

Remembering Second World War: Memory, Politics and Deception

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This paper concerns with the politics of remembering IIWW in Manipur. It will be observed that commemorating the IIWW in Manipur took at least three turns, all competing and contesting for dominance or recognition. First, the colonial state remembered its soldiers and officers in some War Cemeteries in the region silencing the role of local people. Second, after India's independence these colonial monuments have been silenced and instead remembrance is now given to those soldiers and officers who fought the colonial armies such as the INA soldiers who immediately assumed status of patriots and freedom fighters of freed India. At the third level we can see that there was a contested conflict and marginality among different communities of Manipur who have competed to place and identify themselves, not as the colonial armies, but those of their opposite, the INA, the freedom fighters of the nation. It was within this contested marginality among these last groups this paper is particularly concerned with.

Keywords: Second World War, Politics of Remembering, Manipur, War Cemeteries, INA

Introduction

The subject which I have chosen here for discussion is a subject of historical interest due to its politics of remembering involving commemoration, contestation, diminution and even silence. IIWW is, by definition, a world event and the 'Battle of Imphal' was just one part of the War theatres fought in Northeast India. The thousands who gave their lives 'for evermore' are obviously worth remembering in national commemoration. But such 'official remembrance' often insinuates the diminution or even silence of the non-official or vernacular factors which have contributed immensely in the process of the event to become an event. Such diminution and silence naturally generated sense of neglect and hence contestation from the vernacular margins. If the play of politics take its rampageous course in the reconstruction process especially with the change of guard in the state affairs then such remembrance took completely a political turn. The contestation then is political and political resolution often had to take up the course of remem-

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brance. Facts hardly play any meaning in such process of commemoration then. The case of IWW in Northeast is interesting for some important reasons. First, the colonial state remembered their hard-riden soldiers in several War Cemeteries in different parts of the region silencing the role of local people in different corners. Second, after India's independence these colonial armies immediately become things of the past that hardly generate any sense of commemoration but rather condemned as 'colonial army' which implies that they are 'traitors' to the freed nation. Rather, glorification is now given to those soldiers who were once part of the colonial armies but 'rebelled' and fought their master so as to throw them away from India. In this genre, a typical case is the *Azad Hind Fauz* (Indian National Army or INA). They immediately assumed the status of freedom fighters for freed India. Here the change of guard from colonial to Indians becomes clear insofar as politics is concerned. Third, and more interesting, is the contestation among different sections of the population of Manipur, all of which contested to place themselves among the freedom fighter of the nation. This assertion oriented toward identifying themselves, not as colonial armies but that of the opposite, INA. This paper is about these sets of remembrance, marginality and contestation.

The politics of history: playing with facts

My subaltern experience as members of the indigenous community since my childhood days clearly inform me that the Kuki people had definitely taken part in large numbers alongside the INA-Japanese Army against the Allied forces during the war.¹ But this experience found no place in the dominant literature on the IWW in the region which make us believed that the whole tribal belt was with the Allied forces during the War: the Japanese and INA had 'failed completely to win over the hillmen'.² Hence, I took up this theme for my MA seminar paper and since then closely followed the archival materials to deconstruct the existing notion and reconstruct the history of the IWW close to the memories of the local people. I started with the British Imperial records which appallingly inform us, but I strongly felt as part of its propaganda warfare, that the whole tribal belt was anti-INA and Japanese during the War. As part of the same policy, the many cases of digression have been exonerated in the name of lacking evidence and in line with its post-War pacification policy. But as I went deeper into the colonial records in the local archives the story of local participation gradually become clear.

When I worked in Manipur State Archives I came across one article written by certain local historian N. Lokendra Singh of Manipur University who had vividly weaved together the ASI reports during the War and clearly glowingly bring out the subject of local participation against the British Raj. I immediately went to the Secretariat Library where he consulted the ASI reports but to my hard luck, I found that none of these reports were there. I was inform that many records related to the Kukis participation had been 'destroyed' during the government of certain Naga politician, the point I will come later. The perpetrators of public records have not realised that British have the habit of keeping their records at multiple sites and in multiple forms. Thus, these valuable materials are also stored at Assam State Archives though mostly in the form of abstracts, some of which were, however, been 'destroyed', I was told, by an earthquake when it was archived at Shillong. Nevertheless, the huge corpus of INA Records collected by the

National Archives of India, New Delhi from different parts of Southeast Asian countries eventually completed my enquiry. What these corpus of historical materials, both of written and memories of the subalterns, clearly inform me that the local people had indeed, partly or wholly, supported the INA and Japanese during the War. This is especially so with the Kukis of the region.

