

The Fiercest Battle of World War II

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What is unique about the Battle of Imphal during the World War II is that it was the fiercest Battle of the war. Moreover, most inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent had never heard of Imphal, the capital of Manipur. Manipur is located in a North East pocket of the country sharing an international border with Myanmar, and at the time the battle occurred, the British ruling in India was extremely interested in Burma. In this Battle known as “Japan Lan” it was the Japanese Imperial Army that were the aggressors. When they came to Manipur, the Manipuris were surprised to see them—as they had probably never encountered any Japanese, because in physical appearance they resembled one another, and because they did not know the purpose of the Japanese entry into Manipur. This paper highlights why the people of Manipur had empathy for the aggressor, and the reaction of the indigenous communities to the Japanese invasion and the Battle of Imphal.

Keywords: Japan Lan (Japan War), Meiteis, Kukis, Tangkhuls, Meitei-Pangal

Introduction

The most fierce battle of World War II was fought in Imphal in 1944. Yet Imphal, the capital of Manipur, a state in North East India, sharing an international border with Myanmar, was at the time, not known to the majority of Indians who resided outside of North-East India. Still less was it known to the Japanese, who came by the overland route through Burma to Manipur to fight this battle against the Allied Forces. After the Anglo-Manipuri war of 1891, a British Political Agent was stationed at Imphal and it was he who directed the affairs of the state especially during the minority of Maharaja Churachand Singh who was placed on the throne of Manipur by the British in 1907. The Raja had no sovereign powers; all vital functions and powers of the state were taken over or controlled by the paramount British power. The Political Agent was the “de facto” head of state (Dena, 2009).

The Choice of Imphal as WW II Battle Site

The strategic location of Manipur which was the gateway to S.E. Asia was and East Asia which was definitely of great interest to the British. Moreover, the British were determined to conquer Burma. Even after their conquest of Burma, the British needed Manipur not just as a frontier defense base, but to ensure smooth commercial exploitation of both Burma and Assam (Assam is a state in North East India).

Impact of the Battle of Imphal on Manipur

The Battle of Imphal in local parlance is often referred to as “Japan Lan” or “Japan Gal” (Japan’s War). This can be attributed to the fact that it was the Japanese who invaded Manipur. The Battle of Imphal whose

impact still resonates was fought in Manipur, where the native population were not very clear about its reasons, as it was a battle that for the most part involved the British Fourteenth Army and the Japanese Fifteenth Army.

When fighting commenced and bombing became common place, many Manipuris, especially those residing in and around Imphal, the capital of Manipur, had to leave their homes and possessions and find refuge in villages, with relatives, friends, and even strangers. They experienced emotional turbulence, and trauma of great intensity, uprooted and displaced because of a war fought by the British and the Japanese in their backyard. And after the war was over, their trauma did not end, as they had to contend with many difficulties when returning to their original homes; homes destroyed completely or partially, rice stocks hidden or buried in their homes or around it, rotten and spoiled (Rice is the staple diet of the Manipuris).

Distraught and anxious, the returnees were compelled to start life anew: rebuilding a house no matter how difficult, is far easier than rebuilding a life. Compensation for the destruction was provided by the government, but that did not assuage the grief and sorrow within their hearts. And many families who fled their homes, had to, out of necessity, leave behind the aged, sick, and even pregnant women, who were unable to walk on foot to a place of shelter (The only means of transport available and to only a few of the more affluent were bullock carts). A Manipuri family whose head was on good terms with the British Political Agent Christopher Grimson boarded a lorry, but were soon forced to disembark and proceed on foot, as “all hell broke loose”. The family’s young son unable to complete the trek, had to be carried piggy-back by two older sisters-in-law. To add to the woes of refugees was the deadly disease of malaria which claimed many lives (Singh, 2017) Some pregnant women refugees who fled from the epicentre of the battle were forced to give birth in trenches, ditches, the surrounding forests in difficult conditions. One such woman died while giving birth, and her new born infant was left with the dead mother, as it was not possible for any other refugee to nurture and care for the infant.

The war (WWII) was nowhere else as keenly felt than in the princely state of Manipur, but the war ushered in dramatic changes in the worldview of the Manipuris, it transformed the age old ways of living, ushered in changes in polity, society economy, because of the exposure of the native people to people of different nationalities (The Allied Forces were made up not only of British forces, but Americans, Indians, Canadians, Africans, etc.). The infrastructure of roads, bridges, airfields, and construction of various kinds undertaken by the Allied Forces was left for the Manipuris to use in whatever manner they deemed fit. A large number of Jeeps, trucks, vehicles were also left behind in Manipur much to the delight of the people. The pace of modernity was accelerated. Despite these advantages, the important fact to take cognisance of, is that as the Battle was fought in Manipur, the chief stakeholder was Manipur, yet even after the Battle began, the Manipuris were not taken into confidence about the conduct of the war.

