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In the Midst of War Remnants

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Abstract

The material remains of war are tangible reminders of historical events. Museums and archives are valuable sources of reflecting wartime experiences. However, one cannot obtain all remains for archive or military research. The question then is, "What has happened to the uncollected remains left behind?" The Nagas experienced the Second World War through the famous Battle of Kohima. The villages along the Chakhesang Naga region served as the main route and essential base for the Japanese 31st Division during the battle. With the Japanese retreat in June 1944, the Chakhesang Nagas entered a new phase of exploration and collection of war remnants from the abandoned British and Japanese activity sites. The period after the Battle of Kohima brought about significant changes to the people who were invariably undisturbed before this event. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the process, purpose, and impact of collecting war materials among the Chakhesang Nagas.

Keywords: Second World War, war materials, collection, Chakhesang Nagas, Japanese.

Introduction

The study of military remains has become essential to understanding wars and combat in recent years. After every war, war materials are often collected for study and archival purposes. In recent years, the study of war objects has gained importance as these have become the living memories of significant historical events. As Saunders (2004) states, with first-hand memory disappearing, our views are inevitably shaped by the physical remains themselves and by the interpretations of those who had no part in their design, production or original purpose (p. 5). It is undeniable that the study of war materials gives an overview of the war fought, the strategies, techniques, and the extent of the affected area. The collection of every war material however, becomes impossible because arms and ammunition are sometimes hoarded and concealed by the military or go into the hands of the locals of the affected area.

In many cases, the common people of the affected area get access to these materials immediately after the war. Though some items are restored to governments, many are often not considered necessary for military studies or archival records. These are kept under the personal custody of the finder for collection or personal usage. There is a close relationship between objects and memory as people and objects are fringed in the activity of remembering. Jones (2007) argues that objects do not experience, contain or store memory; but objects provide the ground for humans to experience memories. As such, objects are crystallised intentions, the physical memories of former actions (pp. 22, 224-25).

Wars are complex events that bring unpredictable changes. The Nagas had always known war but not in a global context. With the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, India, being under the British Raj got directly involved in the Great War. Singha, in *The Coolie's Great War: Indian Labour in a Global Conflict 1914-1924* (2020), states that of the 1.4 million Indians recruited to the war upto 31st December 1919, some

563,369 were followers or non-combatants. With the formation of the Indian Labour Corps, the Nagas got recruited in the 21st Naga Labour Corps under the reconstituted companies of 35,36,37 and 38 (pp. 3, 168). A total of 2000 men comprising of 1000 Semas, 400 Lothas, 200 Rengmas, 200 Aos, and 200 Chang and other Trans-frontier tribes, were deployed to France in 1917 (Reid, 1983, p. 162). Noting on the impact of the Nagas' involvement in the first global conflict, Yonuo in *The Rising Nagas: A Historical and Political Study* (1984), notes that these Nagas, drawn from different tribes, far from their homes fostered mutual love, service and a sense of political unity. They agreed to return to their land to work for friendship and unity among themselves (p. 125). The result was the formation of the Naga Club in 1918.

The Second World War was the most widespread and devastating war of all times and is described by Joana Bourke (2011), as a people's history. The War was a 'total war', not sparing civilians who had almost no role in contributing to the causes of the war. When the Second World War broke out, India was once again drawn into the war on the side of the Allies. What many Nagas did not comprehend was that, the war would reach their doorsteps through the Battle of Kohima 1944. Robert Lyman (2011) describes the Battle of Kohima as one of the bitterest events of the Second World War. His notes on veteran accounts from Britain, Japan and India are worth noting. Swinson (2015), gives a detailed account of Battle of Kohima, highlighting on personal accounts of participants of both the British and Japanese through narratives, documents and diaries. Though much work has been produced on the Second World War and the Battle of Kohima 1944, only few have worked on the topic from the Naga's perspective. More so, proper research and documentation have yet to be undertaken in the Chakhesang area of Phek district. Most literary works on the Second World War in the Naga Hills have been penned and documented by western authors whose works have portrayed the events from a western perspective and failed to depict the local viewpoint adequately. As such, there needs to be more literature regarding the Japanese invasion of the Naga Hills. Some recent works by the Nagas have concentrated on Kohima, where the actual Battle occurred. Charles Chasie and Harry Feccit (2007), in *'The*

Road to Kohima: The Naga Experience in the 2nd World War', in give an account of how the war was experienced and witnessed by the local inhabitants of the Naga hills. The participation of Naga soldiers and their contribution towards British victory is further acknowledged by the authors. Krienuo Ltu's *World War II in Northeast India: A Study of Imphal and Kohima Battles* (2019), gives an overview of the battles of Kohima and Imphal, besides discussing the role and response of the people who were affected by the war.