The participation of indigenous Kuki community in the war against British imperialism is today an established fact. Interestingly, through the living testimony of those Kuki freedom fighters we have a vivid account of their role during the War for which both the Government of India and Government of Manipur had accepted and accorded them their proper position in the glitters of India's freedom movement. However, as time passed by, this recognition had gradually faded away not only by way of silencing in history books but also with the politics of marginality itself that involved destruction of records, rejoinder to the claims with a simple tool of 'faking evidence' and so on. Yet, outside the state parameter evidences continued to say that the Kukis have contacted the Indo-Japanese forces even before the invasion. During the war, they helped them not only in terms of materials, labours, intelligence services, and as campaigners but also in term of men of war.³ But the history of these support and participation has undergone several phases of change in time. The Kukis who had actually participated in the War were initially regarded as 'traitors' by the British for the act. But they were later recognised as 'Freedom Fighters of Manipur' by the Central Government and also by the then state government after independence and accordingly given them INA pensions for over several decades. Since the 1990s conspiracy has been created around their claims and hence their pensions were stopped. Most of the INA pensioners had passed away today and the onus of fighting against 'injustice' lie now with their hapless wife and children. This process of commission, omission and deception is something that concerns us in this paper. This paper therefore deals with the memories of the Imphal Campaign and how the history of Kukis participation in the event had been running through the darkness of present ethnic contestation and marginalised politics in the state of Manipur. In other words, it is the history of remembering the IJWW in Manipur.

Memory and Deception: Remembering the Armies of IJWW

Commemoration has become one important site of modern social and national reconstruction process. It involved tremendous energy in selecting, erecting and propagating the idea of the past in public spaces that often drive with a mixture of commission, omission and deception. Truly, public commemorations have become not only a site of assimilating diversity but it also served as a site of contestation and political manoeuvring among different sections of the population. This is particularly because remembrance usually involved the politics of forgetting in which the ignored ones eventually found such commemorative practice a source of neglect and marginality. This politics of forgetting often become profound in a situation of contested social and ethnic environment. The case of Kukis participation in INA movement is one good case in this respect. Therefore, a brief discussion on this matter would substantiate our discussion on the indigenous participation in national movement for freedom.

The memories of IJWW show that the War, of course the war of remembrance, is

still going on till today. Just as there were three major armies during the War (INA, Japanese army, and Allied forces) a competition for dominance among them is also visible in the public spaces. This is not enough. An extended war of remembrance is now fought among the three dominant communities of Manipur: Meiteis, Kukis and Nagas. Of the first groups, we can see that immediately after the War the British had established two War Cemeteries at Imphal, one each at Kohima, Digboi and Guwahati. It is clear from such War Cemeteries that none of the local people who had supported the Allied forces during the War and spared their precious lives found any sensible place among the ‘heroes’ of the War. As the popular plaque/tablet of Kohima read ‘When you go home tell them of us and say for your tomorrow we gave our today’ the intended consumers of such memorial was to the European mass. It is of simple rule of thumb that any ‘natives’ who might have the chance to pass through such memorials would either regard them as Europeans/colonial and hence no attachment or s/he would felt neglect for its silence on the ‘natives’. This is the reason why, after independence, these cemeteries were left unattended, forgotten and literally dying out like the silent *topois* until it was refurbished and maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Today, it remains as a favourite hang-out for toilers, lovers and the like not as site of inspiration but to get rid of city congestion. As in most postcolonial states, the colonial war cemeteries in the region, constructed in memory of the ‘colonial armies’, despite being the earliest monumental structures in the region, has lost its relevance today among the people of Manipur. Even if ‘Their Name Liveth Forever More’ in the memory of their bereaved families, the esteemed ‘colonial armies’ are today ‘cast into oblivion’ in the imagination of the postcolonial freed society.



