

Chapter - 6

Forced Labour in Lushai Hills under Colonial Regime

This chapter examines the labour system enforced by the colonial regime in the Lushai Hills. It begins with the existing customary labour services to the chief. It gives the gist of selfless service known as *tlawmngaihna* among the many tribes of *Mizos*. *Tlawmngaihna* was a Mizo code of conduct through which the poor, needy, or destitute were given a helping hand without hopes of returned favours. Since paid labour was unknown, community work known as *Hnatlang* was another way in which weaker sections of people were supported and uplifted.¹ This chapter however concentrates on the labour regime under colonial rule where some of the colonial administrators employed impressed and forced labour to gain cheap labour in cutting roads, bridges, and constructing government quarters. The administration adopted rules that every Lushai village should pay tribute in the shape of rice, in addition every village should be liable to contribute labour for ten days irrespective of the days spent in coming and going, the carriage of luggage of officers and escorts, the maintenance of Government roads within their boundaries, the construction and maintenance of paths to admit officers touring freely without great hardships.”² Gradually, the hill population was reduced to a mere labour force. They were paid for doing such works but it was mandatory on the part of the hill people to contribute such stipulated labour whenever and for whatever it was called for regardless of their engagement in their own cultivation fields.

This mandatory nature of colonial labour service makes the system infamous throughout the hills. For instance, the rate of impressed labour was paid at 4 annas per diem. But the system of giving presents to individuals or chiefs for special services was practised in which broadcloth, trinkets, necklaces etc., were purchased and taken along

¹ Sangkima, *Essays on The History of the Mizos*, Spectrum Publication, Guwahati, 2004, p. 63.

² MSA, Letter from Major J. Shakespeare, Superintendent of Lushai Hills to the Secretary to the Government of Assam, Shillong. No 931 G dated 24th November, 1904.

whenever chiefs and headmen of the plains were visited. When it came to the *Lushai Hills*, there were problems with regard to fixing this rate of impressment of labour. In 1896, Porteus, the Political Officer of North *Lushai Hills*, was consulted on the matter in which he proposed that the labour they exacted was “to be impressed labour on exactly the same footing as impressed labour in any plains district.”³ Thus the rate for any impressed labour was paid at 4 annas in the hills. However, many cases usually escaped payment of such impressments.

The main aim of this chapter is concentration on the practice of forced labour in India under the colonial regime and to see how it virtually converted the hill populations into bonded labourers of the British Empire. The whole population of the erstwhile *Lushai Hills* was engaged in forced labour for the benefit of the British Government. Besides the customary tributes to the existing chiefs, colonial enforced labour on the hill people for constructions and other menial works throughout its administration. The British utilized the annexed hill people for construction of roads, buildings, bridges, Government quarters &c. What was surprising is that, such forms of force were engaged long after the abolition of slavery by the British Government, and the introduction of forced labour laws. The *Lushai Hills* district was annexed to the British Empire in 1898-99 and it remained so till the hill was granted statehood in 1987. For half a century, the population of the *Lushai Hills* suffered and laboured forcefully under the colonial regime. However, Mizo historians in the present times, tend to remember and write only of the ‘good works’ done by the British, forgetting their colonial yoke that brought about such ‘good works.’ So, the chapter will highlight the use of forced labour in *Lushai Hills* during the British administration of the hills.

Chin and Lushai Hills Administration: Initial problems of the British

The first notable characteristic of the *Lushai* political life as observed by the British was marked by their impermanent settlements. Although the population having always been “semi-nomadic and accustomed to move from one chief’s village to that of another on the very slightest excuse, there was a great uniformity of custom and language. With the exception of the immigrants from the *Chin Hills*, who live in the loop of the *Kolodyne*, south of old fort *Tregear*, and of a few hamlets of *Ralte*, in the extreme north, everyone

³ MSA, Summary of events in the *Lushai Hills* District for the week ending the 2nd June 1896, GEN-49, June-December 1896.

talks Lushai or *Duhlian* dialect. There was, therefore, no difficulty in getting people to go from one part of the district to another. In the Chin Hills, the population, having for hundreds of years been located in fixed villages, and these villages having been very often more or less permanently at war with their neighbours, great diversity of custom and language exists, and the people have a very great aversion to leaving the tract usually inhabited by their clan.

The common language and uniformity of custom existing in the Lushai Hills made the work of administration simpler than in the Chin Hills. The permanency of the Chin villages gave rise to a system of colonies from the parent villages, and as all these acknowledge the supremacy of, and pay tribute to, the chief or chiefs of the parent village, there was a 'complete system of government which only required to be supervised.' On the Lushai side of the border, however, every petty chieftain, if he only ruled 10 houses, set up to be an independent monarch and had to be dealt with separately, and all attempts to make the more important chiefs responsible for their lesser brethren have failed."⁴ In this respect, the work of administration in the western district has undoubtedly been more difficult. The permanency of the Chin villages made administration much easier for the British than in the Lushai Hills.

A Chin values his house very highly and can amass goods without having to look forward to having to carry them to another village every few years, and his village being permanent, he can see the advantage of making good roads to it which the nomadic Lushai is sceptical about. The Lushai nomadic system of cultivation gives better crops than the more permanent method practised by the Chins. A Lushai's *jhum* is only limited by his capability and inclination to work, whereas the Chin has a limited area of land which he has inherited. The Lushai has far more trouble over his cultivation, the clearing of his *jhum* being a very heavy task; while the preparation of his field gives the Chin but little trouble, there being no jungle to fell. The Lushais being better off and having more work to do in connection with their crops, are less eager to work for hire than the Chins. There was seldom much difficulty in getting voluntary coolies either for the carriage of rations or for work on the roads in which

⁴ MSA, GOM, *Report on various matters connected with the Chin and Lushai Hills*, CB-5, Political Report-54, p. 3.

respect, the British administrators in the Chin Hills were much better off than those in the Lushai.”⁵

The Chin chiefs were also undoubtedly richer than those of the Luseis. They received more dues than their neighbours, and in every respect they seem of more importance. The Chin Hills was divided into three subdivisions with an assistant Superintendent in charge of each. The Superintendent supervises all their work very closely, sending for the records of cases and revising orders where necessary. The Assistants refer difficult cases to the Superintendent and commit to his court such cases as are beyond their power to deal with. Each assistant is entirely responsible to the Superintendent for his own sub-division, assessing and collecting the house-tax, arranging for coolies, settling all inter-village disputes, and generally administering the sub-division on lines laid down for him by the Superintendent. Any cases between villages in different subdivisions are settled by the Superintendent. So, there was

1. Better supervision of the work done and a greater uniformity of system,
2. The Superintendent was free from all the petty work of a sub-division and each Assistant is equally responsible and has equally interesting work,
3. Each subdivision is a unit independent of the Superintendent, and therefore, in case of a change of Superintendent, no great disturbance was caused, as each sub-divisional officer goes on working his subdivision on the former lines and the superintendent has time to acquaint himself with the work, the country, and the people.”⁶

But the Aijal (Aizawl) subdivision was virtually under the charge of the Superintendent; he certainly had an Assistant, but was not recognised as the sub-divisional Officer. The consequence was that, when the Superintendent leaves Aizawl, much confusion occurred owing to the Assistant suddenly having to take charge of the subdivision. An assistant at Aizawl having no independent charge cannot be expected to take much interest in his work. The Chin Hills was worked as an independent subdivision under the charge of an assistant Engineer, but the roads and rest camps were under the charge

⁵ MSA, GOM, *Report on various matters connected with the Chin and Lushai Hills*, CB-5, Political Report-54, p. 1.

⁶ MSA, *Report on various matters connected with the Chin and Lushai Hills*, CB-5, Political Report-54, p. 2.

of the Superintendent.”⁷ In the Lushai Hills, subjects such as communication were included in the Public Works Department for which, departmental profit came to be highly competitive and labour came to be impressed or forced for maximum profit out of minimum expenditure.

Tribal populations in hill areas were little bothered about changes that took place, remote and secluded as they were. Economic growth or standardisation had no meaning to them. Theirs was a society very much contented and independent in a world of their own. The colonisers perceived a ‘careless’ nature of the hillmen. The white masters recorded that “the Lushai has little use for money, and will not work to get it unless forced to do so. He grows all he wants in his jhum-rice, vegetable, spices, tobacco and cotton to make his clothes. All he has to buy is his salt and that he usually does by exchanging rice in the bazars.”⁸ There was also a system of bondage which involved colonial judicial structures that gradually led to permanent bondage of adults. This process “began with the levying of high rates of interest on small loans of money-lender’s manipulation of colonial judicial structures and eventual enslavement of the debtor to the mahajan.”⁹ In this system, if the revenue collector was himself the money-lender, then, the defaulting hill man became “the chattel of some petty sub-farmer of revenue, and was bound to pay him head-money and do him service, on pain of being sold up or otherwise punished by order of the courts.”¹⁰

Demand of free labour from inhabitants became a common occurrence in the hills so much so that the population sometimes declined or chose not to comply with these demands. At such times, they were made to understand that their raids and forages had forced the British to enter their hills, and that the least they could do to amend was their readiness to meet demands of any sort. The administrators resorted to emotionally blackmailing the people to obtain necessary hands for the benefit of the colonial administrators. Any chief that refuses to surrender met the operations of the British. For instance, during the expedition of 1888, Lyall “impressed large number of coolies in the Chittagong hill tracts, and sent the chief executive engineer of Chittagong to commence

⁷ MSA, *Report on various matters connected with the Chin and Lushai Hills*, CB-5, Political Report-54, p. 4

⁸ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Political Department, Pol-A, April 1914, *Bawi Custom in the Lushai Hills*, p. 8.

⁹ Lewin, *A Fly on the Wheel or How I Helped to Govern India*, p. 225-226.

¹⁰ Lewin, *A Fly on the Wheel or How I Helped to Govern India*, p. 207.

the road towards Saipuia's village, seven miles north-east of Lungleh (Lunglei)."¹¹ After subjugating the chiefs of western Lushai hills, the Political Officer "started demanding the Mizos in the eastern areas to supply coolies and manual labourers to do forced labour which they adamantly refused."¹² In 1890, McCabe was attacked by a party of Lushais when he had gone to Lalbura's village of Sesawng with a hundred soldiers to 'enforce a demand for coolies.' This way, almost every Lushai chief was subjugated with the exception of a few stubborn ones.

