

Remembering the Battle of Imphal: Civilian Encounters with Soldiers and the Violence of War

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Abstract

This paper examines civilian memories of encounters with soldiers during one of the most devastating Second World War conflicts in Manipur—the Battle of Imphal (1944). Drawing on testimonies recorded in *The Forgotten Voices of the Japan Laan*, the study adopts a memory-studies framework that foregrounds the subjective, permeable, and evolving nature of recollection. The narratives collectively reveal an overarching story of survival and escape. Memories of Japanese soldiers include abductions, confiscation of food and livestock, forced labour, and acts of violence during the retreat, while recollections of the Allied forces highlight heavy bombing, political repression, surveillance, and harsh interrogations. Together, these accounts construct a troubling and complex image of the battle in the minds of local witnesses. Continuous displacement, loss of resources, and profound psychological distress render the Battle of Imphal an indelible and traumatic episode for civilians.

By analysing these recollections, the paper argues that civilian memory constitutes a crucial counter-archive to military histories of the battle. These narratives illuminate a larger shared experience of vulnerability, suffering, and perpetual flight from soldiers.

Keywords: Battle of Imphal, Civilian Memory, Wartime Encounters, Survival and Trauma, Manipur and Second World War

Introduction

The Battle of Imphal 1944 was the outcome of the Japanese offensive against British India during the Burma Campaign of the Second World War. Eighty-five thousand Japanese soldiers from the 15th, 31st, and 33rd Divisions, along with seven thousand soldiers from the 1st Division of the Indian National Army, fought against one lakh twenty thousand soldiers from the British Indian Fourteenth Army's IV Corps of the Allied forces (Allen, 1984; Slim, 1956). The battle lasted for four months, from 8 March to 3 July 1944. Important battlefield sites include Shenam Saddle, Nungshigum Ridge, Bishenpur, and Sangshak. The sheer intensity and vast geographical scale of the battle had a profound impact on local people caught in the crossfire.

The Japanese Plan

The Japanese offensive into Imphal was part of the larger Operation U-Go (Allen, 1984, p. 191) which aimed to invade British India, capture the strategic towns of Imphal and Kohima, and destabilize Allied

operations in India and China. The plan, advocated by Lieutenant General Renya Mutaguchi, was conceived as a necessary pre-emptive operation to forestall any future Allied invasion of Burma.

However, the Japanese plan for a swift capture of Imphal and Kohima failed for several reasons, including strategic miscalculations and a significant underestimation of Allied strength and preparedness. The entire operation depended on rapid advances and the capture of enemy resources to compensate for Japan's limited rations and firearm (Bayly & Harper, 2004, p. 382). With supply lines stretched thin across the vast and difficult hilly terrain of eastern India, the Japanese forces were unable to withstand the Allied defence and counterattacks, which were supported by effective air supply and continuous reinforcements (Evans & Brett-James, 1962, p. 336).

As the battle extended into the monsoon season, many Japanese soldiers succumbed to starvation and disease. The majority of casualties occurred during the retreat, with nearly 74 percent of deaths—approximately 53,000 to 54,000 (Allen 638), of which only 13,376 were in combat—resulting from starvation and illness rather than direct fighting (Allen, 1984, p. 638).

The Allied Plan

The Allied Army's preventive fortification of Manipur into a strong military base during the intervening period of 1942–1944, in anticipation of a further Japanese invasion from Burma, proved strategically effective. Massive infrastructural upgrades—including the construction of six airfields in Manipur and the development of strategic transport networks such as the Imphal–Tamu, Imphal–Tiddim, and Imphal–Dimapur routes—created a robust operational system for the Allies. Approximately 155,000 Allied soldiers stationed in Manipur, well-trained and equipped with superior weapons, confronted the advancing Japanese and INA forces.

General William Slim, commander of the Allied Army, made cautious tactical decisions that prolonged the Battle of Imphal in ways that proved detrimental to the Axis. With strong air support and control, the Allies' effective bombing of enemy positions and continuous resupply played a decisive role in defeating the Japanese (Slim, 1956).

Result of the Battle

The Japanese army's high hopes of advancing into British India ended in a humiliating defeat, often regarded as one of the greatest land defeats in military history. The drying up of supplies, along with starvation and disease, took a devastating toll on the soldiers. Their desperation for food and survival, in turn, directly affected civilians who were already under immense duress from the battle.

