



Participation of the Nagas in World War I as labour corps; Awakening of the political consciousness of Naga sentimentalism.

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ABSTRACT

During the first world war due to an innumerable death caused by the war, Britain and its allies France faced a threat of defeat in the western front of France against the invasion of Germany. Therefore, the necessity to raise the human force became inevitable, France appealed to its allies for the support and Britain turned towards India for the same. In 1917, British secretary of the state for India, Austin Chamberlin decided to raise 50,000 Indian labour corps. The British government started recruitment in the Northeast for the non-combatant role and thus 2000 Naga were recruited as the labour corps and an estimated 1680 participated in the world war I under the command of the then Deputy commissioner of Naga Hills, Herbert Charles Barnes. The Naga enrolled in the labour corps due to various grounds but their exposure to a complete new civilization changed their outlook towards the lifestyle, ideology and political perception about the importance and need to preserve their social, cultural, traditions and political rights. This articles focus on the participation and contribution, the need of the government to acknowledge the sacrifices of the Indian labour corps and to understand the complexities of sentimentalism of the Naga in solving a long protracted Naga imbroglio.

Keywords - World War I, Naga Labour corps, British rule, Naga Hills, Naga Sentimentalism.

INTRODUCTION

In 1915, the war committee that regulate affairs of the war under the 'British war committee' was informed about the shortage of non-combatant labour force in the region of western front of France negligence of which will led to defeat of allies in the western front. The shortage of non-combatant arises, as the active combatant could not be spared out to do the works of non-combat roles. Unskilled labour was necessitated inevitably in assisting the soldiers on the battle fields and other numerous works for constructing roads, laying railways tracks, building trenches, supplying and handling arms and ammunition, docks, quarries, hutting, supply and stores depot, grave digging, forestry, produced and procured essential services to army as cooking, laundry, moving supplies and stores, unloading ships, trains etc.¹

¹ Most labour corps works behind far frontline but the Indian Corps work close to frontlines as equal as active combatants in the warzone.

FUNCTIONS AND DUTIES OF NAGA LABOUR CORPS:

Besides the manual functions, they were also tasked with salvaging and repairing the destroyed roads and bridges, tanks, ships, paving the new roads for the soldiers and machineries to pass through. They dug out the trenches in war zones. Naga labour corps was also given the task to carry the food and water to the combatant soldiers in the trenches. They were to supply arms and ammunitions, cooling down the weapons with water when overheated. Evacuating the injured soldiers from battlefield to a safer zone and in the process of saving the soldiers in the battlefield, Naga labour corps perished. The non-combat support was indispensable for the success of the war; they perform various jobs like spying the enemy's movements and activities, transport war equipment to different places where vehicles and aircrafts cannot be transported. Naga labour corps carried the medication as first aid, medical treatment of injured troops.²

REASON FOR THE RECRUITMENT OF LABOUR CORPS:

In January 1917, Austen Chamberlin secretary of state for India discovered that 50,000 men from Africa had already contributed its assistance and sent to France towards the support of allies under South African Native Labour corps. He wanted to send an equal number of troops from India to serve as a labour in war ravaged areas of France.³ So on January 1917, the secretary of State for India Austen Chamberlin wrote to the Viceroy of India Lord Chelmsford asking if India could supply labour to deploy in western front of France. The bigger provinces as Madras, Punjab, Bombay, United province had already sent an active combatant soldier in great number and therefore the responsibility of providing a human labour resource fell into the responsibility on the province of Assam, Orissa, North Western Frontier.⁴

The reason why Britain sought labour force for France was because during the First World War, Britain was in alliance with France and since there was a huge necessitated of the labour force without the support of which France and its allies were bound to be defeated at the Invasion of Germany and its allied forces. These alarming needs of men drove Britain to carry out the recruitment drives even in India as India being under the British rule and their presence in Naga Hills made it to conduct the recruitment of corps for sending to France.⁵ The secretary of state for India enquired from the Assam administration whether it was in a position to raise 50,000 men for the labour corps, Assam government agreed to arrange 8,000 men from the different province of the Hills under its administration, this offer was accepted by the government of India and the state secretary. The idea was to raise 2000 men each from Lushai hills, Naga hills, Manipur hills, Khasi and Garo hills combined. The lucrative baits was that those who volunteered for the corps should be exempted from the payment of taxes, the house tax levied on them would be remitted. The labour corps was raised from Garo hills, Khasi hills, Lushai hills, Naga hills, Manipur hills and Chins of Myanmar. Each group unit consist of 500 men commanded by the British officer.⁶

FORMATION OF NAGA LABOUR CORPS:

On 9th March 1917, the order was issued by the then SDO and the Deputy Commissioner of Naga Hills Herbert Charles Barnes to raise the corps in Naga Hills.⁷ As directed the corps was formed under the name 21st Naga Labour Corps under the command of H.C Barnes, the then Deputy commissioner of Naga Hills with an assistance of Dobashis, clerks and village elders. The secretary of the state was able to raise 20,000 from different administrative quarter from Indian provinces and the rest 30,000 was assured to be recruited in case of requirement needed in future.⁸ Nearly 3500 Naga were sent from different areas of Naga Hills and Manipur areas to France as labour corps. The recruits from the Naga hills was divided into four companies as 15th, 16th, 17th and 18th Naga Labour Corps but were renamed as 35th, 36th, 37th, 38th Naga Labour Corps in order to avoid confusion with other Indian Labour Corps serving in Mesopotamia under the same name. Astonishingly a number of 2000 Nagas were recruited, the Lothas

