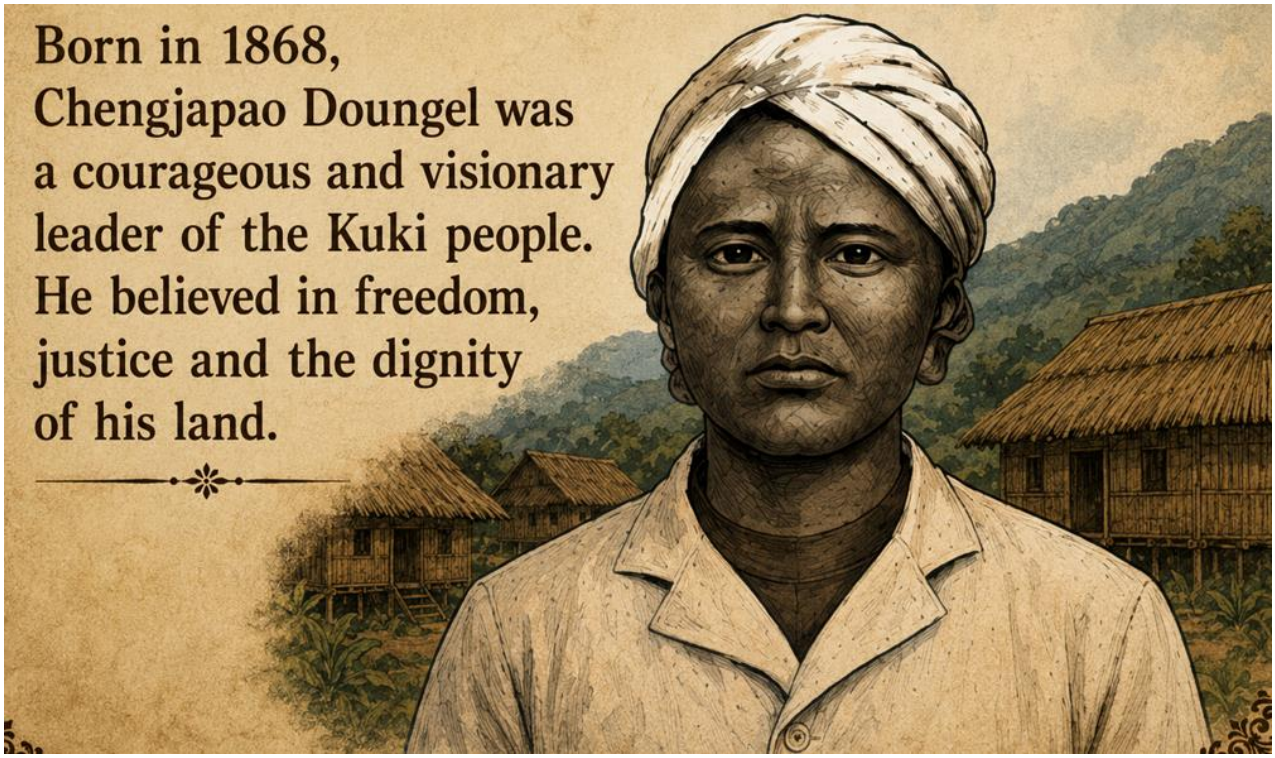


PU. CHENGJAPAO DOUNGEL

FREEDOM FIGHTER, VISIONARY LEADER AND HERO OF THE ANGLO-KUKI WAR (1917–1919)

- Dr. Lamkholal Doungel

Introduction:

Pu. Chengjapao Doungel, born on 4th March 1868 in Lokchao Aisan, present-day Manipur, was a distinguished chief, freedom fighter, and visionary leader of the Kuki community. Revered as the *Kuki Raja* and regarded as the *Mi-Upa* (Elder-man) of the Thadou-Kuki clans, he occupied a position of considerable authority among the Kuki people. As Chief of Aisan, his influence extended beyond his immediate chiefdom, and his leadership became particularly significant during the Anglo-Kuki War (1917–1919).

