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Road Building and Resource Mobilisation in the Naga Hills

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Abstract

This paper seeks to look at various forms of infrastructural initiatives, flow of war materials, reliefs and restorations measures, and subsequently the creation of two Southeast Asian nations – India and Burma – bringing about countless changes and tensions to the local communities in the Patkai Hills. This paper argues that the grid of military-economic spatial brought about by the Second World War not only brought tensions and complexities to communities in the Patkai range but also create a site to experience alternative forms of infrastructures, technologies, administration, labour, occupations, habits, tastes, market, etc., thereby re-shaping the fabric of their social, political, and economic sphere. In other words, I attempt to understand how the Second World War not only intensified the state presence in the Naga Hills, but also re-shaped the fabric of the political, economic, and societal ranging from labour extraction to monetisation, from urbanisation to demographic changes, from marketization to new tastes, habits, and occupation, and enhanced political mobilisation.

Keywords: Development, Labour, Resources, Road, Transport, War

Introduction

To begin with, up till the 1930s, the focus of colonial infrastructure undertakings in the Northeast frontier in British India was largely concerned with connecting administrative centres, even as colonial officials built and maintained a network of infrastructures in the hills. These infrastructural conditions underwent significant changes with the unfolding of World War II along the Indo-Burma frontier in general and in particular, the Naga Hills. The war created urgency for the Allied powers to construct and build highways to move men and resources to meet strategic demands. When the Japanese troops advanced towards British India in the March 1944, Imphal-Dimapur road ^[1], among others, animated into a vibrant entanglement of mobile practices with convoys of armoured cars, trucks, jeep, planes, jet fighters, bulldozer and ambulance; vehicles filled with soldiers and bristling with guns, and ammunitions; officials and staff manoeuvring the flow of men and war supplies; and refugees hustling with pots, pans, and bundles. Taking World War II as the key moment in the history of the colonial Naga Hills vis-a-vis infrastructural building, this paper examines ways in which the war created a context for a wide range of infrastructural intervention in the Naga Hills, thereby, transforming the very fabric of the socio-economic, political, and cultural ethos of the communities.

Roads construction and labour mobilisation

In the early 1940s, the Japanese made a determined attack upon the Chin Hills, Manipur state, and the Naga Hills and as a result of which 6000 square miles of country were overrun, thousands of houses destroyed, villages and towns burnt down or bombed, people looted of their food and possessions and often mistreated ^[2]. In the light of such an event, the Naga Hills, particularly Kohima and Dimapur, transmuted into key front line of World War II where vibrant entanglement of varied mobile practices in terms of transport, war supplies, enforcement of troops, refugees and mobilisation of labourers transpired. These wide ranges of mobile practices spurred significant changes in the Naga Hills ranging from labour extraction, occupation, marketisation, urbanisation, social and political mobilisation.

The interactions of these mobile practices through networks of communication not only intensified the state presence at the frontiers but also introduced “societies and politics in the frontiers to the imperial state through various circuits and conduits of exchange ^[3].” In addition, administrative expansion gained momentum in tandem with pervasive militarisation, even as major infrastructural works remodelled the landscape, along with widespread deforestation ^[4].

The inhabitants along the Indo-Burma frontier, around this time, had developed multiple relationships with the neighbouring majority populations – raids in some cases, forming allies in other cases, and trade in most cases ^[5]. This frontier region encompassed the Chin Hills, the Kachin Hills, the Lushai Hills, the Manipur state, and the Naga Hills where numerous distinct communities such as the Chins, the Maras, the Mizos, the Kukis, the Meiteis, the Nagas, the Kachins, the Mishmis, etc are found. The steady control over hill administrations by the colonial authority in the 19th and 20th century had impacted the local inhabitants to a large extent, particularly in their resistance against annexation, punitive expeditions, and foreign administration. The frontier’s abundant cultural, linguistic, religious diversity and fluidity was, argued Berenice Rechart-Guyot, fractured by the gradual consolidation of the British rule in the neighbouring Assam and Burma ^[6]. Administrative categories such as Partially Excluded Areas and Excluded Areas were assigned to different areas at the frontier based on their proximity with the colonial administrative centres. As a result of the gradual consolidation of the colonial administration in the hills, skirmishes occurred between the local inhabitants and the British Officials on and off ^[7]. In the Naga Hills, part of it was partially administered where the Deputy Commissioner of Naga Hills exercised political influence, while a large portion remained unadministered.

