HOW WOMEN REMEMBER WAR: UNEARTHING MEMORIES OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN MANIPUR

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PROLOGUE

The Second World War – the most decisive, epoch defining war in modern history – was global not only because it almost divided the globe into Allied powers and Axis powers, but also because it was fought in places far removed from the epicentre of the controlling powers. Srinath Raghavan (2016) accounts when India was dragged into the war,[1] it sent a military force to the Middle East and Southeast Asia and extended material and financial contributions that imposed 'terrible privations' on the population of the country (2). Despite India's significant role in the war, Raghavan found 'the story of India's war is only dimly remembered' (3)[2]. If India's military, economic and logistical contributions, apart from the privations suffered by the people of India, are 'dimly remembered' in the larger narrative of the Second World War, even more unremembered are the experiences of people in the far-flung corners of the country.

In this paper, I build on the oral testimonies of women (and men) to present a people's perspective of the Second World War in Manipur, locally known as *Japan Lan* and its life-changing events. The paper has two main sections apart from the Prologue and the Epilogue: the 'Power of Telling' and 'In Their Own Words'. The first

briefly discusses how despite ambiguities, oral testimonies are crucial for unearthing women's repressed experiences and voices. The second part is further divided into four sub-sections that bring together disparate experiences of people in Manipur during the Second World War – experiences of being bombarded, of displacements and losses, of being persecuted and unsettled, and of facing the *enemy*.

Even as I deliberate on the unremembered memories of the people, I foreground the instrumentality of oral testimonies in remembering the direct or indirect imports of the Second World War in Manipur from dimensions ignored in war narratives and official documents.[3] Oral testimonies of the war in Manipur (1942-44) capture the fear and excitement, admiration and antagonism, hardships and opportunities, deaths and displacements endured by the people of the state.

When the Allied powers strategized in defence against the Axis forces, little would they have realized that British India's North-East Frontier, a region far removed from the centre-stage of the war, would assume tactical importance at a later stage. However, a dramatic shift happened with the capture of Burma from the British in 1942. The threat of Japanese incursions into Manipur became apparent. Without delay, spectacular mobilization of war-logistics and military reinforcements began for preparing Imphal as the military base to wrest Burma from the control of the Imperial Japanese Army. The battle(s) fought in this part of the erstwhile British Empire was adjudged as one of the most intense battles that Britain had ever fought.[4]

According to the *Administration Report of Manipur State 1943–44 (1945),* when the news of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941 reached Manipur, it had little impact. In fact, no one realized 'how soon the *enemy* ... reach[ed] the frontiers of the State' (emphasis added, the Administration Report 1). When the Second World War reached Manipur in the form of refugees from Burma, reconnaissance planes, bombardment warnings, military reinforcements and war equipment the people of the state watched the events unfolding as they would a spectacle. However, when Imphal was air-raided for the first time on 10 May 1942, and then

subsequently on 16 May 1942, the unassuming town was flung into chaos and lawlessness. The *Administration Report* notes:

> As a result of the first raid, the civil administration of the state ceased to function … For the rest, the State departments, the doctors, the clerical staff and the menials all fled to a safe distance. The Police, having failed to report for duty the next day, were suspended and all the convicts in the jail escaped. In the centre of Imphal, almost the only civilians remaining were a few pilferers and looters. (2)

By March 1944 Manipur, 'suddenly had to be envisaged as the primary target of a Japanese attack' (4). Yet, the people of Manipur could not have imagined the magnitude with which the war would affect them. It was a war not to have been fought, and least of all in Manipur and Kohima. Yengkhom ongbi[5] Hemabati expressed the sentiments of the people when she remarked, 'It was not our war.'[6] Eighty-seven-year old Ekashini added, 'It was a war to become rich.'[7] She did not specify who became rich, however, every surviving individual knew that the local contractors who either imported essential commodities from outside Manipur or undertook military construction became tremendously rich during the war.

Although the battle was waged for a relatively short period of about four months, the experience seemed long because of the preparations for war logistics that preceded the actual battle. On the one hand, people witnessed a fast-paced transformation in Imphal's terrain with tarred roads, bridges and airstrips rapidly emerging in strategically important places. On the other hand, there was the destabilization of the agrarian-based economy in the state which was overwhelmed by a wartime economy that resulted in a rather imbalanced production of wealth.

Examining the profound changes in the socioeconomic sphere in Manipur during the 1940s, N. Lokendra Singh (1988) comments:

> Agriculture, the mainstay of the economy was thoroughly disturbed by the situation of instability … There was, however,

> a heavy induction of money in the state through the war time mobilization works … Local contractors took advantage of the situation and earned a huge amount of profit (165–66).

Capturing the changing realities, Rajkumar Nimai, the 65-year-old nephew of the erstwhile king of Manipur, Maharaja Bodhachandra,[8] comments:

> What was very unfortunate was the encounter of a 'very sleepy town' – Manipur – with a culture of weaponry in the 20th century. That was a major cultural shock. Our people could not adjust to the shift. Manipur had largely been an agrarian economy.[9]

John Parratt (2005) too observes that there was the transition of an agrarian society to a 'modern era' by the end of the Second World War (93). Post-war Manipur, according to M. Kirti Singh (1988) was a society wherein:

> … [there is a] change in social outlook, way of life, change for a new ideal – ideal of equality and justice – hailed by the modern mind. The people who were orthodox before the war were radically changed. Interdining, going to hotels, new dresses, cinema, theatre, etc., have increased (xxxi).

Kirti Singh conceded that the war changed the lives of the people inalterably, and the society bore the imprint of this transformation. Easterine Kire shares in Mari (2010) what her oral narrators in Nagaland experienced: 'It altered our lives completely' (viii).

Therefore, as much as battlefield experiences are integral to war narratives, experiences of non-combatants and the far-reaching human consequences of the war cannot be undermined in the historiography of any war. The *Administration Report* details the onset and consequences of the Second World War in Manipur; however, lost amidst the narratives of the monumental battles are the memories of individual battles, and more so the experiences of women. While the local history of the war registers the privations borne by the people, women-specific experiences have seldom been explored.

THE POWER OF TELLING

'They must have all lost their memory
They must have all died!'

I heard these words often. It was a challenge reaching out to women who could narrate their memories of the war. Knowing that only a bare thread remains, I was highly sceptical of finding women who had experienced the war. Another challenge in this research was the perils associated with oral testimonies. Someone asked, 'How would you know they are giving you true accounts?' The question of accuracy and truth in oral testimonies of a historical experience is certainly significant. How does one assess if there are elements of exaggeration and manipulation of facts in oral testimonies? Alessandro Portelli (quoted in Polishuk 1998) explains that any discrepancy (between fact and memory) 'enhances the value of oral sources as historical documents. It is not caused by faulty recollections…but actively and creatively generated by memory and imagination in an effort to make sense of crucial events' (14). Sandy Polishuk adds to Portelli's rationalization that there is more to the discrepancies, for they 'tell us more than facts'. Any conflicting versions of a particular memory or

incident can be 'windows into values, dreams, and changes in attitude over time' (14).