In the Naga hills, Kohima became the main battle ground for the British and Japanese. However, villages located along the routes taken by Japanese Army to reach the battle site, were not left unaffected. An intensified and in-depth study of the war can be researched, especially among the Chakhesang Nagas whose territory served as the main route of the Japanese to Kohima. Sites of Japanese occupation have been identified in the Chakhesang inhabited areas and there are narratives which can further be explored and unfolded. Chasie (2007) suggests scope for Nagas to study the Battle of Kohima as part of the history of their people (p. 20). In recent years, Naga scholars have taken an interest in documenting the events of the Battle of Kohima from a local perspective, yet many aspects need to be further researched. One such aspect is on what happened to the war materials left behind after the Battle and how the local population utilised them. The study of war material collection is one facet that has yet to be documented in the Chakhesang inhabited area. To many Nagas, museums may serve as a profound reminder of the historic event. However, there are unsought histories from the rural Naga villages which can be further delved upon. A unique feature, especially among the Chakhesang Nagas, was a period of exploration and collection of war materials left behind by the British and the Japanese armies. Though these collections were purely for personal usage, it is essential to note that the interactions with the foreign people and the activities that followed after the Battle brought a cultural change. Many of the changes in the lifestyle of the Nagas after 1944 can be attributed to the effect of the Battle of Kohima.

This paper aims to give an overview of the collection of military remains of the Battle of Kohima, 1944, which were not handed over to

the government for archival record and examines its usage among the inhabitants of the Chakhesang Nagas of Phek district, Nagaland, India. The methodology for data collection was conducted through the oral sources of witness accounts and documentation of the war materials preserved through the years.

The Chakhesang Nagas and the Battle of Kohima

The ripples of the Second World War affected almost every corner of the world. Phek District of Nagaland, though not written in the books of history, experienced its effects directly and indirectly. Phek District, located in the southern part of Nagaland extends between longitude 94°35'18" to 94°38'09" E, and latitude 25°37'37" to 25°39'47" N and inhabited by the Chakhesang, Poumai and Pochury Naga tribes (GoN, n.d). The Nagas' participation in the Second World War can be studied through its involvement in the Battle of Kohima of 1944, fought between the British 14th Army and the Japanese 31st Division. The twin battles of Kohima and Imphal, fought between April and June 1944, earned the title "Britain's Greatest Battle" on 20th April, 2013 by the National Army Museum of the United Kingdom (Kire, 2019, p. 224). The Battle of Kohima was fought in two phases – the first, the siege of Kohima, between 5th April and 18th April, 1944, which witnessed Japanese attempts to capture Kohima ridge and the second phase between 18th April to 22nd June which saw British reinforcements reaching Kohima to counter-attack and drive the Japanese out from the position they had captured. The Battle of Kohima came to an end on 22nd June, 1944, with the defeat of the Japanese at milestone 106 (Ltu, 2019, p. 45).

Although the actual Battle took place in Kohima, the people of Phek District experienced much during and after. Oral witnesses have played a vital role in describing the hardships of the Japanese soldiers and how in turn,the people who came in contact with them were affected. By the time the Japanese Army had reached the Naga hills, they were exhausted. The road from Chindwin had been most challenging because of the rough terrain, and with food shortages, the Japanese Army had to depend much on the local population to feed the large Army. The logistic support and contribution of the people of the Phek district in aiding the Japanese

forces cannot be undermined. After suffering defeat at the hands of the British in the Battle of Kohima, the Japanese retreated into Burma.

During the Battle of Kohima, many villages were burnt down, and people were displaced for months. Inspite of receiving compensation from the British after the battle, people had to re-establish their villages. The Chakhesang Naga villages were categorised under List 'C' of the rehabilitation carried out by the British. Unlike List 'A' and List' B' of the rehabilitated villages, the Chakhesang Nagas were compensated with some monetary aid and cooking utensils (State Archive, 1944, File. 497).