Chief Kairuma and his allied chiefs offered the strongest opposition and remained obstinate. He persistently refused to meet the Political Officer at his summon or to comply with the latter's demands of labour. This refusal earned him a fine of 60 guns to be paid by 15th October 1895. However, this did not budge the chief and being aggravated, the Government decided to compel the submission of these chiefs and if necessary, to enforce disarmament, by an expedition, sanctioned to the Officiating Political Officer, North Lushai Hills. In accordance with this, the expedition named 'Kairuma Operation' was fixed to begin from 15th December 1892. Preparations on a considerable scale for rationing the force were necessary beforehand. Sellukot outpost in Cachar was prepared for any casualties for which, "the work of laying in at Sellukot, a full two months' supply of all rations for this number of men was successfully carried out by means of Lushai labour, by the middle of December, little or no difficulty being experienced in turning out the required number of coolies, to carry the 1,700 odd loads which had to be transported from Aizawl to the outpost."¹³ The irony of it all was that the people themselves were used to stock rations needed for an operation against them.

For transport with the expedition itself, arrangements were made for the recruitment of 200 Khasias, the permanent transport corps of 150 men and about 50 coolies made up 350 coolies required to move the column with five days' rice in hand and ten days' of all other supplies. But owing to the competition of the Assam-Bengal Railway and the Assam-Burma Railway Survey, the recruitment failed and only 45 coolies could be obtained from the Khasi Hills. To sanction the deficiency, 50 coolies were given by the Public Works Department and to recruitment of the balance in

¹¹ MSA, Letter from L. J. Kershaw, Esq.I.C.S, Offg. Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, To The Superintendent, Lushai Hills, Shillong, Letter No. 1895 J, 20th April 1905, p. 58.

¹² B. Lalthangliana, *A Brief History and Culture of Mizo*, Published by the author with financial assistance of the Mizoram Publication Board, Gilsom Offset Press, Aizawl, 2014, p. 75.

¹³ MSA, Operations against the Lushai Chief Kairuma and the villages of his group, POL-42, CB-4, 1896, p. 2.

Cachar. F. Anley, Extra Assistant Commissioner (Transport Officer), collected the required number of Nagas and Kukis before the 1st of December at Silchar, and they reached Aizawl, 97 strong on the 12th December. After persistently refusing to meet the Political Officer or supply his demands, Kairuma's '*upa*' or elder Chunghnunga, in 1894-95, submitted to the British and Kairuma was forgiven by the colonial administrators 'on payment of a fine in guns and supplying some coolies.'

Another instance was that of Ropuiliani of Ralvawng, wife of Vandulawho had become a chieftainess after her husband's death. She was one of those chiefs that defended the land against the intrusion of the British with Lalthuama, her youngest son. She was obstinate and resisted them to the end. However, while she was residing in Ralvawng, the British "demanded coolies from her. They also asked chicken and other things but Ropuiliani never paid any of the taxes that the British collected, levied or imposed. She proudly proclaimed that she and her subjects had never paid any tax to anyone and had done no forced labour. However, in August 1893, Capt. Shakespear and 80 men set to subdue and subjugate the villages of Ropuiliani and her son Lalthuama. They sent a message demanding 30 guns, 1 *gayal*, 10 pigs, 10 goats, 20 chickens and 100 maunds of rice; and these were to be taken to the Mat river where Shakespear and his troop had their camp and would be waiting."¹⁴ Those that could resist the British did so for some time but it was a sorry day whenever demands were declined or disobeyed.

Although mother and son stood their ground, they could not ward off the imminent submission. They were defeated, taken captive by the British and their guns confiscated. Every village that was subjugated had to pay tribute in the form of free labour, pay taxes and meet every demand materially. This was continued in forms that came to be static in the hills under discussion. The following is a statement showing the number of guns and labour demanded by the colonial administrators from chief Kairuma and the villages of his group.

¹⁴ B. Lalthangliana, *A Brief History and Culture of Mizo*, Aizawl, 2014, p. 77.

Table: 1. Statement showing the number of guns and labour demanded by the colonial administrators from chief Kairuma and the villages of his group

Name of chief	No. of houses	Guns			Punitive labour (in day's Work) of one man		
		demanded	surrendered	balance	demanded	supplied	Balance
Kairuma	455	80	53	27	6,000	2,350	3,650
Neipuihanghi	260	50	12	38	3,600	1,670	1,930
Jataia	130	50	25	25	500	500
Lalbuta	200	40	40	...	2,700	2,700
Ralthienga	100	15	15	...	1,350	1,080	270
Lungliena	170	30	26	4	2,400	350	2,050
Total	1,315	265	171	94	16,550	8,650	7,900

Likewise, Poiboi and his allied chiefs of the eastern Lushai hills had refused to yield to the coolies demanded by the British. But when they saw that the English meant business, Lalhrima supplied the administrator with 100 coolies at Aizawl for seven days, Lianphunga sent 106 coolies on 4th April, and Liankunga cleared the jungle on the Rengti road. The Changsil-Aizawl road was impractical for bullock transport in the rains, Mr. Knight, Assistant Engineer recommended work on the 7th April with coolies supplied by Kalkhama, Khama and Rochawngpuia. The villages of Saitol and Vanpunga supplied 100 coolies without pay for eight days. These coolies carried the bags and baggage of the expeditionary group and constructed permanent barracks in Lalbura's village. Lalhrima was also given the charge of buildings at the Sonai post. On McCabe's return to Aizawl, Lalbura sent 100 coolies for the erection of buildings at fort Aizawl. The villages of Poiboi and Lalhahi also agreed to supply coolies without payment as their chiefs were held by the military force.

Breach of law was another excuse employed by the colonial rule to demand free labour. When such law-breaking became infrequent, or chiefs were partakers in revolts against the British, they were immediately fined. For instance, Assistant Political Officer C.S. Murray in April 1891, decided to punish chief Dokapa with regard to the conduct of his coolies. He proposed that "chief Dokapa should be fined heavily and I think this fine should take the form of coolie labour. Coolies are badly wanted just now for repairs at Fort Tregear. The chief should be kept in custody until this fine is exacted.

I should say 100 coolies working for one month would not be excessive as his village is a fair sized one.”¹⁵ These were the policies that worked in the extraction of labour from the hill men. Punishments in the form of fines were an excuse to gain free services and a front to conceal the real need and necessity of the alien administration. Those that could resist the British did so for some time without success. Every village that was subjugated was demanded tribute in the form of rice, foodstuff, livestock, taxes, free labour and so on. This was continued in forms that came to be static in the hills under discussion.

Forced or Compulsory Labour

Impressment of Transport and Supplies for public and private purposes was authorised by Section VIII of the Bengal Regulation XI of 1806. The Government of India consider that such impressment falls within the definition of “forced or compulsory labour” in Article 2 of the Draft Convention and is not covered by any of the exceptions contained in that article. In accordance with the recommendations contained in the terms of the Resolutions passed by the two Houses of the Indian Legislature, the Government of India repealed Section VIII of the Bengal Regulation. As far as impressment of labour for private persons goes, the section is a dead letter but certain touring officers of Government have found its provisions useful and necessary for which it was retained and in force in Assam.”¹⁶ Therefore, colonial administrators fully exploited impressment of labour from its occupation of the Lushai Hills. Shakespear, who was given charge of the south, adopted measures to be followed locally. A set of compulsory rules were enforced in the southern Lushai Hills.

In 1896, H. J. S. Cotton, Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, proposed that the same system that had been introduced in the south should also be introduced in the North *Lushai* Hills as the inhabitants of both districts come from the same stock and migrate freely from one tract to the other. So, Charles Elliott promulgated the following principles that:

¹⁵ GOM, Letter of C.S. Murray, Assistant Political Officer, Lushai Hills To The Commissioner of the Chittagong Division, G-33, CB-8, No. S82, p. 3.

¹⁶ GOM, Letter from the Joint Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, General and Judicial Department, Pol-99, Letter No. F.187/2/30-Public, the 2nd February 1932, p. 2.

1. Every Lushai village should pay tribute in the shape of so much rice per house to be brought into store at Lungleh (Lunglei) or Tregear; the quantity of rice to be commutable, at the rate which imported rice at Lunglei or Tregear costs, when the Superintendent is satisfied that the people have not got the rice to give. In the North Lushai Hills, the rule appears to be to raise a tax of one rupee per house, and no tribute in rice is levied, except in the neighbourhood of Aizawl, where it is accepted in lieu of revenue at the rate of 12 seers per rupee. The rule in the South Lushai Hills has hitherto been to levy either one rupee or 20 seers of rice per house, with a preference in favour of the rice demand whenever it can be enforced.¹⁷ Cash tribute was then increased to Rs.2 a house, leaving the rate of tribute in rice unaltered, and the rate of commutation practically raised from Rs. 2 to Rs. 4 a maund. The Lieutenant- Governor considers it of importance that as much of the tribute as possible should be paid in rice, as this ‘reduces the cost of rationing the posts.’

2. In addition to the tribute of rice or money, every village should be liable to contribute labour at so many days per house, and each person should be paid so much per day for his labour. This liability should be exacted only when needed for road-making and for buildings at Lunglei and Tregear, and in all cases, the day’s journey to the scene of work should be counted as labour days. In default of such labour, payment should be enforced at the rate which it costs to import coolies from Bengal, that is, at the rate of at least a rupee a day.¹⁸ In both the North and South Lushai Hills, the standard rate of this tributary labour is 10 days per house. In both the tracts too, four annas a day was the rate of pay awarded.

Porteus, the Superintendent of North Lushai Hills recommended that this rate be raised to eight annas, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Mr. Ward, objected to increasing this rate and over-ruled his recommendation. Although Sir Charles Elliott would have had no objection in raising this, he was prepared to accept Mr. Ward’s decision. This rate in the Chin Hills was formerly one rupee per diem, it was gradually lowered to eight annas, which, according to Sir. Alexander Mackenzie, was a reasonable rate. The question of ‘Impressed Labour’ required from the *Lushais* independently of tributary

¹⁷ GOM, Letter from H. J. S. Cotton, Esq., C. S. I., Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal to the Commissioner of Chittagong Division, the 18th January 1896, Calcutta, Military Department File No.10, CB-1, No. 226P, p. 2

¹⁸ GOM, Letter No. 226 P, p. 1.

labour was also discussed. “This question refers to local labour supplied to officers or escorts, or expeditionary bodies on tour or on the march, or on any emergency where labour may be required. Mr. Cotton writes that eight annas would be a fair wage calculated with regard to the price of food and to the cost of such things as make up the necessities of a *Lushai*’s life.”¹⁹ But that followed in the plains of 4 annas was adopted till a more opportune time.