Oral testimonies may even show signs of blurred memories, incoherence (particularly if the interviewee is very old) and disturbances (when there are other contending voices at the time of the interview). However, oral testimonies embody important aspects of the past that do not figure in official documents. This is particularly true of women's experiences in communal riots, conflict situations and war. Penny Summerfield comments on the 'amnesia within popular culture about women's wartime contribution' [and experiences] as:

> Women's experiences are, routinely, omitted from public accounts of the construction of national identity through military activity, and hence from accounts of war, which is reproduced as (inevitably) predominantly masculine (28).

Women's experiences are not only excluded from 'public accounts' of historical events, they are also often repressed in collective memory.

Ronald Grele (2007) distinguishes between individual and collective memory. While individual memories 'vary from socially defined collective remembrances, and often contradict them', Grele finds collective memory 'cohesive, based upon agreement, consensus, and deep communal longings' (*15*). Therefore, what is primarily recounted during oral history interviews is largely dominated by collective (and thereby more *acceptable*) remembering of a particular event or incident. However, a different memory breaks away from the more paradigmatic recollections once a while.

Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack (1991) compare the exercise of uncovering women's silenced notes from 'dominant' voices during oral interviews to listening to 'stereo' sounds, wherein there is an intertwining of 'dominant' and 'muted' voice signals (11). During such interviews, the interviewer has to be attentive to both the said and the unsaid as Anderson and Jack explain:

> A woman's discussion of her life may combine two separate, often conflicting, perspectives: one framed by concepts and

> values that reflect men's dominant position in the culture, and one informed by the immediate realities of a woman's personal experience…. Hence, inadvertently, women often mute their own thoughts and feelings when they try to describe their lives in the familiar and publicly acceptable terms of prevailing concepts and conventions (11).

Hence, it is important to note the dynamic not only between a (masculinized) written history and oral history, but also between the collective (and dominant) narrative of a historical past and more individual memories of the war experiences that interweave in a complex strand.

The experiences recounted in this paper are not of any conspirators, strategists or agents of war. These are recollections of the war by ordinary women and men, detailing their everyday struggles. Embedded within the archetypal memory of the *Japan Lan* are occasional fault lines that reveal a different remembering of the war, different from what is written in history books.

Women and men from places like Kakching, Malom, Maibam Lotpa Ching, Ningthoukhong, Bishenpur, Palace Compound and Khurai shared their experiences and the stories they had heard about the war. These were places of strategic importance during the war. Ukhrul district in Manipur is another site of historical significance. The Battle of Shangshak took place in Ukhrul in 1944. However, I could not reach Ukhrul on two occasions due to bandhs in the hills.

A couple of interviewees aged 90 years narrated their experiences during the war with brilliant clarity. In fact, they were rather conscious that their stories were not coherent. They were apologetic about their insignificant memory. Nonetheless, interacting with women – be they 80 or 90-year-old – was not without its challenges. Only three women interviewees could speak freely without any interventions. They were either surrounded by family members who (re)directed what they were expected to remember, or my own (male) family members who accompanied me sometimes intervened by asking the interviewees

'to-the-point' questions that would elicit *only* relevant answers. I was hoping to listen to anything around the subject of my interview.

While looking for women interviewees, I was particularly interested in reaching out to women who had no links with the world of books. I was keen to listen to their personal experiences or accounts that pertained to other women and not what came out of a book or war accounts written by historians. I decided on this when one of the (male) interviewees started narrating the story of the war straight out of a military history book of the Japanese incursion into Burma. In this regard, Svetlana Alexievich (2017) opines:

> Simple people—nurses, cooks, laundresses—behave more sincerely … They … draw the words out of themselves and not from newspapers and books they have read—not from others. But only from their own sufferings and experiences. The feelings and language of educated people, strange as it may be, are often more subject to the working of time … They are infected by secondary knowledge (xv).

The women I interviewed during the course of this project initially resorted to the readily available narrative of the Second World War in Manipur: there were 20 or 30 'balloons' [aeroplanes] flying in the sky; people fled to the villages to avoid the war; and the Japanese had to endure indescribable sufferings. However, with a little prodding, revealing stories about the war time came to the fore.

IN THEIR OWN VOICES

'BOMBS RAINED FROM THE SKY'

War is a chronicle of devastation. Inevitably, war invokes images of death and destruction; seldom can one imagine anything otherwise. However, amidst losses and displacement, it was also 'like a *mela*', as one interviewee said. Rajkumar Nimai reflects, 'It was a totally … surrealistic experience to the people who lived then.' Rajkumar continues:

> Tanks used in those days were of low quality, and yet people were mortally scared of tanks. They referred to tanks as rhinoceros.

For the men or women, the young or the old, the war unfolded a new age – an age of machinery and artillery – never witnessed before. When Burma fell to the Imperial Japanese Army and forced the British soldiers as well as the Burmese Indians out of Burma, there was little left to imagine. The threat that the Japanese posed to the British dominion in Manipur was real. At an unimaginable pace, Manipur was transformed from what Rajkumar calls 'a very sleepy town' to 'a culture

of weaponry'. In fortifying Manipur against the Japanese offensive, agricultural land, open fields, people's homes and dirt tracks were transformed into supply bases, airfields, army camps and tarred roads.

Even the open skies provided an unforgettable sight. People ran out of their houses to watch airplanes fly. They referred to the planes as 'balloons'. Pukhrambam Ningol Khwairakpam ongbi Madhumati, a defiant looking woman of 92 from Ningthoukhong, recounted her amazement at the sight of the flying objects:

> They used to fly very, very high like swallows. They would emit smoke in the sky all around, and we would especially watch the trails of smoke.[10]

Koijam Mangi, the 93-year-old sister-in-law of the then ruling king, Maharaja Bodhachandra, distinctly remembered the spectacular bomber planes in the sky and gave an equally spectacular description of the sight:

> When planes flew – they were called bombers those days – they would do so in 20s and 30s. However, a big plane would arrive first. Then we knew Japanese planes would follow. Those were very broad planes and used to fly very high.[11]

Easterine Kire's Mari also notes a similar excitement:

> Aeroplanes flew over our skies for the first time. This was such an amazing phenomenon for us that people talked about it for days…. They created great excitement among the villagers and people would shout to each other whenever they heard the drone of an aeroplane (14).

Planes were harmless and fascinating until they started raining bombs. However, what was unforgettable was the damage done by the fascinating flying objects to the people. It did not take long for the ugly face of the war to disenchant people. Yengkhom ongi Hembati, in her interview to Binodini talked about her experience of the first bombing:

> The first time they came they did not unleash their loads of fire. As we had been taught, we ran and jumped into our trenches, but

> the planes simply turned and flew away. That first day gave us a very wrong impression of the war. We could not figure out why the white men were so fussy about airplanes and the trench routines. A few days later, on May 10, the airplanes returned and shocked us all out of our complacency, pouring bombs on us that exploded like unending thunder claps. Many said there were 18 of them.