At the heart of any historical assessment of the Anglo-Kuki War is an important question: Who stood at the head of the Kuki resistance and gave the call to wage war against the British? Contemporary accounts and records reproduced in this study point to Pu. Chengjapao Doungel as a principal leader of the Kuki resistance and identify him as *Pipa* (Head) of the Kukis. His role was therefore not merely ceremonial. The evidence presented in this paper indicates that he exercised authority in mobilising Kuki chiefs, encouraging resistance to British policies, and providing direction at a critical moment in the history of the Kuki people.

A striking episode recorded in connection with his detention further illustrates the position attributed to him. While the Kuki leaders were detained in Imphal Jail, the British sought to ascertain whether Pu. Chengjapao Doungel, Chief of *Aisan*, was indeed the *Pipa* (Head) of the Kukis. He was reportedly paraded in chains through the streets of Imphal three times a day for three consecutive days and made to call upon any Kuki who considered himself his elder or superior to come forward, take his place, and bear the chains in his stead. No one came forward to do so. The episode was subsequently treated by the British authorities as evidence of the position and authority he held among the Kukis.

British records cited in this paper further describe him as "Chief of Aisan, Head of Doungel Clan," "Chief of Aisan, Head of Kukis," and "Chief of Aisan, PIHA (PIPA)." These descriptions are significant because they provide documentary evidence for examining the nature and extent of Chengjapao Doungel's leadership during the period of the Anglo-Kuki War.

His leadership was also reflected in the organisation and mobilisation that preceded and accompanied the war. The records discussed in this paper describe his involvement in consultations among Kuki chiefs, the Jampi meeting, the Chassad Conclave, the Sajam war ritual, and the wider mobilisation of Kuki communities. His call to resist British demands, particularly the recruitment of Kuki men for the Labour Corps during the First World War, became an important immediate factor in the escalation of the conflict.

The Anglo-Kuki War (1917–1919) was ultimately suppressed by the British, and Pu. Chengjapao Doungel was among the Kuki leaders punished and exiled to Sadiya. The fact that he remained in detention for an additional year after other Kuki war leaders had been released is also presented in the historical record as an indication of the importance the British attached to his position as *Pipa* and principal leader.

This paper therefore seeks to revisit the life, leadership, struggle, and sacrifice of Pu. Chengjapao Doungel and to examine his place in the history of the Anglo-Kuki War. Drawing upon British colonial records, historical accounts, and oral traditions, the study argues for a closer examination of his leadership and of the wider Kuki resistance within the broader narrative of India's anti-colonial struggle.

Who Was Pu. Chengjapao Doungel?

Pu. Chengjapao Doungel, born on 4th March 1868 at Lokchao Aisan in present-day Manipur, was a distinguished chief, freedom fighter, strategist, and visionary leader of the Kuki community. He became the Chief of Aisan in 1914, succeeding his paternal uncle, Pu. Helkhup Doungel. His wife was Pi Douneng Lunkim.

Having lost his father at a young age, Chengjapao was raised by his paternal uncle, Pu. Helkhup Doungel, a skilled leader and diplomat who maintained cordial relations with the Meitei kings, Gambhir Singh and Chandrakirti Singh. Following Helkhup's death, Chengjapao succeeded him as chief. A natural leader, he governed with wisdom, fairness, and a deep sense of justice. He was remembered as a benevolent chief who was deeply devoted to his people and ancestral land. Under his leadership, his domain enjoyed stability, prosperity, and equity, with particular concern for the welfare of even the poorest among his people.

His influence extended far beyond the immediate boundaries of Aisan. His territory stretched from the Chingai Sub-division of present-day Ukhrul District to the Somra Tract in Burma and the Pochuri region of present-day Nagaland. The communities within his sphere of authority acknowledged his suzerainty through the payment of *Si-le-Kai*, a customary tax. Traditional tributes, known as *Samal* and *Changseo*, included an annual offering of a *vaibeng* of paddy—a long basket filled with grain—from each household, as well as the hind leg of a hunted animal such as a deer, stag, or wild boar.

