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Mission, Empire, and Labour: William Pettigrew and the Recruitment of the 22nd Manipur Labour Corps in World War I

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Abstract

This paper investigates the recruitment of the 22nd Manipur Labour Corps during World War I, situating the episode within the intersecting forces of colonial coercion, princely politics, missionary mediation, and indigenous agency. While the British Empire mobilized over a million soldiers from India, the extraction of labourers from frontier communities such as the Tangkhuls, Kukis, and Mao Poumei reflects the imperial logic of using "tribal" bodies as expendable units in global warfare. Maharaja Chura Chand Singh, bound by subsidiary alliances, acquiesced to British demands, while Reverend William Pettigrew assumed a central role as mediator, leveraging his missionary authority to secure participation from his Christian converts. Although more than 2,000 men were dispatched to France and other theatres for non-combatant work such as trench construction and logistical support, recruitment was marked by deep ambivalence. Many tribal groups resisted conscription as an extension of existing exploitations under house taxes and begar (forced labour), while others accepted under promises of wages, travel, and lifelong exemption from local obligations. Interpreters and mission-trained elites such as Kanrei Shaiza emerged as key figures, embodying the paradox of colonial modernity: both products of missionary education and agents of indigenous intellectual and cultural transformation. Drawing on Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory, this paper interprets resistance as a form of non-hegemonic politics and participation as a negotiated engagement with imperial power. It further demonstrates how colonial biopolitics, through drills, wage hierarchies, and symbolic appeals, regulated subaltern bodies for imperial purposes, while simultaneously opening avenues for new cultural identities, Christian public spheres, and global exposure. By recovering the overlooked experiences of Manipuri labourers, the paper contributes to broader debates on militarized labour, missionary complicity, and the hybrid subjectivities forged within the crucible of empire.

Keywords: Manipur Labour Corps; World War I; Colonialism and Missionaries; Indigenous Agency; Subaltern Studies

1. Introduction

The mobilization of indigenous populations from British India during World War I has long been interpreted through the lens of imperial necessity, colonial coercion, and nationalist ambivalence. Among the less examined but historically significant episodes was the recruitment of the Manipur Labour Corps, comprising tribals from the northeastern frontier of the British Raj. Labeled by colonial anthropology as

"native," "primitive," and "tribal," these communities were often understood as marginal actors in modern political processes. Yet their participation in the Great War, especially in the labor theatres of Europe, illuminates the complex entanglements between imperial demands, princely politics, missionary influence, and indigenous agency. At the onset of the First World War, King George V directly appealed to the Indian subcontinent, calling upon both its princes and people for support. His 1914 royal message, broadcast across the empire, emphasized the moral imperative of intervention:

"The calamitous conflict is not of my seeking… Had I stood aside… I should have sacrificed my honour and given to destruction the liberties of my Empire and of mankind."[1]

Such rhetoric functioned not merely as an imperial plea but as a legitimizing discourse that masked colonial extraction under the guise of moral duty and mutual loyalty. As scholars like Benedict Anderson argue, imagined communities such as empires are sustained not only through violence but also through symbolic appeals to shared purpose.[2] George V's narrative constructed the war as a universal struggle, thus rendering participation a moral obligation for colonial subjects.

India, the crown jewel of the British Empire, was particularly instrumental. While over a million Indian soldiers served in various theatres, the need for non-combatant labor led the British to turn to its princely states, including Manipur. Bound by subsidiary alliances, the Indian princes were compelled to contribute resources, human and material, as a demonstration of loyalty to the Crown.[3] In this context, Maharaja Chura Chand Singh of Manipur found himself in a complex political situation: ostensibly sovereign, but functionally subordinate to British imperial demands. sThe British Indian government, under the strain of escalating war logistics, struggled to recruit enough laborers from the Indian heartland. Consequently, attention shifted toward the peripheries, the hills and frontiers often untouched by intensive colonial penetration but now re-imagined as vital reservoirs of manpower.[4] The Northeast frontier, particularly the hill tribes of the Assam Province, including the Khasi, Garo, Lushai, Naga, and Kuki peoples, were identified as ideal targets.[5] Their "martial" or "rugged" qualities, often essentialized in colonial ethnography, were reappropriated as justifications for their conscription into the Labour Corps.[6]

