach France, they would be put in the line of fire against the Germans. Such rumour was intercepted, for instance, in the Chin Hills where, it was reported, people ‘spread the story that the Labour Corps men were not really to work as labourers but were being enrolled as fighting men who certainly would all be killed by the Germans’.

The idea that those who go to France will certainly die (‘compelled my lover to die’) in the ‘hands of the Germans’ was not just a rhetoric against going to France but a theatrical positioning against the British recruiters, a non-violent resistance to the recruitment (**Sainghinga’s *Indopui***). Such a rumours of death in the ‘battlefield’ and a sort of bait and switch hiring was circulated across the hills and hence become the main factor behind the opposition to recruitment in the initial stage. They were so taken by such rumours that they decided, as Kanrei has pointed out, not to go even if the government punish them – ‘It is better to die at home rather than die in a war or in a distant place’. Afterall, they did not want to leave their sweet village life where they lived freely and independently.

The success of recruitment in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills and the Chin Hills also pointed out that the failure in other hill districts was mainly due to the process of recruitment. We have noted that in Khasi & Jaintia Hills the administration took active part in the recruitment by mobilizing among the people, explaining to them the details of their duties in France, the emoluments, and so on. They achieve this with the help of the traditional chieftains (Syiems). However, in the Lushai Hills, the Naga Hills and Manipur, the local administration simply issued *parwanas* as usual without themselves involving in the recruitment. While rumours had circulated across the landscape it was crucial that the district administrators must entered the field and prevail over the people to protect them from such rumours. That was not done and hence to the failure.

Overcoming Opposition: New Strategy, New incentives and the successful recruitment campaign

The realization that rumours had pervaded the hill landscape and certain amount of force needed to be deployed by the recruiters led to new strategy in the recruitment in the Naga Hills, Manipur and the Lushai



Hills. All the officers were ordered to take a tour across the hills and mobilize the people, explaining to them the reality of their job and others.

In Manipur, the Lam Subadar and the Lambus were sent with Parwanas for recruiting. When the mere circulation of parwnas did not yield any positive results, the Political agent began the tour by visiting Villages that can supply coolies. In South western part of Manipur, Higgins visited many influential Kuki villages and several rounds of talks took place but they vehemently opposed the recruitment. Even the offer for a case of rum was rejected and the offer for killing a Mithun in honour of the Political Agent was rejected in return. Many of the influential chiefs did not even meet the Political agent and sent representatives instead leading the recruitment to a complete failure. For instance, the ringleader Kilkhong or Khutinthang, nephew of the Chief of Jampi, who carried on the work of the chief and the head of all the Thados, was not present and Tintong, Chief of Laijang and Lunkholal, Chief of Chongyang represented him instead.

This shows that there was total refusal from all corners of the hill districts of Manipur. Apparently, since the beginning of the recruitment, the recruiters were of the view that the Kukis were the first to be engaged for talks in order to recruit men for France or else bound to fail. Many other tribes were under their power and control and it was their immediate attempt to persuade the Kuki chiefs in different parts of the hill districts of Manipur. Many tribes were willing to volunteer, but could not do so in fear of the Kukis. Therefore, unless the Kukis began to volunteer, no other tribes became imminent to volunteer.

The adverse attitude of the Kuki Chiefs had deeply impacted the recruitment campaign towards the other tribes whom the Kukis had controlled over them and the recruitment of coolies would turn otherwise. When the recruiters turned towards the other tribes in the adjoining areas they flatly refused by saying that they will not volunteer unless the Kukis did. To some of these tribes, their surrender for coolies was wholly rested upon the response of the Kukis who in turn will be punished in case they volunteered without them being volunteered first. For instance, the headmen of a dozen of Kabui villages in the northwestern parts of Manipur were obviously frightened of the Kukis, who have always lived among them and commanded all their actions and said that they could not send men unless the Kukis did.

