

Chapter – 7

Conclusion

Bonded labour is the least form of slavery practiced around the world today. It involves the use of people as collateral against debt and other reasons. These people are promised work only until their debt is paid off, but in reality it is almost impossible to buy their freedom. As a result their children often inherited, perpetuating a vicious cycle of bonded labour practices for generations. The history of bonded labour in India is an outcome of certain categories of indebtedness, which have been prevailing for a long time involving certain economically exploited, helpless and weaker sections of society. It originated from the uneven social structure characterized by feudal and semi-feudal conditions. This was also a common phenomenon in the North Eastern region of India. It is in this connection that the present study has been designed. It studies the system of bonded labour in the Lushai Hills (now Mizoram)¹ where one can see them in different forms such as the infamous *Boi* system, of the bonded subjugated tribes, of the population captured in different raiding expeditions and those purchased from slave traders. The people in general were also subjected to colonial labour machine in which they have to work for colonial establishment such as porters, roads, building construction, and other menial works as ‘impressed labourers.’ Therefore, this study concerns with the history of the *boi* system on the one hand and on the other the existence of other forms of bonded labour perpetrated upon certain section of the hill population such as the subjugated tribes under Lushai chiefs, the captives of raids from the plains, the women folk who have been virtually reduced into bonded labour under patriarchal customary practices and labour under the colonial regime.

The most common and controversial form of bonded labour in the *Lushai* Hills was the *Boi* system. According to this system there were three classes of *Bois*: (i) *Inpuichhung bois*, (ii) *Chemsen bois*, (iii) *Tuklut bois*, (*inpui*-big house, *chhung*-within) viz., those who live in the big house or the chief’s house; consisting of persons facing extreme poverty – destitute, widows, orphans and others who had no relatives willing to take them in. *Chemsen bois* (*Chem*-dao, *sen*-red) viz., criminals, debtors and thieves, who, to escape from the consequences of their ill deeds, take refuge in the chief’s house.

¹Throughout this work the colonial term ‘Lushai Hills’ is used which is however coterminous with the present state of Mizoram.

Tukluh bois (*tuk*-promise, *lut*-enter) were persons who during war, have deserted the losing side and joined the victors by promising that they and their children will be *bois*. When the controversy on the *Boi* system continued to be debated among scholars, there were however, other forms of bonded labour practiced in Lushai Hills during the period under study which seldom attracted serious attention. The bonded labour undertaken by the subjugated tribes were generally overlooked despite the fact that they constitute the largest number of bonded population in the Lushai Hills before colonial occupation. They belonged to the conquered tribes who were compelled to submit before the paramount Sailo chiefs as their *bois* and since then remained under their subjugation virtually losing their mobility and other customary rights. They included both the population belonging to the Lusei and non-Lusei tribes. Regarding their relative familiarity with the *Tukluh Bois* as in their state of subjugation and the nature of their bondage, they are probably understood as *Tukluh Bois*. But from its essence and conception this subjugated/conquered tribes are different from *Tukluh Bois* who are generally known to be people who voluntarily deserted their village and willingly submitted to the more powerful or the victors in wars.

Another category of bonded labourers where no serious attention was paid was the captives of war and raids. They were captured from the plains and other rival tribes in the various “raiding” expeditions which make the name of Lushais (in) famous all through the nineteenth century colonial records. Both the categories were clubbed under the local term *Sal*. They were reduced to virtual servitude as the mere property of their captors who were sold and bought as commodities, can be killed as animals if the master wishes so, could become the concubine to the master, yet live lives as part of the family, married as circumstances permitted but with no social and ritual status. But the main role of this *Sal* was to work solely for the master sincerely, tirelessly and without any murmur. Col. T.H. Lewin noted that the real slaves in Lushai Hills were those “men and women taken prisoners by force in war and sold like cattle from master to master.”² They are virtually different from those of the general *Bois* and indeed could not come under the category of the *Boi* system.

Besides, the labour system under the colonial regime was also a less attended subject in the study of labour history in the Lushai Hills which is overwhelmed by the

² Lt. Col. T. H. Lewin, *Wild Races of South Eastern India*, H. Allen & Co, Waterloo London, 1870, p. 52.

(in) famous *Boi* system. People in general were under virtual bondage under colonial regime its infamous labour machine known as “impressed labour” system. Scholars in general were impressed by the colonial instrument of discourse in its various records that since these labourers who worked on the various colonial projects in the hills and beyond were paid petty daily wages, they could not come under the category of bonded labourers. However, looking from its nature of recruitment and its very inception the so-called colonial “impressed labour” system was one of the most oppressive and obnoxious labour system to the local people during the colonial period. The fact that everyone, including the proud chiefs were compelled to work for the various colonial state projects as an instrument of subjugation was indeed the major source of discontentment during the colonial period. The nature of compulsion, even when the hill people were in the peak hour of their cultivation or otherwise make the system as servile and oppressive as other bonded labour system.