During the time of A. W. Davis, (1892-1893) a new rule was made that compelled the hill people to “pay taxes to the government every year, whatever the government wants, be it chicken, rice, goats should be supplied by the chiefs. Every adult male will be liable to give coolie labour, no chief should raid another, and no chief should forcibly take things belonging to his villagers.”²⁰ Government rules such as these were instruments employed by the British to reap cheap labour from the ruled.

In 1897, it was proposed that the South Lushai Hills be transferred to Assam from 1st October 1898. Notwithstanding the rules already introduced, changes were made regarding both north and south. It was decided that the systematic rice tribute in the North Lushai Hills was considered neither necessary nor desirable, while in the South Lushai Hills the tribute must continue to be realised in paddy or rice. The government realised that the same rules could not be adopted for both tracts in respect of tribute as far as possible. For the sake of uniformity as regards the money payments, the cash rate for commutation of the rice tribute in the South Lushai Hills was to be made in accordance with the rate of house-tax in the North Lushai Hills. “House-tax in the north was raised to Rs. 2, while a new set of rules for the south were enforced as:

- (i) that the tribute should as a rule, be paid in rice at the rate of 20 seers of cleaned rice or one maund of unhusked grain per house, the Superintendent to decide which description of grain-husked or unhusked-is to be taken;
- (ii) that when rice is not taken, the rate of commutation should be Rs. 2 per house;
- (iii) that the rate of wage should be 8 annas a day, and that the days occupied in coming and going should be paid for at half rates.”²¹

¹⁹ GOM, Letter No. 226 P, p. 2.

²⁰ V. L. Siama, *Mizo History*, Lengchhawn Press, Aizawl, reprint 2009, p. 66.

²¹ GOM, Letter from C. W. Bolton, Esq., Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal To The Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Pol-183, CB-19, No. 379P, Calcutta, 5th February 1897.

As regards Impressed Labour, a Conference was held at *Lunglei* in December 1896. This Conference found that it was unnecessary to enforce such labour as a 'tributary obligation in the case of every village annually, that it should be taken only in case of pressing necessity, and, as far as possible, it should be paid for at reasonable rates. In the light of the recommendations made, the Chief Commissioner of Assam proposed to adopt the following rules in the South Lushai Hills:

- (i) "that each house is liable to supply one coolie to work for 10 days only, irrespective of the days occupied in coming and going
- (ii) that this liability should be enforced only when, in the opinion of the Political Officer, its enforcement is absolutely necessary
- (iii) that the rate of wage should be 8 annas a day, and that the days occupied in coming and going should be paid for at half rates."²²

Besides the enforced tribute in rice and labour, compulsory labour was another form of colonial serfdom which extracted free labour on pain of the hill population. Lowering status of the hill tribes was added by the forceful compulsion of labour that was to be supplied by the chiefs and by every household. The question of forced labour was one that raised an important aspect of discussion among administrators of both Chin and Lushai Hills. In this regard, the Secretary to the Government of India's opinion was that "difficulties in this respect will, to a large extent, disappear if really substantial reductions can be carried out in the number of our posts and the strength of our police and establishments and if the communications can be improved as suggested."²³ Therefore, unless there were improvements in those respects mentioned, forced labour was a necessity for the working of the colonial government. Superintendents were empowered to make law to be followed in the hills. Since they were their sole masters rules suited to conditions and situations were set up, changed, modified and discarded at will. Thus Shakespear, pioneer superintendent first drew up the following rules to be followed in every Lushai village. It states: every village should remain liable for the following:

1. The carriage of luggage of officers and escorts

²² GOM, Letter from C.W. Bolton, Esq., Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal To The Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Pol-183, CB-19, No. 379P, Calcutta, 5th February 1897, p. 3.

²³ GOM, Letter from the Secretary to the Government of India, To the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Pol-42, CB-4, 1896, No. 1564-E-B, p. 58.

2. The maintenance of Government roads within their boundaries at Rs.15 to 30/-a mile according to circumstances
3. The construction and maintenance of paths to admit of officers touring freely without great hardships.

In the beginning, the British found no difficulty in getting volunteers to live on road hamlets and do road work, but later, forceful means were employed. Regarding rule No. 3 above, Shakespear stressed that it was manifestly necessary to have the power of enforcing it or a chief, as, the simple expedient of not making a path may prevent any not very active Superintendent from reaching his village. Inter village paths were, of course, mainly used by the people themselves and any improvement on them was popular. Regarding this, he wrote: “for such labour, it is doubtful whether we should pay anything, except in cases where the village itself does not benefit much by the path.”²⁴ Shakespear wanted that the present system of compulsory labour, should be maintained only as a ‘temporary method’ of obtaining labour, but the Commissioner of the Chittagong Division decided to set up the system on a satisfactory footing for the future, that is to say, he recommended formulating a set of rules which would be applicable for the next 10 years, which would be ‘fair to the Lushais and profitable to Government.’

At this juncture, Shakespear came up with the characteristic trait of the hill people which, he took as a very ‘strong reason’ for employing ‘forced labour.’ He stated that the Lushai was ‘lazy and thinks the next day as good as today and the day after better than both.’ Consequently, it was, to them, difficult to get him to realise that they attach any importance to punctuality and it was also difficult to get them to work well, when they have got them. As regards making the Lushai more willing to come in, an increase of wages would, of course, have some effect in proportion to the rate of the increase and to the facilities which exist for spending the money earned. Every increase of wage, to a certain extent, facilitates the obtaining of labour, though in most cases the coolies would have to be ‘ordered in.’ Increase in wages suggested was strongly ruled out by Shakespear, his reasons being that “as regards the difficulty of getting the men to work after they have arrived, an increase of wages would not help them much, the Lushai will

²⁴ Letter from Major J. Shakespear C. I. E., D. S. O., I. A., Superintendent Lushai Hills, to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Shillong, No. 931 G, dated 24th November 1904,

always scheme out of his work if he can, and his laziness can only be got over by good supervision.”If the Lushai is lazy, he is also easy going of a very cheerful disposition and soon adapts himself to circumstances. He did not think that the system would be a ‘perpetual sore’ but that if regulated as he suggested, it may be safely and advantageously maintained for some years thence.”²⁵

On the other hand, the Luseis looked on the supplying of coolies as the sign of complete submission not so much because of their actual aversion to the labour but because to be obliged to send a certain number of his men to work at Aizawl or Lungleh was considered as a conclusive sign of the submission of a chief and the mere fact of having to obey orders galled the independent Lushais or any other hill man. It was natural for the hill men to be averse towards the demands made as every chief that had been subjugated was forced to supply coolies, food materials, and shelter. However, forced labour was employed in every work at hand and continued in spite of regulatory conventions from the 1930s.

By 1936, several complaints regarding the use of Forced or Compulsory labour in the Lushai Hills reached the ears of higher authorities and probes and enquiries took place. Abolition was in the air. So, the Sub- Divisional Officer of Lunglei issued an order that “forced or compulsory labour for the transport of persons or goods such as the labour of porters and boatmen shall be abolished within the shortest possible period and with due regard to the conditions prevailing in each district.”²⁶ In the meantime, a new set of rules were formulated as:

- a) “such labour shall only be employed for the purpose of facilitating the movement of officials of the administration when on duty, and also in urgent cases when no other form of transport was available, when proceeding on, or returning from leave, and for the transport of Government stores.
- b) the workers so employed shall be medically certified to be physically fit, where medical examination is possible, and where such medical examination is not practicable the person employing such workers shall be held responsible for

²⁵ Letter from Major J. Shakespear C. I. E., D. S. O., I. A., Superintendent Lushai Hills, to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Shillong, No. 931 G, dated 24th November 1904; McCall, *The Lushai Chrysalis*, p. 260-262.

²⁶ GOM, *Freedom from Labour*, CB-41, Gen-524, No. 1965 D/C, 1936-37.

- ensuring that they are physically fit and not suffering from infectious or contagious diseases.
- c) the maximum load which these workers shall carry is 25 seers.
 - d) unless in case of extreme urgency or necessity the maximum distance from their homes to which these workers may be taken is 15 miles.
 - e) within the period of one year-from 1st January to 31st December each worker may be impressed up to a maximum of 10 days, including the number of days spent on returning to his home.
 - f) the persons entitled to demand forced or impressed labour and the extent to which they are entitled to demand it are: (i) government officials on duty for their actual requirements, (ii) government officials for the carriage of government stores, (iii) government officials when proceeding on, or returning from leave (when no other form of transport is available) in accordance with actual requirements.
 - g) the normal daily journey of such workers shall not exceed 15 miles, to be undertaken between sunrise and sunset
 - h) journeys up to 15 miles will be at the rate of -/8/- daily. Journeys over 15 miles daily to be paid for at the rate of -/2/- per extra mile upto 20 miles and -/4/- per extra mile beyond 20 miles.”²⁷ But these measures hardly found expressions and like all rules, they continued to exist in black and white. Force and compulsion continued undeterred throughout the colonial rule in the hill district.

Impressed Labour

The Lushai Government impressed labour was known as “*Kuli*” work. The “*Kuli*” work was of two kinds called “*Kulipui*” and “*Kulite*” respectively. “*Kulipui*” consists of any kind of impressed labour for which wages were paid-such as building, carrying loads for Government officers, *sepoys*, etc. “*Kulite*” consists carrying *chapasies* loads not more than one day’s journey, for which, wages were not paid. When men were being enlisted for labour in France, the greatest inducement to joining up was the promise of Government that all who went would receive exemption from impressed labour for the remainder of their lives. A printed circular was issued in the Lushai

²⁷ GOM, *Freedom from Labour*, CB-41, Gen-524, No. 1965 D/C, 1936-37, pp. 7-8.

language in which the following words were used for those who would enlist: (the words printed appeared in the circular as such-

during their absence their families will be exempted from impressed labour, and they themselves when they return will be exempted from impressed labour forever. How fortunate they will be!! For this *EXEMPTION FROM IMPRESSED LABOUR* is one of the things which the Lushais desire more than anything else!!!.”²⁸

Relying upon this explicit promise, the men went to France, but when they returned they were surprised to find that although they received exemption from “*Kulipui*” work, they were not exempted from “*Kulite*”.