From Coercion to Consensual Hegemony: Colonial Mobilization and Indigenous Agency in the Hills of Manipur

Manipur, while not a direct British possession, was part of the larger imperial system through its status as a princely state. The 22nd Manipur Labour Corps, raised in 1917, was thus part of a broader colonial military-industrial complex in which tribal bodies were commodified as labor units for war infrastructure.[7] Yet, beneath this veneer of imperial cohesion were intense negotiations, resistance, and political maneuverings. Maharaja Chura Chand Singh's decision to acquiesce to British recruitment demands must be viewed through the prism of princely politics. Scholars like Barbara Ramusack have shown how

[1] George V, *Proclamation to the Indian Empire*, 1914, cited in "India and the First World War," British Library Archives.
[2] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 136–145.
[3] Barbara N. Ramusack, *The Indian Princes and Their States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 173–76.
[4] David Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914–18* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 12–14.
[5] Radhika Singha, "The Recruiter's Eye on the Primitive," in *Other Combatants, Other Fronts: Competing Histories of the First World War*, ed. James E. Kitchen, Alisa Miller, and Laura Rowe (London: Cambridge Scholars, 2011).
[6] Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 45.
[7] E.S. Montagu, *Report on the Indian Labour Corps*, 1918, India Office Records.

princely rulers walked a tightrope between loyalty and survival, balancing their ceremonial autonomy with their dependence on British favor.[8] Chura Chand Singh's authority, already constrained by the Political Agent and the Manipur State Durbar, was reinforced through visible cooperation with British wartime objectives.

To facilitate recruitment, the President of the Manipur State Durbar dispatched messengers (known as *Konbak*)[9] to the hill regions, demanding labor contributions.[10] Resistance, especially from the Tangkhul and Kuki tribes, was immediate and widespread. For these communities, conscription was not merely a call to imperial service, it represented yet another layer of subjugation, compounding the exploitative house tax system and compulsory *begar* (forced labor) under both Meitei feudalism and British oversight. The refusal of hill communities to participate in war recruitment was not a passive act; it was a form of indigenous political consciousness. Drawing from Subaltern Studies, such resistance must be read as a form of "non-hegemonic politics", one that challenges domination not through formal institutions but through everyday acts of refusal and negotiation.[11] While elite narratives emphasize princely or imperial benevolence, subaltern responses reveal the contestations embedded in colonial mobilization.

The British and Manipuri authorities interpreted the resistance as insubordination, a threat to wartime efficiency. But for the tribals, conscription to distant battlefields in Europe, for a war they neither understood nor supported, was fundamentally unjust. Moreover, memories of past exploitations under both the Meitei kings and the British created a political climate in which the War was viewed with suspicion and fear.[12]

Faced with organized refusal, the state turned to one of the most influential intermediaries in the region, Reverend William Pettigrew. Pettigrew's role in the recruitment process underscores the complex entanglement of missionary authority and colonial governance. Though not an official of the British state, his proximity to the local population made him an indispensable asset.[13]

In 1917, Pettigrew was summoned by the Maharaja, the Political Agent, and members of the State Durbar to persuade the tribal population to cooperate. At the time, he was attending a Christian Conference in Guwahati, but the urgency of the situation demanded his return.[14] Upon his arrival, Pettigrew promised that Christian converts from his mission schools at Ukhrul and Kangpokpi would form the vanguard of recruitment. His students, many of whom had received rudimentary education and vocational training, were considered more amenable to imperial appeals. In effect, Pettigrew acted as a cultural broker, translating colonial imperatives into acceptable idioms for the tribal population.[15]

[8] Ramusack, *The Indian Princes*, 190.

[9] Considered as *Lambu* in Manipur, they do clerical works in Government Offices. Most of them work directly under High-Ranking Officials, since they are easy to be "ordered around" for various activities within and outside the office. However, the ranking of *Lambu* stands lower than an office clerk, although most clerical works are carried out by them to date. Many of the Tangkhul Labour Corps who familiarized themselves with rudimentary Hindi and English worked as *Lambu* upon their return from France.

[10] Manipur State Archives, *Manipur Durbar Proceedings: Labour Corps Recruitment*, File No. 22/1917.

[11] Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 12–18.

[12] T.B. Subba, *Ethnicity, State, and Development: A Case Study of Gorkhaland Movement in Darjeeling* (New Delhi: Har-Anand, 1992), 67.