² *Heralding the past and the future, WW.I SNLCA, 2018, pp. 10, 24-30*

³ *Ed. Barrett, The Naga Labour corps, 14 feb 2019. pp.1-2*

⁴ *Pratap Chetri, Northeast India and the First World War, 4 feb 2016, p.5.*

⁵ *Pratap Chetri, Northeast India and the first world war, 4feb 2016, op.cit., p.5*

⁶ *Heralding the past and the future, WW.I SNLCA, 2018, pp.10-11.)*

⁷ *Rengmas and World War-1, pp.3-4*

⁸ *France Ki Kata Ko, Mao Naga labour corps in First World War, 30 Dec 2018, p.1.*

and the majority Sema made a good response, the corps was composed of Sema-1000, Lothas-400, Rengmas 200, Aos -200 and Trans frontier Nagas -200.⁹

DEPARTURE OF LABOUR CORPS TO FRANCE:

The 35th Company left the Naga Hills as a part of the Labour Corps on 21st April and sailed to France on 26th April. Kuhoi Sukhayi Sema was chosen as the chief of Naga labour corps to command over the corps. The corps was taken in two groups, the first group consisted of 668 men that went out from the Naga Hills on 21st April reached France on 21st June 1917. The second group consists of 992 men reached France on 2nd July 1917. At the gulf of Taranto, they boarded a train for Marseilles, from there they were sent to places such as Mametz, Le transloy, Haute Avesnes, Contalmaison, Guillemont, Arras, Abancourt and Belgium.¹⁰ The Third group consisting of almost 817 recruit were diverted to Anglo-Kuki war. In 1917, Maharaja of Manipur signed agreement with the British for raising the labour force and thus as per the proposed agreement a recruitment drive was carried out in different villages. These villages were required to supply able-bodied men in proportion to their population. Many villagers were unhappy at the recruitment of force by the Maharaja, unwilling to send their men to unknown places from where they may not return but still then in the first recruitment drive 2000 forces from different tribe was raised under the banner of 22nd Manipur labour corps.¹¹ In the winter of 1917, there was a protest in the Naga Hills and Manipur. The Naga recruits who were enrolled under the labour corps protested on the duration of stay in France, they demanded that they would serve only for 1 year on the other hand the Kukis in Manipur protested refusing to join the Labour corps when another requisition was placed for fresh labour recruits, they revolted and took up arms against the Maharaja and the British. In 1918, British immediately ordered to discharge those Naga recruits who were protesting for the duration of enrollment to be deploy to repress the Kuki uprising in Manipur. The number of 817 Naga recruits consisted of Angamis- 480, Aos -120, Sema- 90, Lothas -60, Kuki and Kacha Nagas -60.¹² The Naga warriors were deployed to suppress the Kuki uprising in 1918.¹³

In January 1918, the war office wanted to extend Indian Labour Corps and also wanted the extension of Naga Labour Corps for another 12 months but many companies refused to sign and did not want to spent any more time in France than necessary. The Indian Labour Corps started agitation in protest of the extension of the duration of stay, strikes and threat of arson was carried out, consequently they were allowed to send back home and by end of May 1918, Naga Labour Corps sailed for India. The government gives out a war loan, the war loan was remarkable that approximately Rupees 26,264 were given as a war loan during 1917-18 which increased to 39,000 rupees during 1918-1919.¹⁴

In June 1918, about 63 Naga Labour Corps returned home back to Naga Hills. The exact numbers of returnees are unknown due to scarcity of sources and also due to lack of an effort undertaken in this pursuit however in recent years due to the celebration of centenary jubilee, various tribes have taken an effort to preserve the legacy of sacrifices rendered by Labour corps.

REMUNERATION FOR JOINING LABOUR CORPS:

The Naga labour corps were assigned in Nametz, Le translay, Haute, Aresnes, Contalmaison, Guillemont. They were not enlisted as combatant but never less must be discipline, fit, strong, agile. A leader from each tribe was chosen and one chief leader was chosen from among the Naga to command, control and assists the British.¹⁵ In addition the portering and constructing camps, the corps also built roads and collected salvage for battlefield and help release the British troops to go to the front.¹⁶ Some emolument and remuneration of the Naga labour corps are:

⁹ Dept. of Art and Culture, 66 index -2, Kohima ,Nagaland

¹⁰ Ed.Barrett, Naga Labour Corps, 14 feb 2019.

¹¹ In early 1917, Maharaja Churachand signed an agreement with the Manipur British political agent Lt. Colonel H.W.G Cole to recruit 2,000 men for the war effort in France divided into four companies,500 meitei, 700 tangkhuls, 400 kukis, 300 moa tribes

¹² *Heralding the past and the future*, 2018, WW.I. SNLCA, 2018, pp.20-21.

¹³ Asojini Rachael Kashena, *Enduring loss, NESRC Monograph series-2*, 2017, p.5.

¹⁴ 662 Index 2- Naga Hills, Assam secretariat political, pp. 39-80.

¹⁵ Ed.Barrett, *The Naga Labour Corps*, 14 feb 2019)

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.3

- i. Emolument of 15 rupees per month within Indian territory and ration will be provided.
- ii. Once ventured outside of India territory, an amount of 20 rupees will be given per month.
- iii. Extra wages of Rs 200 be given as soon as they embarked on a ship.
- iv. After 6 month, one month extra wage will be added.
- v. Remission of house tax of 2 rupees for recruited families.
- vi. If injured, maimed during the war, they will be compensated half of soldier entitlement in accordance to Indian army regulation volume 1 paragraph 1060.
- vii. If killed or died during the war, their family or clan shall be compensated an amount of rupees 300 as one time ex-gratia.