An interesting impact of the Battle of Imphal is illustrated in the change in the demography of Manipur and especially Imphal. According to Census 1941, the population of Manipur was 5,12,069 and in the 1951 Census it was 5,77, 635. This would mean that despite the Battle occurring in 1944, there was no decrease but rather an increase in the population of approximately 65,000. The bulk of the dead in the aftermath of the war were primarily soldiers belonging to the Japanese Imperial Army and also the Allied Forces. The 1941 Census puts the urban population of Manipur as 99,716 but in 1951 this figure had decreased to 2,862 (Kamei, 2011). Two explanations can be advanced to explain this decrease. In the 1951 Census, an area of only 2 sq. miles was considered as Imphal Town (Imphal was at the time the only town in Manipur). In previous Censuses, the area of Imphal Municipality was considered as Imphal Town. Secondly, maybe, some original residents of the town who fled to the country side during the Battle, did not immediately return to Imphal after the Battle was over.

Manipur and Japan-Commonalities

It is possible that the Manipuris encountered the Japanese people for the first time at the time of the Battle of Imphal. Manipur is however one of the routes between South Asia and South East Asia and Central Asia. Various ethnic groups belonging to the Southern Mongoloid group, the Tibeto-Burmans, the Indo-Aryans, and a sizeable section of Tai (Shans) came to Manipur from pre-historic times. The present ethnic groups of Manipur are the descendants of those migrating people (Kabui, 2000).

India is a route of Japanese culture. Both regions are located within Monsoon Asia, Maritime Asia, and Forest of Shiny Leaves. North-East India and Japan share the common cultural tradition under the Forest Belt of Shiny Leaves, North East India, and is located in the centre of “East Asian Half Moon Arc”, creating the same human way of life under slash and burn cultivation (known as “jhum” in Manipur) in clothing, fashion, food cooking, housing, and utensils, like reeling of silk cocoons. Dyeing teeth in black (practised by the Maring Tribe of Manipur), fermented soyabean (hawai-ja in Manipur), wooden hut with high levelled floor and thatched roof and bamboo work. Praying to Supreme Existence in Nature: People have worshipped hundreds of nature Gods, such as big rocks, stone circle, tree, and waterfall (In Manipur proprietary offerings are made to nature deities). Water purification is a popular and basic practice (Yoshihiro, 2020). This practice is followed in Manipur too.

The Meiteis (the indigenous people who live in the Imphal Valley) believe in nature worship, as did the Kukis and Nagas before their conversion to Christianity. The Puyas (Sacred scriptures of the Meitei) reveal that ancestor worship lay at the base of all religious beliefs. All families trace their roots to the “Immortal Father”—Taibang Mapu Sidaba. The ancestral spirits, both divine and human are designated as “Umanglais”. One can perhaps draw a parallel between the Meitei Umanglais and the Japanese “Kami” defined by Ono as an honorific for noble virtues and authority. All beings have such spirits, so in a sense, all beings can be called Kami. The similarity also consists in both being ubiquitous, powerful, and sacred (Laishram, 2009).

These statements reveal a close affinity between the Japanese and the Manipuris. As expressed by a Manipuri who witnessed the Battle—the Japanese physical appearance was just like ours, the Japanese were not rude to us. They were good and helpful people, gave us medicines (Paojalhing, 2015). There were many reasons which consciously or unconsciously attracted the Manipuris towards the Japanese even though the latter were the aggressors in the Battle of Imphal.

The Kukis of Manipur in particular, welcomed the arrival of the Japanese and the Indian National Army troops to Manipur. This was reflected in the immensely popular song “Lakoi-Pa” of the year 1942.

Thei lou koljang toni lep banna
 Ging deng deng ‘e Japan lenna
 Huilen Kon
 Pego Lhemlhei, saigin bang
 Mao ding deng ‘e van tham jola Japan lenna
 Amao deng deng ‘e Japan lenna momg mo
 Vailoukon sunsel selung hem fante
 Atwi theikhong tabang ging deng deng
 Gin deng deng ‘e Japan lenna huilen Kongjin

English Translation:

From the horizon of Burma plain

Like the sweet note of the bamboo flute
 Japanese planes hums in the sky above.
 When the Japanese plane floats its sweet note
 The depressed farmer forgets his sadness
 Like the sweet melody of the water mill
 The Japanese plane floats its sweet note.
 This song is particularly revealing.