As the head of the Doungel clan and *Mi-Upa* (Elder-man), the customary supreme leader of the Thadou-Kuki community, Chengjapao Doungel exercised considerable authority and commanded the respect and allegiance of chiefs across the Kuki region. His position was not based solely on lineage. His courage, organizational ability, diplomatic skill, and strategic acumen established him as a leader of exceptional stature.

His prominence became particularly significant during the period of growing British interference in Kuki affairs. As colonial policies increasingly threatened the autonomy, territorial rights, and traditional institutions of the Kuki people, Chengjapao emerged as one of the principal figures in the resistance that culminated in the Anglo-Kuki War of 1917–1919, also known as the Kuki Uprising. His leadership, together with that of other prominent Kuki leaders such as Pu. Lhukhomang Haokip, Pu. Khotinthang Sitlhou, and Pu. Enjakhup Kholhou, contributed to the organization and continuation of the armed resistance against British rule.

The British recognized his exceptional stature among the Kukis and referred to him as the "Kuki Raja" or "King of the Kukis." His leadership during the Anglo-Kuki War further strengthened his standing as a symbol of Kuki unity, resistance, and determination to defend their land and traditional way of life. Though the British eventually suppressed the uprising and Chengjapao Doungel was subsequently exiled to Sadiya, his commitment to his people remained unwavering.

Pu. Chengjapao Doungel's life therefore represents more than the history of a single chiefdom. It reflects the story of a leader whose authority extended across communities and whose political vision, courage, and resistance became closely associated with the defence of Kuki autonomy. His

legacy continues to embody the values of leadership, resilience, sacrifice, and resistance to colonial domination.

This study revisits Pu. Chengjapao Doungel's life and contributions as a freedom fighter and seeks to situate his role within the broader history of India's struggle against British colonial rule. Drawing upon British colonial records, oral traditions, and secondary historical accounts, it examines his leadership, the circumstances surrounding the Anglo-Kuki War, and the enduring significance of his contribution to the history of the Kuki people and the wider freedom struggle.

The Anglo-Kuki War (1917–1919) — A Fight for Freedom and Independence

It is essential to first understand the significance of this historic uprising of the Kukis since Chengjapao Doungel's legacy as a freedom fighter is closely tied to the Anglo-Kuki War (1917–1919). The Anglo-Kuki War (1917–1919) remains one of the most significant and defining moments in Kuki history. Known by various names—Kuki Revolt, Kuki Punitive Measures, Kuki Rebellion, Kuki Rising, Kuki War of Independence, and more—this prolonged conflict between the Kukis and the British colonial government spanned nearly three years, covering vast regions across India and Burma. Unparalleled in scale and intensity, it highlighted the Kukis' indomitable spirit, military prowess, and unwavering commitment to their homeland. While the British officially recorded it as "The Kuki Rebellion (1917–1919)," a more accurate and fitting title would be "The Kuki War of Independence" or simply "The Kuki War," as it was far more than just a rebellion—it was a resolute and organized resistance against colonial subjugation.

Causes of the War

The Anglo-Kuki War (1917–1919) stemmed from growing resentment toward British interference in Kuki society. Key causes are — Disruption of Traditional Life, Unjust Policies, Potthang (Forced Labor), Gun Confiscation, Encroachment on Kuki Self-Rule, and The Lambu System (British-appointed intermediaries).