These are the few baiting benefits offered for joining the Naga Labour Corps. The British government bluffed most of these promises.¹⁷ The man signed a contract stating they would serve in the labour corps only for a year. In addition to having medical examination and being given uniform they were drilled for a few weeks on how to march in formation, how to react under fire and how to cross the road in cities. British also informed people that joining the labour corps would allow them to travel to Europe if join the labour corps.¹⁸

Naga were also directed to carry their traditional attires along with the daos, spears, and gears. Before they left the Naga hills, they were asked to come wearing full traditional attires and were asked to display the typical Naga warrior dance, as they danced they were photographed and these deadly warrior looks photograph were circulated as a propaganda to spread and create a fear psychosis in the minds of an enemy and it is said that the German halted their march for a week after seeing those photograph and propaganda that the British has recruited the Naga from the north eastern India whose spears can killed anyone that is targeted.¹⁹

AWAKENING OF POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS FROM THE PARTICIPATION:

It is evident from the fact that the Naga were not being exposed to modern civilization either prior to the advent of British or before the participation in the First World War. The former due to the isolation primarily because of the practices of head hunting and later due to British administrative policies in Naga areas. There has been a lesser contact with the outside world exception of the contact with bordering areas of Assam. The First World War acted as catalyst that hastened the process and exposure to the modern civilization and act as a driving factor in the growth of education and spread of Christianity in one of the most remote areas. Balfour give an account about the Naga in France that in September 1917, on the Eastern France, he came across a gang of Naga engaged in road repairing on the war zone within the sound of guns. They appeared to be quite at home and unperturbed. After the participation in the World War I, Naga realized that their socio-political identity need to be protected and the importance of living together in good will, brotherhood and fraternity. The idea of sacrificing the life for the nation, patriotism for the motherland was infused in their mind and therefore the process of proselytizing the ideology of nationalism was indoctrinate into the blood and veins of the Naga through their exposure to European nationalism and patriotism. They felt the need to bring the Naga who have been living in isolation from one another under one banner to achieve the common goal and thus Naga club was formed, this was the first socio- political organization formed by the representatives of tribal in the form of common wealth of tribal Nations.²⁰

FORMATION OF THE NAGA CLUB:

Consequently, after the First World War in 1918 the Naga club was formed with the branch at Kohima and Mokokchung. This was formed on the advice and initiative of the British whose aim was to unite all the Naga tribes and to bring them into one platform. The Naga Club was the first organization to have the representative of the most of the Naga tribes, government servant; leading headmen of the villages.²¹ The Naga club provided the needed social and political foundation to the Naga tribes and was symbolic of the

¹⁷ *The Pioneer World War I, Naga Labour Corps 1917-18, 24 Nov 2018.*

¹⁸ *Ed Barrett, op.cit., p.2*

¹⁹ *Heralding the Past and the future, 2018.*

²⁰ *A. Lanunungung Ao, From Phizo to Muivah, New Delhi, 2002, pg, 41*

²¹ *Dr. Aosenba, The Naga Resistance Movement, New Delhi, 2001, p.22*

emerging or rather incipient sense of solidarity among the Nagas.²² The road to Naga nationhood perhaps began with the participation of Labour corps in the First World War. Twenty Naga came together to form the Naga club.²³ The Naga club with the main objective like promotion of understanding, development of fraternal feeling and unity among the Nagas²⁴, thus came into existence. Some of the aims and objective of the Naga club are:

- i. To consolidate the socio-political identity of the Nagas .
- ii. To make a distinct Naga Nationality above the tribal identity.
- iii. To developed fraternal feeling of various Nagas tribal Communities.
- iv. To look after the welfare and unity of all Naga tribes.

The primary objective of the Club was to unite the Naga and therefore the Naga club was formed.²⁵ Those who went to France during the First World War realized that they belonged to one ethnic group, prior to which they are not much in contact and secondly they experience the patriotism of western people since they were ready to sacrifice their lives for their country.”²⁶ Nandita Haksar writes that;

“The Naga club was formed mostly by those Nagas who had gone to France during the First World 1914-18 as a part of the Labour Corps... After returning to their homeland, they would work towards unity and friendship among the various Naga tribes. These Nagas together with the British official formed the Naga club in 1918”²⁷

Eastern Kire accounts the experience of the Naga labour corps;

“During the first world war, 2000 Nagas were sent to France as Labour corps. The traumatic experience of the first world war produced insecurity and stirred alive the thought process that led to the birth of a new and wider political consciousness and emergence of a common identity accepted by all who came to call themselves Nagas. These senses of Naga identity is revealed in the assertion the Nagas made in writing to Simon commission in 1929.”²⁸

While Jonathan Glancey writes;

“Those who made it back home to the Naga hills became allies and even close friend. The British, it has said were quietly delighted they helped established a Naga club in 1918 for the returning heroes of France hoping that this would go some way to putting an end to internecine war, making it easier for the British run the country, what actually happened was that the members of Naga club learned to articulate National rather than purely tribal demands.”²⁹

Another Interesting account about the formation was given by Jelle J.P. Wouter;

“Over a time, Christian discourses, symbols and slogan became deeply intertwined with the Naga movement as evidenced by the still popular slogan, ‘Nagaland for Christ’ During the first world war about 2000 Nagas were sent to France...they were introduced for the first time to the ideas of Nation, Nationalism and Patriotism.”³⁰

Henry Balfour the then curator of Pitt’s river museum came across gang of Nagas in France engaging in road repairing in the war zone with in the sound of the guns and account about the Nagas.