87-old Yumkhaibam ongbi Manjuri from Langthabal shared her experience:

> We carried lanterns to the trench for fear of snakes. It was a long trench with openings at both ends. At that instant, everyone started calling out, warning of a plane approaching. As we held lanterns in our hands, we might have been mistaken for soldiers. Once inside, the plane began bombing the trench. The explosion buried us inside. My mother and I were closer to the entrance but my sister and my elder brother were deeper inside the trench. They were buried in the mud. The following morning, they had to be dug out with hands (we avoided using spades for fear of hurting them) …. My sister's cheeks were badly bruised.[12]

The memory of Japanese bombing is still so strong that 88-year-old Meira Paibi leader Thokchom Ramani described the perilous time as:

> Those days, empty shells rained from the sky. Fighter planes pursued and attacked each other in the sky. 'L' shaped trenches were dug for people to shield themselves. They were covered with twigs, sticks, leaves and mud so that bullets didn't penetrate the shield. Apart from the dangers of being killed by bullets and shells, there was also the danger of being bitten by snakes in the trenches.[13]

Humour is still intact in this zesty old woman who has withstood institutional forces in her numerous fights against the State. She remembered: 'to add to our woes, the danger of the moment would often trigger untimely calls of nature.'

Rumours of bombing were rife everywhere, and the alarm that were sounded to warn the people of imminent bombings only heightened

the fear. The deadliest bombing in Manipur that reportedly claimed 90 lives and wounded 49 people,[14] on 20 April 1943 was the bombing of a community hall in Khurai, more popularly known as Khurai Chingangbam Mantop. Rajkumar Nimai talks of this incident and conveys a collective sentiment:

> The biggest, most terrible bombing was at Khurai Chingangbam Mantop. This was a very unfortunate incident… One of my uncles from Khurai had witnessed that incident. He was twenty-four or twenty-five at that time. [He said that] when he regained consciousness, he found himself buried under body parts … This incident was extremely devastating, irrespective of age, caste, creed and sex. This incident became an important factor in instilling aversion and fear for Japan in public imagination.

Bombings in residential areas and market places claimed many lives. Ninety-four-year old Ingudam Tomba recalled a morning when the Japanese bombarded Imphal:

> The bulls got scared and ran away on hearing the sound of explosions. I was worried that my older brother would scold me. When I came out of Thiyam Leirak [in search of the bulls], another bomb was dropped at Keishampat junction. I saw a well-built woman lying on the road. Her child may have been 2 or 3 years old. The child didn't know its mother had died. It sat on the mother's body and reached out to suckle milk.[15]

This heart-wrenching sight was imprinted on the minds of the onlookers and listeners as the story passed on. The now 84-year-old Chingakham Manorama was only 7 or 8 at that time:

> Such stories I heard! Someone dropped dead even as he was walking; a young mother was killed while her child survived. I heard how the child played around the mother's dead body and tried breastfeeding itself.[16]

The interviewees who lived to tell the stories of bombings shared their experiences with gusto, and yet underlined in their memories are also their experiences of persecution. While some were lucky to escape

unscathed, some lost their lives. The bombings may not have touched the bodies of the survivors, yet the life-threatening dramatic moments of the war unsettled the lives of many and displaced people not only from their homes but also from their livelihoods.

'WE FLED; WE HAD NO HOME; AND WE HAD NO WORK'

The war displaced many people making them refugees in their own land. People fled their homes with whatever little they could carry with them on foot, in bullock carts, in boats and some even in cars. People from Imphal took refuge in villages, and people from the villages fled to neighbouring villages. The war did not just displace people from their homes; it also displaced them from their everyday lives, thus practically rendering them inconsequential. Whether near or far, they could not return home for months; and when they did, they found that very little remained of their homes.

Madhumati recounted the hardships that her family faced during those times. War persecuted them and affected their lives in many ways:

> I must have been older than 16 at that time. I was in Oinam Khullel. We fled from our village to Ngatempat in the heart of Loktak. We fled in a boat… Every morning and evening, we had stew made of leaves of water chestnut and potatoes. When there was scarcity of food, some people went to take food from the mahajans and distributed that to poor people. Those men were thrown into prison for taking food from the mahajans. We didn't have any food. We would often fill our stomachs with water chestnut (from Loktak) when there was no rice available for days …. They [the soldiers] burnt all the houses and the granaries. We lost a lot of food grains. We were asked to evacuate our houses. We fled the war for about a year.

The *Administration Report* records the requisitioning of 20,000 homes by 1943 for sheltering the Allied soldiers in Imphal (4).

This led to a massive displacement of the people from their homes and livelihoods, particularly following the two air raids in 1942. However, the *Report* notes that people in Manipur accepted the requisitioning of their homes by the soldiers and their own displacement with 'praiseworthy cheerfulness' (2). It was only when we spoke to the war-survivors that we could find out about their experiences of being refugees in their own land.

The *Report* also mentions that the women's market was 'gutted after the second air-raid' after which it remained closed for some time (2). The destruction of the market place, the lifeline for many Manipuri women, would have certainly displaced many women, even though some may still have found ways to trade their small produce. Food scarcity and no means of earning money heightened their hopelessness. Their losses went beyond material ones. Although people fled their homes for a week, a month or maybe a year or two; for the longest period, their hardships were compounded by uncertainties that informed everyone's lives. Madhumati continued:

> We couldn't pursue any work during that time… We had practically no means of earning money. We couldn't even catch fish because we didn't have our equipment.

Women in many households in Manipur fend for their families. Fishing, farming, weaving and trading are some of the primary activities that women depend on for their sustenance. However, the bombardment in Manipur and the ensuing displacement from their homes, in addition to the requisitioning of houses for the soldiers disrupted their economic activities. Therefore, the means of survival for many women were not only altered but also threatened. They had to earn their livelihood in whatever ways they could. Women who had access to a makeshift marketplace sold vegetables and other items, while women who had access to road and airfield construction work chose manual work for a few rupees.

These devastating circumstances drove women to take up any available work available during that time. Sahitya Bhushan awardee

Khuraijam Nimaicharan Singh shared his first-hand account about the kind of work women did to earn their livelihood:

> Koirengei airfield was the first airfield. It was called Imphal Airfield. During the laying, many of the labourers were Meitei women. Once the tractor had laid the road, women carried all the stones and mud and many other things for tarring the road… As the harvest was already over, there wasn't much work to be done in the fields. Building houses, laying roads, constructing bridges and cutting down plants in riverbanks required men and women labourers. Even though it was a time of great hardship, it was also a time of great opportunity to earn money. Anywhere in Imphal, on roads and in fields, there was high requirement for men and women labourers.[17]

However, such opportunities were not available everywhere. There was work where roads or bridges were being built, or where airfields were being constructed. Koirengei, Kangla and Pallel were some of the locations where there was high requirement for labourers. In fact, Kshetri Bira, an award-winning Manipuri novelist,[18] noted that labourers from places outside Manipur were brought in for construction work.

Ninety-six-year old Naorem ongbi Ibecha from Kakching Wairi Kongoi Pat confirmed the limited opportunities available for women (in Kakching) in those times. Ibecha reluctantly admitted that she joined the labour force in construction sites. She earned about three or four rupees. In those days, it was not a meagre amount. Ibecha's reluctance in admitting she worked at a construction site, albeit briefly, may be because of the low repute associated with this menial work. Women from poor families often comprised the wartime workforce, while women from more affluent families remained protected.