As the momentum to defend the Indo-Burma frontier and to regain control of Burma grew, the Allied party desired important connectivity along the Indo-Burma border representing “a point of convergence of capital, objects and resources, imperialism and its War, and mobilising of numerous different societies inhibiting the area into a grid of military-economic spatial order” ^[8]. The Indo-Burma frontier came to be seen in terms of networks of routes and river transport, railways, roadways, oil pipelines, and airways ^[9]. Within this military-economic spatial grid, one of the pressing hurdles across the Indo-Burma frontier was that of supply line – lack of roads and railways fit for military operations. Hence, massive investment in transport infrastructure unfolded in the Indo-Burma frontier as part of the larger military operation by the Allied forces. In this endeavour, Arakan and Assam were chosen as the two operation areas of the Allied forces with their bases at Chittagong and Manipur Road (present day Dimapur) ^[10] respectively. Along the Imphal-Dimapur road, Imphal (the capital of Manipur), and Kohima (administrative headquarter of the Naga Hills district of Assam) witnessed the largest concentration of Allied troops, supply bases, and reinforcements ^[11].

Among the many routes that were expanded, widened, and made all-weather roads between Assam, Manipur, and Burma, two of the strategic roads – the Ledo Road ^[12] in Upper Assam to Northern Burma and on to Yunnan and the Tedim Road ^[13] connecting Imphal (capital of Manipur) with Tedim in the Chin Hills in Western Burma – was initiated as

part of the larger military preparation of the Allied forces. Other routes such as Imphal to Silchar (130 miles track which is Imphal’s second and minor route to India) which was “merely a trial path but military labour assisted by villagers, made it a jeepable ^[14],” or the all-weather tarmac roads from Tamu Road, south-east of Imphal ^[15] were extensively improved and used as significant arteries. Besides, the pre-war Assam railway system – capable of dealing with only a limited number of wagons per day and exclusively for the rural economy – witnessed a far greater load than it could handle. Hence, extensive measures were undertaken, chiefly by the Royal Indian Engineers, in improving its capacity: the doubling of certain sections or both the broad and metre-gauge lines, the construction of a chord line, and the establishment of ghats and ferries. The pre-war railway system was “a single metre gauge track with no modern train control system and very limited resources in rolling stock and locomotive” ^[16] and handled by the normal civil operating staff. To overcome this, military transportation operations were employed to assist the civilian staff and some 4600 United States Army transportation troops assisted in operating the railway ^[17]. In addition, physical difficulties prevailed due to seasonal liabilities such as heavy rainfall, dense forest, frequent inundation, and intensely malarial.

The constructions of routes in the Naga Hills not only facilitated the flow of men and commodities but also introduced societies to imperial state through various circuits and conduits of exchanges. For instance, the improvement and maintenance of roads, tracks, and mule paths were undertaken by units of engineers on corps, assisted by Naga labourers. In this endeavour, “widening, improving, drains and culverts and clearing slips...[were] done by contract Naga labour (sic)...[while] engineer unit concentrate[d] on bridging and surfacing ^[18]. Routes such as the main road from Dimapur to Kohima, Nakachari-Mokokchung track, tracks East and South of Kohima, Kohima to Phek, Kohima-Jessami, and Zhamai-Tuphema were widened, improved, and maintained to move men and war supplies, even as several offensive and counter-offensive were carried out from both sides when the Japanese forces advanced to capture Kohima. These routes were improved in order of their importance. For instance, the Kohima-Phek track was made all-weather fit for 15 cwt 4*4 trucks (9 ft. Width), and the Kohima-Jessami fit for Jeeps (7 ft. Width) ^[19].

Alternative realities in the Hills

The unprecedented grid of military-economic spatial order created a significant site, particularly for the local communities, to experience alternative forms of infrastructures, administrations, labour, occupation, habits, markets, etc. The construction of strategic roads and railheads spurred the intensification of colonial presence in the Indo-Burma frontier area. Simultaneously, it also exerted intense pressure on the local communities and the physical landscape of the frontier. Numerous workers, army engineers, and troops were brought into the hills, besides recruitment of local inhabitants, for the construction of rail and road networks which played as significant arteries for the Allies. Even so, the Allied forces could not simply execute the operation on their own despite the presence of numerous troops, qualified engineers, and possessions of sophisticated tools, materials, and technologies. They had to engage and operate through the local knowledge of sustaining difficult terrain, harsh weather, skills of road construction, and most

importantly, their cooperation to win the war against Japan. The flow of men, war materials, and the mobilisation of labour resulted in the