²² *Piketo Sema, British policy and Administration in Nagaland 1882-1947, New Delhi, p.142.*

²³ *Durable disorder: Understanding the politics of Northeast India, Sanjib Baruah, New Delhi, 2005, p.107*

²⁴ *Dr. Chandrika Singh, The Naga Society, 2008, New Delhi, p.166.*

²⁵ *Ibid*

²⁶ *Excerpt from Dr. Shurhozeli Lezietsu, Nagas have been suffering for too long, 02 May 2017, p.2*

²⁷ *Nandita Haksar and Sebastian M.Hongray, Kuknalim, New Delhi, 2019, p.19*

²⁸ *Easterine Kire, Walking the Roadless road, New Delhi, 2019, pp.238-239*

²⁹ *Jonathan Glancey, Nagaland – A journey to India the forgotten frontier, London, 2011, p.103*

³⁰ *Jelle J.P Wouter, In the Shadow of Naga Insurgency, New Delhi, 2018, p.18*

“Now that they are back in their own hills, will they settle down to the indigenous simple life and revert to the primitive conditions which were temporarily disturbed” (Balfour, 1921)³¹

They did not settle back settle back certainly, The France returnees were among those who They did not settle back certainly, The France returnees were among those who initiated the Naga club in 1918. It was the first Pan-Naga apex body at that period of time, initially a social club that ran among others, a football team and co-operative store. The Naga club gradually assumed more political character as its member consist from different tribes, they were preparing themselves politically in the event of India gaining her independent from the British. The Naga Club was still in its infancy but the pattern of the future had already been installed in their minds.³²

In the course of the First World War event, the Nagas also experienced alienation and humiliation by the other allied Indian troops because of their way of life and their eating habits which is ultimately infused a sense of unity among the different participant nagas to understand the value of unity and fraternity of brotherhood. One factor which also play a pivotal role in fostering the brotherhood was the common christian identity that led to the progress of mutual sense of peace and unity among the warring tribes, it binded them together under one entity.³³Dr.S.C .Jamir writes;

“The first world war shook the Naga ethos, the Naga principles and Naga morals... their close contact with the allies had made them aware of their own capacity and potential. The Naga club was formed in 1918 set the tone for future, it inspired many progressive Nagas to form similar organization.”³⁴

This awakening of political consciousness also led to formation of tribal council, the Lotha Tribal council was formed in 1923, Ao Tribal council in 1928, restructured in 1930, Sema Tribal council in 1947, Eastern Sema Tribal Council in 1953, NHDTTC in 1945, NNC in 1946 and later Pan tribal and Pan Naga bodies as Naga Students Federation in 1947, Angami Peoples organization in 1972, Lotha Hoho in 1978, Sumi Hoho in 1979, Chakesang Public Organization in 1979, Ao Senden in 1980, Konyak Hoho in 1980, Naga Mother Association in 1984, Naga Hoho in 1998 etc were formed. The founding members of the Naga Club were mostly Angamis, Sema, Lothas, Rengmas, Kukis, Zeliangs, mostly a government servant stationed at Kohima.³⁵ Harish Chandra in, *The Naga story* account that initially Naga club was a social club and run a football team and also a co-operative stores for selling essential commodities with its center's at Kohima and Mokokchung. The emergence and the formation of the Naga club in 1918 and subsequently of the Naga Hill District Tribal Council in April 1945 and renaming it to Naga National Council in 1946 were marked manifestation of socio- political consciousness of the Nagas.

FORMATION OF Naga Hills DISTRICT TRIBAL COUNCIL:

NNC the later transformation of NHDTTC soon became a political force, heralding the dawn of hope in the Naga psyche and giving a loud voice about the political determination of the Nagas.³⁶ It was C.R Pawsey, the Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills, who helped the Naga intellectual to constitute the NNC and work for the Naga unity and strength. The Naga unity went on strengthening, their political consciousness developed. The formation of the NNC having the support of the leader of various Naga tribes boosted the morale of its leaders. Their desire to have independent political status for the Naga people became firm.”³⁷ The objectives of the NHDTTC were:

- i. Uniting the Nagas as the utmost priority.
- ii. Repairing the damages caused during the Second World War.
- iii. Achieving local autonomy for the Hill area.

³¹ *Ibid*

³² *Ibid.*, p.60

³³ *Dr. Hokishe Yeputhomi, Crossroad, Dimapur, 2022, pp.10-11*

³⁴ *Jamir S.C, A Naga Quest for fulfillment, p.77,79.*

³⁵ *Rengma Nillo, Role of Rengma in Naga Political Movement, pp.3-4*

³⁶ *Ibid, op.cit.,p.80*

³⁷ *Dr. Chandrika, The Naga Society, New Delhi, 2008, pp. 166-167*

- iv. Training people for self-governance.
- v. Encouraging the already existing Tribal Council of the individual tribes.
- vi. Managing and administrating their local affairs.
- vii. Considering possible reforms.

If British have formed the NHDTC with an intention to either for carrying out the welfare works then the Nagas had used it as safety valve to assert it repressed voice. Besides the individual Naga tribes respectively developed their own councils and hohos.

