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# **Bonded Labour in Lushai Hills during Colonial Period**

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## Introduction

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)<sup>1</sup> 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 as porters for the construction of roads, government buildings 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 Lusei chiefs, the captives of raids from the plains, the women folks who have been virtually reduced into bonded labour under patriarchal customary practices and labour under the colonial regime.

## Objectives of the Study

The following objectives are examined by this study:

- the history of bonded labour system in the Lushai Hills during the colonial period
- the *boi* system practiced in Lushai Hills
- the state of subjugated tribes under Sailo chiefs
- the state of those captured in different wars, raids and purchased from slave traders
- the state of colonial “impressed labour” system during colonial period
- the discourses (debate and controversies) on bonded labour system in the Lushai Hills

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

- the nature, forms and extent of bondage to the group of bonded labourers noted above

### **Methodology:**

This study is an empirical research based mainly on archival materials. However, oral traditions are also taken into account whenever required to substantiate the archival materials necessary for analysis in the subject under study. Secondary materials are also used in large amount for discussion on the various issues of bonded labour in the Lushai Hills. For collecting the required archival materials field works have been undertaken in the Mizoram State Archives Aizawl, Assam State Archives Dispur, 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 a part from utilizing the available written materials initially adapted from oral accounts, written both in English and Duhlian/Lusei language. Quantitative data has been presented with the help of tables wherever possible to bring out the subject on more concrete form. Overall, the approach taken is both analytical and narrative in essence.

### **Statement of the Problem**

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) *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. *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. *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*.

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 numbers 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 remains under their subjugation virtually losing their mobility and other customary rights. They included both the population belonging to the Lusei and non-Lusei tribes. It was because of their relative familiarity with the *Tukluh bois* such as in their state of subjugation and the nature of their bondage that they are probably understood as *Tukluh bois*. But from its essence and conception this subjugated/conquered tribes are different from *Tukluh bois* who are general known to be people who voluntarily deserted their village and willingly submitted to the more powerful or the victors in war.

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 spent the live as part of the family, married as circumstances permitted but with no social and ritual status. But the main role of this group of *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.”<sup>2</sup> 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 (in) famous *Boi* system. People in general were under virtual bondage under colonial regime with 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

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

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 systems.

One may keep on extending the issue of labour system to include even the women of the hills who had shouldered the whole economic activities of the hills along with the so-called “slaves.” These are the womenfolk in general who 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.”<sup>3</sup> In this sense women have also formed part of the labour forces which invariably falls under the category of bonded labourers sanctioned by customs. But this study will skip this last issue and other related labour system that prevailed in Lushai Hills although the issue will come out again and again during the course of discussion throughout the work.

The central problem of labour issue arises 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 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.”<sup>4</sup> Thus in the prevailing colonial discourse, “Indian slavery was seen as a relatively harmless institution that even served some positive social functions.”<sup>5</sup> It was under such colonial censorship of certain

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<sup>3</sup> Lewin, *Wild Races of South Eastern India*, p. 134.

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

<sup>5</sup> Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton, (eds), *Slavery and South Asian History*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indianapolis, USA, 2006, p. 225.

inhuman practices that the issue of bonded labour is located and studied in this work. In this respect, the labour practices among the hill tribes of Northeast India pose an important field of study.

The study takes the view that 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. Whereas some of the bonded labour practices in the hills in pre-colonial Lushai Hills came to an end by the force of colonialism itself, such as 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 uncommutable form of bonded/forced labour system under the colonial rule. This study is therefore, an investigation not only on the prevailing labour system in the Lushai Hills during the colonial period but it is also a critical study on the colonial discourse of different forms of labour system in the Lushai Hills in particular and among the Northeast tribes in general.

### **Chapterization:**

The thesis is divided into seven chapters.

