



**Department of History**

**Jadunath Sarkar School of Social Sciences**

**Assam University, Silchar, Assam - 788011**

**(A Central University Constituted by Act XIII of 1989)**

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**DECLARATION**

I, Lalhrilmoi Hrangchal, bearing Registration No. Ph. D/1344/2010 dated 24.09.2010 hereby declare that the subject matter of the thesis entitled “*Bonded Labour in Lushai Hills during Colonial Period*” is the record of work done by me and that the contents of this thesis did not form the basis for award of any degree to me or to anybody else to the best of my knowledge. The thesis has not been submitted in any other university/institute.

**Date:**

**(Lalhrilmoi Hrangchal)**

**Place: Silchar**



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**CERTIFICATE**

Certified that the thesis entitled *Bonded Labour in Lushai Hills during Colonial Period*, for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History by Lalhrilmoi Hrangchal is the outcome of a bonafide research work under my supervision. This work has not been submitted previously for any other degree of this or any other university. It is further certified that the candidate has complied with all the formalities as per the regulations of Assam University.

I recommend that the thesis be placed before the examiners for consideration of award of the degree of this University.

**Place: Silchar**

**Dr. Jangkhomang Guite**

**Date:**

Supervisor





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## **PREFACE**

The present work, '*Bonded Labour in Lushai Hills during Colonial Period*' aims to bring out certain practices of bonded labour in the Lushai Hills, present Mizoram. It may be surprising to think that bonded labour, a practice common in the valley states, could have also existed in the hills and among the hill tribes. This work brings out that bonded labour is not only practised in the valley states, but was very much prevalent in the remote hills. It can be said that it was even worse than the valley practices at one time. One can see these in different forms like the infamous *Boi* system, the bonded labour of subjugated tribes-the population captured in different raiding expeditions, remnants of decimating wars and those purchased from slave traders. The whole population of the hills was also subjected to colonial labour machine in which they had to work for colonial establishments such as roads and bridges, building constructions, laying telegraph lines, and other menial works. They were recruited as porters/coolies and impressed labourers. This study therefore, 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 sections of the hill population such as the subjugated tribes under Lusei 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 thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapter-1 introduces the work as a whole and deals with the scope and nature of the study, defines bonded labour, slavery, forced/compulsory labour, provides the statement of the problem, lay out the methodology and objectives, gives an account of the literature review, geography of the land, economic system of the people, the society in general, religion of the people, and law and order among them. Chapter-2 discusses the social and political background of the hill people. It describes the people, social and political system prior to British occupation of the hills. Chapter-3 discusses the origin and system of *Bois*-their status as domestic servants and dependants, half slaves or slaves, their economic importance, the controversy regarding their real status, and the census of the group. Chapter-4 discusses the subjugated tribes who lived among the Luseis as bonded communities. It defines and describes subjugated tribes, deals with their status and role, discusses the circumstances that led to the subjugation of certain tribes where wars, both inter-tribal and inter-clan played a significant role. Chapter-5 deals with

Captive labourers called *Sal* who were the real slaves of the Lushai Hills. The chapter defines them, discusses their sources like raids, slave trade, position of the class, and their role in the society and economy. Chapter-6 discusses the use of Forced Labour under Colonial regime. It begins with *tlawmngaihna* - service before self, gives a gist of pre-colonial customary servitude, and discusses British initial problems of administration gradually solved through enforcement of compulsory/forced labour. It also describes colonial impressed labour that reduced the entire populace into bonded labourers for cutting roads, construction of bridges and government buildings. It looks into the revolts of the people and the aftermath.