Shimray account that, “this political consciousness clearly developed from their contact with the British administration and Christian missionaries and it naturally promoted Naga Nationalism as a unifying force among the Nagas.”³⁸ The formation of the Naga club was the first sign of Naga expression of their political aspiration. On 20 Feb 1947, the Naga National council appealed to her majesty government to appoint India to act as guardian power over the Nagas for a period of 10 years. After the end of which it was proposed, that Nagas should be left as they were in past to determine their own future.³⁹ The NNC declared that Article 9 in the Akbar Hydari agreement gave the Nagas the right to complete Independence once the interim period of 10 years was over this was not acceptable to the govt of India which insisted that the article gave the Naga the right to suggest administrative changes within the Indian union but not secession. Gopinath Bardoloi, the then premier of Assam declared the agreement invalid in 1949 on the other hand in 1956, after all failed effort for a negotiation on self-determination; NNC greeted the govt of India with the formation of Federal government of Nagaland.⁴⁰ The initial political objective of the NNC was to unify all Naga including those of Manipur and Burma and to include the Hills in the province of Assam in a free India with a local autonomy and adequate safeguards for the interest of the Nagas.⁴¹ The Naga resistance to any political change may be traced back to the year 1928, when the Naga submitted a memorandum to Simon commission. The Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills, Charles Ridley Pawsey formed Naga Hill District Tribal Council in 1945 with an intention of uniting the Nagas. The first and the only political organization of the Nagas at that time.⁴² The concept of Naga sentimentalism, Nationalism and political consciousness has certainly been evolved from the participation and experience of the First World War exposure to overseas. It was certainly not just a mere labour experience but has brought a dawn of new civilization in the lives of the Nagas.⁴³

SIMON COMMISSION AND NAGA MEMORANDUM:

Memorandum to Sir John Simon commission is regarded by most of the Naga Historians as the first Naga declaration for Independence. The desire of the Nagas to be free from the yoke of any outside political control and especially from India appeared clear even at the nascent stage of nationalism. A determination to protect what they perceived to be traditional way of life, based on the customary law that were not codified.⁴⁴ In 1921, The Naga Hills District was declared as Backward Tract and placed under the British Assam Province as Per the Govt. of India Act 1919. In 1928, Naga expressed their opinion for self-rule to John Henry Hutton, the then Deputy commissioner of Naga Hills and based on this expression of self-rule given by the Nagas, he wrote to Sir John Allsebrook Simon.⁴⁵ The excerpts of the statement by J.J Hutton are produced below;

“It is the purpose of this note to show that the interest of the hill district will not only served by having them included proposed the reforms but will suffer very serious detriment by being tied up to the politically more advanced plains district while latter will suffer in the future by being joined with people of an irreconcilable culture in an unnatural union which can ultimately only entail discomfort for both parties.”⁴⁶

³⁸ A.S. Atai Shimray, *Let freedom Ring*, New Delhi, 2005, p.45.

³⁹ *Ibid* A.S. Atai Shimray, *Let freedom Ring*, New Delhi, 2005 p.60.

⁴⁰ Samir Kumar Das, *Conflict and Peace in India Northeast*, Policy studies 42, Washington, 2007, p.23

⁴¹ *Ibid* p.22

⁴² B.Datta Ray SP Agrawal, *Reorganization of Northeast India since 1947*, 1996. p.242

⁴³ Bhadra Gogoi, *WW.I Sema Naga labour Corps celebrates Centenary*, Dec 30 2018

⁴⁴ Easterine Kire, *Walking the Roadless road*, New Delhi, 2019, p.238.

⁴⁵ Dr. Aosenba, *The Naga resistance movement*, New Delhi, 2001, p.23.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*

This report by Hutton, brought Simon commission to visit Naga Hills on 10 January 1929. The Naga club submitted a memorandum under which it say "Leave Us Alone" to determine for ourselves our future as in ancient times. Excerpt of the Memorandum to Simon Commission submitted on 10th January 1929.

" ... We pray that the British government will continue to safeguard our rights against all encroachment from other people who are more advanced than us by withdrawing our country from the Reformed scheme and placing it directly under its own protection. If the British Government however, wants to throw us away, we pray that we should not thrust to the mercy of the people who could never subjugate us, but to leave us alone to determine for ourselves as in ancient times..."

This memorandum was first ever Naga political document ever submitted to a foreign ruler.⁴⁷ Simon commission was dispatched to India in 1927 to study the constitutional reforms for India under the seven British members of parliament headed by Sir John Allsebrook Simon, Clement Atlee, Harry Levy-Lawson, Edward Cadogan, Vernon Hartshorn, George Lane-Fox and Donald Howard. The commission arrived in India on 03 February 1928 at Bombay and in the Naga Hills on 10 January 1929.⁴⁸ As per the recommendation of Simon commission through the memorandum submitted by the Naga club, the Naga Hills District was created as 'Excluded Areas' by the Govt of India Act -1935 and no act of Assam legislature was to apply to the Naga areas. However, the act came into effect only in 1937 but could not fully implement due to the outbreak of the Second World War.⁴⁹ After the submission of Memorandum to Simon commission on 10 January 1929, there was debate in the House of Commons in 1935 about the label of 'Backward tract' which was declared in 1921. At the same time, the Nagas were also opposing the proposed 'New reformed Scheme' The British recognized the Naga claim to be treated separately from the British India and therefore under the Govt of India Act 1935 renamed the Naga Hill District as the 'Naga Hills Excluded Area' on 03 March 1936 and came into effect in 1937 removing the label 'Backward Tract' which is to be administered by the Governor of Assam along with the Balipara Frontier Tract, Sadiya Frontier Tract and Lushai Hills.⁵⁰ The application of excluded has been taken in different perspectives by the Nagas, British and India. The excluded area would mean a recognition of a different entity for the Nagas while for the later, it would mean for an administrative convenience. The Nagas were aware that the British would be withdrawn from Asia one day and from the Naga areas and thus made an effort that British settle all the matter relating to the Nagas before they leave India. So, the British proposed for the creation of 'Crown colony' under the Governor of Assam, Robert Reid and Lieutenant Reginald Coupland. They realized cultural and ethnic differences between the Naga tribes and rest of British India and Burma and therefore proposed to carve out 'Trust territory' which will be governed by the British from Britain and the expenditure for the trust territory will be jointly be taken up by India and Britain but these proposed plan was staunchly protested by the Nagas especially by the extremist naga groups.⁵¹