**Chapter - 1:** Introduction

**Chapter - 2:** Social and Political Background of Lushai Hills

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

**Chapter - 4:** The *Sals*: Captive Labourers, the Real Slaves of Lushai Hills

**Chapter - 5:** Subjugated Tribes: Bonded Communities

**Chapter - 6:** Forced Labour under Colonial Regime

**Chapter - 7:** Conclusion

### **Summary of Chapters**

#### **Chapter - 1: Introduction**

This introductory chapter deals with the concept of bonded labour from the various existing literature, review of literature on the subject and of those studies on the labour system of Lushai Hills. It gives the definition of Slavery and Forced Labour on which a chapter each is dedicated in the work. It provides the historical, social, political and economic background of the Lushai Hills and serves as 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 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. 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,”<sup>6</sup> 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 on various grounds.”<sup>7</sup>

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.”<sup>8</sup> Thus in the prevailing colonial discourse, “Indian slavery was seen as a relatively harmless institution that even served some positive social functions.”<sup>9</sup>

Forced labour is defined by the ILO as “work or service exacted from a person under threat or penalty, which includes penal sanctions and the loss of rights and privileges, where the person has not offered him/herself voluntarily.”<sup>10</sup> It has categorised “forced labour” into five key areas for practical purposes which include “slavery and abduction, misuse of public and prison works, forced recruitment, debt bondage and domestic workers under forced labour situations, and internal or international trafficking.”<sup>11</sup> This aspect of labour under force is dealt with in chapter six of the work, where the whole population of the Lushai Hills was reduced to labourers.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976* (Act No. 19 of 1976) dc-siwan.bih.nic.in, accessed 21.01.2012, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> *The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories*, pp. 146-49.

<sup>9</sup> Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton, (eds), *Slavery and South Asian History*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 2006, USA, p. 225.

<sup>10</sup> ILO, (2001a) *Forced Labour Convention*, 29 (1930) (ILO 2001a:9).

<sup>11</sup> The earlier work by the ILO has eight separate categories of forced labour (ILO 2001a). The five key areas mentioned are used in this work.

Article 1 of the Slavery Convention signed at Geneva on 25<sup>th</sup> September 1926 defines slavery as “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised, and the slave trade includes all acts involved in the capture, acquisition or disposal of a person with intent to reduce him to slavery; all acts involved in the acquisition of a slave with a view to selling or exchanging him; all acts of disposal by sale or exchange of a slave acquired with a view to being sold or exchanged, and, in general, every act of trade or transport in slaves.”<sup>12</sup> The Lusei’s real system of slavery was known as *Sal* and where the slaves were also known as *Sal*. These slaves are dealt with in chapter five.

The geography, people, society, economy, political lives of the earlier inhabitants of Lushai Hills are also briefly mentioned in this chapter.

## **Chapter - 2: Social and Political Background of Lushai Hills**

The chapter discusses the general people who inhabited the Lushai Hills, the society and conditions prior to British entry. It also discusses the political condition of the hill people which led to the intrusion of alien rule and its final annexation. Generic names such as ‘Lushai,’ ‘Kookie,’ ‘Chin’ had been used to imply the various ethnic groups inhabiting the hills during colonial period. In this work, ‘Mizo’ is used to refer to all the ethnic hill tribes whereas ‘Lusei’ is used exclusively to mean the erstwhile ‘Lushai’ to indicate the descendants of Zahmuaka.

There are a number of separate tribes under the general ethnic broad groups of Mizo. These primarily include several tribal communities that have inhabited the hilly terrains for several decades. They included the following main tribes: “Lusei, Hmar, Poi/Lai, Lakher/Mara, Chakma, Thadou Ralte, Gangte, Paite, Sukte, Pangkhua, Zahau, Fanai (Muallianpui), Molbem, Darlong, Khuangli, and Falam (Tashons).”<sup>13</sup> Apart from the main tribal groups, the Mizo people are divided into three sub-tribes namely Lakher, Poi and Lusei. The Chakma are another group which concentrate in one part of the state. All these tribes are known to exist in Mizoram ever since the hills came into existence. According to historic records, Tibetan, Burmese and Chinese people had a great influence on the lifestyle and behaviour of the core groups of Mizoram.

<sup>12</sup> Slavery Convention signed at Geneva on 25<sup>th</sup> September 1926, [www.ohchr.org/EN/Professionalinterest/Pages/Slavery/Convention.aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Professionalinterest/Pages/Slavery/Convention.aspx), accessed: 21.09.2014.

<sup>13</sup> S.C. Bhatt and Gopal Bhargava (eds.), *Land and People of Indian states and Union Territories: (in 36 volumes). 19, Mizoram*, Gyan Publishers, New Delhi, 2005, p. 15.