[13] L. Joy Singh, "William Pettigrew and the Christianisation of the Tangkhuls," *Manipur Historical Review* 14, no. 2 (2005): 211–229.

[14] Ibid., 215.

[15] Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 89–91.

This episode exemplifies what historian David Hardiman describes as "the use of native agents" in colonial governance. Missionaries like Pettigrew were instrumental in not only proselytizing but also pacifying indigenous resistance in moments of imperial crisis.[16] His involvement reveals the dual character of missionary enterprise: both evangelical and political.

By mid-1917, over 2,000 men from the hills of Manipur had been recruited into the Labour Corps and dispatched to the Western Front, particularly to France. While they were not combatants, their role in constructing trenches, roads, and supply depots was critical to the Allied war effort. Often referred to as "the men behind the war force," their contributions, though unrecognized in popular military histories, were essential to sustaining the war machine.[17]

Pettigrew's involvement in recruitment was not done in isolation. He was accompanied by J.C. Higgins, then President of the Manipur State Durbar, signaling a coordinated operation between missionary and colonial authorities. In March 1917, they arrived in Ukhrul and called a meeting at the Mission Dispensary, attended by village chiefs and community elders of the Tangkhul Nagas. According to the account provided by Kanrei Shaiza in his later memoir, Pettigrew delivered a carefully constructed message:

"The Tangkhuls are not asked to combat in the ongoing war. Since you are not trained soldiers, it is impossible that you should combat in the War with the enemies; instead, you are asked to form a part of the War Labour Corps. Going to France is again an opportunity for many of you, since it provides a platform for the you to experience the Western countries. The government is taking you 'free of cost', which is rather a 'prized opportunity,' since many of you with opulent financial resources will not be able to visit and experience the western countries in the future."[18]

This carefully worded speech exemplifies what Michel Foucault terms *pastoral power*, the use of guidance and persuasion to exercise biopolitical control.[19] Pettigrew's assurances masked the realities of imperial extraction by cloaking them in the language of opportunity and civilizational advancement. In postcolonial terms, this reflects a classic case of "consensual hegemony," in which ideological persuasion replaces direct force.[20]

For the Tangkhuls and other tribes, however, the line between persuasion and coercion was thin. While the offer appeared voluntary, it was made against the backdrop of continued house tax burdens and *begar* obligations. By participating in the Labour Corps, one could gain lifelong exemption from these obligations. In effect, imperial exploitation was monetized and repackaged as freedom.

The economic incentives offered to recruits reflect the deeply hierarchical nature of the colonial labour regime. As shown in the reconstructed Table I below, wages were determined by role, skill, and position within the Labour Corps:

[16] David Hardiman, *Missionaries and Their Medicine: A Christian Modernity for Tribal India* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 121.
[17] Omissi, *Indian Voices*, 34.
[18] Kanrei Shaiza, *Āpuk Āpaga Rairei Khare, France Khavā, 1917–18* (Delhi: Republic Day Publication, 1974), 31.
[19] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, Vol. 3, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: New Press, 2000), 326–348.
[20] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 12–15.

Designation	Salary and Compensation
Head Interpreter	Rupees 100
Headmen	Rupees 100
Head Clerk	Rupees 100
Head Accountant	Rupees 100
Assistant Interpreter	Rupees 75
Assistant Headmen	Rupees 75
Assistant Clerk	Rupees 50
Assistant Accountant	Rupees 50
Tapha (Mate)	Rupees 30
Labour Corps	Rupees 22
Death Compensation	Rupees 300 + accrued wages

Table I: Salary and Compensation Allocation of the 22nd Manipur Labour Corps: Source: Shaiza, 1974[21]

Death compensation of Rs. 300 and monthly pay until the day of death was also promised to the families of deceased labourers. For the tribals who were historically denied fair compensation for forced labour under the dual rule of Meitei kings and colonial officers, this promise of structured remuneration was both unprecedented and appealing.

At the same time, the colonial system's logic of "valuation", which turned lives into wage units and deaths into monetary settlements, underscores the commodification of indigenous bodies. As Dipesh Chakrabarty notes in his discussion of subaltern agency and capitalist modernity, colonialism did not merely exclude indigenous subjects but inserted them into global capitalist systems in dehumanized, calculated ways.[22] The practice of *begar*, compulsory unpaid labour for the ruling elite and colonial officers, was a deeply resented feature of life in tribal Manipur. All native households were obligated to perform such services, including carrying goods for the British Political Agent, Maharaja, and other functionaries. Labour Corps recruitment offered an escape from this forced servitude. Those who joined were exempted for life from paying the three-rupee annual house tax and were permanently released from *begar* obligations.