That the war was indiscriminate in instilling fear is true. When war threats reached the vicinity of one's protected space, neither kings nor gods could have felt any more secure than ordinary people. Mangi added how even Shree Govinda's idol[19] had to be moved to a place of safety when the surrounding area was bombed. Although gods and

royalty also bore the brunt of the war, it was nothing compared to the hardships faced by common people. Many lost their granaries and valuable items; many others lost their lives and homes.

Material losses were countable and compensated for to a certain extent when the war ended. The hardships and grief, however, could not be compensated for. Ramani was one of the few interviewees who spoke of the misery endured not only by Manipuris but also by Burmese Indians who had to leave their homes and business establishments at the time of the Japanese invasion of Burma. Her story talks of the exodus of Burmese Indians from Burma:

> During *Japan Lan,* many *mayangs*[20] entered from Burma. Many people in Manipur acquired gold and other valuables in exchange for food. As there were no motor vehicles in those times, they [the Burmese Indians] had to leave behind the infirm and sick who couldn't proceed further. Sometimes, they even had to leave behind their loved ones, as they couldn't carry them further. Those left behind lay on the road dying. While many of those dead bodies were cremated by soldiers, many others were found floating in Thoubal river. Fish fed on those dead bodies. After seeing that, I stopped eating fish for a very long time.

Such individual war experiences, of course, are not reflected in war accounts that focus primarily on the strategic aspects of the war. They not only describe how the development and destruction during the war affected the people but also foreground ordeals specific to women.

'… THEY MADE OUR LIVES MISERABLE'

The oral testimonies also revealed stories about women whose hardships took sexual forms. Women and male interviewees shared the abuses and threatened sense of security women experienced during the war.

90-year-old Yendrembam ongbi Leima grew up in Malom Tuliyaima Makha Leirak, not far from where the present Imphal airport is. She was 13 when the war preparations started. Allied soldiers stationed themselves at Malom. Clearly, the soldiers were not restricted to the military spaces and were at liberty to scout the neighbourhood routinely:

> Those soldiers made young women very unsettled. They made our lives miserable. It is embarrassing to even recount… When I was young ... I would often cut through the by-lanes of the village to reach my friend's house who lived on the other side. Once, they [the soldiers] called out 'Biwi' and said '…. [something incomprehensible].' They waved their money at us. We were shocked. There were four of us. They unzipped and showed their private parts to us. My, my! We fled from there.
> There were many soldiers in the Malom area. They made us feel very insecure. If we had to go anywhere, we would go in groups or with young men. That way they couldn't do anything… The Negroes[21] often bathed in the open … that too without their clothes… We saw they had no clothes on them. All five of us were very embarrassed.[22]

Women complained that Allied soldiers, particularly the Africans, would just pull any woman they could lay their hands on. Leima talked of her escape from a soldier's attempts to abduct her from her own house one day. This was the year when one of the most terrifying battles in the history of both Manipur and England was fought – 1944. She said:

> During the battle at Lotpaching, I must have been 16 or 17 years old. …. One day a soldier entered our house. My father-in-law was sleeping. The soldier tried abducting me. He said, 'Biwi' … and asked something incomprehensible. I ran around the courtyard shouting *ima, ima*. He must have thought I was a supply woman. My father-in-law ran out of the house with his clothes in his hand. He said something and the soldier stood still. That was how I escaped abduction. Imagine if I had been alone!

Women from Kakching and Thoubal also expressed their aversion for African soldiers in no uncertain terms. Such resentment towards them explains the propagation of derogatory myths about African soldiers.

70-year-old Subadani from Khongjom Langathel talked about the climate of fear built by stories about African soldiers. These were clearly myths circulated based on their skin colour. They may have probably been fuelled by stereotypes propagated about them by the Europeans:

> We even heard the story of Negroes eating young children. There was a paddy field around Thengman Chingdum. My grandfather told us how he anxiously went to search for his cow when it didn't return home. He saw the severed head of a man, and a Negro skinning the body. He ran back on seeing the man and warned everyone not to leave the children unattended.[23]

Although what Subadani heard about the African soldiers may have been fabricated, these fabrications served the purpose of protecting young women and children from perceived threats. That the Manipuris were antagonistic towards the Africans is evident from the names they gave them, like *chinbanjao* and *natonjao,* referring to their facial features. 80-one-year-old Yengkhom Ningol Manglem Devi from Kakching Shumang Leikai remembered the eventful days, 'We weren't scared of either the *gora* soldiers or the Nepali soldiers. But if we happened to see any *chinbanjao*, we would literally break our backs fleeing from them'.[24]

Khuraijam too discussed his experience with the Africans during his childhood:

> People were scared of Negroes. They wouldn't respond to their demands and enquiries. One day, when I returned from school, I saw a Negro squatting in the side-veranda of my house. On seeing me, he said '*nupi*, *nupi* [woman]!' There was an Englishman who knew Indian languages. He lived in the hangar nearby. I hastily went to call him. It was only when the Englishman came and

> scolded the African that he left. I had also heard stories about how Negroes forcibly entered people's homes. In one such incident, people chased a Negro and smashed his head.

Thokchom Ramani narrated incidents when Allied soldiers knocked on people's doors asking for women:

> They [the Allied soldiers] treated children very affectionately. However, at night, they would come asking for women. They were neither white soldiers nor black soldiers but some other dark coloured soldiers. We knew the Negroes as they kept their hair tied after burning it [Ramani's explanation for kinky hair]. These soldiers would come knocking at the door at night, asking for women. Some of them even married Meitei women. Women couldn't venture out at night. Groups of men kept vigil at night with sticks and swords after which the soldiers stopped demanding women.

If, in some areas of Manipur, soldiers went to neighbourhoods seeking women; in other areas, offences against women took an outrageous turn. Although young women were mostly protected and not allowed to venture out alone, married women often had to go out to earn a living. Kshetri Bira narrated a story he had been told:

> Despite the war receding from Imphal in July-August (1944), it continued until the atomic bombing [of Japan] in 1945. Although there was no fight [between the Japanese and British armies], in Kakching a war of sorts continued in another way. It was during this time that the Negroes launched their offensive in Kakching. Many Negro soldiers were stationed [in Kakching] … Their most offensive behaviour was towards women.

What the Negroes did [to women] is untold and unspeakable. To put it embarrassingly, they literally chased women. Many of them were shamed [euphemism for rape]. They were very notorious.[25]

He recounted how African soldiers raped a woman in his locality in front of her family members.

Although many women were protected from foreign soldiers, some women were driven by circumstances to engage in flesh trade for their livelihood. Leima narrated the story of one woman who lived in her neighbourhood:

> There was a woman called Chaobi [name changed]. I think she didn't have any parents…. One day she was given to [raped by] many soldiers. Not able to get out, she writhed in pain and cried for help. After the soldiers left [on seeing her son enter, Leima insisted on ending the interview without completing the story], an old woman massaged her abdomen. The mess she cleared from her body! Such unutterable words! She was in such pain.