It was after such a deliberate attempt to persuade the hill men that proved to be unsuccessful the recruiters began to be convinced that used of threat or force is imminent to make them volunteer for France. Some tribes who were under the influenced of the Kukis were willing to send their men to France, but they were not in a position to do so in fear of the Kukis. The British now convinced that unless the Kukis were subdued by any means, the recruitment for the Manipur Labour Corp would definitely turn futile.



Similarly, in the Northeastern part of Manipur, as rumours about the intensity of the war and the British defeat had already spread across the hills, the hill men were well aware about the fact that they would soon die as soon as they reached France. However, being indirectly ruled by the British government, the Maharaja of Manipur sent out pioneers (Konbaks) to every village in search of volunteers for France. It is important to note that the political agent of Manipur and the Maharaja were also not unaware about the rumours that spread far and wide across the hills, however they were destined to carry out the recruitment by any means to accomplish the orders of the colonial government. In fact, they were in dilemma at the first instance considering the rumours surrounding the recruitment for the Indian Labour Corps. Some felt that anyone who joined the labour corps would not return alive and they will die as soon as they reached France. Some people termed it as 'the war of no return'. Following the stiff opposition the government began to adopt various kinds of appeasement policies such as attractive statement of service to attract the hill men to volunteer.

As opposition about the supply of coolies persists, hot-head Higgins was finally convinced that fresh recruitment strategy must be adopted to ensure men for France. It is clear from the Octan meetings that, if the Kuki Chiefs abstained from interfering with the other tribes who wished to volunteer for France, the recruiters would not have unnecessarily invoke the idea of any threat or force on any of the Kuki villages. After the meeting, they promised so, however, it was failed later on. Therefore, in southeastern Manipur, when the situation remains the same as to that of the southwestern part, the British attitude could no longer remains the same but directly adopt the measures of threat, followed by forceful confrontations. For instance, tribes such as the Anals and Lamkangs were willing to volunteer for France, but the Kukis of Mombi prevented them from doing so. The repeated defiant attitude of the Kuki Chiefs in the recruitment finally infuriated the recruiters in such a way that they began to threaten those villages of dire consequences if they continued to interfere with the other tribes who wished to volunteer.

After several attempts were made to enlist men for France failed, the recruiters began to use threat or force. Lungsartum Village, a Khawper* of Vawmbuk Village in Lushai Hills, having repeatedly refused to obey the Chief in supplying Coolies was fined 100 punitive labour. In the same manner, when the attitude of the powerful Kuki Chief remains unchanged, they were threatened to raid of their villages and even kill their women and Children, but to no avail. Thus, a series of accumulated frustration and resentment surrounding the recruitment failure and the continuous defiant and disobedience shown by the Kuki Chiefs ultimately aggravated to a complete breakdown giving way to overt expression of anger.



In Southeastern Manipur, the Political Agent promised Ngulkhup, Chief of Mombi to give himself up and was promised to be unharmed if complied. Failure to this proposal, Higgins ordered 50 Rifles from Imphal and marched towards Mombi and burned down the deserted Village on 17th October 1917 leading to the outbreak of the Anglo-Kuki War of 1917. Besides the burning, all cattle found were destroyed such as pigs, goats and chicken.

The Burning of Mombi became a turning point in the successful recruitment campaign for the Indian Labour Corps. The orchestrated actions of the recruiters incited fear psychosis among the other Villages who defied the orders. After the burning of Mombi, the hill men began to volunteer one after another for France except those villagers hidden in the jungle. It is evident that, the influence of the Kuki chiefs was observed to be shaken after the Mombi incident.

Despite the failure of the recruiting mechanism adopted in most of the hill districts of Assam, there were some hill men who were trapped by the policies of the government. As is well known that rumours were the worst consequence affecting the recruitment process across the hill districts of Assam. What was the turning point to some of the hill men who were once preoccupied with the ‘rumours of death’ and finally decided to volunteer for France?