The words “*KULI AWL*” (translated above by the words in capitals) have always been understood to mean exemption from impressed labour of every kind. The men who helped to do the enlisting understood them in that sense, and so did those who joined up. Had the Government announced that “*Kulite*” was not included, the promise of exemption from “*Kulipui*” only would have been little or no inducement, and large numbers would have refrained from enlisting, for, the work they were to be entrusted with were those of the lowest, those having gone being quite unskilled. Those that were finally enlisted were called 27th Lushai Labour Corps which, in May 1917, accompanied by Major A. Playfair, left Lushai hills for France. Altogether 2100 men from Lushai Hills joined the Corps of which 71 of them died in France. Their main work was, a part from porting goods, to burn coals and dig trenches in the battle front. Whereas the few of the educated ones served as writers and translators, some chiefs who had been among the corps were made ‘leaders’ to oversee and supervise the work of the younger ones.²⁹

Before having gone off to France, the exemption of any individual from impressed labour always covered all the members of his family living under the same roof, and the men who enlisted fully expected that the exemption granted to them would be on exactly the same terms. This however, was not the case. They had been given personal exemption only, and able bodied members of their families were liable to be impressed.”³⁰ The ex-non-commissioned officers of the 26th Indian Labour Corps under

²⁸ GOM, Freedom from Labour, Application to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Copy of Political Order No. 15 of 3-7-1920, CB-41, Gen-524, 1936-37, p. 1.

²⁹ V. L. Siama, *Mizo History*, Lengchhawn Press, Aizawl, 2009, p. 72.

³⁰ GOM, Freedom from Labour, Application to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Copy of Political Order No. 15 of 3-7-1920, CB-41, Gen-524, 1936-37, p. 2.

the leadership of *Thanzama Sailo*, (Ex-Headman), *Zathanga* (Ex-Assistant Headman), *Khawngghinga* (Ex-Head Interpreter) on 1st July 1920, wrote an application that, the Government's promise of exemption from impressed labour to those who went to France, should include "*Kulite*" work as well as "*Kulipui*" and that it may take in all the bona fide members of the household living beneath the same roof.



Photo 1, First World War Memorial, Aizawl

The Chief Commissioner of Assam, B. Bell, discussed the matter with the Superintendent and the Sub-Divisional Officer and replied the application as such:- (i) no distinction should be made between "*Kulipui*" and "*Kulite*." The promise exemption (*Kuli Awl*) should be held to cover both. (ii) the above mentioned exemption, after return from France, is a purely personal exemption. The calls upon other members of the family should, however, be made in a reasonable and even generous manner. If the other members of the family are over 40 they should seldom be requisitioned, and if they are over 45 they should never be requisitioned. If the effect of these orders is that a

permanent labour gang, in addition to the present *Santhal* Corps has to be entertained on monthly terms I am quite prepared to sanction any reasonable proposal.”³¹

The order was further forwarded to the Superintendent for information and record which was implicitly followed. Exemption of impressed labour was quietened down and the promise made remained “a rule to be broken.” Regarding the exemption of taxes, it was translated that “the house, no matter who lives therein, was to be exempted from house-tax and impressed labour of a labourer of the Labour Corps who went to France in the Great War during that labourer’s life time only. After his death automatically the house pays house-tax and gives impressed labour.”³²

In 1936, the Sub divisional Officer of Lunglei wrote to the Superintendent of Lushai Hills with regard to impressed labour where he mentioned that, as in the Aizawl subdivision, “impressment is only resorted to when all other methods of procuring necessary transport to facilitate ordinary daily administration have failed, and in no case does impressment exceed actual requirements.”³³ He further opined that while the prevailing conditions exist, it was likely that that will be the case for some time to come as impressment cannot be ‘completely abolished’ in the sub-division unless Government was prepared to increase the expenditure on the transport establishment by at least 300 per cent above what it was at then. In view of the fact that impressment had been cut down to the very minimum (the sub divisional figures for the past four years showing only 7.7 per cent in spite of the exhaustive activities of the Survey Department) the incurring of extra expenditure by Government did not appear desirable or called for.

During the last days of Major McCall in the Lushai Hills in 1939, World War-II broke out again and every village was ordered to send men to fight for Great Britain of whose total was 3550 men and women. “Some were engaged as soldiers to fight the enemy, tending the injured, carrying corpses, labour corps, and women soldiers.”³⁴ Back home in 1941, the district was prepared for safety in case of Japanese attacks. Troupes were made into A and B groups, where group A was to safeguard the district, and group B was to go and fight the Japanese. Group A was to get Rs.5 monthly, and

³¹ GOM, Freedom from Labour, Application to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Copy of Political Order No. 15 of 3-7-1920, CB-41, Gen-524, 1936-37, p. 3.

³² GOM, Letter from W. Shaw, Esqr., A. C.S, Deputy Commissioner, Garo Hills To The Superintendent, Lushai Hills, CB-41, G-524, 1936-37, Memo No. 396 G, 25th March 1936, p. 12.

³³ GOM, Freedom from Labour, Letter No. 1965 D/C, CB-41, GEN-524, 1936-37, p.6.

³⁴ V.L. Siamia, *Mizo History*, Lengchhawn Press, Aizawl, Reprint, 2009, p.77.

Group B was to be paid Rs.10. Every house was also given Re.1 for its services to the British Crown. The *Lushai* Scout Corps known as ‘*Biate Sipai*’ was formed at the same time. This Scout Corps was stationed in the village of *Biate*.



Photo 2, Second World War Memorial, Aizawl

During this World War-II, “the *Lushai* Hills Military police battalion supplied 103 officers and men for the army, sent 101 officers and men to Manipur. Throughout the war, the battalion supplied men to the *Gurkha* Brigade.”³⁵ As it was, the Japanese spies penetrated into the hills and entered the villages of *Khuangphah*, *Vaikhawthlang*, *Teikhang*, and *Mimbung*, taking chicken, eggs and rice from the villagers. These spies hoisted a white flag to show that the British district belonged to Japan, but no sooner

³⁵ J.V. Hluna and Rini Tochhawng, *The Mizo Uprising : Assam Assembly Debates on the Mizo Movement 1966-1971*, p. 1.

they were gone, the flag was taken down. During this war, Japan dropped a bomb in North *Vanlaiphai*, destroying the hospital and many other houses. However, only a compounder was injured in this bombing, but Lushais were included among the many prisoners of war taken from Singapore.

Impressment of labour was also a common phenomenon in the districts of plain areas which were under the British administration. Here, the rate of impressed labour was paid at 4 annas per diem. But the system of giving presents to individuals or chiefs for special services was practised in which broad cloth, trinkets, necklaces etc., were purchased and taken along whenever chiefs and headmen of the plains were visited. When it came to the Lushai Hills, there were problems with regard to fixing this rate of impressment of labour.

In 1896, Porteus, the Political Officer of North Lushai Hills was consulted on the matter in which he proposed that the labour they exact was “to be impressed labour on exactly the same footing as impressed labour in any plains district.”³⁶ He further opined that he would have it paid at the market rate for free labour viz. 8 annas but put it off till the house-tax was raised in 1897-98 as those in force in other districts of the province. He therefore, suggested that the present rate followed in the plains of 4 annas was also to be maintained in the Lushai Hills district. Rate of impressment of labour or the cost of coolies impressed on the occasion of Political Officers’ tours came to be on the same footing with the usual cases of labour impressed for the Public Works Department.

All public works like road cutting, alignment, repair, construction of Government buildings and Quarters were works completed through the exploitation of impressed labour. Thus, every week saw a large number of the hill people impressed for government public work. Records of weekly impressed cases were maintained. For instance:

“The following are impressed Lusei coolies for the week ending 21st December 1907

1. *Rotoii* of Pukzing-5 coolies for 10 days to work at *Tuichawng* under P. W. D

³⁶ GOM, Summary of events in the Lushai Hills District for the week ending the 2nd June 1896, Gen-49, CB-5, June-December, 1896.

2. *Lalhleia* of *Thingsaher*-6 coolies for 10 days to work at *Tuichawng* under P.W.D
3. *Chheuphunga* of *Sedai*-4 coolies for 10 days -ditto-
4. *Sainghina* of *Bungtlang*-15 coolies for 10 days to work at *Lunglei* station under P. W. D
5. *Selhmanga* of *Khawzing*-7 coolies for 10 days -ditto-
6. *Taichhunga* of *Kawnpui*-8 coolies for 10 days -ditto-
7. *Rohmingthanga* of *Sirte*-4 coolies for 4 days for carrying baggage of C.P from *Thenzawl* to *Lunglei*
8. *Manciava* of *Lukok*-4 coolies for 4 days carriage of supervisor's luggage from *Lungleh* to *Demagiri*
9. *Dara* of *Pukpui*-5 coolies for 4 days carriage of tools from *Lunglei* to *Demagiri* under P.W.D
10. *Dara* of *Zotlang*-1 coolie for 7 days for sending a special message to H.A *Sherkor* and to come back with an answer
11. *Dara* of *Zotlang*-3 coolies for 4 days carriage of M.P *Sepoys* from *Lunglei* to *Thenzawl*
12. *Saikunga* of *Sentlang*-12 coolies for 10 days to work at *Lunglei-Demagiri* Road under P.W.D
13. *Hrangphunga* of *Mauzam*-10 coolies for 10 days to work at *Lunglei* station under P.W.D
14. *Sanga* of *Thingdawl*-5 coolies for 10 days -ditto-
15. *Thailala* of *Sirte*-10 coolies for 10 days -ditto-
16. *Zova* of *Hmundo*-3 coolies for 10 days -ditto-³⁷

The next week saw the same entry in the records, of course, with different names, different villages, and different number of days and for different works. The list is unending.

By 1903, the Chief Commissioner of Assam made enquiries into the working and effects of the procedure under which labour was impressed for the use of Government officials in the *Cachar* district, and had come to the conclusion that the demand for coolies, although small in it, was made an instrument for oppressing large numbers of people. It would seem also that coolies could be hired, without impressment

³⁷ GOM, Warrant under His Majesty's Royal Sign Manual to the following effect, CB-27, Gen-335, 1907, pp. 18-19.

more generally than had hitherto been supposed. Under the system by which ‘*begar*’ labour has hitherto been obtained through the *Mirasdars*, the demand for labour was really one for money, as the persons whom it affects supply coolies, and do not work themselves. The demand made on them was in effect a tax which was open to most serious objections as it is irregular in its incidence, is liable to gross abuses on the part of native subordinates, and takes from the people more than what was really necessary for the state.