One *gora* lived in one of the big houses nearby. He was the soldiers' superior. He took Chaobi as his woman on seeing her plight. Once she became his woman, the soldiers had to salute her … One day when all the soldiers had to leave, the *gora* left money for her but he didn't take her with him. After the *gora* left, I don't remember who she married – a tribal or a *mayang*.

Leima was neither critical nor cynical while narrating Chaobi's story. If anything, she was sympathetic. However, in imagining the future of women like Chaobi, particularly when their partners left, she could only think of Chaobi marrying, if at all, 'a tribal or a *mayang*' and not anyone from the Meitei community. Leima confirmed knowing local men supplying women to the Allied soldiers.

Manjuri had also heard of stories about women who offered sexual services during the war. She was quick to identify them as *oktabi*[26] from distant places:

> There were people who organized the flesh trade and would often stealthily supply *oktabi* to the *goras*. I heard about these activities. However, there were no cases of women from among *us* (emphasis added) being supplied to the *goras*.
>
> I don't know which *leikai* they came from. We were told about these *oktabi* doing such things. Our brothers never let us go out anywhere. We were still children. These women would often scout at night.

> [During the war] women couldn't go out for over two months. They had to stop their businesses in the market. So, they started trading their flesh for money. But there was no ostracism or criticism as such. There were no cases of them spreading diseases. These women would often come back and take care of their children.

Firstly, although Manjuri claimed that these women were not criticized or ostracized, there is a deliberate distancing of 'these women' by locating them from far-away places. Secondly, calling them *oktabi* itself invokes moral chastisement. Certainly, women from *respectable* families were not allowed outside their homes, let alone venturing out at night.

Khuraijam hesitatingly described the *modus operandi* of the flesh trade during the war. He also added that these women were from far-away places:

> To put it embarrassingly (to a daughter like you), when the war intensified, English soldiers lived in airfields like Koirengei, Kangla and Changangei… There were Manipuri women found in these airfields. They were from far-away places like Khangabok. Those men who supplied these women were called *bibiwallahs*. The English soldiers would ask the young boys, 'Where are the *bibiwallahs*?' We knew what they were asking for. We often directed them to those men who arranged women for them.
>
> It was mostly the ordinary English[27] soldiers who were on the lookout for such things; Indian soldiers did not do such things… They referred to sexual intercourse as *jik, jik*. They would often say 'ten rupees, one *jik jik.*' They even asked us if we too wanted it!

Although Kshetri did not experience the war in person, he was informed of flesh trade during the war by people who lived during those times:

> Yes, there were suppliers of women [during the war]. There was a cinema hall at Laithengbam Chingdum (hillock) that also served as the officers' club … there were very nice houses there. British officers of high rank resided in Chingaren. Many women

> also lived in that area – Bengali, Meitei, Hindustani and British women. It was rumoured that one man of the Laishram family had increased his wealth tremendously by establishing such contacts [providing women to the British]. He was earlier from a poverty-ridden family. There were such men in this area too.

However, Ramani expressed ignorance of any sexual violence against the women:

> I heard stories about women dancers; I know about soldiers knocking at doors demanding women; I also know how men kept vigil at night with arms and stick…. I haven't heard of any incidents of rape or sexual offences against women. There were [Meitei] women who lived with the soldiers.

While some women were ignorant of any offensive advances toward women, some even maintained that nothing like rape or sexual offences could have happened. While in some areas the damages of war took sexual forms, they remained mostly material and emotional in other areas. However, the question of sexual abuse of women and prostitution continues to be largely ignored, and worse still, silenced.

Acknowledging the presence of the flesh trade, although unorganized, would be deleterious to the image of women, and by extension the image of Manipur. Khuraijam rationalized the ambivalence that may have resulted in silencing the history of sexual violence:

> Those were all Meitei women. On the one hand was the admirable hard work and perseverance that the Meitei women were known for and on the other hand was the newly emerging flesh trade. Most of the airfields had stories like these – Korengei airport, Tulihal airport … It wasn't like they were purely into this trade. In those times, I suspect there might have been instances of venereal diseases.

Nonetheless, he admitted that prostitution during the wartime was purely driven by the deplorable circumstances of the women:

> I had never heard of the flesh trade before the war. Manipur was very pure that way. But during the war, people had to find ways to survive. No one confronted him [the supplier] or challenged his line of work. It wasn't like these women were permanently stationed there. They would leave after some time, and a group of new women would start working there.

Khuraijam, in a way, established that the flesh trade was not institutional but arranged by local men primarily based on soldiers' demands. The women who were involved in such deals did not function as inmates of brothels. They were married women who, as Manjuri put it, 'would often come back and take care of their children'. During such unsettling times, selling one's body might not necessarily have been subjected to moral censure; however, the history of Manipuri women mired in sexual encounters, abuse and liaisons during the Second World War remains ignored.

By the time the war started, Manipuri women had a strong image and legacy in the state. The second Nupi Lan (women's agitation) had just concluded in 1939, and it had established the unwavering courage of Manipuri women. Therefore, to acknowledge women who cohabited with foreign soldiers or engaged in sexual trade comes with certain moral implications. Moreover, the memory of the relationship between Maharajkumari Sanatombi (the daughter of Maharaj Surchandra who ruled during 1886-90) and the first British political agent in Manipur, Major Horatio St. John Maxwell had not yet faded from the collective consciousness of the people. Ch. Manihar Singh in his critique of M. K. Binodini's *Bor Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi* (1976), a novel that fictionalizes the life story of Princess Sanatombi who left her husband after she fell in love with Major Maxwell, remarks:

> In real life except for some short-lived enjoyment of worldly pleasures while residing in the Residency, she was a social outcaste for the rest of her life (272).

It will not be an overstatement to say that the sexual dimension of Manipuri women's wartime experiences has not been sufficiently

explored as it has been collectively repressed. Another reason for not registering the sexual (and often abusive) encounters and relations between Allied soldiers and Manipuri women, particularly in any form of writing, maybe due to the repercussions that this acknowledgement might have had. Acknowledging it would not only have been deleterious to the guarded image of the British Empire, considering 'the Raj had a continued commitment to the ideology of imperial domination', it would also have meant transgressing some of the British government's restrictions regarding sexual contact with local women (Khan 242).

Khan also notes the strict regimentation and legislation regarding soldiers' intimacy with 'native' prostitutes (244). At best, the military reports 'ambivalently accepted that troops did sleep with "coolie" women, presumably low-caste Indian women workers' or at worst, Khan found that:

> Official documentation tried to wish away the problem or excused the soldiers, stressing the naivety, innocence and hardships of white soldiers who could become confused and vulnerable to the predatory advances of Indian 'pimps and prostitutes', especially when under the influence of alcohol (246).

While poverty and starvation may have driven Manipuri women to the flesh trade and sexual exploitation, the men who arranged such liaisons clearly benefited from these deals. Although the war touched everyone's lives directly or indirectly, pressing them into difficult times, the sexually oppressive circumstances that the women had to endure were specific only to them. While women had to undertake such transactions to feed their families, the men exploited their vulnerable position to fill their coffers.