Of the tribes inhabiting the land, the first group to enter the hills were known as Old Kukis, which consisted of Hrangkhawl, Biate, Khawtlangs, Langrawng, Pangkhua, Mawk and others. The second group were the New Kukis, composed of Changsan, Thadou, Lhangum etc who were pushed out by the third group of arrivals known as Luseis. “Among these Lusei tribes, the most prominent was the Sailo clan, known to be the direct descendants of Thangura, a chief said to have existed in 1580.”<sup>14</sup> This group were said to have come to the present hills at the beginning of the eighteenth century. They acquired the name “Lusei” from their ancestor, Luseia. The group was also composed of various clans among which the Sailo is a household name. They trace their descent from Thangura, one of the six sons of Zahmuaka. The other five sons were Rokhum, Palian, Thangluah, Rivung and Zadeng.

The entry of this group spelt the disintegration of the first group of Old Kukis. The social life of the people changed drastically in the face of political aspirations. The Luseis fought against the tribes in and around the hills, conquered and subjugated weaker tribes in a bid to attain paramount power. Tribal wars were succeeded by inter-clan wars when the Lusei group fought among their own clansmen. In the process, the Sailo clan of the Thangur bloodline emerged as the undisputed ruling clan. Those that were conquered or voluntarily surrendered to them were kept in a ‘species of slavery’ and majority were absorbed to form the bulk of the Sailo subjects. But others escaped and fled to Cachar, Manipur, North Cachar Hills, Chittagong Hill tracts and Burma where they have carved a niche for themselves and remains to this day.

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

This chapter examines the *Boi* system of the Lushai Hills. The most common system of Lushai bondage was commonly understood as “*boi*.” 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,”<sup>15</sup> “an individual dependent upon a Lushai chief,”<sup>16</sup> “under-privileged strata of the society, belonging to the lowest strata of the society”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> McCall, *Lushai Chrysalis*, p. 35.

<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> C.G. Verghese and R.L. Thanzawna, *History of the Mizos*, Vol-1, Vikash Publishing House, New Delhi, 1997, p. 39.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew H. Vanlaldika, *Social Stratification Among the Mizos*, Ph. D Thesis, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, 2003, p. 232.

respectively. B. C. Alen defines it as having the “slightest tinge of slavery in the province....”<sup>18</sup> Lawmsanga,<sup>19</sup> J.H Lorrain, Peter Fraser<sup>20</sup> defines *boi* as a “slave.” Sangkima defines the system as “very similar to that of the custom called bonded labour.”<sup>21</sup> Orestes Rosanga says that a *boi* was a “bonded labourer.”<sup>22</sup> 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 chapter investigates 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. *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 system was found to be more prominent and thus constituted the subject of great controversy. The chapter also discusses the role and status of *bois* in the economy of the chief’s family and society. That they constituted a large number in the society is discussed in the census of the *bois*.

This chapter also looks into the controversy on the *Boi* system during the period of study, especially between the Christian missionaries and the colonial state of India 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*.”<sup>23</sup> 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, abolishing would cause great resistance from the local people which would be detrimental to the peace of administration. On the other side, the missionaries represented by the outspoken Rev. Dr.

<sup>18</sup> Mizoram State Archive Aizawl, Letter No. 6866-67 No. 4902P, Shillong the 15<sup>th</sup> August 1916. From B. C. Allen, Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary General of Bengal.

<sup>19</sup> Lawmsanga, *A Critical Study on Christian Mission With Special Reference to Presbyterian Church of Mizoram*, Ph.D Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2010, p. 111.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Fraser, *Slavery on British Territory: Assam and Burma*, Canarvon, Gwenlyn Evans and Sons, 1913, p.1

<sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> Orestes Rosanga, *The Economic History of Mizoram from 1900-1940*, Ph. D Thesis, University of Delhi, 1990, p. 180.

<sup>23</sup> 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.

Peter Fraser, felt that the *Boi* system was “a real system of slavery.”<sup>24</sup> 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 re-emerged after. It was finally abolished in 1927 by the British Parliament.