II World War Cemetery, Imphal



II World War Cemetery, Kohima



II World War Cemetery, Guwahati

Contrarily, the mania of anti-colonialism eventually transformed the images of the INA and Japanese army from being ‘invaders’ of colonial period to ‘liberators’ and ‘freedom fighters’ now. Accordingly, to the freed people it was their beloved armies of INA and the Netaji that occupied their imagination. Hence, countless numbers of Netaji statues and INA memorials have been erected by the freed individuals, groups and governments in different part of the former colonies. In this way ‘their name liveth forever more’ in India and abroad. In the same vein, INA War Memorial Complex was also erected at Moirang in Manipur where Indian Tricolor was hoisted for the first time on Indian soil on 14 April 1944. This Complex houses the Netaji Library (established in 1968), the INA War Museum (1969), a huge Auditorium, the statue of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose (1972, 1993) and a replica of INA Memorial in Singapore (the foundation of which was laid by Netaji himself but which was subsequently demolished by British armed forces). The whole complex was reworked and dedicated to the nation in 2005. The construction of this Complex was started by INA war veterans and later taken over by the Manipur state government since 1985. It is now under the care of Department of Culture, Government of Manipur.



Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose



Replica of INA Memorial of Singapore



INA Museum



INA Auditorium

INA War Memorial Complex, Moirang

On the other hand, the Japanese army which assisted INA in its war for independence against British colonialism have also gained currency among the Indians although we learned that they truly did not share the ideology of the latter in liberating India. Being the dominant force behind INA, it becomes obvious that the indigenous people understood INA in terms of Japanese hence the war had been understood by them as Japanese's War. As they shared their forces against the British Imperialism they seem also deserve much appreciation among the local people. Thus, we can see that in their effort to erect war memorials in Manipur the state government took particular interest. One such memorial came up at Red Hills named 'India Peace Memorial'. The Government of Manipur protected the monument where a public order is served at the gate itself: 'Please walk on the path only, Keep off the grass. Don't pluck anything, Don't touch or sit on the memorial stone. Preserve Peace Everywhere'. This line shows the seriousness of the local society over the memories of Japanese army who were considered by them as 'liberators', not colonialists as the British. This is in complete contrast to the way they think about the British War cemeteries, which had been reduced to oblivion until the Commonwealth War Graves Commission took up the matter.



Indian Peace Memorial, Red Hills

Making and unmaking of 'freedom fighters' of Manipur

What is interesting in the memories of IIWW in public representation is that hardly we

found any community claiming their support to the British and Allied Forces during the War. The force of the time, an anti-colonial genre of thoughts, certainly played its rampageous course in suppressing and silencing facts of their support to the British colonial regime although we have good amount of evidences for the same. It seems clear that no one wanted to be dubbed as a postcolonial ‘traitors’. What is even more interesting now is the contestation for the opposite, that is the support given to the ‘freedom fighters’ and ‘liberators’, INA and Japanese. In Manipur, we could see a cut-throat contested conflict or rather the politics of downplaying the role of ‘others’ among the three dominant communities in the state: Meiteis, Kukis and Nagas. It is seen that to the postcolonial local people the real heroes of IIWW were not those soldiers and supporters of Allied Forces but those who had assisted the ‘liberators’.

We can see that the latter are honoured as ‘Freedom Fighters of Manipur’ and ultimately occupy a central place among the soldiers of IIWW. But the issue arises among them: Who are to be remembered and recognised? Here ethnic politics played its ghostly politics of promoting *ones* heroes against forgetting or silencing the contribution of *others* heroes. This has become especially intense with the growing ethnic contestation and ethnonationalism among different ethnic communities of Manipur. Instead of speaking for *our* ‘freedom fighters’ each of these communities tended to speak *my* ‘patriots’, a tendency which eventually contributed further to their divided politics of ethnicity. It is true that many numbers of the local people in Manipur joined the Japanese-INA forces in various capacities but when it comes to remembering the one that dominated the state government would strived to promote what I would called their ‘ethnic heroes’ and that too at the cost of ‘others’. It was in the light of this looming ethnicity that one might locate the destruction of the first Netaji statue in 1993 by some ‘unknown’ persons, the bust part of which is now inside the museum. In this respect, the case of remembering the roles of Kukis in the War shows the play of politics of deception, of forgetting and of downplaying very clearly.