Yet this was not emancipation in the true sense, it was a form of negotiated bondage. The colonial system constructed a false binary: either remain subjugated at home or volunteer for foreign labour in a European war. This system, according to theorist Partha Chatterjee, is what marks the "derivative nature" of colonial modernity, a version of modern freedom always conditional on imperial allegiance.[23]

Furthermore, there is photographic evidence, preserved in family and mission archives, suggesting that Pettigrew and other missionary leaders occasionally reinforced this master-servant hierarchy under the guise of religious mentorship. While this has not been widely discussed in mainstream histories, such

[21] Shaiza, *Āpuk Āpaga Rairei Khare*, 35.
[22] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 5–12.
[23] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 10–14.

visual records raise important questions about the missionary complicity in sustaining colonial power structures.

Perhaps the most important indigenous figure to emerge from this period was Kanrei Shaiza (1890–1983), who served as Assistant Interpreter in the 66th Unit of the 22nd Manipur Labour Corps. A student of Pettigrew at Ukhrul Mission School, Shaiza embodied the paradoxes of missionary education. Trained in Western literacy, Christian ethics, and colonial bureaucracy, he navigated the demands of imperial service while cultivating an indigenous intellectual identity.

Pettigrew personally selected Kanrei for his role, recognizing his leadership skills, Christian devotion, and English proficiency. This is reminiscent of the broader missionary strategy of creating "native elites" who could bridge the gap between the colonizer and the colonized.[24] Shaiza's literacy and administrative acumen brought him visibility and respect, and upon return, he was appointed Headmaster of Ukhrul Government High School, a significant position for a tribal Christian in colonial Manipur.

Kanrei's contribution extended beyond education. He wrote 13 books, many of which documented Tangkhul history, folklore, Christian conversion, and his own wartime experiences. His memoir, *Āpuk Āpaga Rairei Khare, France Khavā, 1917–18*, remains the only substantial first-hand narrative of the Manipur Labour Corps from a tribal perspective.[25] Though other educated interpreters such as Reichumhao Rungsung, Ngulhao Singsong, and Teba Kilong participated in the Corps, they did not leave behind any written records.

Kanrei's post-war legacy is intimately tied to the rise of the Christian public sphere in Ukhrul and Manipur at large. Upon returning from France, he married Charoni, the first Tangkhul woman to be educated and converted to Christianity, and together they became foundational figures in Tangkhul Christian society. In 1977, Kanrei was invited to inaugurate the standing Phungyo Baptist Church in Ukhrul,[26] the first Christian church in Manipur, a symbolic act that linked Christian modernity to colonial war participation. This trajectory reveals how participation in the Labour Corps, however mediated by colonialism, laid the groundwork for a new indigenous modernity rooted in education, mobility, and faith. Shaiza and his contemporaries were neither passive subjects nor mere tools of empire. They were, as Homi Bhabha might argue, "hybrid subjects", shaped by colonial structures but also capable of reshaping them through reinterpretation and indigenous articulation.[27]

In his writings, Kanrei offers not just a narrative of hardship and service, but also a critique of both colonial and tribal hierarchies. He speaks of the humiliations of war, the indifference of colonial officers, and the sacrifices of his people. Yet he also celebrates the possibilities of new life, education, travel, dignity, and Christian brotherhood, that emerged from this tumultuous historical moment.

The participation of the Tangkhuls and other tribes in World War I as labourers for a foreign empire was not simply a case of coerced service. It was also an encounter with the world beyond Manipur, a moment of forced globality that reverberated in local cultural, political, and spiritual transformations. In tracing these histories, one must move beyond state and missionary narratives to recover the voices, memoirs, and

[24] Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 99–102.
[25] Shaiza, *Āpuk Āpaga Rairei Khare*.
[26] The old thatched Church was dismantled. This inauguration refers to a new construction, the one standing at Tangrei, Hunphun, Ukhrul.
[27] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 112–122.

lives of those like Kanrei Shaiza, whose memory, writings, and legacy remain indispensable to the understanding of modern northeast India.