The Immediate Cause of the Anglo-Kuki War (1917–1919)

The Anglo-Kuki War began when the British attempted to recruit Kuki youths into the Labour Corps for deployment in World War I. While other hill communities complied, the Kukis, led by Pu Chengjapao Doungel, strongly resisted. He urged Kuki chiefs to oppose the recruitment, even by force. Two chiefs, Pu Ngulkhup of Mombi and Pu Ngulbul of Longya, openly defied British orders. In response, the British sent Captain Coote with the 4th Assam Rifles to Mombi in September 1917, but the Kukis resisted, declaring their land "closed to the British" (D.K. Palit, *Sentinels of the North-East*, 1984, p. 62). The conflict escalated into a full-scale war lasting nearly three years. In May 1919, facing severe shortages, the Kuki chiefs surrendered. Despite this, their defiance remains a significant chapter in India's anti-colonial struggle.

Chengjapao Doungel's Strategic Village Tours

As a *Mi-Upa*, Chengjapao Doungel played a pivotal role in fostering social and cultural unity among the Kuki tribes. Accompanied by elders for counsel, young men for protection, and slaves for service, his visits to key villages reinforced kinship ties and solidarity. Villagers welcomed him with great honour, often traveling long distances to escort him. His journey took him to Phailengjang (then in Burma) and border villages like Molvailup and Phaisat, as well as Jampi, the Sitlhou stronghold in western Manipur, and Chahsat, the Haokip clan's principal village in northeastern Manipur. He also visited Kangdung, Songsang, Sinjol, and Chalkot in the Naga Hills (now Nagaland), along with Diger Kuki (Dimphai) and Haflong in North Cachar Hills (now Dima Hasao). Each visit was marked by grand feasts, where his hosts slaughtered mithun and pigs and served traditional *ju* (wine) in his honor. These ceremonious receptions, befitting a Mi-Upa, strengthened kinship bonds and reaffirmed unity among the Kuki people.

Beyond strengthening cultural ties, Chengjapao Doungel's visits served a strategic purpose that inspired tribal leaders and facilitated coordination among area chiefs, ensuring their preparedness for war. This unseen force of unity among Kuki leaders became a decisive factor in their resistance against the British.

***Sajam* – The Traditional War Rituals & Conclaves under Pu. Chengjapao**

The Anglo-Kuki War is marked by remarkable war preparations, including secret war meetings like the historic Chassad Conclave. Despite lacking modern communication, the Kukis coordinated their resistance with precision. The most crucial secret meeting was held at Chassad on March 7, 1917, led by Chengjapao Doungel (Aisan), Lhukhomang Haokip (Chassad), Khotinthang Sitlhou (Jampi), and Tintong Haokip (Laijang). Among others, twenty-three Kuki chiefs attended. As per tradition, a Mithun was sacrificed by Lhukhomang Haokip, and the attendees feasted together. Key decisions were made on attacks, weapon manufacturing, and food storage. The war oath ritual, *Sajam*, symbolizing unity in battle, was first performed by Chengjapao Doungel on March 1, 1917, followed by Lhukhomang Haokip on March 7 at Chassad. The ritual was later conducted across other villages to prepare warriors for the fight.

The Jampi Meeting

Another important meeting under Pu Chengjapao Doungel was held at Jampi village that comes to be known as Jampi Meeting. They were ten chiefs who attended the meeting. The meeting was also attended by several other regional elders and village volunteers. It was consultative meeting in preparation of the imminent war with the British for defending their ancestral land in accordance with the order issued from their supreme head Chengjapao Doungel. Chenjapao Doungel inspired the Chiefs and they unanimously elected Pu. Tintong Haokip, Chief of Laijang as Commander in

Chief, and Pu. Enjakhup Kholhou, Chief of Thengjang as the Second in Command of the Kuki forces.

Chenjapao Doungel's Call to Arms: The Jampi Meeting and the Resolve to Fight

Waging war against the mighty British Empire was not a decision taken lightly by the Kuki chiefs. However, it was through the resolute appeal of their leader, Pu Chengjapao Doungel, that the Kuki clans came to a consensus. The Jampi meeting, where the chiefs gathered to discuss the impending war, was a pivotal moment in the Kuki struggle. It witnessed intense deliberations, with some chiefs expressing reluctance and hesitation. They questioned the wisdom of waging war with limited weapons and manpower against an empire that spanned across the globe, where the sun never set.