Much work has been done on the history of bonded labour practices, nature and extent, exploitatative aspects and legal sanctions, problem of freed bonded labourers etc., in the national level. Some of these are Gyan Prakash's *Bonded Histories : Genealogies of Labor Servitude in Colonial India*, where he argues that bonded labour came into being during the colonial period of India, outlining the contentious 'geneologies' of bonded labour, its historical roots, causes, effects and shows how the twin powers of colonialism and capitalism have transformed 'Kamias' (serfs) into 'bonded labourers.' Oddvar Hollup's *Bonded Labour: Caste and Cultural Identity among Tamil Plantation Workers in Srilanka*, shows how the descendants of Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka, whose forefathers has been brought over as 'coolies' to work first on coffee then in tea and rubber plantations, have retained their caste and cultural identity despite the long separation from their homeland. Nainta Rishpal's *Bonded Labourin India: A Socio-Legal Study*, states that bonded labour which had remained largely confined to the agricultural sector has now spread to other areas like stone quarries, brick-kilns, construction sites, forestry, carpet-weaving, fishing, bidi-making etc. Kevin Bale's *Disposable people: New slavery in the global economy*, states that more than 27 million people are trapped in one of India's oldest social institutions. His is a disturbing story of slavery where people as mere commodities could be disposed when not in use. Taking up the changing faces of bonded labour, Siddhart Kara's *Bonded Labor: Tackling the System of Slavery in South Asia*, comes up with the stark realities that unlike the old forms of slavery that were long term investments, he shows the new slaves as cheap, requiring little care and are very much disposable when no longer needed.

Unlike the extensive literature on bonded labour in the plains, there are no works on the same subject regarding the Lushai Hills or the present Mizoram, pre-colonial, colonial or post-colonial. There is, of course, an extensive number of literature on slavery centring mainly on the *Boi* system. However, these also do not go beyond the controversial question of the *bois* being slaves or otherwise. A fleeting remark on bonded labour was passed by Sangkima in his book *A Modern History of Mizoram* where he states that the *boi* system was “very similar to that of the custom called ‘bonded labour’- the system commonly found and practiced throughout India.” Barring this, the *boi* system or any other form of servitude has not been dealt with from the point of bonded labour, leave alone the subject of subjugated tribes. Regarding the *Sals* of Lushai Hills, no substantial work has been done except for a few lines of definition on which Shakespeare’s work cannot be bettered. Captives of war or remnants of conquered tribes kept in the villages of their conquerors ended there, while Liangkhaia’s *Mizo Chanchin* (Mizo History) echoes with the treatment given to the conquered Hmar tribesmen who were made to fence or stockade villages and whose detestable bondage gave birth to “forced labour for building the houses of chiefs.” Colonial subjugation and successive occupation of the hills was projected as ‘heaven-sent’ and a ‘moderniser’ although it reduced the whole population to the status of bonded labourers for more than half a century. B. Lalthangliana even blamed the British forced “Coolie” work for the migration of a large number of people to North Cachar Hills, Manipur, Burma and Cachar.

In the light of these aspects, the present thesis is prepared with a view to show that bonded labour was practised in the Lushai Hills from very early times and continued throughout the British rule where everyone from chiefs to slaves, toiled for the white aliens in their own land. The work throw light on the history of bonded labour system in the Lushai Hills during the colonial period, the *boi* system, the state of subjugated tribes under *Sailo* chiefs, the state of those captured in different wars, raids and those purchased from slave traders. It also shows the state of colonial “impressed labour” system, and the nature, forms and extent of bondage to all the groups of bonded labourers noted above.

The scope of the study covers colonial period while constantly drawing from circumstances of pre-British times. The method employed is simple narration and analysis. For the collection of required archival materials field works have been

undertaken in the Mizoram State Archives, Aizawl, Assam State Archives, Guwahati, and National Archives of India, New Delhi. Records of Foreign Department, Home Department and miscellaneous files, census reports, and other related files were consulted from the above archives. For oral sources, I have interviewed certain knowledgeable persons in Mizoram and North Cachar Hills apart from utilizing the available written materials initially adapted from oral accounts, written both in English and *Duhlian*/Lusei dialect. Quantitative data is presented with the help of tables wherever possible to bring out the subject in a more concrete form.