

Mobilizing the Margins: Labour and Military Forces from North East India in WWII

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Abstract: *During World War II, Japanese forces pushed forward to India's eastern frontier, thousands of men from the remote hills of North East India were recruited or conscripted to serve in multiple roles: as labourers for road building, portering, guiding troops, guerrilla fighters etc. The experiences and contributions of these communities have been largely overlooked in the mainstream historical accounts of the war. This article examines how the people of North East India contributed, both as labourers and as combatants, in sustaining the war front, and analyzes why they became involved.*

Keywords: *Labour, military, Terrain, North East India, WWII*

Introduction

By 1942, the rapid Japanese advance through Malaya and Burma had directly brought the war to the borders of British India. North East India, once seen as a remote and underdeveloped frontier instantly became a strategic importance as a key military corridor. It became the gateway for lakhs of refugees and retreating British troops from Burma, as well as for the advancing Indo-Japanese forces. Manipur, Nagaland and Assam became an active war zones. The British military command began reinforcing positions across the North East by constructing airstrips, expanding road networks, building infrastructure, fortifying defences, and organizing the evacuation of fleeing troops and civilians. This rapid militarization needs large-scale mobilization of both civilian labour and military personnel. The local people, accustomed in navigating the region's challenging terrain, were seen as essential assets.

Labour Evacuation of refugees

The fleeing troops and civilians entered India from two main land routes through North East India. The first route started from Mandalay to Imphal via the Tamu Pass. While the second route was from Myitkyina (North Burma) to

Ledo in Assam via the Chaukan Pass. The sole responsibility for the evacuation was on the hands of the Indian Tea Association who managing a huge Indian labour force. The ITA mobilised workers from tea garden labourers from estates across Assam and Bengal for relief operations. Alongside this, local labourers from the Naga Hills, the hill regions of then Assam, and the hills and valley of Manipur were also recruited. Labour was mobilized through village headmen and local contractors.

The relief operation faced by the authorities at that time was to extend essential support systems such as food, shelter, medical aid, and transport. The relief work was begun with the construction of camp to accommodate large number of refugees. They constructed the first camps at Jiribam, Makru and Barak in Manipur and engage porters, to make camps at Lakhipur and at Silchar to accommodate a maximum of 1000 daily.¹ The camps were constructed by tea garden labourers under the direction of European planters.² One of the most crucial aspects of the refugee evacuation process was the portering service.

Porterage

With limited access to adequate motor and lorry transport, portering emerged as the principal means of transporting essential supplies and administering relief to refugees. A significant portion of the portering were being done by tea garden labourers and local communities such as the Abor's, Garos, Khasis, Lushai's, Meiteis, Kuki, Nagas, Mishmis and Pnars, who often worked under arduous conditions. In Manipur, a group of contractors collected strong men from Imphal to go to Tamu and work as porters.³ Kangjam Mera Singh, recalled that, "upon reaching Tamu, the contractor, who was fluent in Hindi and other languages, would negotiate with rich Indian businessmen and their families who needed porter services. We would then carry the people children, old men and women on the readymade, improvised palanquins which were made and sold by the local people of Tamu. We were paid Rs.7 each for every such trip. The destination was Palel from where they would be transported by army".⁴ The Abors played a significant role as guides and porters along several evacuation routes. In 1942, they provided a Labour Corps of about two thousand men, who played an excellent role in transporting supplies and rescuing Indian refugees during their evacuation from Burma.⁵ In a remarkable instance, an Abor porter was awarded the Albert Medal for an outstanding act of endurance and devotion to duty. He saved two stranded refugees by alternately carrying each on his back across a considerable distance, going back and forth between them.⁶

In addition to portering, they provided support in small rescue missions. Army truck drivers were largely unfamiliar with navigating the narrow and treacherous hill roads. There were numerous accounts of near-miraculous survival when trucks plunged 200 feet down steep slopes. Numerous rescue operations in such incidents were undertaken by labourers of tea garden and

Naga tribesmen stationed along the roadside.⁷ The Garos also provided Labour Corps.⁸ Local labourers not only assisted civilian refugees but also served as porters for the Assam Rifles, V Force, and various military and air force units operating in the hill regions.⁹

Construction works

The British command undertook a major infrastructure initiative. A network of new roads was constructed, while existing roads were widened to ensure continuous supply and troop movement across the challenging terrain of North East India. Among these, three principal routes were strategically developed: one extending from Ledo in Assam towards the Chinese front through northern Burma; another stretching from Dimapur to the Central Front and a third beginning from Dohazari, south of Chittagong, to support operations in the Arakan region. Of these routes, the most critical was the one connecting Dimapur to Imphal, the primary artery supplying the central front during the Battle of Imphal. The construction of these road was a formidable engineering task, requiring the coordinated efforts of both military personnel, garden labourers and local labourers.