Another means of livelihood that the women turned to was entertaining soldiers with their dance. *Marbak jagoi*[28] was a popular form of entertainment in Manipur during the war. Ramani described the *marbak jagoi* that she had witnessed:

> Some Meitei women were *marbak jagoi* dancers. In courtyards and open fields, soldiers often surrounded these women … the *marbak* dancers were daring and skilled in music and dance. They sang and danced to the music of a harmonium. We were also part of the audience. The soldiers would offer them money by tugging the notes in between their fingers and extending their hands. The *marbak* dancers, however, accepted the money only when it was given to them, and they would sing, '*Babu, duniya diwane*'. I didn't know what they were singing, but I learnt snatches from them.

Ramani remembered that these women accepted their payments with dignity and professionalism. The soldiers may have tried to lure the female performers, yet the dancers kept their distance from the soldiers and, by extension, from disrepute. However, Khuraijam, who had also been part of such an audience, remembered an occasion differently in his memoir *The Second World War in Manipur and My Childhood*. He narrates how the white soldiers would often titillate the female dancers by holding out money to them and hiding it in their pockets, or in the folds of their shirtsleeves or in their collars:

> It was at this time when the pilots laughed heartily to have their shirts and bodies searched and touched by the soft hands of those beautiful dancing ladies for the money that they had shown them earlier (86).

Ramani claimed that these women were performers and were not held in contempt despite the conservatism of the Meitei community. However, she confessed, 'There were women who were in relationships with soldiers.'

Manjuri too confirmed that the *marbak* dancers were not held in low esteem:

> We heard of the *marbak jagoi* dancers. They were not looked down upon. No, they were not *mayangs*. They were all Meiteis and they would dance to get money from the *goras.* One man would lead such women to the garrisons. The *goras* especially asked for these women. They were often taken in trucks. Those army trucks were driven by Meiteis.

The interviewees remembered how popular *marbak jagoi* was during the wartime. The women danced to the tune of Hindi songs wearing *ghungroo* (ankle bells). Their memory of this form of entertainment during the dreariness of the war is revealing. On a lighter note, it shows how rituals and dance, community feasts and festivals continued amidst the perils of the war. On a more serious note, it highlights how, a certain section of women was protected from the soldiers, whereas some women entered military spaces to entertain the soldiers for a living. What is even more revealing is how men, who lived or worked in close proximity with the soldiers, may have enjoyed the privilege of their negotiating powers at the expense of the women.

Despite Ramani and Manjuri's liberal views about the female entertainers, Ramani could not help wondering about the consequences for women who cohabited with the soldiers:

> We'd often wonder whether these women would be really taken as their wives back to their country, or whether they would be abandoned later on. Some army officers kept these women as their *wives*, but they were not women from our area (Thoubal). I don't know where they were from.

Ingudam Tomba also attested the fact that some *marbak jagoi* artists had relationships with officials from the Allied forces. He remembered a woman called Wangoi Chaobi who was in a relationship with a 'Burman' captain and who intervened on his behalf when he was arrested for not reporting for duty.

M. Kirti Singh shared the common perception of the *marbak jagoi* performers even before the Second World War:

> After Manipuri war of 1891 this form came to be associated with loose moral character, and the girls branded as women of easy virtue got interested in extracting money from the low class people of Manipur (191).

Khuraijam gives details of the effect that these dancers had on the onlookers in his memoir:

> *Marbak Jagoi* was often performed through engagements made by British [sic] officials or by local heads… The performers of the dance could earn a lot of money in a single night primarily at places where they could be witnessed and enjoyed by a huge crowd of British officials … what pleased and interested them most were the gaits and the waves of their body as well the facial expression of those dancers (84).

As a young boy, Khuraijam had some understanding of the implications of such performances. The performers' sexuality was devoured and enjoyed by Manipuri men and the soldiers of the Allied forces alike. Therefore, there is a strong indication that this form of entertainment, which was arranged by men, may have facilitated occasions for sexual intimacy between the performers and the soldiers, and sometimes even sexual exploitation.

Understandably, there is little mention of sexual liaisons, abuse and the flesh trade in the narratives of the war. Lokendra Singh summarily mentions, 'Reports of assault, murder and molestation were also there though such occurrences were very rare.' (177), whereas *the Administration Report* mentions no such thing. Stories of sexual abuse and exploitation are not uniformly informed. Primarily, not everyone was aware of such incidents, and many women were protected from hearing about such cases. Manorama added how her uncle and father once shooed her away when she happened to catch snatches of their conversation about a woman being raped. Secondly, few people were willing to talk about such things. A male interviewee refused to comment anything more than mentioning that his stepmother was a *marbak jagoi* dancer and claimed that he had no knowledge of her whereabouts.

Yuki Tanaka (2002) expressed her discomfort about how her father and uncles were 'silent about the issue of comfort women' (2). Tanaka questions the silencing and institutional erasing of the history of sexual exploitation of Chinese and Korean women by the Japanese Army during the Second World War. Although abuse of women by soldiers of the Allied forces in Manipur may not have been institutional

or fuelled by either political or moral ideologies,[29] which had fuelled the Japanese Army, it was nonetheless an import of the war – a direct consequence of the war.

'JAPAN WAS VERY GENEROUS AND NOBLE'

Despite the brutalities that the Japanese Army was known for in the Southeast Asian countries that they invaded, they evoked sympathy and respect from a certain section of the people in Manipur. Particularly when it came to the question of their attitude toward women, Japanese soldiers were unambiguously regarded as noble in character. However, one memory that lingered of the Japanese Army in the Second World War was that of its crushing defeat.

Accounts[30] of the battles in Imphal and Kohima point out how Japan's devastating defeat was primarily the outcome of an ambitious imagination and misjudgement on the part of the high command in the Japanese Army. Max Hastings termed the Japanese 'high command's approach' as 'recklessly insouciant' (70). Hemant Katoch too found the decision for the Imphal Campaign on the part of General Renya Mutaguchi 'to be motivated by an omnipresent desire for personal grandeur'(11). These accounts show how the leadership of the Japanese Army underestimated the strategies and capabilities of its opponent, and how it ultimately resulted in a catastrophic loss for the Japanese Army. Pressed by depleting resources and the throttling of supply lines by the Allied forces on the one hand and advancing monsoon rains on the other, how did the Japanese soldiers respond to local villagers where they camped? Conversely, how did local Manipuri people respond to the *enemy* who looked like them in every sense?

Having lived in Maibam Lotpaching where one of the fierce fights unfolded in 1944, 87-year-old Taorem Gouramohan was in awe of the Japanese who launched a stealth attack on one of the Allies' camps:

> To the east of Oinam Bazar, there was a particular spot called Shakhangdabi. One day when *Japan* went there, they found that

> the [British] Army was camping there … The next day, two *Japan* went to the camps disguised as hill women. Wearing tribal shawls and each carrying a cane basket on their backs, they surveyed the camp area on the pretext of selling things. They disappeared after the surveillance. At night about 10, all the [British] soldiers were rounded up and massacred. Blood streamed down from that place, I was told.[31]

The Japanese were considered the enemy particularly in the hills. Cases of cruelty and hostility by them were reported from the hills in Manipur. *The Administration Report* records:

> In the hills wherever the Japanese went they seized any paddy they could find and killed all the livestock, paying when at all in Japanese Burma notes or occasionally in cleverly forged Rs 10/- British India note (6).