We have seen that the Kukis joined INA-Japanese forces in large numbers because of their long history of enmity with the colonial regime especially after the brutal suppression of the Kuki Rising 1917-19. Their contributions were therefore recognised by the Government of India. As such after India’s independence 148 Kukis, who actually took part in the War in different capacities, were honoured with INA pensions by the GOI. In the same vein, we have also seen that the Freedom Fighter Cell/Department of Manipur Pradesh Congress Committee (I) had also published in 1986 the living testimony along with their photographs of the ‘freedom fighters of Manipur’ under the title *Freedom Fighters of Manipur in Indian Struggle for Freedom*.⁴ Of these seventy-eight were Kukis whose living testimony found no doubt in their contribution for the freedom struggle. However, to their misfortune the new politics of contestation that become flaring in the 1990s dragged these hapless freedom fighters into the whirlpool of ethnic politics. We have seen that Kuki-Naga conflicts come to the open since the early 1990s and went on throughout the decade. It was during this period that a sinister design to omit or downplay the contribution of the other community was also soaring high in the air.

In a mud-slinging politics, each of the two communities wanted to prove that they

are 'very' Indians and others are 'foreigners' in the land. More so, both of them went back to history to make their claim acceptable in which their role during the freedom struggle of India was often the point of contention. Each community claimed that they have fought against the British whereas the other group was 'traitor' in the process. The dominant Meiteis also not only claimed that they were the real freedom fighters but also that in the process of such mud-slinging politics between Kukis and Nagas they encourage both the parties so that they died out in the process. It was within this politics of contestation the role of hapless Kuki freedom fighters was forgotten and silenced. Accordingly, in 1998 the government had en masse suspended/terminated the pensions of 148 Kuki INA pensioners. The reason for this, I was informed, arises from a concocted case of 'lack of evidences' or 'fake evidences' initiated and promoted against them by the government during the tenure of a Naga chief minister who propped a top Naga bureaucrat at the crucial office to materialise the sinister scheme of ending, once for all, the pride of Kukis as the 'freedom fighters' of Manipur.⁵ The crucial point, however, is: if the earlier government had passed the phase of scrutiny and recognised them as 'freedom fighters' with sufficient evidences at their disposal and accordingly granted them pensions what is the need for new 'evidences' at this point or what is the need for re-opening up the case of scrutiny? Was there any sense of posterity in asking evidences at the altar of the deceased freedom fighters and from the dead men? Here ethnic politics come to the fore. There was a strong case of suspicion that ethnic enmity between the two tribes since 1992 have played a central role into the making and unmaking of Kukis as 'freedom fighters of Manipur'.

If the Naga-dominated government had driven the hapless Kuki INA pensioners into penury, the Meitei-dominated state government was equally evasive in the matter. Department of Art and Culture also published another booklet later entitle *Freedom Fighters of Manipur* that content the names of 97 'freedom fighters' of which 79 are Kukis and 18 are Meiteis. However, when it comes to displaying in public space Kukis become invisible and oblivion. Since the Manipur government took over the INA Memorial a special gallery for 'Freedom Fighters of Manipur' was created in the INA War Museum the obvious objective of which is understandable: to house the remains of the patriots of Manipur. But unfortunately the Museum found the photographs of only 12 'freedom fighters of Manipur'. Of these pictures in the said gallery, it is noteworthy that there are 11 Meiteis. The photograph of only one Kukis and no Nagas appear in the gallery. Here, again, we also find another flaring case of ethnic politics coming to the fore. Kukis who dominated the list of 'freedom fighters' and Nagas whose role was not recognised, together seems to have not deserved any place in the state-sponsored public space like Museum. The officers at the INA Memorial informed me that the Department had indeed called for such photographs and testimonials in public, and what they displayed were only which it received. I doubted seriously at the officer's argument because these photographs have been already available at their disposal in the noted volume published by MPCC (I) in 1986. I felt a strong sense of reluctance on the part of the officers because when I enquired whether the family members of all the 'freedom fighters' were informed to contribute the photos and souvenirs of the deceased heroes the answer was negative.