The Chief Commissioner considered therefore, that the time had come to do away with impressment, except for urgent reasons and accordingly directs that the impressment of labour shall henceforth be discontinued in the district of Cachar, except in really urgent cases, and with the special sanction of the Deputy Commissioner who must report to the Chief Commissioner, each case in which he gives such sanction. The Commissioner at the same time, reserves the power to sanction impressment when it is necessary in the interests of the state, as for instance, to supply transport for military operations.”³⁸ Although impressment of labour was ordered to be abolished, the Chief Commissioner of Assam still allowed the arrangement with a contractor for the supply, when required, of carts and coolies for long journeys, such as to Manipur and the *Lushai Hills*.

In the Lushai Hills however, Shakespear once again defended impressed labour on the same grounds of Lushai character. He noted that:

laziness is a male vice, and on account of its prevalence, I am in doubt as to the wisdom of abolishing the impressment of labour. Here in Manipur, I find that the women do all the work except ploughing, and that many women entirely support their lazy husbands. Here, surely is an object-lesson for us. In spite of these defects the Lushais are by no means a disagreeable people to have to deal with, and they have great capabilities which will repay cultivation.”³⁹

Thus, on the grounds of Shakespeare’s disagreement, abolition of impressment in Lushai Hills was kept aside. In fact, the system continued to be fully exploited. The

³⁸ GOM, Abolition of Impressment of Labour in the District of Cachar, Letter No. 1789 Misc/5417 J, from the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam from the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar, CB-8, G-101, 9th December 1903, Shillong, p. 10.

³⁹ GOM, Note on the Lushai Hills, its inhabitants, and its administration since 1888, 22nd March 1905, CB-7, Gen-79, 1900, p. 12.

administrator's first action was to fine Chief *Dokapa* heavily in the form of coolie labour as coolies were badly wanted just then for repairs at Fort *Tregear*.

In 1904, however, the Superintendent wrote to the Officiating Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam wherein he raised questions to abolishing impressed labour and increasing the staff of Government coolies. He stated that the Commissioner had been of "opinion that the exaction of impressed labour, if kept within moderate limits, is not open to much objection." The Lieutenant-Governor too, had agreed with the Commissioner on this line of thought, but all the same, the former "fears that in the *Lushai* Hills the demand has been somewhat excessive and the source of greatest harassment has been the ambitious Public Works Programmes which has been adopted by the *Lushai* Hills District and which is illustrated by the employment of a Public Works staff immensely larger than that which suffices for three times the population in the Naga Hills district."⁴⁰ No doubt, much was required at the outset for opening out communications but the gravity had to be understood.

Having heard their arguments, the superintendent seemed somewhat mollified. However, the unfinished *Sairang* Cart-road was kept in mind even if impressment had to be done away with. But when the subject persisted and drawn much attention, Major Cole came to the rescue. He "arranged for the building of rest-houses on the *Champhai-Falam* road by contract with the chiefs as Lushais do not object to work of the kind so long as they can take their time over it."⁴¹ In 1906, the Officiating Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam wrote to the Commissioner of *Surma* Valley and Hills Districts regarding Shakespeare's defence of impressment. But Cole's clever interference saved the situation and impressment was substituted with 'contract labour.' From 1907, supervision of all bridle paths and rest-houses, erection of elaborate rest-camps along the roads were kept in rain check for the future supervision of Luseis, if and when they were in a position to do so.

Prior to this, inducing the hill population to come forward for voluntary labour was one step in the acquisition of labour from the hill men. When enhancement of taxes was not possible in all parts of the district in the face of poor harvests, chiefs were

⁴⁰ GOM, Letter from the Officiating Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam to the Commissioner, Surma Valley and Hills Districts, No. 9054 J dated Shillong, the 2nd August 1906.

⁴¹ GOM, Letter from the Hon'ble J. C. Arbuthnott, C.I.E., I.C.S., Commissioner, Surma Valley and Hills District to the Judicial Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam. No. 908T, dated Camp, Shillong, 14th June 1906.

induced to plant rubber with a promise that ‘house-tax would not be enhanced on those villages which made bona fide attempts to grow rubber.’ Lac cultivation was also introduced due to its quality of giving quick results. These were introduced to make up the loss caused by ‘the wind’ of abolition of impressment.

Besides the above mentioned tasks, various buildings in the South Lushai Hills district were almost all constructed with impressment of labour. “Superintendent’s bungalow, Assistant Commandant’s bungalow, Office buildings, Record buildings, Rations buildings for the purpose of storing food-grains, Assistant Surgeon’s building, Hospitals, Government Servants’ Quarters, soldiers’ barracks, Interpreters’ houses, coolie sheds both for *Sonthal* and Local coolies, school houses, workshops of engineers, meteorological sheds, doctors’ quarters, circuit house buildings, transport offices, officers’ staging bungalows, hospitals, female hospitals, cholera hospital, transport godown, cook-sheds of *sepoys*, *subahdars*’ quarters, guard houses, stables, school-master’s quarters, *Sonthal* cooly sheds, fowl sheds, engineer’s workshop, meteorological shed, tailor’s shed, local coolies’ cook shed, cobbler’s shed, school master’s cook-shed, blacksmith’s workshop, cook shed of ambassadors’ quarters, bazaar *jamadar*’s quarters, transport office, transport agent’s quarter, engineering office and store keeper’s quarter, supervisor’s quarter, officers’ staging bungalow, ministerial officer’s bungalow, doctors’ quarters, ministerial staff quarters, contractor’s quarters, engineering staff halting shed were constructed under Public Work Department’s impressment of Lushai labour.”⁴² Besides, “*Zawlbuks* for Lushais were built through impressed labour.”⁴³

All the above buildings were reported to be either “newly constructed or thoroughly repaired” by hands that seldom receive wages for their labour. They were compelled, coerced or impressed, the majority done through tributary labour to the Government. The buildings were constructed with corrugated iron roof and walls and planked floor, sawn posts and planking, bricks with bamboo shingle roofed terraced floor bricked &c., either by impressing the Lushais or by compelling them. From material collection, carriage and construction, the hill tribes laboured throughout the British regime. The common people found it difficult to protest due to Shakespeare’s continued emotional blackmail and the cooperative efforts of administrators and chiefs.

⁴² GOM, Appendix A, CB-27, Gen-335, 1907, pp. 20-23.

⁴³ GOM, CB-27, Gen-335, 1907, p. 23.

Although “*Kulipui*” work was paid, there were many instances when wages for labour escaped payment. For instance: “Chiefs Sairuma, Lalhleia, Lalkhama and Lalchunga’s villagers in 1904, were engaged in cutting political road but were reported to have received no payment for their labour. They could not even say how many miles of road they had cut and the amount due to them.”⁴⁴ Many instances of the same nature decorate the diaries, reports, accounts and letters of Political Officers, Superintendents, clerks, circle interpreters of the Chin and Lushai Hills.

Forced Labour in the construction of Roads and Bridges

From the establishment of the colonial rule in the Lushai Hills, communication constituted the biggest challenge and task to the new administrators. Roads were the first that captured attention as there were hardly anything that were worth the name with the exception of cart tracts and footpaths barely visible especially during the monsoon when these paths were overgrown by shrubs and grass. Walking through these bridle paths was a challenge that few ambitious officers undertook out of necessity and compulsion. In this regard, the first importance was given to roads both political and village paths. Besides, a number of small rivers which, during monsoon, became unaffordable lie in the path on which bridges were needed construction. The existing roads were mainly cart-roads/tracts barely enough to admit carts with no proper alignments. It was not surprising therefore, that the first concern and tasks of the administration was communication where force and impressment was most extensively employed.

The first constructed road was “the Aizawl-Changsil covering a distance of 16 miles, constructed by the Public Works Department. This road was important as Changsil could be reached by boat from Silchar through the Dhaleswari. Silchar to Aizawl via Duarband was the second road built because of its strategic position. By 1893, the construction of 75 miles of road to a width of 8 ft. was complete.”⁴⁵ The third road Aizawl to Lunglei was constructed the same year which extended 110 miles. The construction of Sairang-Silchar road began in 1894, measuring 2 to 3 ft. wide with stone walling in nalas. At the same time, the Aizawl-Serchhip road, a project began earlier,

⁴⁴ GOM, Fly Leaf, CB-9, Gen-114, 1904, p. 27.

⁴⁵ ASA, *Annual Report of the North Lushai Hills for the year 1892-93*, Government of Assam, Shillong, p. 2.

was continued. Grants were also given to the Public Works Department for making a suspension bridge on the Sonai crossing.⁴⁶

In 1893, the Under Secretary to the Government of Bengal asked a report of roads both existing and intended, to be submitted and consequently, Lieutenant F. R. F Boileau Royal Engineer sent the report which he divided it into three parts. The roads which concern the Lushai Hills district were:

- (1) Aijal (Aizawl) to Lungleh (Lunglei) of 110 miles
- (2) Lunglei to Haka 130 miles
- (3) Lunglei to Chittagong 140 miles.⁴⁷

The same year, “the Panthey mule transport system was introduced on the suggestion of Captain Daly for the transit of provisions to the forward posts. Owing to some unexpected difficulties, the arrangements were not altogether successful in 1893-94, but the work was brought to a satisfactory termination by the cooperation of the military police as well as of Lushai villagers. The arrangements for 1894-95 were concluded without a hitch, and reflect credit on the contractor, Mr. Kohn.”⁴⁸

In 1896, the second Chin-Lushai Conference was held at Lunglei in December. This conference recommended the construction of roads from Aizawl to Falam-160 miles, and Falam to Tiddim-60 miles in length. The first road was to be used by officers to and from Aizawl to Lunglei, “to admit of officers touring freely without great hardships.”⁴⁹ The second passes through Fort Tregear and was an important means of communication between Lunglei and other *Lushai* villages to the east, as well as with Haka.

By 1896, the existing roads were-

- | | |
|------------------------|-----------|
| 1. Sairang- Silchar | 120 miles |
| 2. Lunglei- Chittagong | 140 miles |
| 3. Haka- Kalawn | 150 miles |

⁴⁶ ASA, *Administrative Report of North Lushai Hills for the year 1894-95*, Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong, 1895, p. 5.

⁴⁷ ASA, Letter from C. W. Bolton, Esq, Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal To The Secretary to the Government of India, No. 391P, Foreign Department, Calcutta, 8th February 1897, p. 2.

⁴⁸ GOM, *Kairuma Operation*, CB-1, Military Department - 10, 1895.

⁴⁹ ASA, Letter from Major J. Shakespear C. I. E., D. S. O., I. A., Superintendent Lushai Hills, to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Shillong, No. 931 G, dated 24th November 1904.