As such, around 1942-43, even before the Japanese troops arrived at Kohima, disturbed conditions were already ensuing in the Naga Hills caused by the impressments of labour from the Naga Hills in road building operation, followed by the retreat of the Allied troops and the tremendous exodus from Burma of Indian refugees. Under such a situation, scarcity of food and widespread diseases became prominent. For instance, the construction of the Ledo road alone demanded a workforce of fifty thousand labourers^[20] and it was reported that some Angami Nagas worked for free to hasten the completion of the Ledo Road, while corporations of young Nagas serviced motor vehicles at selected points along the road^[21]. At the same time, with the help of Allied intelligence services (called Special Operation Executives), frontiers officials recruited Kachin, Chin, or Naga villagers into 'levies'^[22] and during the critical period of January and February 1944, more than 720,000 recruits were signed up^[23]. In another report, the Chief Refugee Administrator of the Burma Refugees Organisation acknowledged that "many acts of bravery were performed by the Nagas and our Intelligence was well served by volunteers who penetrated the Japanese lines and brought back valuable information^[24]." Such unprecedented exposure of the local inhabitants, especially in the recruitment of workforce or 'levies', change the very notion of labour in the hitherto exclusively agro-based society. Wages of labour, traditionally exchange in kinds such as grains, were paid with cash transforming the mode of payment.

When the Japanese troops reached Kohima on 4th April, they launched a series of attacks and by 9th April 1944, the British and Indian troops had been forced and confined at the tennis court in Garrison hill. In addition, the Japanese had cut the main connecting road (Imphal-Dimapur road) between Jotsoma and Dimapur, while the Daily Issue Store (DIS) and Field Supply Depot (FSD) of the Allied forces were continuously targeted and attacked^[25]. With their main artery being cut off, that is, the Imphal-Dimapur Road, both Kohima and Imphal relied extensively on the supply by air amidst challenges such as the accuracy of dropping supplies on the narrow ridgelines at Kohima and inadequate airstrips to land on at Imphal. In this endeavour, war materials and supplies such as "water and ammunition by parachute were constantly dropped by cargo planes, while Hurricanes of the RAF bombed and cannoned places Kohima village and Merema ridge^[26]." By 20th April, "parachutes festooned every other trees (sic)"^[27] in and around the garrison hill at Kohima. Interestingly, these parachutes which were air dropped on large scale by the Allied forces for supplies were later used for "warmth and decoration"^[28] by the local communities. Evidently, the local communities did not simply facilitate, mediate, or negotiate the various schemes and measures of the state but also appropriated them according to their own needs and purposes.

Meanwhile, the grid of military-economic spatial order paved way for the emergence of new urban spaces. In the Naga Hills, Dimapur emerged into a boom town, primarily based on its location as a base and rail terminus. In fact, even before the war, a railhead was laid out "to handle 1000 tons of stores a day at first, eventually rising to 2000 tons, while depot areas had to be made to hold a reserve of 30 days for a force of a corps of three divisions plus L of C troops^[29]." By March

1944, the tonnage was increased from 3800 tons to 5200 tons per day. Hence, Dimapur witnessed an unprecedented flow of war supplies, troops, labourers and refugees that necessitated the construction of depots, staff quarters, godowns, refugee camps, and rehabilitation centres. In the process, it transformed Dimapur – an administrative outpost of British India – into a vibrant town.

The influx of troops, labourers, and staff brought with them different habits and lifestyles where varied commodities, objects, and materials manufactured from across the globe found their way into the Naga Hills. For instance, on 2nd April 1944, an officer and his troops arrived at Dimapur and found a large canteen issue depot where "vast quantities of chocolate, food, toilet requisites, cigarettes, beer and even whiskey" were at their disposal^[30]. Hence, commodities from across the globe, through networks of communication, travelled to the frontier as part of the war imperatives.

Conclusion

The Second World War had durably changed the Naga Hills in many aspects, ranging from "social, cultural, political, administrative, religious, [and] economic"^[31]. The Naga Hills, with minimal administrative interference, saw the intensification of state presence in multiple forms – mobilisation of labour and troops, constructions of roads and airfields, depots, storage facilities, campsites, staff quarters, refugee camps, workshops, and vice versa. While the colonial infrastructure until the 1930s in the Northeast Frontier focus was largely limited to a few key roads and railways, concerned with connecting administrative sites and outposts, the unfolding of the war along the Indo-Burma frontier created an urgent situation for the Allied power to construct and build new connectivity to move men and resources.

