



The Marginalisation of the Nagas During The Battle of Kohima.

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Abstract:

The Battle of Kohima was one of the most furious battles that was fought in the Naga Hills during World War II which had a huge impact on the lives of the Naga people as they came to realise the threat of war on humanity. The paper will be analysing the narratives of the Nagas during that period and explores the Naga's experiences as a marginalised group of people. It will also try to analyse the position of the Nagas during the Battle of Kohima through the narratives of the Nagas. In order to understand the impact of British imperialism in the Naga Hills along with the trauma and the sufferings that they had to go through with reference to the book *The Battle of Kohima* by Mekhrie Khate, et al., and *The Road to Kohima: The Naga Experiences in the 2nd World War* by Charles Chasie and Harry Fecitt.

Keywords: Marginalisation, Battle of Kohima, Nagas, British, Japanese, narratives, people, villagers.

The Battle of Kohima also referred to as the forgotten war or the Japanese invasion by the Nagas was "voted 'Britain's greatest Battle'" in 2013 (Chasie and Fecitt 10). It was fought between the British and the Japanese in the hilly region of North East India in the Naga Hills i.e., the present-day Nagaland from 4th April 1944 to 22nd June 1944 during World War II as part of the Burma Campaign where it played a significant role due to its geographic location since Kohima along with Imphal served as a gateway for the Japanese to enter India.

The Nagas as a distinct group of people comprised of a diverse indigenous group belonging to the Tibeto-Burman speaking people. They consist of various tribes with different languages, customs, cultures, etc., living in "North Western Myanmar and in the Indian States of Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam (Chasie and Fecitt 22). The Nagas society is essentially rural in character divided among themselves based on village until the arrival of the British in the nineteenth century.

The Anglo-Nagas relationship led the Nagas to witness a transformation in the life in various aspects such as cultural, political, economic, etc. It also brought about the Battle of Kohima in 1944 during which the British and the Japanese fought in the Naga Hills where the Japanese 31st Division attempt to capture the Kohima Ridge from the British which led to an intense battle between the Japanese and the INA soldiers on one side and the allied force on the other.

The objective of this paper is to analyse the Nagas experience as a marginalised group of people during the Battle of Kohima. It will analyse how they suffered innumerable at the hand of both the British and the Japanese soldiers as the British bombed their village while the Japanese killed and ate their cattle, poultry, etc., leading to the destruction of many villages and livestock. Thus, during this period the Nagas were living at the mercy of the British and the Japanese which can be seen from Nohol Khatso statement quoted in *The Road to Kohima: The Naga Experience in the 2nd World War*, where he said, “What to do, we had to learn to be friends with both British and Japanese in order to survive!” (Chasie and Fecitt 59).

The Nagas who were loyal towards the British during the Battle of Kohima suffered not only at the hands of the Japanese but also at the hand of the British who bombed their villages and burnt their houses. This can be seen from the narration of Lhoutuo Shüya of Meriema village who stated that:

When the British bombed the Japanese camp, the shed where we stored hay caught fire. Some of it had burnt and there were still some unburnt so we tried to put out the fire but a British plane flew past several times and we hid. The situation worsened as we fled from the village and ran towards the New Secretariat but some stayed behind in the village. In the night we were fearful and ran from place to place because we could be by either British or Japanese, mistaking us for their enemy (Khate, et al. 77-78).

This instance is an example of how the Nagas as a marginalised group of people had to suffer amid the battle even though they showed their loyalty towards the British. Since the British bombed and burnt the Japanese camp in the process of which the villages were burnt and destroyed along with the Japanese camp as a result affecting the Nagas directly or indirectly. As shows us how the Nagas suffered as it explains how the shed where they stored hay caught fire due to the bombing of the Japanese camp and they were unable to save it due to fear since a British plane flew past several time. Lhoutuo Shüya also narrates how their fear grew more at night as they could be attacked by either side mistaking them as their enemy. Therefore, all they could do was to pray and hope that they might not encounter such an unpleasant situation as a result of which the people were living a life of fear.

Another such example can be seen from the narration of Noumvüo Khruomo of Kohima village who narrates how “the night the war began they buried their grain and fled to their fields. But soon they learned that ‘The Japanese were eating our grain ... killed and ate our domestic animals ... British threw firebombs and torched our village’ (Chasie and Fecitt 64) portrays the sufferings that the Nagas as a marginalised group of people had to go through during the battle. It shows us how the villagers were hiding their grains from the Japanese by even going to the extent of burying it since the Japanese were

eating their grains and domestic animals. While on the other hand their villages were being destroyed by the British. Charles Chasie quoted Vingotsore where he states:

‘I was angry when the Japanese started doing whatever they liked with our livestock and took them whenever they liked. But I was really hurt when they fed my entire standing crops to their horses – crops that were meant to feed my family for a year. Taking food from starving people and feeding animals is incomprehensible to us and considered an extreme taboo!’ (Chasie and Fecitt 59).