4. Fort White- Tiddim	24 miles
5. Lunglei- Haka	130 miles
6. Haka- Kan	65 miles

By 1903-1904, there were 4 miles of cart roads and 542miles of bridle paths. A few years later, the mileage of the district's bridle paths increased from 523 to 680 miles."⁵⁰ The Sairang Cart Road to the river *ghat* was a project began during the superintendentship of Major Shakespear in 1905 which was kept unfinished. Its completion was intended to relieve Government of the heavy recurring cost of the maintenance of the expensive *Santhal* Transport Corps at Aizawl. This measured 13.50 miles. There was a remarkable development in the history of road construction during these years. These roads connected places within and outside the district and communication became much better.

By 1920, five unmetalled roads were available."⁵¹

1. Aizawl-Sairang Road	13.50 miles
2. Aizawl Station Road	6.00 miles
3. Sairang Station Road	2.00 miles
4. Lunglei Station Road	2.38 miles
5. Demagiri Station Road	1.00 miles

Road construction continued undisturbed throughout the next decade. A project on the construction of "a 3' bridle path from the 74th mile of the Lunglei-Tuipang road to Lungdawh on the Kolodyne, whose distance was 32 miles with an estimated cost of Rs. 10,354/ was sanctioned by the Public Works Department and the road made."⁵² This bridle path was important as traders could come to Lungdawh by small boats from Arrakan and opened trade with the northern side of Arrakan. It also served as "an important route for rationing Tuipang."⁵³ Roads of short mileage as well as long, riddled the once impregnable jungles of the Lushai Hills and connected it with the nearby areas.

⁵⁰ Animesh Ray, *Mizoram: Dynamic of Change*, Pearl Publishers, Calcutta, 1982, p. 197.

⁵¹ Animesh Ray, *Mizoram: Dynamics of Change*, p. 197.

⁵² GOM, Construction of a 3' Bridle path from the 74th mile of the Lungleh-Tuipang Road on the Kolodyne, Letter from Mr. E. P. Burke, I.S.E., Under Secretary to the Government of Assam in the Public Works Department, to The Commissioner, Surma Valley and Hill Division, Shillong, 4th October, No.12627C, Gen-359, 1926, p. 1.

⁵³ GOM, Letter No. 12627C, Gen-359, 1926, p. 5.

In 1929, probes made regarding forced labour in the Lushai Hills earlier, came to surface once again. To pacify authorities on this matter, the Chief Secretary to the Government of India made the following announcement:

The position as regards forced labour in this province was described in Mr. Botham's letter No. Pol-1765-6225 A.P dated the 19th December 1922. In the plains districts of the province there is little or no forced labour, although Bengal Regulation XI of 1806, which is in force in Assam, *legalises the impressment of transport and supplies for touring officers* on payment, and the time may come when the powers given by the Regulation will be needed. In the *hill districts and frontier areas* impressment is resorted to as an *administrative necessity* and has the sanction of *immemorial custom*. Such labour is utilized *only for transport for officers on tour and occasionally for urgent public works* when no other labour is available. This practice must be retained, but there should be no difficulty in giving effect to the regulation and control to which the Government of India propose to agree. In particular, the provisions suggested in question 25, as regards forced portage, are mostly already enforced by the orders of local officers.⁵⁴[Emphasis added]

Following this announcement, the local officers were fully authorised to exploit labour in the hills which went unchecked whatsoever. In the Lushai Hills, 'only for transport and supplies for touring officers' became applicable in all circumstances, and 'occasionally urgent public works' was practically translated as 'permanently fixed labour for public works.' Impressment was looked upon as an administrative necessity sanctioned by custom. Therefore, administrators in the hill areas resorted to it without any qualms. Public works department sponsored works like road cutting were faithfully carried out by impressing Lushai labour. The result was better communication system in the land.

By 1936, the following roads came to be laid."⁵⁵

1. Sairang-Changsil	6. 35 miles
2. Aizawl- North Vanlaiphai	80.25 miles
3. Aizawl- Falam	102.50 miles
4. Aizawl- Silchar (Duarband)	78. 50 miles

⁵⁴ GOM, Extract from D. O. Immgn-331/7755 G. J, dated the 22nd October 1929, from the Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, to the Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Industries and Labour.

⁵⁵ Animesh Ray, *Mizoram: Dynamics of Change*, p. 197.

5. Aizawl- Lunglei	102. 50 miles
6. Aizawl- Tipaimukh	71. 78 miles
7. Lock's Trace Road	51. 75 miles
8. Lunglei- Demagiri	42. 14 miles
9. Lunglei- Haka	58. 00 miles
10. Lunglei- Sherkor	67. 14 miles
11. Dokham- Kolodyne	31. 25 miles
12. Zongling- Tongkolong	42. 00 miles
13. Tuipung- Chakhang	45. 00 miles

Till 1947, the Aizawl to Silchar and Aizawl to Sairang roads were the only two jeepable roads. During the time of Major H.W.G. Cole, he reported and suggested that the Sairang Cart Road, be metalled as “the road would be impassable for some months during the rains, unless it was metalled for a considerable portion of its total length.”⁵⁶

The road from Silchar to Tipaimukh leads to Senvawn, Parvachawm, Daido and Pachuiaia. Besides these, another road constructed led from Bairabi through Kolasib which continued along the ridges of the Bualpui range of hills almost parallel to the present Aizawl-Silchar road, running via Zanlawn to Serkhan hills, important roads that served better communication in the Lushai hills. During operations east of the Sonai from 10th to 8th June 1892 mainly against *Poiboi* and his group of chiefs, McCabe, Political Officer, North *Lushai* Hills, found that it was impossible to traverse the country side with no proper roads and while on the expedition, assigned as many coolies to make a bridle road from Aizawl to Sonai. Every coolie they had brought along for carrying baggage and supplies were also engaged. But “the Aizawl-Changsil road was completed by Mr. Knight, depending almost entirely on Lushai labour.”⁵⁷ Impressment was extensively resorted to for the completion of communication works considered as long pending “original works” to pave the way for early reduction in Public Works staff and its expenditure. The main reason behind large number of impressments was that although

imported coolie actually costs a little less than 8 annas a day, yet on account of their having to be paid and fed on Sundays, when sick and when returning empty and also

⁵⁶ ASA, Impressed Labour in the Lushai Hills, the maintenance of Santhal Transport Corps and allied matters, GEBA. Judicial Department, Political-A, July 1907.

⁵⁷ C. Chawngkunga, *Important Documents of Mizoram*, Art & Culture Department, R. T. M. Press, Aizawl, 1998, p. 248.

having to be supplied with rations from Aijal to Lungleh when employed at any distance from those places, the actual increase of the cost to Government will be considerably greater than at first.⁵⁸

Therefore, local labour was given priority from all quarters.

In the Annual Report on the Lushai Hills for 1906-07, the total number of Luseis impressed for one day fell from 33,574 in 1905-06 to 23,677 in 1906-07, which was a substantial decrease indicating that the orders of Government on the subject of impressment had received attention. Of the 23,677 impressed coolies, nearly 5,000 were supplied to the military police. In his annual report of 1907, Major Cole submitted a statement of the total number of Luseis impressed during eight years as shown table 2.

The most number of impressed coolies came from the Public Works Department. Even missionary undertakings required impressment of labour. The number entered in the report is staggering. Statement for the number of Luseis impressed during 1900-01 and 1901-02 for the Aizawl subdivision are not given for reasons unknown. Just as Major Cole himself “doubt the accuracy of the figures entered,”⁵⁹ there could have been ‘less entry’ for every department and for every year. In the previous example shown for the number of labours impressed, every week saw more than fifteen impressed cases. At this rate, the number of persons impressed for a single year could have been 165 days minus 52 Sundays into (say) fifteen labourers a day, it would have been 1,695. One can just multiply this number into the total number of working days to get an image of Luseis impressed for eight years.

If roads were an important means of communication in the newly established district of the Lushai Hills, bridges served as consonants in the breach between places and completed the necessary links. Just as the hilly area was crisscrossed by undergrowth bullock cart tracts or sometimes invisible footpaths and village paths, so were the rivers bridged with temporary bridges of two or three or sometimes even a single wooden plank or bamboos tied together. These were often carried away by flood

⁵⁸ ASA, Impressed Labour in the Lushai Hills, Letter from Major J. Shakespear, Superintendent, Lushai Hills To The Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, No. 936 G., dated Camp Lalhrima’s village, the 26th November 1904, Judicial Department, Political-A, July, 1907.

⁵⁹ See the column “Remarks” in the Statement.

Table: 2. Statement showing number of coolies impressed during eight years from 1898-1906.

Works	1898-99		1899-1900		1900-1901		1901-1902		1902-1903		1903-1904		1904-1905		1905-1906		Grand Total		Remarks										
	Ajial	Lungleh	Ajial	Lungleh	Ajial	Lungleh	Ajial	Lungleh	Ajial	Lungleh	Ajial	Lungleh	Ajial	Lungleh	Ajial	Lungleh	Ajial	Lungleh											
1	8010	7745	15014	35121	50135	17180	17180	17180	17180	2723	14526	17211	11464	11751	23215	22853	11807	34660	22	21	23	24	25	26	27				
Public Works Department					*	15156	15156	104*	104*	†	2723	14526	17211	11464	11751	23215	22853	11807	34660	22	21	23	24	25	26	27			
Military Police	21156	6749	12912	2204	15116	785	785	785	785	8864	1504	10368	4469	2280	6749	3755	1520	5275	34660	22	21	23	24	25	26	27			
Superintendent (Miscellaneous Works)	12004	36399	36399	‡	1473	1473	2389	2389	1756	1756	34660	22	21	23	24	25	26	27			
Survey Party	1300	260	2153	748	2901	34660	22	21	23	24	25	26	27			
Subdivisional Officer, Lungleh, Miscellaneous	34660	22	21	23	24	25	26	27		
Telegraph Department for construction of new lines	34660	22	21	23	24	25	26	27		
Medical Department	34660	22	21	23	24	25	26	27		
Missionaries	34660	22	21	23	24	25	26	27		
Total	42470	14754	57224	38073	104551	18071	18071	2130	2130	3175	3175	3175	2980	2980	2980	2980	790	790	34660	22	21	23	24	25	26	27			
																				34660	22	21	23	24	25	26	27		
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																				34660	22	21	23	24	25	26	27		
																				34660	22	21	23	24	25	26	27		
																				34660	22	21	23						

Bridges

during the monsoon and new bridges had to be conjured up almost at the beginning of each new autumn. These were the norms on the more levelled rivers whereas those that flow between higher hills were more permanent. In such cases, hanging or suspension bridges replaced them. Besides, deep ravines and gorges added to the problems of communication. The best possible way of solving the problem was to build bridges of a permanent nature on the rivers or ravines. Engineers inspected the locations and accordingly, construction work began. Communication was a department left to Public Works Department. Just as road-cuttings under the same department had been performed through local labour, bridges also demanded local labour free, impressed or forced.