N. Lokendra too recounts the atrocities faced by the hill people during Japanese incursions into their land:

> Those villages which were on the Japanese lines of communication therefore were very hard hit and they lost almost all stocks of food. Even the house hold goods of the local people particularly, the Nagas were not spared (177).

Writing about the time that the Japanese entered Kohima during the Second World War, Easterine Kire recounts how the Japanese army 'extort[ed]' from the villages they invaded and how the villages 'were finally taken over by the British troops' (xii). Kire presents an unambiguous picture of her people's loyalties and sympathies during the war in 1944. The eponymous character of Kire's *Mari,* a heart-breaking novel that traces the romance of Mari and Victor through the tumultuous times of the Battle of Kohima, shares the horror that the Japanese Army evoked among the people in Kohima:

> Stories of Japanese atrocities hurtled through my mind. Our men who had been picked up by them were badly beaten and then tied to the trees all night long while their captors slept. We had also heard stories of women being molested by them, spoken of in

> whispers among the elders, because rape was considered the most heinous of crimes and we knew very little of it before the Japanese came (67).

Katoch notes that the 33rd division of the Japanese Army that entered through Tiddim road and the Silchar-Bishenpur track towards Imphal could get some of their supplies and reinforcements. They may not have been initially subjected to hardships and starvation, as the 15th or the 31st divisions had been. The 15th division of the Japanese Army was advancing towards Kangpokpi to block the route between Kohima and Imphal while the 31st division was advancing toward Kohima (25). Traversing through a better terrain, the Japanese soldiers of the 33rd division may have been less hostile to the villagers than their counterparts moving to Kohima. However, with monsoon rains and accompanying diseases, the 33rd division suffered its share of exhaustion, starvation and disease in June 1944. Interviewees from villages on Tiddim road and the Silchar-Bishenpur track remember the Japanese soldiers not as the face of a ruthless army but as individuals scampering for their survival. 97-year-old Lairenjam Amumacha from Bishenpur said:

> Women in those days were mortally scared of the soldiers… However, *Japan* were more tolerant towards women. If any woman happened to snatch anything from their hand, they would merely smile. However, if any man were to do the same, they would be intolerant. *Japan* were also better behaved than British soldiers.[32]

Amumacha talked of how women helped the starving Japanese Army. Yet, many interviewees concurred that despite their abject conditions the Japanese soldiers did not resort to force or harassment of the local people for food or meeting their other needs. Amumacha continued:

> Women helped *Japan*. When the soldiers saw Meitei women, they would ask them for food and offer money in exchange. But the money they gave was of no use to them. Yet, they neither begged

> nor snatched. When they were hungry, they would take the food, but they would pay for it. When men denied them food, they got angry. However, when women forbade *Japan* from eating food saved for their children, they embarrassingly laughed. Sometimes [when their hunger became unbearable], they beat their stomachs and asked for food in exchange for money. Women themselves gave them food from their kitchens.

Khuraijam expressed his admiration for the perseverance that the Japanese exhibited against such treatment:

> They suffered most terribly. No food, no medicines and no bullets. They fought among themselves. They started losing morale and chaos reigned among them. However, despite all their suffering, I never heard of any instance of the Japanese committing any atrocities against women in Manipur. On the other hand, I have heard of many atrocities they committed toward women in Southeast Asia during the Second World War.

Madhumati too remembered how 'noble and generous' the Japanese were and how they 'didn't resort to any kind of cruelty' towards the people. 83-year-old Leisangthem ongbi Ibechaobi from Yumnam Khunou spoke about what she had heard of the Japanese soldiers and how mistaken they were in thinking of the Japanese as their enemy. She regretfully recollected how her own people treated the Japanese:

> My grandfather told me how they persecuted *Japan* as they thought *Japan* were enemies. We realized later on that *Japan* had come to rescue us. My brother too told me how out of ignorance people went after *Japan* to kill them. I was told one of them even tried throwing a bomb at my grandfather when he confronted them… These were things I heard in my childhood. *Japan* were portrayed as the enemy to the people.[33]

If people in some parts of Manipur were sympathetic towards the Japanese, in other parts they considered them intruders. This was determined by how the Japanese negotiated with the local

people. Whether considered the enemy or the saviour, it is true that not everyone in the war torn region shared the same experiences or sentiments for the Japanese.

Listening to the memories of the people who experienced the war or who had heard stories of the war was like experiencing history from below. Discernibly, a few women responded with what they were made to believe during the war – that the Japanese were the *enemy*. Whereas, other women and men had corrected their views about Japanese soldiers, and said that the Japanese had actually come to rescue Manipuris from the British government. These women and men seemed to have shifted their loyalty retrospectively and now looked back at their fellow Manipuris' treatment of the Japanese with regret.

EPILOGUE

When the Battle of Imphal concluded with the final retreat of the 15th division of the Japanese Army from Manipur toward the Chindwin river in July 1944, people in Manipur could not have possibly imagined the larger picture of why their land had been embroiled in a battle between the Japanese and the British. More importantly, the aged survivors only remember how the war affected their lives and homes. They remember how they fled to *safety* from their homesteads when Japanese bombardment started in Manipur in early May 1942, claiming 71 lives and injuring 80 others (*Administration Report* 15). The internal exodus was precipitated both by the bombings and the requisitioning of houses for sheltering the army in the 1940s and marked the onset of difficulties that the people faced even as the British government fortified Manipur to withstand the Japanese offensive. Not only did the people have to survive the bombings, they also had to survive myriad other problems that came with the war. Food shortages and price increases heightened their aggrieved condition. Displacement from their homes and routine livelihood activities catapulted many women's lives from one of economic independence

to dependency, thus making them vulnerable to exploitation, sexual and otherwise.

Often women were objects of voyeurism. As the rank and file of the military population was stationed in Manipur without their families, they looked towards local women for sexual services and comfort.[34] The Allied soldiers' gaze may have been informed by exoticism and eroticism of the East (as propagated in colonial writings) as much as it was by their respective cultural backgrounds. Therefore, any gestures or advances that transgressed the guarded space of the women and their bodies may have outraged the women.[35] Accounts of soldiers pulling women's hands, or knocking at doors demanding women or making sexual overtures abound in the narratives of the interviewees.

However, as far as women's *agency* in establishing intimate relations with the Allied soldiers – be it sexual or emotional – is concerned, whether they benefited monetarily or in kind, they were also a casualty of the war. Those who were engaged in the flesh trade during the war years were driven by hardships and desperation rather than by their sexual agency. On the one hand were the Allied soldiers whose demand for sex treated women indiscriminately as objects of pleasure, while on the other hand were the local middlemen who made economic progress by facilitating occasions for sexual encounters as they had better negotiating powers.

Such a *telling* of the Second World War's experiences in Manipur goes against its archetypal narrative in history books and in official documents. The history of war, written more often than not by men, primarily offers a perspective from the top – about people who take strategic decisions, people who collaborate in and facilitate the war efforts, people who commandeer invincible armies, soldiers who wield weapons and lay their lives in battlefields and so on. Such a history also informs people and the way they perceive the events of the past. Individual memories, on the other hand, conform to as well as deviate from the widely accepted narrative of the past by singularizing the experiences. In the context of war memories in Manipur, such variance is discernible in the memories of the common people (as opposed

to agents and actors of war), and particularly so among women who experienced and remember the war differently.