As one keeps on extending the issue of labour system, we find the women of the hills who shouldered the whole economic activities of the hills along with the so-called “slaves.” These womenfolk in general were subjugated under the patriarchal set up of the hill society although they were the backbone of economic activities in the hills and served, along with the “slaves,” as virtual labour force. Lewin noted that “Upon the women falls the whole burden of the bodily labour by which life is supported. They fetch water, hew wood, cultivate and help to reap the crop, besides spinning, cooking, and brewing.”³ In this sense women have also formed part of the labour forces which invariably falls under the category of bonded labour sanctioned by customs. But this study skipped the last issue of female labour and other related labour systems that prevailed in Lushai Hills although the issue comes out again and again during the course of discussion throughout the work.

The central problem of labour issue arose from the very nature of colonial discourse on the tribes. The emergent colonial political economy in the hills divorced kinship from politics and focused on the extraction of labour and taxation regime to refine hierarchies. It was a common practice in colonial period to reduce many forms of bonded labour to a customary practice so that the colonial regime got their much needed labour services. Although colonial officials denounced debt bondage, they did not try to

³ T.H. Lewin, *Wild Races of South Eastern India*, p. 134.

eradicate it because it generated large profits from India's cheap labour markets. British India officially abolished slavery in 1843, but debt bondage continued to flourish. "Slavery became defined as corporeal and involuntary while debt bondage became defined as non-corporeal and voluntarily entered."⁴ Thus in the prevailing colonial discourse, "Indian slavery was seen as a relatively harmless institution that even served some positive social functions."⁵ It was under such colonial censorship of certain inhuman practices that the issue of bonded labour is located and studied in this work.

Bonded labour is not an exclusive heritage of the valley state system. It did occur, and was sometime even worse than the plains, in the hills among the *tribals*. The study takes the position that bonded labour is very much part of the social and cultural practices among the hill tribes. Some of the bonded labour practices in the hills in pre-colonial Lushai Hills came to an end by the force of colonialism itself, but bonded labour undertaken by subjugated tribes and the captives from raids, some (the *Boi* system) continued to thrive even under the roof of colonial regime in the name of "customs" while there was also an introduction of an un-commutable form of bonded/forced labour system under the colonial rule. The present work therefore, investigates not only the prevailing labour system in the Lushai Hills during the colonial period but critically studied the colonial discourse of different forms of labour systems in the Lushai Hills in particular and among the Northeast tribes in general.

The concluding summary of each of the chapters under study is given below.

Chapter - 1: Introduction

The chapter dealt with the concept of bonded labour from the various existing literature, review of these literature and of those studies on the labour system of Lushai Hills, provided the historical, social, political and economic background of the Lushai Hills and the introduction to the various chapters of the work. In introducing bonded labour it found that it is the least form of slavery practised around the world today involving the use of people as collateral against debt and other reasons. Bonded labour and similar practices like peonage, debt slavery, serfdom, contract labour have been prevailing throughout the history of mankind. It originated from the uneven social structure

⁴ Prakash, Gyan, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labor Servitude in Colonial India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, pp. 146-47.

⁵ Chatterjee, Indrani et al.,(ed.), *Slavery & South Asian History*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, U. S. A, 2006, p. 225

characterized by feudal and semi-feudal conditions. This was also a common phenomenon in the North Eastern region of India. A modernization of the feudal system in America after the Civil War was ‘Peonage.’ It persisted in rural areas of India, Pakistan and Nepal. Tea and jute plantations in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam bind women who constituted the bulk of bonded labourers. Women are also forced to work in prostitution as a way to pay off the ‘debt’ they acquire when they are illegally smuggled to destinations.

Bonded labour is defined as “any labour or service rendered under the bonded labour system,”⁶ a bonded labourer means “a labourer who incurs, or has, is presumed to have, incurred, a bonded debt,” and the system means “the system of forced, or partly forced labour under which a debtor enters, or has, or is presumed to have, entered, into an agreement with the creditor to the effect that,--(i) in consideration of an advance obtained by him or by any of his lineal ascendants or descendants (whether or not such advance is evidenced by any document) and in consideration of the interest, if any, on such advance, or (ii) in pursuance of any customary or social obligation, or (iii) in pursuance of an obligation devolving on him by succession, or (iv) for any economic consideration received by him or by any of his lineal ascendants or descendants, or (v) by reason of his birth in a particular caste or community, he would render... labour or service to the creditor for a specified period or for an unspecified period, either without wages or for nominal wages.”⁷ This has been a subject that made “Colonial administration in India misrepresent bonded labour as a cultural or regional tradition.”⁸ Colonisers typically interpreted indebtedness as the result of expenses incurred by costly customs associated with marriages, funerals and religious ceremonies. Although colonial officials denounced debt bondage, they did not try to eradicate it because it generated large profits from India’s cheap labour. British India officially abolished slavery in 1843, but debt bondage continued and flourished. Hence, “Slavery became defined as corporeal and involuntary while debt bondage became defined as non-corporeal and voluntarily entered.”⁹ Thus in the prevailing colonial discourse, “Indian

⁶ The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976 (Act No. 19 of 1976) <http://indiacode.nic.in>, accessed 21.01.2012, p. 2

⁷ The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976 (Act No. 19 of 1976) <http://indiacode.nic.in>, accessed 21.01.2012, p. 2-3

⁸ Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labour Servitude in Colonial India*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 31.