The NNC insisted and persisted that neither were Nagas Indians nor had their hills ever been Indian terrain, be it in terms of pre-colonial political realities, mythological and cosmological configurations or the cultural stretch of Bharat."⁵²

Extract from the account of the governor of Assam make it more clearer the distinctiveness of the Nagas, Sir Robert Reid is a

clear evidence of the uniqueness of the Nagas. The excerpt;

"The inhabitants of the hill tracts on the North east frontier of Assam and the hill tracts on the Northeast frontier of Burma are alike in races and culture. They are not Indians or Burmese... We have no right to allow this great body of non-Indian animist and Christians to be drawn into the struggle between Hindus and Muslims... They cannot be left to Indian political leader neither knowledge, interest nor feeling for the areas"

⁴⁷ *Ibid pp. 129-131*

⁴⁸ *Nandita Haksar and Sebastian M Hongray, Kuknalim, New Delhi, 2019, p.19*

⁴⁹ *Ibid., p.240*

⁵⁰ *A. Lanunungung Ao, From Phizo to Muivah, New Delhi, 2002, pp.41-42.*

⁵¹ *Dr. Aosenba, The Naga resistance movement, New Delhi, 2001, p.28*

⁵² *Jelle.J.P. Wouters, In the Shadow of Naga Insurgency, New Delhi, 2018, pp.6-7.*

However this scheme was not able to put into action, it failed due to lack of support by the Nagas. Robert Reid and Reginald Coupland lamented that had the Nagas lent a slightest support or encouragement to this scheme, the colony might have been a reality.⁵³

ATERMATH INDIA INDEPENDENCE:

On 28 Nov 1949, The Naga representative group met first Governor General of India Chakravarti Raja Gopalachari in Shillong. Rajaji said to the group, "India wants friendship with you; it does not want to appropriate the land of the Nagas. The Nagas have the freedom to act as they want, to be a part of India or stay outside if they think they have the right to do so, let them do so"⁵⁴ In Dec 1951, Nehru travelled to Guwahati. A five-member Naga delegation met him aboard a steamboat in the Brahmaputra with CM of Assam Bishnu Ram Medhi secretary of Tribal affairs department. In the meeting Nehru called Naga people demand for Independence 'Absurd and impossible to consider given the context of India and world situation at the time. At the same time PM Nehru also said, all other legitimate demands of the Nagas would be considered but only within the ambit of the Indian constitution. Disappointed with Nehru, The Nagas boycott the election in 1952. The Kohima fiasco in 1953, embarrassed in the presence of Burmese prime minister U Nu. Nehru meeting on 11 March at Delhi, Naga leaders were not cowed and retorted that they would carry on until they achieve their goal.⁵⁵ NNC president Khadao Yanthan called him as Kashmiri Brahmin Hindu who did not know the Nagas. Nehru was responsible for causing the armed confrontation between Indian army and the Nagas for more than three decades.⁵⁶ India was proud of its military superiority. In 1973 at the East Pakistan war, Indian army has crushed East Pakistan with a population of 357 million in 12 days and therefore General KV Krishna Rao said that, Nagaland has less than one lakh people and of them only a few were creating trouble and thus could be easily crushed. Borghain remarked that such a derogatory view of their struggle causes the Naga people huge anguish and responsible factor creating more dislikeliness towards the Indians.⁵⁷ It would be an empty waste to say that the Indian army could kill most Nagas, today it is not possible anywhere in the world to wipe out an entire population. Harish Chandola remarked on the arbitrary military use on the Nagas by the Indian Government. Harish Chandola account that

"The Indian government left no stone unturned to divide the Nagas and win sections of them over with money, office and inducement. It has won over a sizeable number against the separatist but this has not solved the problem."⁵⁸ "It is clear that Indian policy makers have chosen to callously interpret the problem from outside rather than trying to get inside the Naga experience if done properly, the act of reaching out to the Naga might have helped prevent or at least mitigate the intensity of the tragic confrontation."

The visit of Nehru might not have ended in such disarray had there been a more sensitive handling of the situation by the Assamese D.C Satyen Barkotokoi. Nehru himself is reported to have said if the situation in the Naga hills would have been much better, if it had been handled a little more competently by local officers and if some officers who were notoriously unpopular had not been kept there.⁵⁹ Ruler in Delhi divided this region into the administrative units arbitrarily. Those sent there to administer were told that the land belongs to India, though the people there did not consider themselves Indian. They were not familiar with geography, history and languages of the Naga. They were arbitrary and did what they liked, they were unfriendly.⁶⁰

⁵³ *Ibid, op.cit.*

⁵⁴ Harish Chandola, *The Naga Story*, New Delhi, 2013, p.162.

⁵⁵ Homen Borgohain and Pradipta, *Scroll of Strife*, New Delhi, 2011, p.144

⁵⁶ *Ibid. Scroll*, p.145.