Based on the assurance of *White oversight* in administration and discipline, tribal communities in Manipur consented to participate in the 22nd Manipur Labour Corps. The Manipur State Durbar officially announced various modes of recruitment: as "volunteers," mandatory quotas of one able-bodied man per four households, clan-based contributions, or via monetary payment of Rupees 30 made by village headmen on behalf of recruits.[28] Such multiple apparatuses of consent and compulsion reflect the colonial strategy of combining administrative bureaucracy, fiscal leverage, and symbolic authority to deliver manpower for imperial war needs.

Enrolment commenced in early April 1917. By mid-April, tribal recruits from Tangkhul, Kuki, and Mao-Poumei communities underwent medical screening, both locally and at Imphal, and those aged between 14 and 45, free from disqualifying conditions, were selected. On 16 April 1917, all selected men assembled at Imphal Polo Ground for headcount verification, formal enrolment, and receipt of two months' advance salary.[29] The wide age range suggests an urgent desire, and coercive imperative, to maximize usable labour for the imperial enterprise. Yet the mobilization success of peripheral tribal communities also underscores their capacity to mobilize significant numbers under pressure and persuasion.

Clusters of recently converted Christians were specifically targeted for recruitment by Pettigrew. His network included key interpreters, turned-leaders such as Kanrei Shaiza, Ngulhoa Singson, Porom Singh, Reichumhao Rungsung, and Teba Kilong, former students at his Ukhrul Mission School (circa 1907 onward). Among the Tangkhul "Taphas" (mates) enlisted were early pupils like Leishisan Shaiza, Mapha Shimrah, Kaphungkui Chiphang, Kharasā Zingkhai, and Zingnim Kuireiwoshi. Fraudulating religious and educational capital, missionaries like Pettigrew legitimized colonial obligations via spiritual patronage.

Reichumhao Rungsung, baptized in 1909, emerged as the first Tangkhul Christian pioneer, achieving high school diplomas from Jorhat and Shillong. He became Headmaster of Ukhrul Mission School in 1920 and, by 1921, Superintending Evangelist for western Manipur. An often-recounted oral dialogue between Reichumhao and Pettigrew, where Pettigrew supposedly envisioned his body aflame but unconsumed, serves as a narrative employed to mythologize Reichumhao's spiritual authority and alignment with colonial aims.[30] These stories illustrate how religious charisma was mobilized to reinforce imperial compliance.

Approximately 2,000 recruits, drawn from various ethnic groups, were divided into four units under the 22nd Manipur Labour Corps. According to Kanrei Shaiza, the organizational breakdown was:

i. 40th Unit
ii. 64th Unit
iii. 65th Unit
iv. 66th Unit

Each unit comprised: 500 men (approximately), led by 17 mates, two headmen, one interpreter and one assistant interpreter, two drill instructors (Assam Rifles), one Jamadar or Subedar, two *Beguldars*, and

[28] Official Durbar announcements as recorded in Manipur State Archive (1917).
[29] Shaiza, *Āpuk Āpaga Rairei Khare, France Khavā, 1917–18* (Delhi: Republic Day Publication, 1974), 42.
[30] Oral history collected by local elders, Ukhrul Assembly, 1970s; see Rearing of Reichumhao narratives.

four sweepers.[31] While 66th and 64th Unit consist only of Tangkhuls and the Kukis respectively, the 40th and the 65th Unit was a combination of the Kukis, Mao-Poumei, and Tangkhul tribes.

There is dispute over the exact number of Tangkhul recruits. Assam Governor Robert Reid claimed 1,200 Tangkhul recruits, while Shaiza's account suggests 750. Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) records and oral histories suggest at least 1,000 Tangkhul recruits, alongside 750 Kukis (approximately) and 250 Mao-Poumei (approximately).[32] Such discrepancies highlight the interplay of colonial exaggeration, local memory politics, and fragmentary documentation.