Native laborers were instrumental in initiating the construction of the Ledo Road. Once the Americans took charge, these workers were primarily organized into categories such as Indian Pioneer Companies, Indian State Labor Units, India Tea Association labor, local tea garden labor, the Assam Civil Porter Corps, Civil Pioneers, and contract laborers.¹⁰

The Nagas have demonstrated unwavering loyalty throughout the war. They offered themselves for service in Labour Corps.¹¹ The Angami Nagas, residing along both sides of the Manipur Road, provided thousands of young men for road construction and transport work.¹² By April 1942, about 2,500 Nagas were engaged on the Tamu-Pallel section and another 2,500 between Mao and Kohima.¹³ Amidst widespread panic and evacuation when merchants and other civilians fled from impending danger in Kohima and Dimapur, Naga labourers on the road demonstrated extraordinary courage and resilience by remaining at work. The Nagas between Pallel & Tamu also remain at work.¹⁴

A large number of Lushai, have served in Labour Corps.¹⁵ The Lushai's have done remarkably well in meeting the demand on them made by the need for road buildings, carrying and servicing officers and army stores between destinations.¹⁶ Labour is being impressed or engaged through Chiefs on a fairly lavish scale. For example over 1,500 men per day are being employed on building R.A.F. observers posts.¹⁷ Others are carrying supplies forward or to V Force dumps: or on portorage for parties to and from the Chin Hills.¹⁸ Approximately 12,000 labourers remained engaged in the construction of the jeep road to Aijal, comprising around 9,000 Bengali workers and 3,000 tea garden labourers.¹⁹

The contributions of the labourers were not limited to road-building alone; they

were also essential in the construction of airfields. Airfields were constructed across Assam, with Dinjan and Chabua serving as key bases that played a crucial role in the operation of the Hump Route. By 1944, Manipur had six airstrips around the Imphal valley - koirengei Airfield, Tulihal, Pallel Kangla, Wangjing and Sapam. Naorem Kalimohon of Manipur, recalled: "We took up different types of jobs during the war. One of them was collecting stones from the river to be used in the construction of roads and airfields."²⁰ In their construction, not only men but Manipuri women also participated. In the Hills of Manipur, in 1942 the army was employing daily up to 5,000 impressed labourers and that another 6,500 were employed by contractors on military projects.²¹

The construction of hospitals also relied on the labour provided by the locals. Local Naga labourers constructed wards and office huts from bamboo and thatch, commonly known as bashas.²² Alongside, Manipuri women also contributed significantly to the war effort. They worked in military hospitals, where they were engaged in essential tasks such as doing laundry for patients and medical staff. Though their labour, regarded as menial, was important in maintaining hygiene and care in the medical facilities and ensuring the smooth functioning of medical services under challenging wartime conditions. Meanwhile, Lushai girls, trained in the well-established Mission hospitals, made significant contributions in nursing services.²³

In *Defeat Into Victory*, Field Marshal William Slim acknowledged the indispensable role of Indian labour in the Burma campaign, stating that, "Without this contribution we should never have built either the roads or the airfields that were vital for the Burma campaign and for the supply of China."²⁴ This rare recognition from a senior military leader on the role played by Indian labour, often overlooked in dominant historical narratives.

Working Condition

The labourers worked under extremely challenging conditions. There was total absence of essential equipment and modern machinery. They were often forced to dig with limited tools or even bare hands, carry heavy loads for long distance in the rugged terrain and enduring harsh climatic conditions in the midst of war. Often, they carried out their tasks within striking distance of the Japanese. All the while, they had to endure these hardships on severely limited rations. During the final phase of the evacuation through the northern route via Pangsau Pass, the muddy terrain became so challenging that porters managed to travel only three miles per day, often taking ten to twelve hours to do so.²⁵ Slim reflecting on the situation, noted that,

"These three roads were pick, shovel, and basket roads, made by human labour, with an almost laughable lack of machinery. The men who built them worked under the most arduous conditions of climate and with the most elementary scale of accommodation, often with the enemy within striking distance."²⁶