While the order for war had been issued by Pu Chengjapao Doungel, the head of the Kuki tribes, chiefs like Pu Songchung Sitlhou and Pu Vumngul Kipgen voiced their doubts, stating they lacked sufficient arms and ammunition to confront the British forces. The situation seemed grim, and morale was low. However, in the face of this uncertainty, some chiefs stood firm in their determination to defend their land, dignity, and people, regardless of the outcome.

In the midst of the heated discussion, Pu Khotinthang Sitlhou, the Chief of Jampi, rose in anger, condemning those who were hesitant by declaring, "You all are chicken-hearted." The words of encouragement were followed by Pu Tintong Haokip, the Chief of Laijang, who, fired with resolve, stood up and discharged his gun into the air, swearing in the name of his ancestors: "I will fight the British to the last of my bullet. Winning or losing is not the matter, but I will protect my sovereignty."

His defiant words, accompanied by the sound of his gunshot, shifted the atmosphere. The chiefs were emboldened and inspired, and despite the initial doubts, they resolved to heed the call of their leader, Pu Chengjapao Doungel, to wage war. This meeting at Jampi proved to be the turning point, cementing their unwavering commitment to the fight for their homeland, no matter the cost.

***Thingkho Le Malchapom*— The Secret Code of Communication**

One notable example of Pu Chengjapao Doungel's strategic leadership during the war was the use of a conventional yet highly effective secret communication method known as '*Thingkho Le Malchapom'* (King-Chilly tied to smouldering firewood). This coded message was passed from village to village, covering the entire Kuki-inhabited region within just two to three days. The warning sign signalled the official declaration of war against the British in 1917. This sparked a widespread mobilization, with each Kuki contributing to the war effort. Some manufactured guns and ammunition, while others crafted *Pumpi* (cannons), *Songkhaithang* (stone traps), and other indigenous weapons, and many others collected and stored different kinds of material, arsenal and supplies in different places.

The War, Freedom Struggle, and Its Aftermath

The Anglo-Kuki War (1917–1919) began on March 7, 1917, with the Kukis fiercely resisting British forces across their inhabited regions. Though ultimately defeated, they fought valiantly to uphold their pride and dignity. Lasting nearly three years, the war played a significant role in India's freedom movement, particularly through Kuki connections with Bengali revolutionaries in Cachar and Sylhet, who opposed the partition of Bengal and intensified anti-British resistance. Historian Robert Reid described it as "the most serious [rebellion] in the history of Manipur" (1942:79), while H.K. Borpujari noted the involvement of German spies and the influence of Bengal's revolutionaries (*Problems of the Hill Tribes*: 218).

After the war, Kuki Chiefs were charged with crimes, but their sentences were later reduced. A clemency policy by the British government led to shorter punishments for most leaders. Some, including Chief Chengjapao Doungel of Aisan—who received the longest sentence—were exiled to Sadiya between 1919 and 1922–1923. After three years in exile, all Kuki war leaders except *Pipa* Chengjapao Doungel were released. As the principal leader and an elder (*Mi-Upa*), he remained detained for an additional year before his eventual release.

Victory in Defeat—The Outcome of the War

For the Kukis, the Anglo-Kuki War was not a defeat but a testament to their resilience. Despite heavy casualties and the exile of many chiefs to Sadiya, Jorhat, and Guwahati, their spirit remained unbroken. L.W. Shakespear described it as the largest military operation in India since the late 19th century, surpassing previous campaigns in scale and intensity. (*L.W. Shakespear,* pp. 235-236). Though peace-loving by nature, the Kukis rebelled out of patriotism and a refusal to accept foreign rule. The British, despite superior weaponry, took nearly three years (1917–1919) to subdue them. More than a rebellion, this was a war to defend their homeland, making 'The Kuki War of Independence' a more fitting name. It epitomized Kuki nationalism, establishing them as a courageous warrior people whose resistance against colonial aggression remains an inspiring chapter in history.