⁵⁷ *Ibid, op.cit., p.147.*

⁵⁸ Harish Chandola, *The Naga Story*, New Delhi, 2013, p.253.

⁵⁹ *Ibid, pp.147-148*

⁶⁰ *Ibid, p.217*

“Nagaland and India need genuine mediators rather than meddlers who were often callous tough talking bureaucrats and politicians hiding behind their state provided pomp.⁶¹ Because of the absence of mediator of genuine intent and ability and because of a lack of vision, involvement and political will among Indian leader. As a consequence, Indian in general and the people of Nagaland in particular have suffered.”⁶²

NEED OF COMMEMORATING THE NAGA LABOUR CORPS:

According to records of The Indian Memorial at Neuve Chappelle, over 4700 Indian Soldiers and laborers have no known graves. The former chief minister Shurhozelie Leizietso will be retracing the footsteps of the Naga unit in France acknowledging that had it not been for them, the socio-political association as Naga club might not have held the significance it does for the Nagas today.⁶³ The Naga labour corps participation in the First World War is remembered for awakening a sense of Naga Identity in the Naga history. When the centenary was organized on October 2018 by the Sumi Hoho more than 2000 invitees and descendants of the Naga labour corps attended the program especially of the Sumi Naga Labour corps.

The Sumi Hoho recognized the heroic, historic and legendary sumi naga labour corps with pride who fearlessly and sacrificially took part in the World War I in foreign land and rendered their noble services in war that changed the global history of mankind. We honor and acknowledge the role they played in awakening the consciousness of Naga identity. The concept of Naga political consciousness certainly evolved from the experience of Labour corps exposure to overseas inspire the Naga elders of that era to an agreed concept of Naga nationalism.⁶⁴ One of the participant of the Labour corps named Khukishe Kati of Lithsumi village narrated the story about the journey, The news about the recruitment were conveyed to the villagers through the Dobashi. It was said that the British need a men to work during the war and that the wages would be given and all that are willing to work should be prepared with full traditional attire and warfare equipment. Wages will be paid as long as labour stayed and work. Villagers enlist to earn money, they took their traditional attires, spears, dao with its holders and left the village somewhere around march 1917. They walked all the way to Mokokchung then Mariani on foot then they were taken to Jalpaiguri by train and after examination, they were taken to Bombay then from Bombay boarded a big ship travelled to unknown place and sailed to France. The ship was a shipwreck and many died while trying to escape. We were all shocked to experience the travel on water since we have never seen such a vast expanse of sea before.

The journey continued and we saw water on all sides and land was visible. We were convinced that we would perished at sea and were filled with fear and broke down and many wished to go back home. We were instructed not to drink sea water but many people died of dysentery, their dead body were tied and with iron ball in between the feet were thrown into the water.⁶⁵ Nagas worked hard and sincerely, the British could see this but Nagas were not given sufficient food. Nagas were not treated at par with other corps and there was much discrimination against them due to their indigenous, ethnic-cultural difference. With Very little to eat and not enough clothing against the cold climate, many Nagas perished in France as they were either killed in the warfront or due to illness. Even when asked about providing a proper food and clothing, the British officers take it as an Insult that mere laborers dare to ask for a food and cloths. When few survived returned back home, Wonimo Murry was terminated from the service because back in France he asked the British officer H.C Barnes the food and clothes advocating to keep, the Nagas warm and well feed.⁶⁶ Though they were recruited as labour corps but their works are equal as active combatants, their history are just remembered in just a few line in the pages of history but they deserve to be remembered more than that for the sacrifices which they have rendered in shaping the Naga History.

The Naga corps suffered with lack of food and clothes, emotional trauma of missing their loved ones and their homeland amidst their brutal war. Cut off from their comfort zone of foraging, fishing, hunting and removed from their agrarian culture of rice, meat, vegetables their staple food and taken to

⁶¹ *Homen Borgohain and Pradipta, Scroll of Strife, New Delhi, 2011, p.149.*

⁶² *Ibid, p.158*

⁶³ *CM to retrace footsteps of Naga Labour Corps in France, 29 May 2017, pp.1-2.*

⁶⁴ *Bhadra Gogoi, World War I Sumi Naga labour corps, 31 Dec 2018.*

⁶⁵ *Heralding the past and the future, 2018, p.86.*

⁶⁶ *Dr. Jan Ezung Neinu and Elilo Ezung, A Visit to France, 7 Sept 2023, p.10*

foreign land with a culture, climate and food they were not accustomed to.⁶⁷ The Sumi Hoho is of the view that the govt of India and the state govt of Nagaland should provide ample opportunities and logistics support to the Naga scholars for future researched works of the 21st Naga labour corps contribution to the first world war for the allied power in the European theatre of war. The common wealth war graves commission should recognize the ultimate sacrifice of Naga labour corps and initiate a sponsored tour to visit the various graveyards located in France to enable the descendent to physically pay homage to their ancestors. The common wealth graves commission should also erect a monument in memory of the 21st Naga labour corps, sacrificial contribution in the World War I in Nagaland.”⁶⁸ Nagaland former Chief minister Shurhozelie Leizietsu unveiled a memorial monolith in honor of Naga labour corps, this monolith was erected in a hill rock opposite the Red cross building in the heart of Kohima. CM lamented- One can hardly imagine the feeling the Nagas must have felt leaving their homeland for the first time and crossing oceans to distant lands fighting for the British crown. Certainly it was not India War and it was definitely not the Nagas war but the Naga labour corps participation and the bravery they exhibited during their battles in Europe and elsewhere would have ramification. Amongst all the tribes who were sent to duties in the war, the Nagas were the first to realize the need to organize and unite themselves. Men who returned from France formed a political association called the