⁹ Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labour Servitude in Colonial India*, pp. 146-49.

slavery was seen as a relatively harmless institution that even served some positive social functions.”¹⁰

The Lushai Hills is a hilly, precipitous, landlocked area where lack of communication has cut it off for a long time. When the world outside was rearing to attain the highest degree of perfection in every aspect of life, our hills was still clothed in darkness with occasional glimpses of planes flying high up in the skies, and no idea of modernisation. This was due to its physical nature for which it remained disconnected. The primitive ways of life and practices had led to the discovery of the people by the British. Regarding the Lushai Hills, the communities inhabiting it are patriarchal, mostly speaking languages that slightly differ from each other. They belonged to a common stock of Tibeto Burman origin. The society is patriarchal and no woman had any say in matters of politics with a few exceptional cases of women chieftains who even went to the extent of warding off the British intrusion into their land. Ropuiliani and Darbilhi were two such noteworthy women.

The economic system of the Luseis was based on the age-old practice of jhumming where every possible food items were grown for self-consumption. Jhumming was the mainstay of the population. Besides this, the Luseis indulged in raids and wars from which they take captives to work in their jhums. Chiefs were economically well-off from the class of people known as *bois* which were divided into three categories- *Inpuichhung*, *Chemsen* and *Tukluh bois*. Common people owned captives taken from raids and though they do not keep *bois*, they were benefitted by the captive labour. Politically, the hills were under the administration of chiefs who were helped by his group of “*Upas*” or elders of his choice. These *upa* were expected to be well-versed in the custom of the community failure to which render them out from the service of the chief. The political system of the Lushais was incomplete without mention made of the *Zawlbuks* which were important institutions next to chieftainship. The two institutions worked hand in hand and complemented on each other. For the success of and betterment of the Lushai chiefdoms, *Zawlbuks* were a must.

The later part of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century witnessed a change in the social life of the hill people. The people’s immense

¹⁰ Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton, (ed.), *Slavery and South Asian History*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indianapolis, USA, 2006, p. 225.

indulgence in raids and wars resulted in the death of a good number of the men folk. The agriculture (jhum cultivation) suffered due to loss of many hands, mainly the male members of the families. Labour which was usually divided came to rest on the women folk alone. They came to be burdened with feeding the whole family which were sometimes very large as the hill people still practised joint system of family life. Thus we see that colonial administrators like Lewin noted the heavy burden that fell on the womenfolk. They had to work from dawn to dusk, in the jhum fields and at home like slaves. At this juncture, the possibility of labour substitution was discovered in the form of the captives they took. These were so handy that the Luseis began to raid in earnest.

The social and political conditions of the pre-British period created a change in the hills. The constant feuds and raids had brought the hill people in contact with the alien rulers who finally annexed their lands to the British Raj.

Chapter - 3: Describing the *Boi* System of Lushai Hills

The chapter examines the *Boi* system of the Lushai Hills. The system of Lusei bondage was commonly understood as “*boi* custom.” It has been defined in different ways by different writers. Thomas Herbert Lewin, Verghese and Thanzawna, H. Vanlaldika and others define the term “*boi*” as “one who had lost the right of individual freedom of action,”¹¹ “an individual dependent upon a Lushai chief,”¹² “under-privileged strata of the society, belonging to the lowest strata of the society,”¹³ respectively. B. C. Alen defines it as having the “slightest tinge of slavery in the province...”¹⁴ Lawmsanga,¹⁵ J.H Lorrain, Peter Fraser¹⁶ defines *boi* as a “slave.” Sangkima defines the system as “very similar to that of the custom called bonded labour.”¹⁷ Orestes Rosanga says that a

¹¹ Thomas Herbert Lewin, *Progressive Colloquial Exercises in the Lushai Dialect of the Dzo or Kuki Language with Vocabularies and Popular Tales*, Calcutta Central Press, Calcutta, 1874, p.80

¹² C.G. Verghese and R.L. Thanzawna, *History of the Mizos*, Vol-1, Vikash Publishing House, New Delhi, 1997, p.39

¹³ Andrew H. Vanlaldika, *Social Stratification Among the Mizos*, Ph. D Thesis, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, 2003, p.232

¹⁴ MSA, Letter No. 6866-67 No. 4902P, Shillong the 15th August 1916. From B. C. Allen, Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary General of Bengal.