To the Kukis, the Japanese planes and the Japanese themselves, came to liberate the depressed Kukis from their state of sadness under the colonial regime (Haokip, 2011). The song got so deep rooted in their psyche that threats of bitter punishment or intimidation by the Britishers, to those who sang the song, failed to produce any effect (Guite, 2010).

Anthropologically, the direct ancestor of Japan was proto-Mongoloid, who originated from the South Part of East Asia in the late Palaeolithic Age. On the other, North-East India has been inhabited mostly by Austroloid and Southern Mongoloid, followed by Indo-Aryan. Due to the long distance between India and Japan, they had very few occasions of human interchanges (Yoshihiro, 2020).

Reasons for Supporting the Japanese Imperial Army

In 1944, 60,000 soldiers of the Japanese Imperial Army crossed the Chindwin River marching to Imphal. Of the indigenous communities, the Kukis were the most enthusiastic about the arrival of the Japanese Army into Manipur. There were reasons for them contacting the Japanese in and around the Chindwin belt in 1943. Two decades before the arrival of the Japanese the Kukis had been defeated in the Anglo-Kuki War (1917-1919). They were subsequently subjected to intensified colonial presence and exploitation.

Secondly, in addition to the Lambus (minor officials), there was a hierarchy of colonial officials, the sub-divisional officer, assisted by Lam-Subedars, Mohiris, interpreters, etc. The erstwhile old taxes were vigorously collected with certain additional ones. Besides, more Assam Rifle posts (para military regiments) were established and stationed in strategic positions (Shakespeare, 1929, p. 20). The advent of World War II further exacerbated the situation. Being in the militarily operational zone, the hillmen were impressed for various military projects, such as forced labour. The hillmen were also used as porters (Administrative Report of Manipur 1943-1944).

The influx of refugees from Burma and labourers brought several new strains of malaria, dysentery, small pox, and cholera, which even infected livestock (livestock were a source of wealth). This was exacerbated by crop failure in the hills since 1942. Many Kukis fled their homes to refugee camps set up by some generous Kuki Chiefs. With the coming of the INA (Indian National Army of Subhas Chandra Bose), Japanese forces were considered to be “God Sent Saviours”, by the Kukis, to free themselves of colonial yoke (Guite, 2010). The leaflets which were air-dropped for local support were note-worthy; Now is the time for India to get her independence. This is the Golden Opportunity to drive the British out of India. The Imperial Japanese Force have full power, and are very sincere in their decision to assist you fight against Britain (History of Freedom Movement Papers, R-1, 49/3, NA I). These leaflets certainly influenced the Kukis illustrated by the career of Pu Capt. Lamkthoang of the INA. He stated: “I am not an ordinary man; I was a Captain for the Independence of India.” (Pu is pre-fixed before the name of a Kuki gentleman).

The years 1942-1943 were challenging times for people living in the trans-border region of India and Burma. The Japanese/INA after annexing Burma, planned their “forward policy” and started recruiting the ethnic communities in their intelligence networks of Hikari Kikan (Rising Sun Organisation) and Nishi Kikan (Western

Organisation). Along with the enrolment Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose made appeals to the people to support the Japanese and the INA. At this juncture, Pu Nohhao, the Chief of Wayang village, and father of Pu Lamkhothang, was tortured and arrested for attending a meeting at Chahmol village, that was summoned by the Japanese Army. This infuriated Pu Lamkhothang, especially as he had joined the Assam Regiment in 1939 to do something for his country. He was determined to leave his Regiment; he went down to Burma, met with the Japanese Army and the INA and joined the latter. Whereas he served as a jawan (ordinary soldier) in the Assam Regiment, he was appointed a Captain by the INA, and later promoted to Civil Organiser and Facilitator. He led many battles, and convinced members of his community and neighbouring tribes to support the INA (Lunminthang, 2020).

The Kuki virtue of sacrificial spirit prompted them to join the INA in hundreds. They were a gallant and martial lot, who among the people of North East India, could challenge the invincible power of the “British Empire” (Gangte, 1993). The Japanese also stated that they had come “to your country to set you free from the British bondage. They (the British) seek their own good and satisfaction. Their aim is to get all for themselves.” (Japanese Propaganda, File No. 29).

Despite the inconvenience caused to the local hillmen by the Japanese occupation, especially continuous demands for “Kome” (rice), the Kukis generally portray the Japanese as a valiant and fearless people, who did not indulge in harassment of women and children, and who paid for the “Kome” in Japanese currency.