Naga club was set up with branches in Kohima and Mokokchung immediately after their return in 1918. The relative lack of historical record should however not deter the people from commemorating their contribution.⁶⁹ The ingenious concept of the Naga identity shown by the Naga labour corps served in World War I was a pre-cursor for Naga nationalism and the existing sustenance of its spirit is certainly a reality, which must be honored, remembered and respected by all the Nagas. The Naga labour corps created history for our present and for our better future, let us never forget them from generation to come. Forever grateful to Naga labour corps for the foundation they laid for the everlasting friendship and unity of the Nagas.⁷⁰

The government of Nagaland must need to understand the importance of completing the proposed memorial park that was promised in 2017 in honour of the veterans of the First World War the Naga labour corps who sacrificed their life and the pioneers of Naga Nationalism. A Naga Labour Memorial day must be observed in Nagaland to give due honour who deserved to be honored and remembered. Encourage an imparting of knowledge in schools, colleges, university, and school text and in varied academic field.⁷¹

CONCLUSION:

Histories will one day question the contribution of Nagas to the Indian struggle for freedom, well if credibility of Savarkar can be questioned what left aside for Nagas. What would Nagas and India answer be? It is therefore that India even after knowing all this clearly if they wishes to thrust the stone on the neck of the Nagas and fit the people into the mainstream narratives that they are Indians and those freedom fighters have sacrificed for the Nagas then it must from the beginning give the ownership of the day regardless of the participation of Nagas in the Indian National freedom struggle lest the generations do not suffer in future on the question of their ancestors participation and contribution towards owing the date of 15 August or 26th January as their own.⁷²

This sentimentalism is further deepened when Government of India imposed the various act upon Naga territory as Assam maintenance order Act, Disturb Area Act and the most draconian Act , Armed Force Special power Act. The sentiment of loatheness and aghast towards India was because of its inhuman treatment meted out to the Nagas especially towards the women’s in the period of conflict post 1955. This sentiment could felt in this statement. “Even in the last war when the Japanese overrun our country, referring to Naga territory . There was not a single case where women were molested by the terrible Japanese soldiers but Indian soldiers had a black record to this sorrow. If India wants to shoot, the Naga shall face bullet without retaliations as much as humbly possible. We shall refuse to submit to evil things

⁶⁷ *Ibid*,p.11

⁶⁸ *Sumi Hoho celebrates 100 years of WWI Labour corps, Eastern Mirror, 29 Dec 2018.*

⁶⁹ *Excerpt from the CM Shurhozelie speech, Memorial in honour of Naga labour corps, the Statesmen, 21 April 2017.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid*

⁷¹ *Dr. Jan Ezung Neinu and Elilo Ezung, A Visit to France, 7 Sept 2023, p.11.*

⁷² *Hokato Awomi, Sentimentalism Ownership over Independence day, 20 August 2023, pp.1-5*

that we shall not barter our birthright freedom, liberty and independence with enemy bullets"⁷³ Refusing to accept the political content of the Naga struggle, the govt of India supported by the state govt headed by Bishnuram Medhi treated the issue as a law and order problem to be dealt with by the security forces that were given blanket power to bring the situation under control.

This approach resulted in the wide scale violation of human right on the Nagas, such act set the signal to the Naga masses that their way of life was not safe in the hands of new Indian rulers assuming frightening proportion during the height of the Nagas struggle from the 1960s till 1980s with it the implementation of AFSPA create more bitterness in the minds of the Nagas. A wide scale human rights violation occurred and inhumane acts was committed on the Nagas.⁷⁴ The prolonged conflict of Nagas issues for more than eight decades can be squarely blamed on the part of the government of India for.

i. Ignoring the intensity of Naga Nationalism.

ii. Creating frustration and disappointment in the minds of the people in not getting due respect which to them was a loss of honour and dignity.

iii. Casually treating the movement in a manner of quelling a domestic discontent.⁷⁵

Foreign occupation of the land of Nagas has always been fiercely opposed by the different Naga tribes and all recorded history of the Nagas reveal this.⁷⁶ Today it is admitted by even the bitterest critics of the Nagas that their long struggle has given the Nagas a cohesiveness and a sense of national unity to which very few nationalist of the Indian sub-continent can lay down.⁷⁷ Be it with Ahoms or British, the acknowledgment of Non-interference in the Naga affairs resulted in a cordially and understanding between the Nagas and the Assamese in the border and the British in the Naga hills.⁷⁸ Until and unless India understand the significance of Sentimentalism of the Nagas and its aspiration of upholding the identity and fears of losing the same and the Naga understand the Geo-politics and its de-limitations and setbacks. The crux of Indo-Naga imbroglio would only benefit the extremist, the called revolutionaries, terrorism and the politicians. The conflicts of peace can dragged to another more decades in the form of seeking a solution that will only add to the wealth of the unfaithful revolutionaries.

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⁷³ V.K Nuh, *The Naga Chronicle*, pp.59-60.

⁷⁴ *India Northeast, Udayon Misra, New Delhi, 2014, p.27.*

⁷⁵ *Ahu Sakhrie, The Vision of T Sakhrie for a Naga Nation, Kohima, 2022, p.21*

⁷⁶ *India Northeast, Udayon Misra, New Delhi, 2014, p.95*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

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