In fact, ethnic politics such as this is not new to Manipur. The contest for domi-

nance and the politics of downplaying the claims of ‘others’ on ethnic lines was also already in the air after India’s independence. This is reflected in the memorandum of the Kuki Political Sufferer’s Association of Manipur (KPSAM) to the prime minister of India in 1958:

Compared with her (Rani Gaidinliu) services or the services of the twenty-four aforesaid Manipuris (who have been recognised as freedom fighters by central government), those of the Kuki political sufferers and martyrs... were by no means insignificant and... the contribution of these Kuki patriots to the cause of Freedom Movement of the country deserve similar recognition from the Government of India.

The memorandum ridiculed the Rani as a ‘traditional oracle’. Similarly, Nagas were also accused of helping the British during the Second World War. When asked why the Kukis have not applied to the state government for a state monument or commemoration to honour their ‘patriots’, the Kuki notables answered that the Meiteis or Nagas who dominated the state government would never accept such demands. Therefore, they said, it is pointless to beg before such government. They instead demanded such recognition from the central government. This is apparently in keeping with the reality of ethnic relations in the state where downplaying the achievements of the ‘others’ is usually used as a tool not only for dominance but also to highlight differences.

Nonetheless, the Kukis claimed that it was with the generous grant of the Central Government that they got a plot at the prime location at Imphal where Kuki Inn stands today. Way back in 1958 the same KPSAM demanded to the Central Government a ‘War Memorial in the heart of Imphal town to commemorate Kuki Matyrs and Sufferers’. The plot where Kuki Inn stands today was the fruit of that effort. It was here that a memorable Memorial hall called ‘Kuki Inn’ (meaning Kuki House) came up in 1963 where the inside wall of the hall is adorned with the pictures of their ‘patriots’ of the Kuki Rising. With the further sanction from the central government, one war memorial complex that includes a museum, a library and a committee hall came up in the same premise recently.



The Kuki Inn, Imphal

Conclusion

Important points that deserve attention in the above discussion is that memory sites such as museums, monuments and memorials are often a site of contestation and hence are political in character. We have seen that the British created War Cemeteries in keeping with their official preoccupation and forgetting the democratic concerns of the local people leading to the denigration of its monuments in postcolonial period. The silenced in colonial period have risen to compose and of national commemoration in postcolonial period. But the multitude of claims and the ethnic politics which have profoundly emerged during this period makes the subject of commemoration even more controversial. The dominant put up 'theirs' at the cost of silencing and omitting the marginal others causing heartburning and hence enhancing ethnic contestation. While accommodation, recognition and integration is something politics is calling such act of forgetting and neglect continue to remain impediment toward the new goals of the state. Unless the new state could see the rise of vernaculars as form of opposition to its genre of integration nothing much would be in the offing. Kukis insistence for recognition and representation is just one case.

Notes

¹ I have given this subaltern experience, supported by facts, in much details in my earlier paper "Representing local participation in INA–Japanese Imphal Campaign: The case of Kukis in Manipur, 1943-45," *Indian Historical Review*, 37(2), Dec. 2010: 291–310.

² For two divergent views on local support see Lal Dena, "INA movement in Manipur: Myth or Reality" *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, (35th Session) 1974, pp. 365-369; N. Lokendra Singh, *Manipur During World War II (1941-45): Socio-Economic Change and Local Response*, Published by Manipur State Archives, Imphal, 1993. For details on Imphal Campaign see KK Ghosh, *Indian National Army: A second front of the Indian Independence movement*, Minakshi Prakashan, Meerut, 1969; SK Bose (ed.), *A Beacon Across Asia: Biographies of SC Bose*, New Delhi, 1973; LA Gordon, *Brothers Against the Raj: A Biography of Sarat and Subhas Chandra Bose*, New Delhi, 1990; and JC Lebra, *Jungle Alliance: Japan and the Indian National Army*, Asia Pacific Press, Singapore, 1971.

³ See for details Jangkhomang Guite, "Representing local participation in INA–Japanese Imphal Campaign: The case of Kukis in Manipur, 1943-45," *Indian Historical Review*, 37(2), Dec. 2010: 291–310.

⁴ See *Who's Who of Freedom Fighters of Manipur in Indian Struggle for Freedom*, Freedom Fighter Cell/Department, Manipur Pradesh Congress Committee (I), 1986 (Hereafter *Freedom Fighters of Manipur*).

⁵ The cases against the hapless 'freedom fighters' had begun, I was inform, in 1997 during the tenure of a Naga chief minister and a top Naga civil servant.

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