In 1894-95, a number of projects on transport and communication were undertaken. Of the public works undertaken during the year, the most important was the construction of the Tuichong Bridge, which was opened on the 17th March 1895. It was described as “a work of such magnitude and such far-reaching effects on the pacification of the country, deserved a fuller description in the report.”⁶⁰ This was followed by the construction of the Thega bridge, whose responsibility fell on Captain Piperno. Before the work could begin, the site of construction needed temporary huts for rest and the jungle needed clearing, R.H. Sneyed Hutchinson, the Superintendent of South Lushai Hills therefore, “arranged for the hutting and supply of coolies to the captain. Accordingly, he went down to collect Lushai labour for the jungle clearing and hutting at Thega.”⁶¹ At the same time, he reported that he had been successful in clearing the road from Haka to Upper Kolodyne by Chins, while from there to Tregear had been done by his own people, the Lushais.

The total cost of such an elaborate work was only about Rs.400/- instead of three or four times that amount and he had not had to take off a gang of Sonthals and send them off to Haka for road-clearing. The same source reports that he was having a road cleared by Lushais from their boundary towards the North Lushai Post of Sherchhip to Lungleh. This road was intended for the use of officers coming over

⁶⁰ GOM, *Kairuma Operation*, CB-1, Military Department - 10, 1895.

⁶¹ ASA, Summary of Events in the South Lushai Hills for the week ending 17th November 1896, Memo by F. H. B. Skrine, Esq, Officiating Commissioner of the Chittagong Division, No. 9221, Chittagong, 23rd November, 1896.

from Aizawl for the conference, as also to the engineers who may be deputed to report on the road from Lunglei to Aizawl, with the thought that the road he was cutting could prove the best line.

Many bridges mostly of timber were constructed through Lushai labour. The “Tlawng river was widened and made deeper in some places to facilitate water-way travelling. A bridge was also constructed across the Tuivawl River and the road continues as far as Chhiahpui.”⁶² Chiefs were demanded coolies beyond their obligations to construct either timber or suspension bridges. Of the latter, some were made of iron. Among the most important were those between Demagiri and Lunglei road, ten in number, Thega Khal and Lunglei, two, and, those on the Oldham Cart Road, numbering ten. In 1907, statement regarding the various bridges built or repairing the existing ones was made, which is shown below:

Table: 3. Statement of Timber Bridges on Demagiri-Lunglei Road⁶³

No.	Site of Bridges	No. of spans	Total Length		Clear Roadway		Remarks
			Ft.	In.	Ft.	In.	
1	2	3	4		5		6
		Spans	Ft.	In.	Ft.	In.	
1	Bridge below Telegraph Office of Demagiri	6	67	0	6	6	Constructed this year
2	Dooma Chari nala, 2 nd mile	4	53	0	6	6	Ditto
3	Hills basha stream, 4 th mile	6	83	0	6	6	Ditto
4	7 th mile nala	3	43	0	6	6	Ditto
5	8 th mile nala	3	42	0	6	6	Ditto
6	10 th mile nala	3	45	0	6	6	Ditto
7	Sirilnla, 24 th mile	4	66	0	7	3	Ditto
8	26 th mile nala	4	42	0	7	3	Ditto
9	27 th mile nala	4	42	0	6	6	Ditto
10	Chotophyrong stream	5	122	6	8	0	Ditto
11	29 th mile rocky cliff	4	76	0	6	6	Ditto
12	43 rd mile nala near Lunglei	7	73	0	8	0	Constructed last year

⁶² B. Lalhangliana, *A Brief History and Culture of Mizo*, p. 68.

⁶³ GOM, CB-27, Gen-335, 1907, Appendix B, p. 13.

Table: 4. Statement of Timber Bridges on Oldham Cart Road⁶⁴

No.	Site of Bridges	No. of spans	Total Length		Clear Roadway		Remarks
1	2	3	4		5		6
		Spans	Ft.	In.	Ft.	In.	
1	At 1,300 yards from godown	2	24	0	7	6	Constructed this year
2	„ 1 mile 264 yards from	6	72	0	7	6	Ditto
3	godown	3	31	0	7	6	Ditto
4	„ 1 mile 1,043 „ „ „	3	35	0	7	6	Ditto
5	„ 2 mile 6 „ „ „	7	76	0	7	6	Ditto
6	„ 2 mile 200 „ „ „	1	11	0	7	6	Ditto
7	„ 2 mile 279 „ „ „	3	38	0	7	6	Ditto
8	„ 2 mile 615 „ „ „	4	70	0	7	6	Ditto
9	„ 2 mile 655 „ „ „	1	8	0	7	6	Ditto
10	„ 2 mile 786 „ „ „	1	13	0	7	6	Ditto
	„ 2 mile 943 „ „ „						

Besides the timber bridges constructed, suspension bridges were built the same year as shown below:

Table: 5. Statement of Suspension Bridges between Thega Khal and Lunglei⁶⁵

No.	Site of Bridges	No. of spans	Total Length		Clear Roadway		Remarks
1	2	3	4		5		6
		Spans	Ft.	In.	Ft.	In.	
1	Iron suspension bridge over ThegaKhal	1	200	0	6	6	Built by Captain Piperno at Public Works Department cost
2	Ditto „ „ Tuichong river	1	320	0	5	6	

The above “statements”⁶⁶ shows not only the number of bridges and the locations they were built, but the length and breadth of the bridges constructed in 1906-07.

⁶⁴ GOM, CB-27, Gen-335, 1907, Appendix D, p. 13.

⁶⁵ GOM, CB-27, Gen-335, 1907, Appendix C.

⁶⁶ GOM, CB-27, Gen-335, 1907, Appendix B, C, D, p. 13.

Since labour from imported coolies costs a great deal for their keep as well as wages, the district officers concentrated on procuring available labour at cheap wages, through forceful means or simply impressment. It was constantly rammed into their heads that they had brought this upon themselves through their consistent raids into the plains and valleys. Ignorant as they were, the hill population could do nothing but comply. Alien rule told much on the subjected, whose endurance reached the end of the string. Silent submission and obedience could hold no longer and sometimes, chiefs were derided by their own people. Although the local inhabitants detest impressment, the colonial administrators could continue impressing them through a constant reminder of their past forays and raiding expeditions. For instance, Shakespear confessed that he had always reminded them that:

our occupation of their hills has been forced upon us by their own bad behaviour and that whatever inconveniences they suffer from our presence, they must take as the natural results of their folly and that we should have been perfectly justified in making them, as far as possible, recoup us for the expense they had forced on us by supplying free labour for all Government work.⁶⁷

Being cultivators subsisting entirely on their jhum cultivations, the hill people found themselves torn between duty to the family and forced obligation to the government. There was no way that small families with one male member could be both in the cultivation fields and the government's work sites at the same time. Yet they were prevented from making complaints of any sort. If however, they did make them, the British made no sign of heed. However, when these complaints against excessive demand for coolies were made too frequently, Shakespear pacified the complainants that:

he would not ask Government to tax its peaceable subjects anymore in order to import coolies to work there just because the Lushais, who were responsible for the occupation of the hills, prefer smoking and drinking to earning money.⁶⁸

It was not difficult or impossible to bribe the innocent hill men with words. Shakespeare's method of inducing them to take the punishment for their own evil

⁶⁷ Impressed Labour in Lushai Hills, the maintenance of the Santhal Transport Corps and Allied Matters, Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Judicial Department, Political-A, July 1907.

⁶⁸ Impressed Labour in Lushai Hills, the maintenance of the Santhal Transport Corps and Allied Matters, Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Judicial Department, Political-A, July 1907.

doing in the past was always a success. It was constantly rammed into their heads that they had brought this upon themselves through their consistent raids into the plains and valleys. As such, the hill population could do nothing but comply. All the same, being coolies to an alien rule made them lose endurance. Sometimes, silent submission and obedience could not hold and people's anger was often directed to the chiefs by deriding them for being fickle minded in the way they had let the British handle them.

During the second famine of Mautam in 1911, rice was scarce but the same had been collected and stored by the Government in Bungle. This was transported to Tlabung, Sairang and Tipaimukh for which the Government spent more than Rs. 539,972. Rice at that time costs Rs. 5 and 10 annas per maund (kg.37). This greatly helped people to get through the famine. People living in far off places flocked to Bungle to carry this rice supplied by the Government never knowing what awaited them. The rice was a loan to the people and when the time came to repay, the hill people had no cash and had to "become coolies and pay their debts by doing forced labour in gangs and groups in Aizawl, of which the most outstanding work done by them was the digging of the Aizawl Water Reservoir (situated above the Chief Minister's Residence)."⁶⁹

Revolt against Forced Labour

Even before the establishment of colonial rule in the Lushai Hills district, British officers had demanded 'coolies' from the chiefs in the course of military expeditions. Almost every chief supplied the demands with the exception of a few stubborn ones who were dealt with further force. The supply of coolies served the twin purpose of curbing their raids and forays in those territories under their jurisdiction and transportation of supplies. Demand of labour was adopted as a means of punishment and subsequent subjugation. Almost every chief revolted against the unjust demands made by the British. But these were met with further subjugation. When the land was finally annexed to the British Empire, supply of free labour became a part of 'being governed.' When the chiefs could not ward off demands before annexation, there was no way to revolt against the forced labour demands after it. However, the subjects of the chiefs often rose in revolt against them for being weak enough to bring the

⁶⁹ B. Lalhangliana, *A Brief History and Culture of Mizo*, pp. 53-54.

situation upon their people. Suhas Chatterjee states that “the imposition of forced labour, a system quite contrary to the spirit of independence of the Lushais and a concept completely foreign to their social and political ideas, resulted into armed rebellion in the north so also in the south.”⁷⁰ These later did not in the least, have any effect upon the chiefs who were gradually fully under the influence of the alien rulers.