¹⁵ Lawmsanga, *A Critical Study on Christian Mission With Special Reference to Presbyterian Church of Mizoram*, Ph. D Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2010, p.111

¹⁶ Peter Fraser, *Slavery in British Territory: Assam and Burma*, Canarvon, Gwenlyn Evans and Sons, 1913, p.1

¹⁷ Sangkima (ed.), “Boi and Sal As An Important Economic Factor in Early Mizo Society with Special Reference to Chief”, *A Modern History of Mizoram*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 2004, p.18

boi was a “bonded labourer.”¹⁸ They can rightly be called bonded labourers as they were not allowed to leave a chief’s house unless they pay Rs. 40/- for their board and lodging.

The *bois* were of three types: *inpuichhung bois*, *chemsen bois*, and *tukluh bois*. *Inpuichhung bois* (*inpui*-big house, *chung*-within) viz., those who live in the big house or the chief’s house; consisting of persons facing extreme poverty – destitute, widows, orphans and others who had no relatives willing to take them. *Chemsens bois* (*Chem*-dao, *sen*-red) viz. criminals, debtors and thieves, who, to escape from the consequences of their ill deeds, take refuge in the chief’s house. *Tukluh bois* (*tuk*-promise, *luh*-enter) were persons who during war, have deserted the losing side and joined the victors by promising that they and their children will be *bois*.

This chapter also investigates on the origin and evolution of the *boi* system in Lushai Hills and found that it originated from the system of debt payment. The origin of the system was seen to have begun with the custom of debt bondage which gradually included other groups of bonded labourers like war captives, destitute, criminals and those who were bought. They were also captured in raids. *Bois* were also recruited mainly from poverty and although it seemed to be a common practice, the custom also involved a great deal of coercion on the part of the *boi* holders and was the last resort on the part of the people who entered *boi*hood. The *boi*hood was found to be more prominent and thus the subject of great controversies immediately before the colonial occupation due to inter-tribal war fares.

It also discusses on the role of *bois* in the economy of the chief’s family. The *boi* system was undoubtedly the source of a chief’s wealth and even power. *Bois* worked in his *jhums*, he gained the marriage prices of the female *bois*, every married male *boi* stayed, and work three/six years for him after marriage and so on. Besides, it was the male boys, who become the personal close aide of the chiefs in all his transactions on the village affairs as well as to the other villages. Hence, not only in the economy of the chief but also to its political and social role the chief greatly benefited from his *bois*. It was due to this that the gradual abolition of *boi* system was detrimental to the power and influence of the chiefs during the colonial period.

¹⁸ Orestes Rosanga, *The Economic History of Mizoram from 1900-1940*, Ph. D Thesis, University of Delhi, 1990, p.180

This chapter also discusses on the debate and controversies on the *Boi* system during the colonial period, especially between the Christian missionaries and the colonial state of India. A controversy arose between the state and missionaries from 1908 which went on till 1912. The colonial state maintained that the *boi* system was a tribal custom that housed the poor and “not a bound slavery as they could be free by paying forty rupees or a gayal.”¹⁹ Hence, it felt that the practice did not come under the banned slavery system in British Empire and need not be abolished. It felt that since it was a tribal customary practice abolition would cause great resistance from the local people which was detrimental to the peace of administration. On the other side, the missionaries represented by the outspoken Rev. Dr. Peter Fraser, felt that the *Boi* system was “a real system of slavery.”²⁰ Accordingly, they insisted its abolition under the banned practice of slavery within British Empire. The controversies emerged into a huge political debate across the British Empire ranging from the heated debate between Fraser and the district officers, Assam government, and government of India and finally in the British Parliament and later in the United Nations. The debate came to a standstill with the outbreak of the I World War but again re-emerged after that. It was finally abolished in 1927 by the British Parliament.

The *boi* custom of the Lushai Hills generated a lot of controversy even among present day scholars, social scientists and historians who are divided in their theories about the system being slavery or otherwise. It had a quality of servitude and the *bois* were bound until they could buy their freedom. This in itself suggests that they were bonded labourers. In the present day Mizoram, *boi* custom is no longer a welcome topic of discussion. Even elderly people are reluctant to discuss anything in connection with the custom. Descendants of *bois* are reluctant to disclose their *boi*hood which shows that it was indeed a shameful past which had nothing glorious about it.