The Tangkhul Reaction to the Japanese Invasion

The Tangkhuls, a major tribe of Manipur had a different reaction to the invasion. Innocent Tangkhuls lost their lives although they were not specifically targeted. The Japanese invasion of India came during the month of March 1944 in the Tangkhul Hills. The first inroads into Tolloi occurred on the 26th March. The twin villages of Tolloi and Phungton were directed to provide provisions and porters. But the hearts and loyalties of the villages were with the British. Tolloi was an important village, it lost a brilliant student who was sniped to death in 1944, on a mistaken belief that he was a Japanese soldier, and another 12 students were blown to bits by a live World War II bomb explosion near the school compound (Raikhan, 2016).

The general Tangkhul public had no knowledge of who the Japanese were, and what their purpose was. The Tangkhul country for the first time became aware of the harbingers of war in the form of Japanese bombers and fighters flying over their homeland towards Imphal with terrifying noise and aggression. The Battle at Shangshak was one of the fiercest and most important battles in the North-East, Ukhrul (headquarters of the Tangkhul Hills) came to be occupied by the Japanese.

After the capture of Ukhrul and Shangshak, the Village Chief and elders of Tolloi were summoned for provisions and porters, and the Chief was detained to ensure good and timely action. The Japanese were authoritarian in demanding provisions and service, although they did pay for these in Japanese currency which though a novelty, possessed no buying power in Manipur. During the heavy gun battles between the Japanese and the British Indian soldiers, the Tangkhul elders were constantly worried about the conditions of their homes (they had perforce to leave their homes and find shelter in the jungles), the rice stock-pile and livestock, and the men from the village requisitioned as porters by the Japanese.

Villagers spent seven months in the wooded jungle and returned home in October 1944. The war made the lives of the people of Shangshak miserable. Oh, the valiant Japanese Army, many lost their lives, we will never forget the memory of the brave soldiers (Aziz, VR, 2014).

Most of the Japanese force which reached the gates of Imphal, met defeat. Stories abound in Naga villages of how the retreating Japanese soldiers, many without arms, were followed by Nagas and slaughtered, of how they reached villages, begging for food with swollen mouths and bellies, how they would hungrily eat the food left uneaten by pigs in their troughs. The bodies of dead Japanese soldiers lay strewn on roads and paths, unable to give proper burial by their comrades or villagers (Raikhan, 2016).

As the Battle of Imphal wore on, the problem of supplies for the Japanese worsened (The Japanese turned to the civilian population to meet their needs). The Japanese seized any available paddy and killed livestock; if they paid, it was said to be Japanese or Burma notes or forged Rs.10 British Indian notes (Lydall, 2015).

The only time the Japanese killed someone in the village was when a gentleman from Lungphu-Yarteo, promised to give them 40 coolies but did not keep his promise. They shot him (Katoch, 2016, pp. 29-30). Yet, the villagers were attracted both by the friendly nature and the generosity of the Japanese as also their valour.

The Kuki Reaction to the Japanese Invasion

The Kukis were one of the first groups to contact the Indo-Japanese forces in the Chindwin Valley of Burma. The Japanese stated that they had come to set the country free from British bondage. “We shall be brothers and friends as we are all Mongolians.” (Haokip, 2011, p. 86; Japanese Propaganda, File No. 29). A Kuki lady stated: “The Japanese army arrived in our area (Gamnom Village) set up camps, took rice and vegetables from us, which we readily gave. There was no case of Japanese harassing the villages during their stay.” (Haokip, 2019, 131-133). Nemjahat’s experience was different. She refers to two villagers being blindfolded, dragged to many places, and finally bayoneted to death.

The Kukis who witnessed the war, stated that the Japanese soldiers occupied the built areas of a village, while the local population had to find shelter elsewhere, and requisitioned their food supplies because they were starving. However, the Japanese were courteous, valiant, and fearless. But when they died, their bodies were never picked up—priority was given to British soldiers, then Indian, and Gurkha soldiers.

Another reason for Kuki support to the Japanese INA forces was the origin myth used by both the Kukis, and to a much lesser extent the Japanese. A Kuki Chief, Nungkhogin of Suangsang welcomed the Japanese to his house. “Our generation started from two brothers, and we are closely related. We are very glad you came to us.” (Administrative Report of Manipur 1943-1944). Zamkithang, a second clerk in the SDO, Tamenglong office stirred up the Kuki people secretly saying: “The relationship with the Japanese is that our clan originated from two brothers: Saungthu (Chongthu) and Saungja (Chonaja). The Thadou (Kuki) clan are descendants from Saungthu and the Japanese are from Saungja, so we are very closely related, and cannot but help them (Japanese).” (Katoch, 2016).