Here the anger of a marginalised group of people can be seen from the narration of Vingotsore who could do nothing but only express his feeling of anger when the Japanese started doing everything they pleased without taking into consideration the feelings of the Nagas. It also portrayed the desperate image of the Nagas during that period who were suffering from starvation when Vingotsore narrates about how upset she was seeing the Japanese fed her entire standing crops to their horses which were meant to feed her family for a year by pointing out how the Nagas considered taking of food from starving people and feeding it to animals as an extreme taboo which cannot be justified. It also shows how the soldiers did not even try to understand and think for the owner of the crops and his effort before feeding it to their horses. We can also understand how hurt the farmer might have felt seeing his hard work to feed his family being used to feed the horses. While witnessing all this he must have been really hurt worrying about how he would be able to feed his family since the crops he had grown were being destroyed.

It also points out how the Nagas as a marginalised group of people were not given due respect which had been portrayed in the description when the Japanese came to the Naga Hills in Phesama village through the story of a woman named Satono. She was very excited hearing about the coming of the Japanese as they were said to be of the same race. Thus, she considered them to be her brothers but when the Japanese first came, “To the surprise and amusement of many, the six Japanese who first came, walked straight to Satono’s house and in no time, they had dug trenches in her front yard and killed her prize hen and were cooking it for their supper ... She would not say anything but her displeasure could be seen on her face” (Khaté, et al. 39). This can be seen as an example of the Nagas as a marginalised group of people who were looked down upon by the Japanese who came and walked straight to a person’s house and dug trenches in the front yard without even getting permission from the owner whether she was willing to let them dig their trench in her front yard. Those soldiers might have thought of themselves as superior to the villagers and that despite their actions the villagers had no right to stop them or oppose them. Thus, they started doing whatever they thought they should do without even bothering to speak to the villagers and explain the reason for their actions. They even killed the prized hen of the woman and cooked it for supper without even asking her whether she would be willing to give them her hen and share with them. The action of the Japanese here can be seen as arrogant towards the Nagas whom they see as someone inferior to them. The description of the woman’s silence in seeing all these things shows us how annoyed and disappointed the woman might have been that she had no words to express her feelings though the people around her could understand her feeling by looking at the expression of her face.

The Nagas during the Battle of Kohima worked even as labours, spies, guides, etc. This can be seen from the narration of various people such as Zhovire of Jakhama village narrates how the Japanese during that period employed the villagers:

who were found sturdy enough...to carry ammunitions across to Lierie where the battle was raging. Women and old men were sent to gather edible herbs or pound grain ... Labour was paid in the beginning with the Japanese money but as the war became more grim, forced labour and forced extraction of ration of ration became the order of the day (Khate, et al. 32).

It shows us how the Naga men who were found to be well-built were made to work for the Japanese as labour carrying their ammunition while women and old men were made to collect edible herbs and pound the grain for them. This demand of the Japanese later turned out to be a burden for the Nagas who could hardly feed themselves during that period. Neiselie of Kohima village recounts another incident about how they would be forced to work for the Japanese since the “Japanese would come and write down names of the men and boys who were to carry loads for them. I was twelve but I said I was ten years because I knew that they did not take boys below twelve (Khate, et al. 54). It also shows us how some people lies in order to be exempted from working for the Japanese during the battle by pointing out how the Japanese would force the villagers to work for them. Noumvüo Khruomo also narrated his experience of working as labours to carry the loads of the Japanese along with seven other villagers for nine days during which they were not able to eat the food provided to them since they were so deeply troubled in their thoughts. He also narrates about how they worked for the British as labour, stretch carrier and spies as he said, “Our people helped the British, we spied on the Japanese and reported their positions...I carried loads for the British from Ketsiezou to Meriema. Some men carried bodies from Bayavü to Seitho on stretchers (Khate, et al. 49-50, 55). All this shows how the Nagas as a marginal group of people were considered to be insignificant and inferior as the both the British and the Japanese directly or indirectly made use of the Nagas to fulfil their own interest. The Japanese took away the food and livestock of the Nagas and forced them to work for them as labour while the British tried to win the support of the Nagas by providing them protection and food supplies as a result of which the Nagas help them work as spies, guide, labour, stretch carrier, etc.

Thus, during this period the Nagas as a marginalised group of people had to suffer from both the hand of the British and the Japanese. As the British destroyed their homes after finding out that the Japanese were camping in the village while the Japanese came and took away everything that could be salvaged after the British left in the process of which the Naga's were left to suffer. Despite of all these the Nagas remained loyal to the British throughout the Battle of Kohima since the British were able to win the trust of the Nagas with their patience and by providing them with security and rations during the battle.

Work Cited:

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