This paper highlighted how World War II intensified the presence of the state as well as introduced societies at the frontier to various apparatuses of the state. The unprecedented grid of military-economic spatial order created a site for the Allied powers to construct and build highways to move men and resources to meet war demands. Even so, the Allied forces relied extensively on the local communities for the execution of such large-scale operations. The Allied forces engaged and operated with the local institutions and knowledge of sustaining difficult terrain, harsh weather, skills of road construction, and most importantly, their cooperation to win the war against Japan. Other mediums such as printed newspapers also played a significant role in the War. Besides, administrative expansion gained momentum, even as major infrastructural initiatives reshaped the landscape. At the same time, the war introduced societies to a range of alternative realities in terms of road construction, transport, labour, market, commodities, occupations, food, and taste thereby creating a site to experience alternative 'modernity'.

References

1. This highway connecting Imphal with Dimapur via Kohima, with a railhead at Dimapur, is referred to by various names such as Manipur Road, Imphal-Dimapur road, NH-39, etc. For this paper, I used the term Imphal-Dimapur road unless quoted directly from the source.
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3. Lipokmar Dzuvichu, Manjeet Baruah. Introduction: Objects of frontiers, in *Object and Frontiers in Modern*

- Asia: Between the Mekong and the Indus, (eds.) Lipokmar Dzuvichu and Manjeet Baruah, Routledge, New York, 2019, 2.
4. For more details, see Berenice Guyot-Rechard, 'When Legions Thunder Past: The Second World War and India's Northeastern Frontier', War in History. 2017; 25(3):328-360.
 5. For instance, see Raj Kumar Thakur, 'Whose Hills? Whose Plains? The Politics of Border, Indian Historical Review. Lipokmar Dzuvichu, 'Roads and the Raj'; Lipokmar Dzuvichu, 'Empire on Their Backs'; Philippe Ramirez, People of the margin, 2016; 43(1):83-101.
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 8. Lipokmar Dzuvichu, and Manjeet Baruah, 'Introduction: Objects of frontiers', 9.
 9. *Ibid.*
 10. New Delhi, NAI, Military MISC/1562/H (Notes on Kohima), 1943.
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 12. *Ibid.* Also see Guyot-Rechard, 'When Legion Thunder Past'.
 13. For more details, see Pum Khan Pau, 'Tedim Road – The Strategic Road on a Frontier: A Historical Analysis', Strategic Analysis. 2012; 36(5):776-786.
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 15. Japs being slowly pushed back into Burma: Enemy's Ambitious Plan Fails, The Times of India, 13th May 1944.
 16. New Delhi, NAI, Military, MISC/1562/H, 1943.
 17. *Ibid.*
 18. New Delhi, NAI, Military, MISC/568/H, (War diary for G (OPS) branch- Headquarter Fourteenth Army), 1944.
 19. *Ibid.*
 20. Colin R. Alexander, *Administering Colonialism and War: The Political Life of Sir Andrew Clow of the Indian Civil Service* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019, 213.
 21. Guyot-Rechard. When Legion Thunder Past', 340.
 22. Levies were small bands meant to harass the Japanese, wearing them out and preventing large-scale attacks on the front line. Apart from the local levies, the local inhabitants, although not necessarily voluntary, also came to play a variety of non-combatant roles such as informants, porters, labourers for road constructions, rescued lost strangers from starving Burmese refugees to stranded Ledo Road engineers, or monitored vehicular traffic.
 23. Christopher Bayley and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: Britain's Asian Empire and the war with Japan* London, Penguin Group, 2004, 366.
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 26. New Delhi, NAI, Military, MISC/1562/H, 1943.
 27. *Ibid*, p. 9.
 28. Second World War 60th Anniversary: The battle of Kohima, North East India, 4th April-22nd June 1944 (COI Communication, 2004). Foreword by the Under Secretary of state for Defence and Minister for Veterans, Ivor Caplin MP. Accessed on 19/10/2022 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/30002/ww2_kohima.pdf
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 30. Swinson, *Kohima*, 52.
 31. Rechard-Guyot, When Legion Thunder Past, 356.