Meitei Pangal Encounter With the Japanese

The population of the Meitei Pangal recorded in the Census of 1951 was only a little over 31,000 individuals. In the Pangal village of Kwaktha, the villagers became distraught and disturbed by the sound of guns continuously firing, and bombs falling. Not conversant with the cause of the war, the villagers decided to flee and seek shelter elsewhere. The British had given orders that no houses should be left standing, as they could be used by the Japanese to hide in. Rather than having their houses destroyed by soldiers, the villagers in desperation destroyed their own homes, and hid their rice stocks under the earth. But when they returned to Kwaktha after the war, they

found the village littered with the corpses of Japanese soldiers. Their reaction was to collect the remains of the dead, and bury them (Annhaa, 2020).

The Meitei Reaction

The Meiteis, the majority indigenous group that dwell in the valley of Imphal had this to say: The war bewitched the Meitei nation, there was a natural movement modifying traditional beliefs in accordance with modern ideas. Manipuris developed an ebbing consciousness that the world is vast, with different races, religions, practices, and culture. Manipuris have experienced the exceptional which couldn't have happened without Japan Lan. Without it, Manipur would still be struggling for a while for Independence. For hill dwellers, there was an intense arousal for a belonging, dreams of equality, fairness, and justice (Singh, 2017).

Everyone was a victim in the war. The war did not determine who was right, but it decided who survived. It was people against people, and nations against nations. The horror started at noon, an air assault at Koirengei. There were seventeen bomber aircrafts—they said the pilots were all 15 years old Japanese girls. Bombs and sirens became a routine thing. In Khurai Konsam Leikai (a locality in Imphal) at the Chingangbam Gulap's Mandap when Ras Leela (Lord Krishna's dance with the Gopis) was being performed, 300 people gathered in the Mandap died (Tamphasana, 2020).

War impacted everyone, irrespective of status. I too, even though I belong to the Manipuri Royalty, had harrowing experiences. We had to flee home along with my mother the Queen, and a good part of the war years were spent as refugees in makeshift arrangement in somebody else's portico, or some such places (Maharaj Kumari Binodini Devi). Ningthoujam Ongbi Ibempishak stated that the worst impact of the war was the fear experienced by booming guns, terrifying explosions exacerbated by chaos, lawlessness, numerous gangs prowling—looting people and homes. Insecurity was rampant. Despite these travails, a woman from Thanga related that the villagers pounded rice, and sent it on boats to the Japanese base at Moirang (the site at which Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose hoisted the Indian Flag).

Most local families had to live in a single homestead; some 25,000 people were given just two days to move out. Rice stored in granaries on timber piles was extremely vulnerable to fire, and rice hidden under mud floors, or in a garden, was dug, sprinkled with petrol, and burnt (Ian Lyall Grant). At other times, local houses were burnt. A woman who stayed behind gave birth inside a trench. In the evacuation, a child was left behind, not to be seen again (Katoch, 2016).

The Manipuris were not partial to either of the warring sides, but after the war they returned to villages ravaged and dotted with bomb craters, with scarce any trees (Birachandra, 2019, pp. 90-91). A student recalled the first bombing of Manipur on May 10th 1942 by Japanese aircraft. Imphal was enveloped with thick smoke and thugs were looting people (Singh, 2019). He described the war years as hard. When he and others returned to Imphal, they found that the walls of their homes had been knocked down to prevent intruders staying within, by the British and Indian soldiers. Khumanthem Kala's mother and his family sheltered a wounded Japanese soldier at great risk to themselves.

Thousands of soldiers in vehicles with strange equipment and food items began pouring into Imphal. Manipuri children especially were excited to see these new people and did petty jobs for them in return for new exotic food items or clothes. But very few Manipuris actually sided with the British, except for a few thousand tribals of the "V" Force led by Capt. Bob Khathing.

Conclusion

The Manipuris, whether of the plains or hills, for the most part, did not actively participate or support either the Japanese or the Allies in the Battle of Imphal. They nevertheless were impacted by the Battle in many ways: they suffered deprivation and discomfort, they were fascinated by, and emulated, in part, some of the lifestyle features of the foreigners in dress, food habits, world view, etc. But the majority of the people, especially the Kukis, had great empathy for the invading Japanese and particularly admired their courage as also their Code of Honor—Bushido Code.

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