The famine which broke out in 1911 steered the people towards revolt. The labour forced on them by the alien rule to pay off the price of the rice they had borrowed was an unpleasant experience which inspired them to revolt against the alien rule. But as usual, it was crushed with a firm hand. Having no other options, many people migrated as they were “fed up of being coolies. Those in the northeast fled to *Cachar* and settled in and around Lakhipur. Those in the northwest went to Hachhek hill range and settled in the Cachar hills, those in the west went to Tripura, from where they were disinclined to return to the hills even after the British evacuated the Lushai Hills.”⁷¹

The outbreak of the First World War was the final straw that lit the spirit of revolt in recruiting young men to fight for a country whose people had been instruments of slavery and bondage in their own land. However, the failure to honour their promise of ‘freedom from coolie labour’ after the war proved the greatest treachery of the British. The educated young men revolted by accusing the government for not honouring their words. They wrote petitions to no avail. However, this helped in the formation of political platforms and groups that went a long way in paving the way to independence.

The recruitment of labour corps in the war was looked upon with trepidation of the superstitious beliefs of the hill people. They could not believe that those who go to France would return intact. Moreover, they were reluctant to fight for alien rulers. Above all, they were incensed at the forcefulness in which they were recruited without much value to the lives of the people to gain a war in which they could benefit nothing from, except sacrifice the lives of their dear ones. Therefore, they rose in revolt against the recruitment of labour corps.

⁷⁰ Suhas Chatterjee, *Mizoram Under the British Rule*, p. 113.

⁷¹ B. Lalhangliana, *A Brief History and Culture of Mizo*, p. 54.

The most far reaching revolt was that known as the Kuki Rebellion of 1917-18. The first chief to rise in revolt was chief Ngulkhup whose refusal to meet the Political Agent resulted in the British burning down the village of Mombi. The rebellion was taken up by Chief Chengjapao with his small band of guerrillas. Other chiefs joined the rebellion and within a short time, chiefs Ngulbul, Tintong, Pachei, Chengjapao, and Khotinthang revolted against the British. But the latter crushed down the rebellion within a short time. "In February 1919, The British occupied Chief Ngulbul's Longya village, killed his son, and arrested his brother along with another 55 persons. They also captured the chief of Ukha, Ngulkhup (chief of Mombi), Tinton (chief of Longya) with his henchman Enjakap."⁷² The rising spread as far as Chin Hills where most of the prominent chiefs and villages such as Teddim, Haka and Falam revolted against British effort to impress labour for the war theatre in Europe.⁷³ The risings were however brutally suppressed and as a penalty for rebelling against the British the so-called rebels were made to pay for all the damages caused by them and the expenditure incurred to quell the risings. This amount the hillmen had to pay in labour. Thus, when they fought against forced labour recruitment for the War, the hapless hillmen eventually landed in aggrandising the amount of their labour share in the Empire.

In the Lushai Hills, although people disliked all forms of forced labour they co-operated the British Empire in its effort in the War by sending good number of their men when they were promised by the colonial administration that they would be exempted from impressed labour and house-tax after the War. However, after the War, as we have seen, the colonial government, instead of exempting them from all forms of labour and house-tax, they were exempted only for *kulipui*. Another form of labour called *kulite* was continued despite strong opposition. Of the house-tax exemption, it was pronounced that those unmarried men who have been to the War as part of the Labour Corps would only be exempted for the said tax only when they left their parents house. The people eventually felt deceived by the colonial government but best showing their protest with petitions and appeals nothing could be done until they were more organised in the 1940s. Mizo Union was formed in 1946 as a common platform for all the people of Lushai Hills. Apart from many other issues the Mizo

⁷² NAI, Home Department, Police Files, no. 8, 1919.

⁷³ See Vumson, *Zo History*.

Union took a strong position against the established colonial authority on the question of forced labour. In its general body meeting on 26 to 30 September 1947 the Mizo Union, a part from other resolutions, resolved that “in order to redeem forced labour government should improve and enhance transport and communication in Mizo ram” (*Mizoram ah tihluhna cooli alo tlem theihnan, sawrkhar hnenah Transport tipung tur in dil kan rem ti e*).⁷⁴ This is in a way a strong demand to abolish forced labour system in Lushai Hills. But the revolts against forced labour went unheeded and the whole population suffered and laboured during the whole period of colonial rule in the Lushai Hills.

Conclusion

“*Kulipui*”, “*Kulite*” or whatever form of extracting labour employed by the British rule became so oppressive to the hill men that they often protested against it. Coolie labour was one area that often tried chiefs and their subjects. From the earliest days of British entry, the chiefs of the land had assured cooperation and loyalty to the crown. This promise stood between them and their subjects whenever there were demands of labour. Chiefs were bound so much by their words that they were also forced to concede the supply of labour to the alien rulers. This became the source of friction between chiefs and their subjects, while creating a condition of mistrust between them and the aliens. Whenever they sense a spirit of hesitation in obeying orders on the part of chiefs, the government resorted to force. The system had become so loathsome especially to the old that “even education to boys hold no value for the aged folks of the hills as to them, after finishing their education, the boys could serve in no greater capacity than escorts over the coolie labours.”⁷⁵ As years went by, the educated youth began to yearn for freedom in all spheres.

Inspired by the wind of nationalism, a political party was formed on adhoc basis, under the style of the “Mizo Common People’s Union,”⁷⁶ on 9th April 1946 which was renamed Mizo Union on 11th April, 1946. This was the first political party that went a long way in changing the ancient customs, traditional practices of the land, and those impositions of the British government. With its gradual growth, the Mizo

⁷⁴ See Appendix-IV, No. 1.

⁷⁵ Vanchhunga, *Lusei leh avela Hnam Dangte Chanchin*, Art & Culture, Bethesda Printing Press, Aizawl, repint, 1994, p. 284.

⁷⁶ R. Vanlawma, *Ka Ram Leh Kei*, pp. 87-89.

Union spread awareness in many aspects of life. Feeling the needs of the masses, it began to raise voices against the injustice of traditional obligatory tributes to chiefs, and compulsory tributes to the government among which was “abolition of forced coolie labour.”⁷⁷ In 1950, “forced labour for the purpose of building or repairing chief’s houses by their villagers, a practice which was not popular with the people, was abolished.”⁷⁸ With the “convention of the Mizo District Council from 23rd June to 10th July 1952, the Lushai Hills Chiefship Abolition Act, 1952 was passed which was to be effective from 1st January 1953. This Act abolished all existing chiefs as on 25th April 1952,”⁷⁹ and with it, all their powers and rights to receive customary gifts were automatically abrogated.⁸⁰ With these abolitions, people were finally freed from their customary bondage. However, bondage under colonial rule continued and persisted. Other abolitions included meat tax, salt tax, bee tax, blacksmith tax, *fathang*, coolie labour and the Personal Residence Surcharge. The last was one introduced by the British to prevent immigration of local inhabitants to such towns as Aizawl and Lunglei.

J. Shakespear the first Superintendent of Lushai Hills (1897-1898), (1990-1903) (1904-1905) introduced forced or compulsory labour in the hills and continued with impressment under the auspices of higher authorities. The phenomenon of force continued under successive superintendents all of whom employed it in one form or for one work or other. When Captain H.R. Brown (1890-1891) became the Political Officer of North Lushai Hills, he was under the misconception that the Lushai Expedition of 1889-90 had completely cowed down or subjugated the Luseis and that they would no more rise against the British. He, therefore, in order to consolidate British rule, concentrated his attention to the construction of roads essential in the landlocked country. But the Lushai labour was so disobedient that he had to “adopt coercive measures as his last option.”⁸¹ In the process, he antagonised the *Lushai* chief Khalkhama so much that he was murdered.

⁷⁷ GOM, Application for the village welfare activities admitted by Superintendent, Lushai Hills, CB-56, Gen-695, Aug-Oct, 1947.

⁷⁸ GOM, *Abolition of Forced Labour for building chief’s houses*, 13th February, 1950, CB-69, Gen-847, 1950.

⁷⁹ Sangkima, *Mizos : Society and Social Change*, p. 175.

⁸⁰ *The Lushai Hills (Chiefship Abolition) Act 1952*, Chapter 1, Section 3.

⁸¹ Suhas Chatterjee, *Frontier Officers in Colonial Northeast India*, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2009, pp. 269-270.

Major H.W.G. Cole (1898-1900)-(1907-1911), having credit as a long serving officer, had a lot of responsibilities. He established Primary education, brought missionaries, established marts to encourage commerce and cottage industries, and sold traditional clothes weaved at home. But being too keen on filling the British coffers that he employed “forced labour on the nearby villages to go to the market in Aizawl to buy and sell commodities.”⁸² A. G. McCall, I. C. S (1931-35) – (1935-43) also a long serving administrator in the hills, had a number of work done for the hill district but was all the same, a patron of forced labour. He was “accused of using coercive means to procure portage from these populations under the Defence of India rules during the World War II.”⁸³ In 1941, he summoned a Durbar at Aizawl on August 14 where nine points of resolution regarding matters of state were adopted. In the meeting, it was suggested that transport should be increased for the betterment of the district and the people as a whole. However, McCall discarded the idea outright as this would “entail more freedom of coolies.”⁸⁴ He was reluctant to do away with the system that has been so useful in shaping the British Government of India even in remote hill areas such as the Lushai Hills district. However, Coolie (*Kuli*) labour was finally abolished by the District Council in a resolution passed on 13th January 1953.”⁸⁵ It finally freed people from the shackles of bondage under the British Government.

The population of Lushai Hills suffered and laboured under the oppressive forced and impressed labour of the colonial regime for almost a century. They were so devastated by the atrocious British administration that they lost pleasure in the beauty of their customary practices. Voluntary service and duties towards their chiefs were looked upon as heavy milestones. The spirit of *tlawmngaihna* lost its significance in the face of force. In fact, the craving for freedom from hereditary chieftains or alien rule grew in the minds of people and took root. It acted as a catalyst in the emergence of nationalism propounded by the educated young people of the hills. This led to the birth of political platforms through which ideas of independence were propagated finally leading to the district’s attainment of a democratic statehood in 1987.

⁸² V. L. Siana, *Mizo History*, p. 69.

⁸³ Indrani Chatterjee, *Slavery, Semantics and the Sound of Silence*, Rutgers University, p. 25

⁸⁴ V. L. Siana, *Mizo History*, p. 178.

⁸⁵ Zoram Hriattirna, 15 November, 1952, p. 5 as quoted in Sangkima, *Mizos: Society and Social Change*, p. 181.