The Allied success—driven by stronger logistical operations and superior air control—involved extensive bombing of various locations. Suspected regions or villages believed to be infiltrated by Japanese soldiers, as well as agricultural lands and local resources, were targeted to deny the enemy access to supplies. This denial policy resulted in the destruction of large swathes of agricultural land, crops, stored grains, livestock, and valuable civilian resources.

The fallout of the bombings and the soldiers' pressure for food fell heavily on civilians who were caught between the opposing forces. Survivors recall dreaded encounters with Japanese troops and the terrifying, indiscriminate Allied bombings.

Methodology

The methodology for this study involves the interpretive analysis of interviews and testimonies from

witnesses of the Second World War in Manipur, as recorded in Yaiphaba Kangjam's *Forgotten Voices of the Japan Laan: The Battle of Imphal and Second World War in Manipur* (Kangjam, 2019). Particular attention is given to the witnesses' encounters with soldiers during the Battle of Imphal. This approach is grounded in memory studies, which emphasize the permeable, subjective, and continually evolving nature of memory. Accordingly, the analysis focuses not on establishing the factual accuracy or truth-value of the recollections, but on understanding their experiential dimensions and the individual ways in which witnesses remember and relate to past events.

Objective

The objective of this paper is to regroup and analyse recurring memories in order to understand how civilian witnesses reacted to soldiers during the Battle of Imphal. It seeks to decipher the idiosyncratic ways in which individuals register and recall their experiences, acknowledging the subjective nature of memory and its varied modes of expression (Halbwachs, 1992; Assmann, 2011). By examining these personal recollections, the study aims to identify patterns of shared suffering and to demonstrate that the civilian narrative of the Battle of Imphal is, for many, fundamentally a narrative of survival and escape from soldiers. In doing so, the paper highlights how civilian perspectives and stories contribute to, and enrich, the collective memory of the war.

Discussion and Analysis

Japanese Forces: Abduction of People and Resources

Yaiphaba Kangjam's *Forgotten Voices of the Japan Laan* contains personal testimonies of survivors recounting their encounters with Japanese soldiers infiltrating their villages or operating in close proximity. Survivors like Gachung Dangmei describe their encounters with Japanese troops in his village.

They [the Japanese] knew that of all the villages lying along the Tiddim Road, including our village, Laimanai, was the most resourceful, and it is also situated at a good position on the hills.

That is why they set up a big hospital here, and many top-ranking officers of the Japanese were stationed here (Kangjam, 2019, p. 67).

Witnesses often seem to interpret the purpose and intent of the Japanese while recalling their encounters. This reflects a mediated, introspective form of war memory that reveals personal understandings of the situation, as well as individual explanations of the causes and effects of unfolding events. Gachung's recollection, for instance, offers a confident and logical interpretation of the circumstances, highlighting key factors such as the presence of local resources, manpower, strategic advantages like hill positions, and the availability or likelihood of finding useful helpers. His understanding of the Japanese position suggests a coercive entry that served primarily the interests of the Japanese soldiers. The memory of these encounters is therefore heavily coloured by perceptions of exploitation and the possible extraction of valuable resources from the local population.

The infiltration of villages by Japanese soldiers disrupted normal community life, bringing an end to the villagers' sense of freedom and safety. Their memories express deep distress and anxiety over the abduction of civilians and the seizure of livestock and resources. Fears of punishment and death under soldiers' pressure are strongly voiced in these recollections. V. R. Azip, for instance, recalls memories that capture the distress of the village elders, conveying a profound sense of helplessness in the face of armed soldiers.

Our elders were constantly worried about the condition of their homes, the rice stockpile, and livestock. They were also worried at the same time about the men from our village who were being used as porters by the Japanese and were taken to different places. My elder brother was also one of them. My parents cried a lot thinking about him, wondering if he would ever make it back (Kangjam, 2019, p. 124).

Azip's memory of the Japanese soldiers' abduction of his brother conveys the deep pangs and anxieties experienced by his family and the wider community.

The civilian memories of the Japanese clearly establish the soldiers' exploitation of villagers, reducing them to mere tools for military needs. These memories voice the tragedy borne and endured by the civilian community.

The Japanese dependence on local villagers for crucial wartime operations made civilians a vital component of their campaign. Civilians served not merely as subsidiary support but as core elements—acting as helpers, porters, guides, and sources of intelligence for resource mobilization. The importance of local knowledge is illustrated vividly in an incident in which Japanese soldiers abducted a local trader who was returning home from Cachar. Gouramohan remembers: “At Tairenpokpi the Japanese met three Manipuri traders who came from Cachar (Assam). One of them could speak English, and the Japanese took good care of him and used him as their guide to reach Maibam village through Irengbam” (Kangjam, 2019, p. 54). The memory highlights the Japanese eagerness to abduct and exploit villagers at even the slightest hint of their usefulness. It also reflects the heightened danger faced by physically able male civilians upon the entry of Japanese forces.