The *boi* system 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. Some call them slaves, others half slaves or servants, still others call them dependants. However, any amount of debate would be useless as long as we try to incorporate the system to other forms of servitude besides what it already was. The chapter concludes that the *boi* system must be understood from its own setting. It is significant that a *boi* should be called a *boi*, nothing more, nothing less. It is one form of bondage in which both the elements of philanthropy and slavery blended together in a peculiarly Lushai’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.”<sup>25</sup> 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 sometimes the whole village voluntarily submitted to the more powerful Lusei 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 groups of people succeeded in

<sup>24</sup> Peter Fraser, *Slavery on British Territory: Assam and Burma*, (Canarvon, Gwenlyn Evans and Sons, 1913), p.1.

<sup>25</sup> J. Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, TRI Aizawl, [1975], 2008, p. 129-130.

escaping to other hills or more often in the British territory in places like Cachar, Chittagong Hills Tracts or Tripura, it was the only way out from such subjugation under the Sailo chiefs. Thus we see that large number of hill populations continue to migrate into the British territory to evade the manpower of Sailo chiefdoms in Lushai Hills. Shakespear noted 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.”<sup>26</sup>

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. The subjugated tribes under the paramount Sailo chiefs like *Thado*, *Biate*, *Hmar*, and other clans lived “in a species of serfdom very much on the footing of the *tukluh bois*, where *Kairuma* received a *mithun* out of the marriage price of each of the daughters as well as the other dues.” They were “remnants of conquered clans and not allowed to leave the village. 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.”<sup>27</sup>

These subjugated tribes included Ralte, Biate, Thadou, Paite, Vuite, Hmar/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.”<sup>28</sup>

The main method of subjugation was raids. In fact, Mackenzie has recorded that “the whole history of this frontier is indeed the story of their outrages and of their efforts

<sup>26</sup> Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>27</sup> Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>28</sup> Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 40.

to prevent, repel or avenge these.”<sup>29</sup> The main reasons for wars or clan feuds were 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.

The chapter also discusses the role and status of the subjugated tribes in the society. It was from this time that “forced labour for constructing houses of chiefs came into existence and continued until chieftainship was abolished in 1952.”<sup>30</sup> 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.”<sup>31</sup>

However, all clans of the tribes listed above were not bonded to the Lusei 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 has 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**

This chapter 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 in the Lushai Hills who were sold, bought, and could be killed as the master wished. They were locally called *Sal*, meaning “slaves.” They worked along with other people but their status was very low in the society, much below the *bois*. In fact, they formed the lowest class in the society. Besides these, other clans subjugated in inter-clan wars within the Lushai Hills were also reduced to slavery. They belonged solely to the captors who would own, sell or even kill them at their disposal. They were considered forming the true state of slavery in the Lushai Hills.

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. Besides, such captives were usually kept in the forefront 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 prominent from the 1830s till the country was occupied. We also see the same frequency of raiding

<sup>29</sup> Alexander Mackenzie, *The North East Frontier*, Mittal Publication, New Delhi, [1979], 2007, p. 331.

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

<sup>31</sup> Liangkhaia, *Mizo Chanchin*, p. 138.

in the frontiers of Sylhet, Cachar and Tripura since the 1820s. In the Burmese frontier, one can also see raiding since the 1880s. The main motive behind raiding was to procure slaves or captives, other items such as heads, booty and so on were mere incidents that coincided with the raids. Those captured were, according to Carey and Tuck “sold like cattle and were distributed at a man’s death amongst his heirs in common with beads and guns.”<sup>32</sup>

The indigenous economy of the hill society was dependent on *jhuming*. 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 slaves and womenfolk. Children also had a share in the daily routine work of the Lusei community whereas men engaged in war and hunting.

It was in the context of this division of work 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 more preferred. It was in the nature these slaves that there were relatively very few slaves rescued after the Hills were occupied. Young women 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 were very much the children of the captors. Therefore, when they attained adulthood they remained 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**

The 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 Mizo. “Since paid labour was unknown, community work known as *hnatlang* was another way in which weaker sections of people were supported and uplifted.”<sup>33</sup>

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 Lushai village should pay tribute in the shape of rice, in addition every village should be liable to contribute labour for ten days

<sup>32</sup> Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, pp. 203-204.

<sup>33</sup> Sangkima, *Essays on The History of the Mizos*, Spectrum Publication, Guwahati, 2004, p. 63.