Sainghinga states that, exemption from house taxes and corvee were also announced following the circulation of Parwanas in Lushai Hills. Moreover, a circular was also issued by the government saying that their families will also be exempted from impressed labour during their absence, and they, themselves for life on return from France. In spite of its late announcements, tax exemption for life became an eye opener for most of the hill communities. JH Lorrain noted that, “An Assam Missionary observed that, ‘No greater reward’ could possibly be granted to any Lushai than perpetual exemption from this part of his taxes”. To the hill communities, the imposition of an annual house tax of Rs. 2/- to Rs. 3/- and the requirement of ten to fifteen days corvee labour annually were perceived as coercive colonial policies that enforced consolidation of their rule that invoked resentment in the hills since its inception.

After the failure of the lucrative schemes introduced, many hill men decided to volunteer when lifetime exemption from house-tax and forced labour was announced for any hill men who volunteer for France on their return. Patricia Mukhim further states that some of them went on the promise that they and their families would not have to pay revenue to the Crown and that life was considered by some to be much better than tilling the soil. This strategy became so successful especially in Lushai hills when majority of them began to volunteer immediately when the announcement came. They no more fear death, which signifies that they chose death than to remain under colonial subjugation.



Similarly, in the Khasi & Jaintia Hills, many young men volunteered after the announcement of lifetime exemption from house-tax and impressed labour. While in the Garo Hills, announcement of lifetime exemption from house-tax alone became a turning point in the successful recruitment of the ILC.

Despite the general opposition to recruitment among the Kukis, the Kukis of southwestern hills of Manipur have been beholden by their debt to government during the *mautam* (bamboo famine) in 1911-12. Seeing them in such a precarious situation one Khupjathang Kuki, a Lambu from Southeastern Manipur hills (without the authority of the government) promised them full remission from the debt if they supply coolies for France.

On account of this, most of the villages in this area collected men for ILC and eventually 750 Kukis went to France in the first batch. Besides, authority also used threats of different sorts among the Kukis if coolies are not supplied such as threat from de-recognition of the existing villages, increment in house-tax, more corvee (forced labour) etc. Chingmei Kuki village in Southwestern Manipur hills was one of such examples. Pu Goumang Singson, the great grandson of Haopu Kuki (one of the Labourers who went to France), for instance, said that three men were sent by the Chingmei village for France when the district administration threatened them to de-recognize their village. Altogether, a total of 8500 strong hill men from the Northeast frontier tracts had sailed for France under the Assam Labour Corps.

Conclusion

The recruitment of Northeastern hill men into the Indian Labour Corps during the Great War was a complex process marked by resistance, negotiation, inducement, and coercion. The initial failure of recruitment in several hill districts demonstrates that the colonial administration underestimated the importance of local political structures, community authority, and widespread fears concerning service in France. Rumours that labourers would be sent to the battlefield and compelled to fight the Germans became a significant source of opposition, particularly in Manipur, the Naga Hills, and the Lushai Hills.

The subsequent change in recruitment strategy reveals how the colonial state adapted its methods when voluntary recruitment failed. Officials increasingly entered the villages, negotiated with chiefs, offered improved pay and allowances, and introduced incentives such as exemption from house tax and forced labour. These measures were particularly influential in the Lushai, the Khasi and Jaintia, and the Garo Hills. In Manipur, however, recruitment was further complicated by the authority of Kuki chiefs and their opposition to the colonial campaign. The eventual use of threats and military force, including the burning of Mombi in October 1917, marked a decisive escalation and contributed to the weakening of resistance.



Thus, the recruitment of the Indian Labour Corps cannot be understood simply as an outcome of voluntary wartime service. It emerged from the intersection of colonial administrative pressure, local political authority, economic incentives, fear, resistance, and coercion. The experience of the Northeastern hill communities demonstrates how the First World War extended colonial intervention into remote societies while simultaneously exposing the limits of colonial authority. The eventual mobilisation of labour was therefore not merely a military or economic undertaking but also an important episode in the history of colonial power and indigenous responses in Northeast India.

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