The Battle of Imphal's extension into a far longer fighting period than the Japanese had anticipated placed severe strain on Japanese forces, a burden that ultimately fell upon the villagers who were caught in the unfolding circumstances. The battle progressed from an intended few weeks of fighting to several months, extending well into the monsoon season of June–July and producing numerous unintended consequences. Japanese desperation for food, medicine, and other essentials became a primary cause of death as their troops retreated. The withdrawal turned into a perilous journey marked by starvation, disease, and the overwhelming sense of loss and defeat.

These desperate circumstances also affected civilians. The use of brutal force, violence against villagers, and the theft of food and livestock became increasingly common, particularly in the hill areas infiltrated by Japanese troops (Lokendra, 1998, p.177; Archive, p 6). The soldiers' shifting behaviour toward extreme brutality remains a troubling memory—one that local witnesses recall as illogical, shocking, and deeply mysterious.

The Japanese soldiers were friendly when they arrived, but by the time they retreated, they became hostile. They took away our pigs, chicken, and rice. They would beat up the locals. They even killed two people from our village. Their hands were tied; they were blindfolded and dragged to many places before finally being bayoneted to death. The reason was not known to us (Kangjam, 2019, pp. 139-141).

The testimony presented here shows how the soldiers' treatment of civilians remains an enigmatic source of terror, clearly violating social and humane expectations of rational behaviour. Their actions continue to endure as a deeply troubling memory.

Civilians' encounters with the Japanese were deeply unsettling and remain painful memories for many. Their presence was unbearable due to their unfulfillable demands, often accompanied by threats and the possibility of death. Any contact with Japanese soldiers was understood as a sign of danger and a signal

to flee as far as possible. Many survivors, including Th. Chomlal Aimol, recall the continuous escape and running from the Japanese throughout the battle.

Facing a lot of difficulties staying with them, we went near Hangoipat, situated along the Leimatak River, but the Japanese were spread everywhere, and we found them there as well. When they could not find anything to eat, they would snatch our food. Sometimes the women had to cook twice. Finding the same situation there, we moved again near Laphurou where there was a ravine...the Japanese reached there too and started demanding food... Besides meeting their demands staying with the Japanese was risky, and so we fled from there too and stayed at Varok village behind Chothe village at Bishenpur (Kangjam, 2019, p. 72).

Survivors' memories reveal the helpless situation of the locals in the face of Japanese soldiers. They show the profound change in their lives after the Japanese entry into Manipur.

Allied Forces: Bombing and Political Repression

Civilian memory also recalls the exploitation carried out by the Allied forces during the battle. These recollections reveal that the Allied, much like the Japanese, engaged in actions that caused significant hardship and suffering for civilians. Their tactics—such as extensive bombing of civilian areas, repression, and surveillance to curb local support for the Japanese—were central to their military strategy. However, in the process, they destroyed scarce resources and agricultural lands belonging to civilians. The Allies' close surveillance of villagers to deter any potential assistance to the Japanese further heightened the risks and anxieties experienced by the local population.

The Allied Army's execution of the Denial Policy, or Scorched Earth Policy, during the battle led to the destruction of vast expanses of both resource-rich and arable land (Naorem, 2020). Although the policy aimed to prevent the advancing Japanese forces from accessing local resources, it proved extremely costly for civilians. It decimated livestock, stored grains, and other essential resources, leaving villagers to mourn the loss of their homes. One survivor, Kullachandra, recalls, "most of the houses were burnt down by the government [the British government]" (Kangjam, 2019, p. 59). Similarly, Thanglengir Chiru remembers: "We received information that the British were planning a heavy bombardment of areas under Japanese control. Once again, the villagers opted to move far from the Japanese-occupied region" (Kangjam, 2019, p. 77).

The Allied Army received minimal assistance from the King of the princely state of Manipur, Bodhachandra, and from a few Tangkhul Nagas. However, the majority of the population remained non-participatory or neutral during the war. Their non-participation was partly due to a lack of awareness about the political situation at the time, which prevented them from perceiving any meaningful role for themselves in the conflict (Kangjam, 2019, p. 51, p. 117).