In Honour of Pu Chengjapao Doungel: A Legacy of Bravery

Pu Chengjapao Doungel passed away on 28th August 1928 after successfully leading his people for 14 fruitful years. His health deteriorated, particularly due to the hardships he endured during his four-year exile in Sadiya, which was imposed as punishment for his leadership in waging war against the British Empire. Even today, the portrait of Kuki Chief Pu Chengjapao Doungel is displayed at the Queen Victoria Memorial Hall in Kolkata, India, and the British Museum in London. To honour his legacy, statues have been erected in several significant locations, including Moreh in Manipur, C-Aisan in Manipur, and Lamdukan Junction in Haflong, Dima Hasao. These statues stand as enduring tributes to his contributions and leadership. To further commemorate his

legacy and inspire future generations, the Pu Chengjapao Doungel Memorial High School was established in Molkon village, Manipur.

On 15th August 2004, during his Independence Day speech, Shri G.C. Langthasa, a seasoned politician from North Cachar Hills (now Dima Hasao) and the then Hon'ble Minister of Assam, acknowledged Pu Chengjapao Doungel's role in India's freedom struggle and fervently appealed for the emulation of his spirit and ideals. He declared that Doungel was one of the freedom fighters of North Cachar Hills and that his name shall be remembered with honour in the history of the region. Additionally, in recognition of the sacrifices and valour of all patriots who fought in the Anglo-Kuki War, a Memorial Park has been planned. The Government of Assam has already allocated land at Sadiya for this purpose, ensuring that the bravery and resilience of these warriors are preserved and remembered for generations to come. Pu Chengjapao Doungel's death anniversary is observed every year on 28th August, commemorating his legacy and the sacrifices he made for his people and his motherland.

Chengjapao Doungel and Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav

As part of the Government of India's initiative, '*Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav*' was celebrated to commemorate 75 years of India's independence by paying tribute to the nation's unsung heroes who played a pivotal role in the country's freedom struggle. In this historic celebration, Chengjapao Doungel was rightfully recognized as a 'Kuki hero' and a great son of India. His remarkable story of valour and bravery was highlighted and disseminated through the Doordarshan network and other media platforms, reaching audiences in multiple regional languages. This initiative ensured that his contributions to India's struggle for freedom were acknowledged and preserved for future generations.

Conclusion

Pu Chengjapao Doungel is remembered for his extraordinary role as the chief leader in the Anglo-Kuki War (1917-1919), and for mobilising and urging his people to fight against the British colonial rule. His leadership in the Anglo-Kuki War (1917–1919) embodies the Kuki people's unwavering quest for autonomy. As a visionary leader and strategist, he played a crucial role in resisting British colonial encroachment through war councils, diplomacy, and military engagements, leaving a lasting impact on India's anti-colonial struggle. Though the British suppressed the war, the Kukis' defiance remains a significant chapter in India's freedom movement. Their resistance was not mere rebellion but an assertion of sovereignty, inspiring future generations to uphold their heritage and fight for justice. Despite his exile, Doungel's influence endured, earning him the title of 'Kuki Raja.' His legacy as a stalwart of resistance underscores the need to recognize indigenous contributions to India's freedom struggle. As we mark his 98th death anniversary in 2026, his life stands as a beacon of inspiration, ensuring that the Kuki people's sacrifices are honoured in the broader narrative. It

was by no means easy for anyone to challenge the authority of the then mighty British Empire. Therefore, tribal freedom fighters like Pu. Chengjapao Doungel must get due recognition and a space in the history of our independence. Thanks to the Government of India initiative of 'Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav' that recognised Chengjapao Doungel as one of the great unsung heroes of this great nation, India.

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