

# The Kukis and The Indian National Movement for Independence.

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Manipur the eastern most part of India is a mountainous region, isolated from the neighbouring states by a chain of hill rangers. The state is a home of large number of ethnic groups, including 39 scheduled tribes. The term “KUKIS” is a generic word which covers a number tribes, sub tribes, clan and sub-clans independent of each other though they are classified into “Old Kukis” and “New Kukis”. All the tribes have close affinity with each other in terms of language, culture, dress, mode of living, food habits etc., but they prefer to be identified separately by the names of their respective tribes. Unfortunately, there was no monumental inscriptions and materials to trace their past history. Kukis are hardly and warlike people. Before they learnt fire-arms they used spears, swords, bows and poisoned arrows. Their favourite game was hunting and taking pleasure in marksmanship competition. Kukis are good in manufacturing indigenous gun-powder. They love their freedom and independence. They have a distinct customary laws. The Kukis can communicate in a single dialect wherever they settled in Manipur, Nagaland, Burma and Chin-Hills.

It was because of these advantages since 1820's, British used the Kukis against other tribes to protect their colonial interest. Socially, Kukis were bound together under the Chieftainship System. The institution of chieftainship is hereditary. The chief has a Cabinet Body, Constituted from sub-clan elders of the village. This cabinet body (Haosa – Inpi) is headed by the Chief himself. It is apex governing authority within the Kuki Society. Any issue within the village is decided by this body. Below this stood traditional institutions like SHOMPI (Elder Institution), SHOMCHA (Junior Institution), LOMPI (Elder Force), and LOMCHA (Junior Force). It was under the direction of these Kuki Chiefs that give support to the I.N.A. Japanese during the Second World War in 1943-44.

The Thadou Kukis – K. Kipgen. P-3.

Major General D.K. Palit remarks: “Because of the more centralized and autocratic nature of the Kuki Leadership they have a greater power of combining effectively against a common evening, and at this period they were much feared by other tribes.

Hutton (1929-22) said if the Kukis “when I first made the Kukis acquaintance and for years after. I regarded him merely as an administrative nuisance .....

The operations against the rebellions (Kukis) of the Manipur State in 1918 and 1919 led to a very better acquaintance with him and from then onwards the more I have seen of the (Kukis) the more I have respected him and the better I have liked him for pluck, intelligence, straight forwardness and cheerfulness he stood high among his neighbours”.

Anglo-Kuki relationship and the Indian National movement for independence were the same in essence. They have the roots in emotion and tradition. To the Kukis the British were alien people and were a threat to their independence and very existence. To the Kukis the Raja of Manipur was their “alley luraed deserter” with whom they were very close prior to the advent of the British interference in Manipur.

The Kukis never accepted the British rule and were always on the lookout for an opportunity to drive the Englishmen out of their beloved country. The Kukis were thoroughly nationalist.

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With the commencement of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War in 1914 when Germany and Austria attacked France, Russia and Serbia, more nations were dragged into its fray. Being part of the British Empire, India was to contribute in the war effort with 50,000 labourers of which the share of Manipur was 2,000 strong men. In the process of recruitment of labourers the special officers Government of Assam vide his letter no. 123w. dt. 2-2-1917 wrote to the political agent, Manipur to the effect that he should seek the active participation of the Raja of Manipur in raising the Manipur share for he took keen interest to assist since the very commencement of the war. Imposition of the said order was strongly opposed by the Kukis. They felt disappointed with humiliation. Traditionally men to go war, and to jungle for wild games, menial labour falls within the realm of womenfolk.

D.K. Palit Sentinels of the North East – The Assam Rifles, New Delhi: Palit & Palit 1984. P-64.

To order the Kukis to go to France as labourers was an insult. They have a responsibility to fulfil as provided by tradition. Since there was no alternative they had to fight for their independence. But after their defect in 1919 by the British, the Kukis were on the hunt for another opportunity to rise against the British. They are fully aware of the fact that the Indian freedom struggle still continued and this resulted in a number of Kukis to respond to the call of Subhas Chandra Bose to join Indian National Army during the Second World War with an object to drive the British from the soil of their motherland.

It is noted from local sources that the Kukis rendered different ways of assistance to the Japanese – INA assault force during and the eve of Imphal and Kohima Campaign. Hikari Kikan (Intelligence organisation) which not only talk about 60 Kukis who had come to the Japanese came said that the “Kukis living east of a front line company of enemy outposts in position in the Ukhrul area are co-operating with us including the headmen .....

Further, the report states that “our agents find it easier to travel through the district 25 Kms. wide, along the west bank of the Chindarin River, where majority of the natives are of the Kukis tribes. The Kukis rendered not only the immediate needful services like porters (Coolies) and the bulk of labour forces collecting rations, as guides, interpreters’ informants and many have actually participated in the battle fields in fighting against the allied troops. It is noted that the Kuki Chiefs after reaching an agreement with the Japanese forces called upon all the Kukis to leave their services under the colonial Government and support the INA. The accounts of seventy eight Kukis published in the freedom fighters of Manipur are living testimonies of all those who participated in the ensuing campaign of these 63 (sixty three) of them actually fought the allied forces, 6 (six) in intelligence agency, 7 (seven) as interpreters and guides and 2 (two) of them in collecting rations. They were given 3 or 5 months training and after the war those arrested were imprisoned for six months to one year. Thus, we see that the kukis help the INA – Japanese soldiers at the risk of their lives. They look after the sick and needy and take them back to their base and hospitals. In this connection K.R. Palta, personal intelligence officer to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose mentioned that the local population on the borders of India whole heartedly welcomed and help the INA. The INA had nothing material to give to these brave civilians except of a word of thnks, wishing them “Jai Hind”. The coming of the INA Japanese forces in 1943 was therefore taken to be one great opportunity by the Kukis to throw away the British Colonial yoke.

Therefore, we can say that although the Kukis were aware of the national movement for independence their core concern was in the liberation of the Kuki territory from the colonial yoke. It was also a desperate way out from an intolerable condition of existence created by the colonial officials, their irresponsible troops, harsh new laws, forced labour, posting, various odd taxes, tortures and all forms of exploitation under British Colonialism that their participation in the INA movement was made with a conscious, premeditated and tactful resolution based on their own reasons and understanding of the situation. The Kukis also expressed their feelings towards their support to the INA Japanese through their songs composed during the war and commonly known in Thadou Kuki as Japan Gal La (Songs of Japanese War).

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1. NAI, New Delhi INA Records F/255 no. 2.  
Hekari Kikan INA Records. P-16.
  2. Who’s who of Freedom fighters of Manipur in Indian Struggle for freedom. Freedom Fighter Cell/ Department MPCC(I) 1986.
  3. K.R. Palta, My adventure with the INA. Lahore Lion Press 1946. P-144.
  4. Pu. Jamthang Haokip, Manipur a Gospel leh Kukiho Thusim 1984. P-40-49.