A small number of locals, however—through their contact with the INA and the Japanese—developed strong nationalist sentiments and were politically motivated to join the anti-colonial movement alongside the INA-Japanese forces. These individuals contributed as soldiers, scouts, intelligence agents, and helpers. Their involvement alongside the INA significantly strengthened the broader national freedom struggle (Chakravarty, 2017). Their support for the Axis powers, driven by hopes of a free nation, posed challenges to Allied military efforts.

The Allied forces' attempts to prevent any collaboration between civilians and the Axis led to strict surveillance and crackdowns on civilian life and movement. Monitoring of civilian activities, close scrutiny of missing persons, interrogations, and the banning of political or cultural organizations—such

as the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha, which was blacklisted—were all implemented (Mukherji, 2009, pp. 110–115). Severe punishments were enforced for those suspected of assisting the Axis. Constant monitoring of suspects and their families further increased the burden and anxiety experienced by civilians.

Survivors such as Laishram Birendrakumar Singh, who worked as an interpreter for the British during the battle, recall the atrocious mistreatment and brutal interrogation methods inflicted on civilian suspects:

The prisoners were all well-known local goons from different places in Manipur. They were suspected of taking money from the Japanese and supporting their cause. The interrogator was a British officer. He would ask a question, and I would translate it for the prisoners. The officer kept hitting the prisoners black and blue since all he got was “No, I don’t know” as an answer. It was such a sickening sight that I didn’t go back to work after my first day (Kangjam, 2019, p. 12).

This memory points to the Allies’ exploitative measures—including surveillance, intimidation, and punishment—that created terror and fear among civilians. It demonstrates how civilian lives were ultimately drawn into the conflict, targeted, and exploited for military purposes.

Conclusion

Through an interpretive reading of testimonies preserved in *The Forgotten Voices of the Japan Laan*, this study highlights how memory functions not simply as a record of events but as a lived, subjective archive that captures the emotional and experiential dimensions of war. The recurring narratives of escape, helplessness, and survival reflect a collective memory shaped by trauma, uncertainty, and the struggle to protect family and community.

The Manipuri survivors and witnesses of the Battle of Imphal 1944 remember it as one of the most challenging and unforgettable episodes of the Second World War in Manipur. Their brief encounters with soldiers from both warring sides—the Allied and the Axis—were marked by conflict, tension, and distrust. Memories of relentless bombings, political repression, exploitation of resources, and forced labour carried out by the soldiers still echo in the minds of the civilians.

Due to the overwhelming pressures and challenges posed by the battle and the presence of soldiers, the conflict crystallizes in the collective memory of civilians as a struggle for flight and survival. Unlike the relatively friendly and amicable relationships with soldiers during peacetime in Manipur, the Battle of Imphal remains a painful memory, revealing a broader pattern of collective victimhood and suffering.

These recollections reveal the difficult and precarious position of civilians in relation to soldiers from both the Allied and Axis forces. Civilians were treated as expendable resources, coerced into becoming instruments of war, subjected to political repression meant to control their will, and punished on suspicion of collaboration by both sides. These conditions make civilian memory of the battle profoundly painful and traumatic.

The conflicted relationship with soldiers—their opportunistic, authoritarian, and often violent behaviour—remains an unforgettable aspect of civilian remembrance. The discussion of civilian perspectives and memories establishes a clear call for recognising the experiences of ordinary people whose voices have long been marginalised or silenced. Their narratives demand acknowledgement of their suffering, healing for their traumatic past, and the restoration of dignity to an overlooked history. These memories also reveal the fate of small and marginal communities who bore the brunt of military atrocities.

This collection of survivors’ memories—particularly the book *Forgotten Voices of the Japan Laan*—acts as an archive that restores the histories, experiences, and subjective recollections of local survivors of the

battle. It offers an opportunity to understand the impact of the Battle of Imphal from multiple perspectives: military, civilian, marginal, and official. The stories, tragedies, and unique experiences of the civilians illuminate the profound toll of the war in terms of suffering, displacement, and the destruction of nature and resources—contrasting sharply with military or official narratives that prioritise statistics, strategies, and numbers. These humane and experiential dimensions demonstrate the far-reaching impact of modern warfare. The tragedy of war is not measured solely by soldiers' deaths but also by the suffering of those who do not wield weapons but live in shared communities with no sense of animosity or enmity. Their stories call for recognition, remembrance, and the continued preservation of marginalised histories that illuminate the true costs of modern warfare.

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