Boi was a system which had its own tempo, its own rhythm, and its own history. Certainly, it is one form of servitude and this state of bondage is called *boi* and the system as *boi* system. There is no good reason to rationalize it as either charitable institution or slavery. Substantially, it has the elements of both but it can never be

¹⁹ Copy of Government Order, November 1909, in “Chanchinbu Newspaper”, November 1909, f. 213 in Collections of the Anti-Slavery Society, Rhodes House, Oxford, as cited in Indrani Chatterjee *Slavery, Semantics and the Sound of Silence*, p.300

²⁰ Peter Fraser, *Slavery on British Territory: Assam and Burma*, (Canarvon, Gwenlyn Evans and Sons, 1913), p. 1

purely anyone of them; it is neither a charitable institution nor a form of slavery. It is something else; it is a *boi* system that does not need any translation or transliteration. For translation of this type of practice into some existing system in a completely different context, would be to do great injustice to the system that flourished at one point of time. This is because the definition of *boi* system with some existing system elsewhere or translation of its meaning into foreign tongue would involve good amounts of commission and omission. Such exercise should be as far as possible avoided. To meet the needs of the *boi* system one must, therefore, necessarily go for the local, the real, the authentic, instead of adopting other terms. To understand the *boi* system from its own setting it is significant that a *boi* should be called a *boi*, nothing more, and nothing less. It is one form of bondage in which both the elements of philanthropy and slavery blended together in a peculiarly Lusei's way.

Chapter – 4: Subjugated Tribes, Bonded Communities

The chapter examines the state of communities who were conquered and subjugated by the Sailo chiefs. Shakespear noted that they were “living among the Lusheis under the Thangur chiefs and have become practically assimilated and included in the wider term Lushai.”²¹ They were often considered to be *tukluh bois* but from its essence and nature of bondage they were different from *tukluh bois*. In the case of *tukluh bois* it was voluntary in nature where certain families or sometime the whole village voluntarily submitted to the more powerful Lushai chiefs for protection. But in such cases, they were always considered as the *bois* to such chiefs, the only condition being dictated by the Sailo chiefs for admitting under his village or protection. However, in the case of the so-called subjugated tribes they were forced to submit without having any other option than accepting the servitude under the Sailo chiefs. The only way to evade such forcible control and appropriations was flight. If certain group of people succeeded in escaping to other hills or more often in the British territory in places like Cachar, Chittagong Hills, Hill Tracts of Tripura, that is the only way out from such subjugation under the Sailo chiefs. Thus we see that a large number of hill populations continue to migrate into the British territory to evade the manpower Sailo chiefdoms in Lushai Hills. Shakespear noted:

²¹ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, TRI Aizawl, [1975], 2008 p. 129-130

It seems most probable that the country into which the various Thangur chiefs moved, under pressure from the Chins, was almost entirely occupied by small communities having no power of cohesion. The greater part of these were absorbed, and now form the majority of the subjects of the Thangur chiefs; but some fled north and west into Manipur, Silchar, Sylhet and Tipperah, where they are as Kukis and where their appearance caused much trouble, as, from the very nature of the cause of their migration, much ill-feeling existed between them and the triumphant Lushais.²²

The unfortunate groups who could not escape such control have to bear the burden of the sweeping political formation process in the Lushai Hills under the Sailo chiefs. Most of the early colonial accounts noted the condition of these subjugated tribes under the paramount Sailo chiefs. Shakespear, for instance, noted Kairuma's village before it was burnt down by British forces. He found that there were 80 houses belonging to *Thado*, *Biate*, and other clans "living in his village in a species of serfdom very much on the footing of the *tukluh boi*, only that *Kairuma* received a mithun out of the marriage price of each of the daughters as well as the other dues." He said that "these people were remnants of conquered clans and were not allowed to leave the village. I was assured that, if any of them tried to run away, a party of young men would be at once sent off to kill or bring back the fugitives." They were finally liberated after the British burnt down the village in 1891. Shakespear noted that "all these people made their escape to the villages of their own clans."²³ In fact Shakespear also noted:

Many [Lushei] chiefs held considerable numbers of Paihte or Vuite or Khawtlang in a species of semi-slavery. These were captives or descendants of captives made in war, and nearly all have availed themselves of the Pax Britannica to return to their own people. Again, we found certain villages ruled over by non-Lushei chiefs, who were living under the protection of powerful Lushei chiefs. In the process of pacification, these non-Lushei chiefs, who were living under the protection of powerful Lushei chiefs, regained their independence and have gathered round them many of their clansmen, who formerly were scattered among the Lushei villages, and who, if we may judge by what has undoubtedly happened in other cases, would, in a short time have become completely absorbed.²⁴

²² Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 5,6

²³ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, pp. 48-49.

²⁴ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, pp. 40

This chapter therefore examines how the Lusei chiefs conquered the Lushai Hills in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century and eventually controlled over the tribes who lived there before their appearance. These subjugated tribes included Hmars, Ralte, Biate, Paihte, Vuite, Khawtlang, and so on. A large part of these original inhabitants were forcibly subjugated by the Sailo chiefs whereas many of them made their successful escape into British territory and Manipur hills. Those who could not make their escape were thus, subjugated, oppressed and forced to adopt the culture and customs of the victor, the Sailo chiefs. Shakespear, for instance, noted: “The population of a village ruled by a *Thangur* chief at the present time is composed of representatives of many tribes and clans, which have all more or less adopted the language and customs of their rulers.”²⁵ He goes on to say:

Before the Thangur chiefs had risen to their present pre-dominant position there were many consanguineous communities scattered over the hills, living under headmen of their own and each using dialect of its own. Some of these communities appear to have had separate corporate existence for long periods and in consequences to have been subdivided into many families and branches, while others were quickly absorbed by the Thangur and consequently have few sub-divisions.²⁶

To come to an understanding of the particular tribes under subjugation, the general tribes of Lushai Hills is first discussed. Majority of the Lushai Hills population were subjugated under the Sailo chiefs and have been since living in the state of ‘semi-slavery’ until the Hills was annexed into the British Empire. Among these groups were the Old Kukis, New Kukis, and the Lushai/Lusei clans. The first group was the first to migrate from the Chin to Lushai hills and then to Chittagong tracts from where they migrated to North Cachar Hills. The second group of New Kukis in course of time, were driven out by the Lushais. They went directly to the present Tripura towards the close of the first half of the twentieth century, but were pushed back by Colonel Lister for creating trouble in the British Frontiers. Some of them submitted to Lister who enlisted them as soldiers and formed a good outpost on the frontiers. On coming to their present habitat, the Lushais defeated the first and second group of settlers, and became virtual

²⁵ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 40.

²⁶ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 41

rulers over the people. In their attempts to extend their sway over the tribes, the British Government sent repeated expeditions against them since 1850.”²⁷

The main method of subjugation employed by the Lushais was raids. They raided each other constantly. These raids begot counter raids and the results were usually subjugation of the loser. In fact, “the whole history of this frontier is indeed the story of their outrages and of their efforts to prevent, repel or avenge these.”²⁸ Reasons for Wars or Clan feuds were mainly quarrel for land, to make bois or slaves, or bonded labourers of one another, competition for the hand of maidens in marriage, marriage prices, revenge, and collection of taxes.

Besides conquering and subjugating other clans, the Sailo chiefly clan made others into bois. Some of these have been mentioned. Hmars, Thadous and Biates, Hualngo, Hualhang, Vaisal (foreign captives) and Khiangte, Pnar in Meitei.”²⁹ These tribes were not only subjugated but kept in a “species of serfdom”, made to do all sorts of work. Besides these, the Fanais were forced to become *tukluh bois*, beginning with the son of their chief, Rorehlova. They were the major means of accumulating wealth and betterment of economic condition. Moreover, they were most useful as village defenders. They were made to fence villages, and build the houses of chiefs. It is said that it was from this time that forced labour for constructing houses of chiefs came into existence and continued until chieftainship was abolished in 1952.”³⁰ The condition of the subjugated tribes was such that they were reduced to mere labour force. Besides, the Luseis “treated the commoners (*hnamchawm*) so badly that life among them became really hard” which became one major factor for the migration of the earlier occupants of the hills.”³¹

Status of the tribes under subjugation of the Lusei chiefs is best explained in accordance with their respective roles played in the hill economy. They were simply tribute paying subjects who obeyed and did as directed. They could not even maintain

²⁷ Sangkima, *Mizos: Society and Social Change*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 1992, p.20

²⁸ Alexander Mackenzie, *The North East Frontier*, Mittal Publication, New Delhi, [1979], 2007, p.331

²⁹ See Mc Call, *Lushai Chrysalis*, Elephant Industries, New Delhi, Reprint TRI [1949], 2003, p.71; Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 48, 49; Peter Fraser, *Slavery in British Territory, Assam and Burma*, p.17; Indrani Chatterjee, “Slaves, Souls and Subjects in a South Asian Borderland”, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Debt> on 27.07.2010, Rudgers University, p.9

³⁰ Liangkhaia, *Mizo Chanchin*, Swapna Printing Works Calcutta, Pvt, Ltd, L. T. L. Publications Aizawl, p.105

³¹ Liangkhaia, *Mizo Chanchin*, p. 138

their own identity and were sometimes absorbed and incorporated into the chief's clan by the ceremony called "*saphun*." All clans of the tribes listed above were not bonded to the Lushai chiefs. A few stragglers here and there might have promised to become *tukluh bois* or a few still might have been forced to become *bois*, but these does not stand for all clans in their entirety. Bondage of a few clans have led some modern writers to project and conclude that all clans of a particular tribe were *bois*, slaves or bonded servants.

Chapter - 5: The Sals: Captive Labourers, the Real Slaves of Lushai Hills

It examines the labour performed by captives who were captured in various raids in the Chittagong, Arrakan, Tipperah, Burma, Cachar plains, and Chin Hills. They formed the real slaves called *Sal* in the Lushai Hills who were bought, sold and could be killed as the master wished. They worked along with other people but their status was very low in the society, much below the *bois*. Besides these, other clans subjugated in inter-clan wars within the Lushai Hills were also reduced to slaves. Raids were prominent till the British administration entered the Lushai Hills. The chapter concentrates on the condition of the captives who were captured from the various raids on the plains and other far-flung tribes in the borders. As they belonged solely to the captors who would own, sell or even kill them at his disposal they were considered forming the true state of slavery in the Lushai Hills. Lewin noted that the Lusei chiefs constantly fought among themselves and "when a short interval of comparative peace comes, they make a raid upon the nearest British territory to procure slaves."³²

Captives in war or raids contributed much to the chiefdoms. They added to the importance of a person by increasing his economic status through their services. They also served as items of exchange, concubines, gift items and so on besides serving as labour force. Also, such captives were usually kept in the forefronts in battles. They were at times, promised freedom from slavery by the number of enemies they could kill or for their bravery.