The Collection and usage

Looting the enemies' possessions was a common phenomenon during the American Civil war. After battles, officers in both armies commanded soldiers to gather items that would be useful to the Army, including arms and ammunition. In the process, soldiers often stripped enemy bodies of uniforms, shoes and personal effects (Weicksel, 2018, p. 117). A similar situation was witnessed during the Battle of Kohima, more so with the Japanese soldiers, as they had run out of supplies by the time they reached the Naga Hills. Probational Account Officer Masao Hirakubo, 58 Infantry Regiment, 31st Division, who was responsible for providing supplies to 1,000 officers and other ranks, states how with 50 soldiers, he acquired ration for his regiment, "We went into Naga Village north-east of Kohima Ridge in the early morning of 5th April, 1944 with complete silence, the enemy being surprised. To my great delight there were twenty warehouses in which a lot of rice and salt was piled up (Tamayama & Nunneley, 2001, pp. 171-172)." Senior Private Manabu Wada, of the 138 Infantry Regiment, 31 Japanese Division also mentions that the Battle of Kohima began on 4th April, 1944, but by 5th April, they had run out of rations (ibid. p. 175). There was also shortage of ammunition. Under such circumstances, the Japanese soldiers were compelled to loot the enemies' food and ammunition.

After the Japanese retreat, looting of war materials was continued by the locals of the war-affected area of Phek district. To the locals, this was not considered looting but collecting the scattered unclaimed materials

left behind by the Japanese and British Army. The manufactured materials proved most beneficial to the locals, and they utilised them in whichever way best suited the local needs. Military remain samples for archival records were mostly collected from the Kohima battle site, thus leaving abundant materials for the people of the Phek district to explore, experiment and reuse. In the Phek district, the Japanese base at milestone 30, where the 31 Division set up the 1st Field Hospital, was a most visited site. The Kohima battle site was also explored to collect useful abandoned materials. In these multiple explorations, people collected anything they found exciting and purposeful; bowls, cups containers, empty food cans, spoons, ammunition boxes, saddles, bullets, tiffin boxes, water bottles, band-aids, belts, calling bells, gas masks, pocket knives, swords and vehicle parts among others. The most sought-after item for collection were the untaken arms. Young boys often visited these sites with the men of the villages to retrieve them. The drive to possess an arm was invariably immense, that some men went to the extent of digging the graves of buried soldiers.

In the process of the collection of war remains, the people can be portrayed as collectors of items having historical value. As Belk (2006) suggests, the collection is the creation of the collector who brought it into existence, either by taking objects out of their former economic circulation or by rescuing them from unappreciative neglect and thereby sacralizing them as part of the collection within which they become enshrined (p. 534). In many cases, the recovered items served a new purpose rather than in their original usage form. The iron from abandoned British Jeeps was smelted into machetes, knives, hoes and other tools. Steering shafts were modified into gun barrels while headlights came to be treasured as valuable items. The horse saddles were cut into three or four pieces and shared among women. They were used as backstraps while weaving; some of which are still in use. Bombshells dropped during air strikes were collected and used as church bells. One can still see them in the Mesulumi, Leshemi and Lowuza villages of Phek district. The collections became personal property, with a significant portion being utilised till recent years.

Some of these items came to be used for entertainment and amusement.

Until the early 1980s, young boys often went to Japanese-occupied sites in search of items they could play with or modify in whichever way they found accommodating. They collected soldiers' helmets and played with them like footballs or sometimes became useful household storage containers. Recovered gas masks were used by elders to threaten disobedient children. The original purpose of usage was less understood and overlooked. Some of the objects found pseudo meaning with optimal usage in an innovative and resolute denotation. To some, collected items became a new source of economic enrichment. Around the Jessami area, the locals were asked to dig out Japanese graves, collect what they now presume gold teeth, and sold them to some dealers. Not understanding its value involved, they enthusiastically collected and sold them at a 'high' price.