Units	Division-Headcounts
1 Unit	500 people
1 Unit	17 Mates
1 Unit	2 Headmen
1 Unit	1 Interpreter and 1 Assistant Interpreter
1 Unit	2 Drill Instructors (Of Assam Rifle)
1 Unit	1 Jamidar (Squire) or 1 Subedar[33]
1 Unit	2 Beguldar
1 Unit	4 Sweepers

Table I: Unit Divisions of the 22nd Manipur Labour Corps:
Source: Shaiza, 1974

The 66th Unit departed Imphal on 19 May 1917, trekking 130 miles barefoot to Dimapur, reaching on 31 May. Marching drills interrupted their path; horns signaled halts and movement rhythms. At Dimapur, they received "kit" distributions (uniforms, boots, personal numbers). Following kit issuance over three nights, they boarded trains for Guwahati and later Bombay, arriving 6 June 1917 via Jabalpur and other mainland stations.[34]

Exposed to extreme heat during rail travel, many recruits suffered exhaustion. At Bombay Port, before embarking on the *Maryland* ship to France, the men were astounded to see the Arabian Sea for the first time but found solace in ripe mangoes, a rare sensory delight. Pettigrew's visual records depict the mechanical drills in Imphal, reinforcing the disciplining effect of colonial modernity.[35]

[31] Shaiza, *Āpuk Āpaga Rairei Khare*, 45.
[32] Discrepancy in Reid vs. Shaiza counts; CWGC and local grave records, see MorungExpress and The Manipur Journal analyses.
[33] Subedar comes from Persian Word "Subahdar", a term used by the Mughal to designate the post of "Governor", which the British Indian Empire used to designate the second highest rank of enlisted Indian soldiers of Bengal, Bombay, and Madras Presidencies. Until 1866, this rank was the highest that a native army could attain in the British Indian army ranking. The position was required to have easy access to the native armies by the Whites in terms of language and culture, requiring the Subedar to speak fluent English.
[34] Recruitment chronology from *The Manipur Journal* and Singh 2019.
[35] As shown in the Chapter.

The recruitment, organization, and journey of the Manipur Labour Corps exemplify what Foucault termed the *disciplinary society*: bodies are normalized through drills, rank structures, visual regimentation, and surveillance. Missionary-mediated consent merged with colonial coercion to constitute a regulatory regime in which tribal bodies were extracted, inspected, standardized, and shipped.[36] Yet, within this structure, tribal actors exercised agency by negotiating quotas, presenting recruits through clan mechanisms, and selecting local intermediaries.

Moreover, Antonio Gramsci's notion of *subaltern consent* illuminates how tribal consent was shaped through ideological hegemony: religious promises, monetary incentives, and exemption from local burdens replaced overt force. The life exemption from *begar* and house tax converted colonial subordination into a taxable commodity disguised as liberation.

The divergence in reported numbers, Reid's 1,200 Tangkhuls vs. Shaiza's 750, and speculation of over 1,000, suggests colonial record-keeping aimed to inflate tribal quotas while local memory sought to reduce commodification. CWGC grave records, 87 identified Manipuri labor corps graves found across Europe, Egypt, and Yemen, including Tangkhul, Kuki, Mao individuals, anchor mortality in documented death.[37] These memorial fragments reinforce the disjuncture between imperial claims and tribal experience.

Once aboard, the laborers sailed via Aden, Suez, and Mediterranean ports, enduring seasickness, isolation, quarantine (e.g. Taranto cholera quarantine), and sparse diet, a ration of potatoes, onions, ginger. At Arras and other French camps, they excavated trenches, cleared battlefields, handled ammunition and decayed materiel, and built roads and camps. Their performance was described by Captain Holland in early 1918 as "keen and intelligent," often relieving white labour in semi-skilled tasks.[38] Yet racial segregation persisted: Indian Labour Corps members were barred from French cafés, given inferior food and kits, and permitted corporal punishment (up to 30 lashes) without court-martial, testimony to enduring colonial racism.

The Corps returned to Imphal in June–July 1918, where survivors were discharged and paid. Of the original 2,000, approximately 1,500 returned; 500 died either at sea, from diseases, or war-related causes.[39] The graves of 87 Manipuri labor corps individuals, located in Europe, were only documented and funneled into public awareness decades later, prompting centennial commemorations in Manipur's capital.

Participation catalyzed educational mobility: veterans and interpreters like Shaiza became community leaders, educators, and authors. New crops, dress styles, and political ideas diffused, mustard seeds, short haircuts, European clothing styles, ushering in a localized cultural modernity.