The Chittagong Frontier recorded the highest incidents of Kuki raids. These became prominent from the 1830s which went on unabated till their country was occupied. We also see the same frequency of raiding in the frontiers of Sylhet, Cachar

³² T.H. Lewin, *The Hill Tracts of Chittagong and the Dwellers Therein*, Elephant Industries, New Delhi, Reprint TRI Aizawl 2004, p. 148

and Tripura since the 1820s. In the Burmese frontier one can also see raiding since the 1880s. We can see that the main motive behind raiding was to procure slaves or captives, other items such as heads, booty and so on were merely incidental. Those captured were, according to Carey and Tuck “sold like cattle and are distributed at a man’s death amongst his heirs in common with beads and guns.”³³

The indigenous economy of the hill society was dependent on the primitive form of agriculture, viz; *jhuming*. There was a great need of man-power as the size of the workforce determined the volume of production. Therefore, the more the number of persons in the workforce the better where a family of more members was economically better off than one with a small number of members. Workforce constituted of men, women and children although the quantum of work varied according to capacity. The main brunt of economic work was born by the womenfolk. The male concentrated their works in clearing *jhum* forests, hunting animals for meat, raid expeditions, and purchasing necessary items from bazaars often two or three days’ journey away.

Women figure prominently in the routine of cultivation. From sowing to reaping and storage, dawn to dusk and dusk to midnight their labour round the clock and the year, meant better homes and economic status. Household work from cooking to grinding, fetching fire-wood and water, cleaning, stitching, weaving, knitting, cooking and feeding live stocks, looking after children require the hands of women. In the *jhums*, they were the first and the last. Lewin states that, “upon the women falls the whole burden of the bodily labour by which life is supported. They fetch water, hew wood, cultivate and help to reap the crop, besides spinning, cooking, and brewing.”³⁴ A Lushai who helps a woman in her work was considered henpecked and mocked by telling him to wear petticoat. So, the main brunt of economic life was born by women. They were merely slaves of their lords. Women captives were doubly enslaved.

Children had a share in the daily routine work of the Lushai community. Bigger children helped in looking after their siblings, carrying water, running errands for any elder in the house, looking after the cattle or watching the fields from pests and such usefulness were always fully utilized. Children in the house of a chief inspect the traps of the chief, deliver messages &c. A child could help his family and parents in many

³³ Carey and Tuck, pp. 203-204.

³⁴ T. H. Lewin, *The Hill Tracts of Chittagong and the Dwellers Therein*, TRI, Aizawl, Reprint 2004, p. 142.

ways. Schools had no attraction to them. From the time educational institutions were opened by Christian missionaries, no child attended it for instance, the Methodist opened a Primary school at Tahan and as there were no children closed it again in 1940. Their help was a great necessity to parents who were glad of any extra hand.”³⁵

It was in the context of this division of works in Lushai Hills that captives from other places were taken during the various raids in which women of young age and children of both sexes were most preferred. It was in the nature of these slaves that there were relatively very few slaves rescued after the Hills were occupied. Young women who were captured as captives were generally married off, the bride price being enjoyed by the captor. Children were brought up along the children of the family as if they are very much the children of the captors. Therefore, when they attained adulthood they remain very much part of the Lusei society. It was these slave populations who were absorbed within the Lusei society that this chapter is dealing with certain difficulties.

Chapter – 6: Forced Labour in Lushai Hills under Colonial Regime

This chapter examines the labour system enforced by the colonial regime in the Lushai Hills. It begins with the existing customary labour services to the chief. It gives the gist of selfless service known as *tlawmngaihna* among the many tribes of *Mizos*. *Tlawmngaihna* was a Mizo code of conduct through which the poor, needy, or anyone in need was given a helping hand without hopes of returned favours. Since paid labour was unknown, community work known as *Hnatlang* was another way in which weaker sections of people were supported and uplifted.”³⁶

This chapter however concentrates on the labour regime under colonial rule where some of the colonial administrators employed impressed and forced labour to gain cheap labour in cutting roads, bridges, and constructing government quarters. The administration adopted rules that every Lusei village should pay tribute in the shape of rice, in addition every village should be liable to contribute labour for ten days irrespective of the days spent in coming and going, the carriage of luggage of officers and escorts, the maintenance of Government roads within their boundaries, the construction and maintenance of paths to admit officers touring freely without great

³⁵ B. Lalthangliana, *A Brief History and Culture of Mizo*, Published by the author with Financial Assistance of the Mizoram Publication Board Aizawl, 2014, p. 88.