Furthermore, the labourers were severely affected by diseases. An outbreak of cholera occurred among the labourers engaged in road construction. Fears of a cholera outbreak adversely affected on the road labour, as the labour force rapidly diminished.²⁷ The Naga labourers between Piphema and Kohima are suffering badly from beriberi, dysentery and malaria.²⁸ The vulnerability and suffering of wartime labourers are also illustrated by the air raids on aerodrome that took place in the Dibrugarh subdivision. Preliminary official reports recorded significant casualties among the Indian Tea Association recruited labour force. Three local's labourer, ten I.T.A. coolies were killed. In total, at least 30 labourers were directly affected by these attacks.²⁹ Records indicate that more than 200 porters lost their lives while serving on the routes from the Hukawng Valley. Among them were 63 Garos, 59 Khasis, 52 Pnars, 13 Abors, 13 labourers from tea gardens, and 2 government-employed porters.³⁰

The working condition of the tea garden labourers were differed from those of the Khasis, Garos, and Pnars, who being specifically recruited into the Porter Corps. The tea garden workers were recruited with better pay, for short periods, and often worked under familiar British planters, conditions that naturally gave them an advantage. They were provided with supplies and medical care. They ate food they were used to and were prepared for the tough working conditions. In contrast, the Garos, Khasis, and Pnars were not as well integrated. They didn't share the same close ties with those leading them and were expected to work for longer periods, often under unfamiliar officers who lacked effective authority in managing them. The Khasi group was led by a Pnar officer, while the Pnars were under the command of a Khasi leader.³¹ Essential dietary items such as fish and milk, staples in their traditionally modest diet were unavailable to them, posing significant nutritional challenges during the course of their service.

Military V Force

Beyond their labour contributions, the people of North East India also made significant contributions to the Allied operations by providing various forms of military support. When the war intensified, the British government expanded its recruitment efforts to raise local fighting forces, from the hill tribes and plains communities. One such initiative was the establishment of 'V Force' - A guerrilla force established with the assistance of the Assam Rifles, by distributing arms to Nagas and Kuki.³² The primary objective was to disrupt Japanese lines of communication through ambushes and acts of sabotage, while also gathering intelligence from behind enemy lines. It was designed to operate along the Indo-Burma frontier.

The V Force functioned under a central headquarters and was divided into six area command with its own headquarter and operated on the frontier areas with the services of up to 1000 tribesmen.³³ The V Force helped retreating troops

and the civilian refugees around Imphal and Kohima. The Force carried out patrols along the frontier to guide and support refugees crossing into India from Burma. By 1944, V Force entered a new phase of its operations away from watch and ward in 1942 to long range patrol and Ambushes in 1943 to an association with offensive operations in 1944. In the Imphal and Kohima battles, the Assam zone of V Force functioned not only as an outstanding intelligence-gathering unit but also actively participated in combat operations. General Slim, acknowledged the force's expanding role that, "It later extended its activities to include minor raiding operations, and frequently fought successful actions with Japanese patrols and detachments."³⁴ The effectiveness of the V Force lay not only in its guerrilla tactics but also in its crucial role as an intelligence-gathering unit for the Allied command. They provided detailed and timely information on Japanese movements. General Slim, acknowledged the value of such reports, noting: "Our V Force agents also brought us stories of the massing of transport, mechanical and animal, even of elephants."³⁵ Slim acknowledged, "V Force became an important and very valuable part of the intelligence framework."³⁶

One of the most remarkable local figures associated with the V Force was Major Ralengnao Bob Khathing, the only commissioned Naga officer in the British Indian Army. Born in Ukhrul, Manipur, Ralengnao played a significant role in the Battle for Imphal. He was awarded an MBE in 1943, MiD in 1944 and MC in 1945.