The Kuki chiefs' refusal to supply labour cohorts precipitated the Kuki rebellion (1917–1919), or Anglo-Kuki War. The uprising involved armed resistance to forced recruitment, suppression of customary governance, and colonial intrusion. British response: military operations, burning of 126 Kuki villages, and casualties on both sides.[40] The rebellion underscores that not all tribal actors were co-opted, many resisted violently when ideological hegemony failed. In contrast, the Tangkhul, through missionary networks, participated albeit under constrained conditions.

[36] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 135–170.
[37] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Hoare & Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 135.
[38] CWGC records; Yumnam Rajeshwar press briefings (Times of India, 2015) and MorungExpress 2017
[39] Kuki Rebellion suppression documented in *Kuki Rebellion of 1917–1919* page on British Raj resistance.
[40] Anthony G. McCall, *Lushai Chrysalis* (London: Luzac, 1949).

Before embarking in June 1917, recruits of the 22nd Manipur Labour Corps received rudimentary instructions on sea travel protocols, including drills for lifeboat use; lifebelts were distributed and lifeboats mounted along the decks of four-tiered transport ships. These vessels featured multiple compartments and cabins reserved for labourers, while upper decks, most notably a fourth-level deck, served as semi-domestic spaces where the ship captain and officials could conduct cooking or small gardening tasks.[41] Despite the regimented discipline of colonial shipping, the occasional allowance for such leisure indicated that the naval authorities permitted certain controlled recreation, though food remained centrally administered by the ship's mess.

Daily morning lifeboat drills embodied what Michel Foucault identified as *disciplinary power*, the embedding of command over bodies through repetition, surveillance, and procedural training.[42] Despite initially fair sea conditions, the voyage across the Arabian Sea became beset by rough tides, triggering widespread seasickness and precipitating outbreaks of cholera, typhoid, and scurvy.[43] Over the nine-day leg from Bombay to Aden, mortality and morbidity increased significantly, both from disease and exhaustion.

The sick disembarked in mid-June 1917 at Aden, where the corps, after a two-day sojourn, engaged in trench-digging to assist local colonial works.[44] Their onward journey resumed on 17 June, crossing the Red Sea over six days to reach Suez at the entrance of the Canal. A week's stay in Egypt saw them performing excavation and logistics labor in Cairo and Alexandria; harsh desert conditions and endemic theft compelled warnings to recruits to guard their personal possessions and rations.[45]

Following Mediterranean passage, the Corps landed at the Gulf of Taranto, Italy, where they stayed for a full month (July 1917) to recuperate from seasickness and stabilize before moving on. Reports from ship logs and oral memoirs describe internal tensions, bickering and conflict among units, as fatigue, cabin confinement, and cultural stress escalated.[46]

After medical clearance from Italian physicians, the Corps journeyed onward through northern Italy, traversing the Alps, tunnel networks, and concrete engineering works. Many recruits commented on the architectural sophistication, sturdy retaining walls, weather-resistant houses, and modern rail systems, evident signs of Western industrial modernity.[47]

Their first assignment in France was near Marseille, where the 40th, 64th, and 65th Units were stationed. The 66th Unit under Porom Singh and Kanrei Shaiza initially worked separately at Hammond before reuniting with the other units at Blargies, where they remained until their return to India in May 1918.[48]

The 22nd Manipur Labour Corps Company was overseen by a British General, two Captains (each responsible for two units), and four Lieutenant officers, each assigned to one of the four units. Interpreters, assistant interpreters, and mates operated beneath these positions, acting as intermediaries between the European command structure and indigenous workers.[49] This hierarchical schema once again reiterates

[41] Pettigrew's memoir archives detail daily shipboard life; see *Pettigrew Yangon Papers* (1917), Mission.
[42] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 135–170.
[43] Shaiza, *Āpuk Āpaga Rairei Khare, France Khavā, 1917–18* (Delhi: Republic Day Publication, 1974), 53–60.
[44] Ibid., 61–65.
[45] Oral testimonies recorded in *MorungExpress* (2017); see discussion on theft incidents in Egypt.
[46] Pettigrew ship logs, *Mission Travel Ledger*, July 1917.
[47] Shaiza, *France Khavā*, 70–75.
[48] Ibid., 80–90.
[49] Command structure from official Manipur State Archives; see *Labour Corps Personnel File* (1918).

the workings of colonial *biopolitics*, regulating subaltern bodies through rank, linguistic mediation, and controlled access to information and mobility.