While living in the remnants of war, a change in the vegetation was also witnessed. A typical weed, eupatorium odoratum, a native of tropical which infested almost all north-east Indian states was a direct effect of World War II. The rapid spread of Eupatorium odoratum after the Battle of Kohima, resulted in the local nomenclature of the plant - 'Japan prü', meaning Japanese plant/weed in the Chakhesang Naga dialect, associating the plant being brought by the Japanese. According to a study conducted by R.S. Tripathi et. al. (2006), the eupatorium odoratum entered northeast India through troop movements from southeast Asia (p. 305). Believing it to be a medicinal plant brought by the Japanese, the locals still use it in times of injury by crushing the leaves and placing it over a wound as a coagulant.

Impact of Collection

It has been estimated through oral accounts that almost every household in the villages of Phek district possessed at least one item of the remains of the war. While for some, it was a sheer pleasure to collect the remains, for many, they served different beneficial purposes whereby, war remains became entangled with the lives of the people. What many did not realize was that through the use of war materials, memory was materialised and in turn history. The landscapes of the abandoned sites became places of activity and reminders of the past. Bender (2002)

remarks that landscape is time materialising because a place that has been inflected with memory serves to draw people towards it or to keep them away, permits the assertion of knowledge claims, becomes a nexus of contested meaning (p. 104). A significant impact of the Battle of Kohima and the collection of remains in the aftermath can be attributed to change in the people's lifestyle. With exposure to the technologies of the world and realising the importance of establishing communication to the outside world, formal education began to be looked upon as a necessity, and enrollment in schools began to increase. Charles Pawsey (1946), the then Deputy Commissioner, noticed an intellectual awakening among the Nagas. In his report on the Battle of Kohima, he states, "The first and most obvious effect is the demand for education amongst all tribes but especially amongst the Angamis who previously were less literate than the Aos. I think this desire is due to the fact that throughout the war, the Angamis have seen more foreigners than any of the other tribes and naturally desire to know more of the world, a desire that can only be satisfied through education. ...During the War they (Nagas) have found their feet. They have come to the conclusion that they are as good as, or better than, most other races provided they have equal opportunities and equal education." (State Archives, File no. 155). As Christian missionaries promoted education in the Naga hills, the number of Christian population and churches increased incredibly. While in 1940 there were 14 churches in the Chakhesang inhabited land, the number rose to 40 by 1950 (Golden Jubilee CBCC Souvenir).

Another notable change among the Chakhesang Nagas can be seen in the increase in the use of metals. Most war materials were made of iron, so the people smelted and modified them into different domestic and agricultural items. With raw material available in the abandoned sites, maximum usage of iron tools has been observed. With better tools, work culture began to change to a more convenient and durable one. The collection of rifles resulted in increased hunting activities among the Chakhesang Nagas. Instances have occurred where an individual alone collected eight rifles from a single visit of an abandoned site. It was observed that Japanese gun barrels were smaller than British guns and with shortage of Japanese bullets after the retreat, the locals reworked

on the barrel sizes to fit British bullets, which were easily available at the time. Being enticed by soldiers' rifles during the Battle of Kohima, this was the main item of collection and modification among the men.

A most significant impact in the collection of war remains was seen among the Naga National workers and the development in the Naga Political movement. Most Chakhesang Naga villages being well equipped with the advanced rifles of the times, gave a new dimension to the Naga political leaders to fight for the Naga cause. The formation of the Naga National Council (NNC) in 1946 paved a path for the Nagas to fight the Indian Army during the troubled years of the 1950s. The arms collected after the Battle of Kohima were voluntarily donated to the Naga Army to counter the Indian Army in open combats. A combatant states that in the initial years of the NNC, Second World War arms were used in all their operations. Having no other source for procuring arms, many rifles were repaired and modified by the Naga soldiers during the NNC operations' early years.

The changes brought by the Battle of Kohima manifests in different aspects of the Naga culture. The social, political, economic and religious life of the Nagas underwent significant alterations and its impact can be seen even today. The memories of account witnesses and the tangible reminders are indispensable for redefining history from a Naga's viewpoint. The innovative usage of war remains among the Chakhesang Nagas gave new insight to the unexplored and ignorant minds of the people. With many years having passed since the Battle of Kohima and war materials corroding and disappearing, memories are fading; making researchers go to the depth of every possible clue to reconstruct the momentous War that took place in the Naga soil.

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