Lushai Defence Scheme

In the Lushai Hill, the District Superintendent Tony McCall, started Lushai Defence Scheme between April-May 1942. When the Army was retreating from Burma McCall realized the danger was near, something had to be done and acted swiftly to defend Lushai Hill.³⁷ This led to the formation of the Lushai Defence Scheme. The basis of the scheme was the organisation of the whole district (i) to deny food and labour to the enemy and (ii) to supply both local village "home guards" and mobile guerillas to work with the 1st Bn. Assam Rifles, in harassing throughout the whole length of the district any enemy columns or patrols which penetrated or tried to pass through the Lushai Hills.³⁸ If at least 90% of the village agreed to this it was enrolled in the scheme, a monthly token payment of Rs.1/- being given to each householder and Rs. 10/- to the Chief.³⁹ Men with guns were asked if they wished to enrol as "A" Pasalthas (village gunmen or home guard) if not their guns were temporarily allotted to other volunteers, and these "A" Pasalthas were paid R.5/-per month and promised powder and shot for their weapons.⁴⁰ The mobile guerillas (B Pasalthas) were liable to serve anywhere in the district and were provided with weapons and ammunition by V Force, paid Rs. 10/- per month, plus rations when called up for duty.⁴¹ Every village was enrolled in the defence scheme.⁴²

Lushai Scouts

A special unit known as the Lushai Scouts was raised from among the local Lushai men under the Command of Lieutenant Colonel John Longbottom. The Lushai recruits were aged between 18 and 20. In the Chin Hills, the Lushai Scouts started carrying out patrols from May 1944 onward. They had engaged fifty-one separate actions behind the enemy lines and due to their exceptional jungle warfare skills, their casualties were remarkably low, only one British officer and two other ranks killed and twenty-three wounded.⁴³

1st Assam Regiment

The contributions of the men of the 1st Assam Regiment are essential to this narrative and cannot be overlooked. In 1941, the Regiment was established as part of the Indian Army in Shillong. Recruitment efforts in India's northeast initially drew on communities such as the Ahom, Naga, Mizo, Kuki, Khasi, Garo, Lushai, and Manipuri. These were later expanded to include ethnic groups like the Adis, Nishis, Monpas, and settled Gorkhas and Sikkimese.⁴⁴ In 1944, at Kharasom and Jessami they engaged the 31st Division of Japanese force in combat.

However, the involvement of local communities of North East India in labour, military service, and intelligence during the Second World War raise a significant question: why did they choose to support and participate in the Allied war effort? The explanation can be found in a convergence of factors, including from political influences to economic inducements. The reasons underlying this support and involvement can be attributed to the following key factors:

Propaganda

During the war, the British used propaganda among the local population in Northeast India to secure their support against the Japanese and the INA. They spread messages warning that the Japanese were planning to invade their region and seize their lands, claiming that local settlements would be taken over by the Japanese and settled.⁴⁵ This propaganda emphasized the dangers of Japanese rule and the consequences that would follow if the British were defeated. They feared that if Japan took control, the tribal communities would suffer even more than they had under British rule. As a result of these misconceptions and fear created by British propaganda, many local people refused to support the Japanese and the INA, and instead backed the British war effort in order to prevent a Japanese invasion of their villages.

Japanese oppressive stance

Due to inadequate ration supplies, it became impossible for the Japanese soldiers to give an effective fight. Hence, they came to depend heavily on the local villagers for their survival. Over time, however, the demands placed upon the villagers became excessive, and when the villagers could no longer meet them, the soldiers resorted to coercion, compelling the people to provide food.

The Japanese also resorted to the use of forced labour from the local population, a practice that was deeply resented by the people. The Japanese had ill-treated those who did not cooperate with them, even destroying their livelihoods by seizing livestock and food supplies. On the night of June 1, 1944, Yarteo of Hundung Christian village was executed, ostensibly for failing to provide six coolies to the Japanese party. In reality, however, the officer suspected him of being a British informer.⁴⁶ This type of ill treatment led to resentment and hatred toward the Japanese among the local population.

Communication barrier

The language barrier between the Japanese and the local population was also a significant factor that limited the support the people could extend to them. Communication became a serious challenge for both the Japanese and the local people, often leading to unnecessary misunderstandings and tensions between the two groups.

Apprehension of British reprisals

On the other hand, supporting the Indo-Japanese forces meant becoming enemies of the British, and fear of punishment by the British government also pushed many locals to support the Allied war effort.

Amicable relations with the British

The British had long maintained a closer relationship with the local population than the newly arrived Japanese. As a result, it became even harder for the Japanese to gain the trust and confidence of the local population. In certain regions, like the Naga Hills, positive pre-war relations with British colonial officials fostered local support. According to anthropologist C.V. Furer Haimendorf, their loyalty was largely due to the popularity of British officers who had built strong relationships with the Nagas. He argues that even though figures like J.H. Hutton and J.P. Mills were no longer stationed in the Naga Hills, the trust and friendship with the Nagas which they built up continued to benefit British soldiers during the war.⁴⁷ To win the support and respect of the hill communities, the British cultivated friendly relations and refrained from harsh treatment of the local population.