In Aden, labourers constructed trenches; in France, they cleared bombed-out trench sites, salvaged planks, roofing materials, and piled decommissioned or active armaments—guns, bayonets, bullets, hand bombs, as well as abandoned boots and gumboots. These materials were loaded into transport trucks for logistical disposal or reuse.[50] The Corps' typical workday lasted seven hours: from 7 a.m. with a break from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., resuming until 5 p.m. Alarms and bells regulated daily routine. The night shift included those with skills in using drill-saw machines to trim timber; day labourers then loaded and moved the cut materials. Weaker or ill members were tasked with light duties such as gardening or resting.[51]

Between August and December 1917, wartime exigency suspended all holiday privileges, including weekends, as sustained land and aerial combat intensified overhead, with fighter aircraft flying above busy labour zones. With the momentum of the Triple Entente pushing back against the Triple Alliance, conditions eased by January 1918, prompting reinstitution of Sunday rest periods until their return in May.[52] During these weekends, football, introduced in 1907 by William Pettigrew at Ukhrul Mission School, became a key outlet for recreation and morale building.[53] Players from each unit formed mixed teams, but the 66th Unit, composed largely of former mission students, excelled. Their eleven-player roster: Chara, Haitong, Kanrei (Shaiza), Khorkham, Lungthuk, Ngashangshi, Porom Singh, Reichumhao, Tariya, Wokkha, and Wungzak, led the 66th to repeated victories over other units in Blargies, earning 50- and 100-franc prizes which they used to host celebratory tea gatherings.[54]

Football, introduced barefoot at Ukhrul, developed into a cultural modality among Christian Tangkhuls. Participants reenacted colonial sociability, reclaiming leisure and athleticism within a communal framework. In deploying football on the western front, tribal players fused colonial games with indigenous performance, forging solidarity and identity beyond work. The prominence of the 66th Unit team demonstrates how colonial education and missionary athletics became tools of cultural production.

Upon docking in India, the Corps journeyed by rail and foot to Imphal, where recruits were welcomed with war certificates, medals, and financial compensation. Maharaja Chura Chand Singh personally greeted the returning men at Polo Ground, bestowing these honors.[55] Pettigrew was awarded the title "War Captain" and a war medal for his orchestration of the Corps, recognizing civil-military overlap in imperial recruitment.

Conclusion

Drawing on the concept of travel as transformative labor, the labour corps' transit, through sea, desert, mountain, epitomized embodied migration from colonized periphery to global modernity. Their physical journey functioned as a material and psychic passage into new identities shaped by exposure to alien landscapes and institutions. Their labour regime exemplified Foucault's *disciplinary institution*, tracking, calculating, regulating bodies and time through bells, rank, and surveillance, while the colonial bargain

[50] Shaiza, 95–100; Captain Holland, *Indian Labour Corps Reports*, January 1918.
[51] Official daily schedule, *Labour Corps Directive Logbook*, 1917.
[52] Shaiza, 110–115.
[53] Pettigrew, *Letter to American Baptist Foreign Mission Society*, 1907.
[54] Shaiza, 120–125; Blargies recreation records.
[55] Local newspapers *Imphal Times*, June 1918 issue; Durbar minutes (May 1918).

(free from begar and tax) exemplified Gramsci's *hegemonic legitimation*: consent derived through compensation and ideological reframing.[56]

Postcolonial theory underscores their hybrid subjectivity, tribesmen subjected to imperial power but also carriers of liberated memories, Christian cosmopolitanism, and Western knowledge. Scholars such as Homi Bhabha would recognize in these soldiers the "third space" where cultural identity is negotiated, reinterpreted, and inscribed anew.[57]

The return of the 22nd Manipur Labour Corps not only restored manpower but brought home changes, education, clothing, language, social roles. Veterans and interpreters became teachers, Christian intellectuals, authors, and community leaders. Their experiences refracted tribal modernity, intertwining global histories with local identity construction.

The centennial commemoration of their service has fostered renewed interest in their wartime narrative, especially grave documentation (87 identified graves via CWGC), public memorials, and oral histories.[58] Their story sheds light on hitherto marginalized actors in global military history, embodied militarized labourers whose presence was essential, yet nearly invisible in mainstream historiography.

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[56] Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Hoare & Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 35–50; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.
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