Apart from the gendered dimensions of the war experiences in Manipur that counter the history from the top, a humanist perspective of Japanese soldiers counters the common perception of the Japanese Army as the ruthless enemy. Although the Japanese Army was largely hated for its war crimes both in Southeast Asia and in the hills of Manipur and Kohima, people in the Manipur valley, particularly women, described the soldiers they met and helped as 'courageous', 'noble' and 'generous.' Women in Manipur helped in easing the soldiers' hunger and misery. This perspective undermines the largely accepted brutal face of the Japanese Army.

Accounts of the days preceding the battle, of the raging battle, of people's outlook towards the Allied soldiers and the Japanese, of the way the soldiers treated women, and of hardships and losses could only be uncovered by oral testimonies. These recollections present individual memories of the Second World War. More importantly, underneath the grand narratives of trepidation and trauma in the wake of the Japanese bombing of Imphal and the battles that ensued two years later, lie the untold experiences of women, particularly those who were oppressed and exploited. Admittedly, it was a war with foreign stakeholders at remote distances, and yet the repercussions on the lives of the people in Manipur were immediate and damaging.

NOTES

1. Srinath Raghavan notes that the then viceroy Lord Linlithgow did not consulted neither the Executive Council nor the Central Legislative Assembly, nor yet any Indian leader. See Raghavan, p.1. (2016)
2. Among the few war narratives of India's war experience are Raghu Karnad's *The Farthest Field: An Indian Story of the Second World War* (2015); Yasmin Khan's *India at War: The Subcontinent and the Second World War* (2015); and Hemant Katoch's *Battlefields of Imphal: The Second World War and North East India* (2016).

3. Hemant Katoch's *Battlefields of Imphal: The Second World War and North East India* (2016) and to a certain extent Yasmin Khan's *India at War: The Subcontinent and the Second World War* are books that capture the experiences of people during the Second World War in Manipur. N. Lokendra's essay 'Socio-economic Changes during Second World War and Beyond (1942–50)' is an equally significant work that presents a nuanced account of the war days in Manipur.
4. Battle of Imphal/Kohima was adjudged 'Britain's Greatest Battle' by the National Army Museum, England in April 2013. See Katoch, p.167 (2016).
5. 'Ongbi' is used particularly to refer to married women. Yengkhom ongbi here means the one 'married to Yengkhom family'.
6. Interview by Maharajkumari Binodini of Late Yengkhom Ongbi Hemabati reproduced as an essay. Translated by Pradeep Phanjoubam (in English) as 'The Late Yengkhom Ongbi Hemabati.'
7. Leishangthem ongbi Ekashini in conversation with the author, Singjamei Leisangthem Leikai, 14 July 2018. All the oral testimonies included in this paper were recorded and transcribed by the author. The translation from Manipuri into English was also done by the author. All testimonies quoted in this paper appear without reference to page numbers; the details of each oral testimony are given the first time they appear in the text.
8. Maharaja Bodhachandra was the king of Manipur during the Second World War.
9. Rajkumar Nimai in conversation with the author at Rajkumar's residence in Palace Compound, Imphal, 11 August 2018.
10. Pukhrambam Madhumati in conversation with the author at Madhumati's residence in Ninghthoukhong, Manipur, 14 August 2018.
11. Koijam Mangi in conversation with the author at Mangi's residence in the Palace Compound, Imphal, 11 August 2018.
12. Yumkhaibam Manjuri in conversation with the author at Manjuri's residence in Malom Tuliyaima Maning Leikai, 12 July 2018.
13. Thokchom Ramani in conversation with the author at Ramani's residence in Chingamakha Heirangoithong, Imphal, 13 Aug 2018.
14. As recorded in the *Administration Report of Manipur State 1943–44*, p 15.
15. Ingudam Tomba in conversation with the author at his residence in Keishamthong Thangjam Leirak, Imphal, 13 July 2018.
16. Chingakham Manorama in conversation with the author at Manorama's residence in Nagamapal, Imphal, 12 August 2018.

17. Khuraijam Nimaicharan in conversation with the author at his residence in Khurai, Imphal, 14 July 2018. Khuraijam also gives a compelling account of the war in his autobiography The Second World War in Manipur and My Childhood (2012).
18. Kshetri Bira has published two novels: Phirep (2012) and Ningthigi Ningthem (2015). Both are based on the Second World War experience in Manipur.
19. The idol worshipped in the largest Hindu temple in Manipur.
20. The term used for non-Manipuris.
21. The oral narrators confirmed that Manipuris referred to the soldiers from Africa as 'Negro.' However, it is highly probable that in those days the Manipuris were unaware of the racist connotations of the term 'Negro.' I have used the term 'Negro' as they used it, and I do not suggest any racist connotations whatsoever.
22. Leima in conversation with the author at Leima's residence in Malom on 12 July 2018.
23. Subadani in conversation with the author at Subadani's residence at Thangjam Leirak on 13 July 2018.
24. Manglem Devi in conversation with the author at her residence in Kakching on 10 August 2018.
25. Kshetri Bira in conversation with the author at his residence in Kakching, Manipur, on 10 August 2018.
26. Literal translation means 'a woman who cannot be (sexually) satiated'.
27. By English soldiers, Khuraijam probably meant soldiers from Britain, America, Canada, New Zealand or Australia. When the oral narrators talk about 'white' soldiers, they often do it indistinguishably as they may not have known their nationalities.
28. *Marbak* is a corrupted form of *meereibak*. *Meereibak jagoi* translates as 'foreign dance.' M. Kirti Singh traces the beginning of the *marbak jagoi* to the introduction of the kathak dance form in Manipur during the reign of Maharaja Chandrakirti (1850 to 1886). See Kirti, p. 91 (1988).
29. Tanaka notes how the 'comfort women system' was set up by Japanese military leaders to 'protect the moral and physical character of their troops' and, by extension, to safeguard the Asian civilians from rape and from 'contracting VD through contact with unauthorized prostitutes. They undoubtedly viewed their conduct as honourable.' See Tanaka, p. 3 (2002).
30. See Max Hasting's *Nemesis: The Battle for Japan, 1944-45* (2007) and Hemant Katoch's *Imphal 1944: The Japanese Invasion of India* (2018).

31. Gouramohan in conversation with the author at his residence in Maibam Lotpaching on 13 August 2018.
32. Amumacha in conversation with the author at his residence in Bishenpur on 11 August 2018.
33. Ibechaobi in conversation with the author on 14 July 2018.
34. Yasmin Khan discusses similar concerns in her article 'Sex in an Imperial Zone'. See p. 243 (2012).
35. Khuraijam recounts an incident when a young English soldier-artist, while sketching the portrait of a young woman, appalled her by asking her to lower the *phanek* she had tied up to her chest so that he could sketch her naked torso as well (140). See Khuraijam, p. 140 (2012).

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