

Fear of Death/Fear of Dying Away from Home?: Faith and Fear Among Manipuri Recruits in World War I

World War I was a devastating four-year global conflict, involving more than 30 countries in total (Freeman 4). Although Indian participation in World War I has increasingly received scholarly attention, much of this work remains largely centred on the Northwest Frontier and the Punjabi and Gurkha Regiments. The narrative emerging from the Northeastern frontier of India remains overlooked. Among the 1.4 million combatants and non-combatants recruited from India between August 1914 and December 1919 were two groups from Manipur sent by Maharaja Churachand Singh of Manipur: around 310 combatants of the Manipur Double Company, attached to 3/39th Garwali Regiment in late 1916, and around 2000 labourers of the 66th Manipur Labour Corps deployed as part of the Indian Labour Corps in mid-1917 (Roy 74; Chettri).

Manipur's distinct cultural and religious identity provides distinct ways of understanding how war was experienced, remembered and interpreted in local contexts. Drawing on archival records, songs, poetry, oral traditions, memoirs and colonial correspondence, this paper examines the role of fear, religious belief and local cosmologies surrounding death in shaping the wartime experiences of Manipuri recruits during World War I. Colonial authorities interpreted Manipuri wartime service overseas as evidence of imperial loyalty overcoming religious conservatism. This paper, however, argues that instead of abandoning, Manipuri recruits mobilised their religious beliefs as a way to negotiate wartime displacement, fear, and the possibility of dying away from home. Manipuri recruits feared not only death, but also dying away from home. By foregrounding emotional experience, religious beliefs, and local cosmologies, this paper examines WWI from "the distinct and separate point of view of the masses" (Guha vi). It situates

Manipur's distinct wartime experience within the broader narrative of Indian participation in WWI and its colonial dimensions.

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