³⁶ Sangkima, *Essays on The History of the Mizos*, Spectrum, Guwahati, 2004, p. 63.

hardships.”³⁷ Gradually, the hill population was reduced to mere labour force. They were paid for doing such works but it was mandatory on the part of the hill people to contribute such stipulated labour whenever and for whatever it was called for regardless of their engagement in their own cultivation fields.

The mandatory nature of colonial labour service made the system infamous throughout the hills. For instance, the rate of impressed labour was paid at 4 annas per diem. But the system of giving presents to individuals or chiefs for special services was practised in which broad cloth, trinkets, necklaces etc., were purchased and taken along whenever chiefs and headmen of the plains were visited. When it came to the *Lushai Hills*, there were problems with regard to fixing this rate of impressment of labour. In 1896, Porteus, the Political Officer of North Lushai Hills proposed that the labour they exact was “to be impressed labour on exactly the same footing as impressed labour in any plains district.”³⁸ Thus the rate for any impressed labour was paid at 4 annas in the hills. However, many cases usually escaped payment of such impressments.

Prior to the occupation of the hills by the British, forced labour already existed in the form of construction of houses of chiefs, free labour to work in the chief’s *jhums* and so on. By the time the British entered the hills they added yet another set of forced labour over the existing free labour to their chiefs. Section VIII of the Bengal Regulation XI of 1806 authorised “impressed labour” for transport and supplies to officers on tour.³⁹ It was under such regulation that officers posted in Lushai Hills also adopted a set of compulsory/mandatory labour from the people. Road construction was one area where labour was most impressed. The rugged mountainous region as in the Lushai Hills devoid of any network of roads in the strict sense of the term was where the hardest labour forces were required. It was here the hill labours were most employed causing unimaginable hardship especially when the proud Luseis were not willing to work for anyone. Besides, the hill labours were utilised for constructing telegraph lines, government buildings, roadside rest-houses, water reservoirs and so on. In 1896, there were six roads in the hills, 5 more roads in the 1920s and by 1936, 13 roads were

³⁷ MSA, Letter No 931 G dated 24th November, 1904 from Major J. Shakespeare Superintendent Lushai Hills to the Secretary to the Government of Assam, Shillong.

³⁸ MSA, Summary of events in the Lushai Hills District for the week ending the 2nd June 1896, GEN-49, June-December 1896.

³⁹ MSA, Letter No F. 187/2/30-Public, the 2nd February 1932, from The Joint Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department to The Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, (General and Judicial Department), Political-99, p. 2.

completed in the district. Statement of Timber Bridges on Demagiri-*Lunglei* Road was given the same year which showed 12 timber bridges on Demagiri- *Lunglei* road built, 2 suspension bridges on the Thega Khal and *Lunglei* 10 timber bridges in the Oldham Cart road were constructed by 1907.”⁴⁰ Huge labour forces were employed for these. For instance, from 1898-1906 the total labour forces employed for the construction of various government projects were 6.5 lakh (6,55,564 labour).

It was because of this laborious nature of colonial “impressed labour” that the system was opposed by the hill people and the colonial officers had to often resort to military enforcement. For instance, we know that after subjugating the chiefs of western Lushai hills the Political Officer “started demanding the *Mizos* in the eastern areas to supply coolies and manual labourers to do forced labour” which they adamantly refused.”⁴¹ In 1890, McCabe was attacked by a party of *Lushais* when he had gone to *Lalbura*’s village of *Sesawng* with a hundred soldiers to “enforce a demand for coolies.”

The term “*Kulipui*” and “*Kulite*”, referring to the colonial “impressed labour,” are still a common adage today to mean torture and oppression. It was due to opposition from the people that the Government of Assam had even constituted an enquiry commission in 1936. The enquiry however found that “impressed labour” was useful and necessary for the officers working in the hills. It was through the employment of Impressed Labour that 2100 and 3550 men and women were recruited to fight for the British in the First and Second World Wars respectively. The system continued despite a stiff opposition from the people of Lushai Hills, Manipur and Chin Hills. The issue was finally taken over by the Mizo Union whose formation in 1946 heralded the beginning of Mizo nationalist movement against colonialism. Impressed labour issue immediately constituted one of the political issues carried over by the new political platform. The union, in its Proceedings of the General Assembly held at Aizawl on 26 to 30th September 1947, demanded that transport be increased so as impressed labour could be decreased. Kuli labour was finally abolished on 13th January 1953 by the District Council.

⁴⁰ MSA, Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Judicial Department, Pol-A, July 1907, Appendix B, P.13.

⁴¹ B. Lalthangliana, *A Brief History and Culture of Mizo*, p.75.