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 hardships.”<sup>34</sup> Gradually, the hill population was reduced to a 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. This mandatory nature of colonial labour service made the system infamous throughout the hills.

“Section VIII of the Bengal Regulation XI of 1806 authorised “impressed labour” for transport and supplies to officers on tour.”<sup>35</sup> It was under such regulation that the 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. 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 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, 2 suspension bridges on the Thega khal and Lunglei, and 10 timber bridges in the Oldham Cart road were constructed by 1907.”<sup>36</sup> 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 tribes and the colonial officers had to resort to military enforcement at times. 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.”<sup>37</sup> In 1890, McCabe was attacked by a party of *Luseis* when he had gone to *Lalbura*’s village of *Sesawng* with a hundred soldiers to “enforce a demand for coolies.”

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<sup>34</sup> MSA, *Letter from Major J. Shakespeare, Superintendent of Lushai Hills to the Secretary to the Government of Assam, Shillong*, Letter No 931 G dated 24th November, 1904.

<sup>35</sup> MSA, Letter No. F. 187/2/30-Public, the 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.

<sup>36</sup> MSA, Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Judicial Department, Pol-A, July 1907, Appendix B, P.13

<sup>37</sup> B. Lalhangliana, *A Brief History and Culture of Mizo*, p. 75.



The term “Kulipui” and “Kulite”, referring to the colonial “impressed labour,” are still a common adage today to mean torture and oppression. Impressed Labour had been the major instrument of British recruitment of hill people during the World Wars. A total of 2100 men and women were impressed to join the 27<sup>th</sup> Lushai Labour Corps where 71 persons lost their lives in the First World War. The Second World War again recruited 3550 men and women who served mainly in digging trenches, disposing corpses, running errands and so on. People were recruited with a promise of freedom from impressed labour to those who went to France. But after the war, those who went were exempted from “*kuli pui*” work whereas they were required to continue with “*kulite*” work for which wages were not paid. Petitions were put up through the leadership of *Thanzama Sailo*, (Ex-Headman), *Zathanga* (Ex-Assistant Headman), *Khawngchinga* (Ex-Head Interpreter) on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1920. But it was to no avail.

In the Chin Hills and Manipur too, revolts arose against the colonial impressed labour system where many men and villages were lost. 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. Hence, the system continued in the Lushai Hills till 1952 despite a stiff opposition from the people. In the Lushai Hills, the issue was finally taken over by the Mizo Union whose formation in 1946 heralded the beginning of Mizo nationalist movement against colonialism. The union, in its Proceedings of the General Assembly held at Aizawl on 26 to 30<sup>th</sup> September 1947, demanded that transport be increased so as impressed labour could be decreased. *Kuli* labour was finally abolished on 13<sup>th</sup> January 1953 by the District Council.

### **Chapter- 7: Conclusion**

This chapter forms the conclusion of the work as a whole.

#### **1. Workshops and Seminars attended/participated:**

- (i) Participated in a 21 days’ workshop on “Historical Research Methodology,” jointly organised by the Institute of Distance Education, Rajiv Gandhi University, Itanagar and the North East Regional Centre, Indian Council of Historical Research, Guwahati, from 29<sup>th</sup> March to 18<sup>th</sup> April 2012 at Rajiv Gandhi University, Itanagar.



- (ii) Participated in Seven Days National Level Workshop on “Data Analysis through SPSS” 13<sup>th</sup> TO 19<sup>th</sup> October 2014, organised by IQAC, BODOFA U. N. Brahma College, Dotma, Kokrajhar, Assam. [www.bunbc.ac.in](http://www.bunbc.ac.in)
- (iii) Participated in International Seminar on “Mughals and the Northeast: Linkages, Sustenance and “Crisis” 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> November 2014 organised by the Department of History, Assam University, Silchar sponsored by Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi.

## 2. Publications in the form of Articles:

- (i) ‘Revisiting the *Boi* system of Lushai Hills,’ *Journal of Northeast India Studies*,(JNEIS) Vol - 4(2), Jul.-Dec. 2014, pp. 41-54
- (ii) ‘*Sal*; Slavery in the Lushai Hills,’ *International Journal of Research (IJR)* Vol-1, Issue-10, November-10 2014, ISSN 2348-6848, pp. 1903-1931