Religion

A shared religious bond also played a crucial role in shaping local support during the war. The hill communities, many of whom had embraced Christianity, found a natural affinity with the British, who required little effort to present themselves as allies and protectors. In contrast, the Japanese, unfamiliar with both the land and its people, struggled to gain acceptance. This sense of religious commonality strengthened the perception that the British were on the "right side," while the Japanese were viewed with suspicion and distrust.

Chief-mediated recruitment

In areas where communities were under the strong authority of their chiefs, the people generally followed the chiefs' decision and agreed to recruitment when called upon. In the Lushai Hills District, the colonial authorities were able to secure wider support largely through the cooperation of the chiefs. In early 1942, the District Superintendent, Tony McCall, called and addressed meetings of all the Chiefs, both at Aijal and at Lungleh.⁴⁸ He asked them to decide whether they wished to come into the scheme and actively oppose the enemy. They gave their agreement and were then asked to get the consent of all their villages.⁴⁹ By November 1942, practically 100% of the villages in the district are enrolled.⁵⁰ This achievement may be credited to the cooperation of the chiefs.

Economic incentives

While some were motivated by economic opportunities - such as wages and employment. A large number of tribal people were initially conscripted into wage labour in the region. However, as manpower shortages created competition between levies, military projects, and tea plantations, wages began to rise and many subsequently joined voluntarily. The earning of the Nagas increased significantly during the war, rising from merely 4 or 5 annas per day prior to the war to 5 rupees.⁵¹ Road construction became a profitable job and, for many, more attractive than engaging in cultivation. In Manipur at that time, the prevailing labour charge for a coolie was 4 annas per day. However, for the purpose of road construction, the wage rate was fixed at Rs. 2 per day, which attracted an abundant supply of labourers. This higher wage rate ensured sufficient labour for the construction. Payments were made on the same day, which kept the labourers satisfied and motivated. Consequently, the construction of the road from Litan to Shangshak was completed within the month of July 1942.⁵² In addition to this, people also sought out jobs that offered even higher wages. Naorem Kalimohon recalled, "Some contractors offered to pay us Rs.1.50 per day for helping in the construction of roads but we went for the airfield construction instead where we were paid Rs.2.50 per day."⁵³ On the Aijal (present Aijwal) Road Project, wages were comparatively high. A man from Mualvum reported that he once earned as much as Rs. 9 in a single day, and that by carrying food supplies from the river he could easily make about Rs. 5.5 per day.⁵⁴ This led to Civil officials and others faced hardship as many lefts for the highly paid work on the Aijal Road Project, which was said to pay nearly a lakh of rupees weekly. Consequently, the P.W.D. struggled to obtain sufficient labour.⁵⁵

Conclusion

North East Indian Communities contribution in World War II ranged from rigorous labour mobilisation to active military engagement. Thousands of local men were recruited into Labour Corps and sent to work under arduous

conditions to support the Allied war effort, building roads, airfields, and transport routes essential for British operations in the eastern theatre. Not only in labour, the region played a significant role in military activities. Guerrilla units such as the V Force and Lushai Scouts, and the Lushai Defence Scheme, support to harass Japanese troops, gather intelligence, and disrupt enemy movement. The 1st Assam Regiment, raised from diverse tribal groups of the North East, further highlighted the region's integration into the war's frontlines. Together, these labour and military engagements show that North East India was not a passive periphery but an active participant in the Allied war effort.

The involvement of these local communities in the war cannot be explained by a single factor, but rather by the intersection of political pressures, economic opportunities, cultural affinities, and strategic circumstances. British propaganda, fear of Japanese oppression, communication barriers, and apprehension of colonial reprisals all discouraged collaboration with the Japanese. At the same time, attractive economic incentives, pre-existing bonds with British officials, the role of chiefs in mobilization, shared Christian ties, encouraged participation in the Allied war effort. Thus, the people of North East India became integral to the Allied cause whether through labour or participation in intelligence and guerrilla networks, or direct combat service. Regardless of the reasons behind their participation, it cannot be overlooked that the labourers who worked hard under harsh conditions and the soldiers who fought and died in defence for an empire that wasn't their own were key contributors to the Allied victory against Japan.

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