

# How Global War Memory in the Indo-Myanmar Border-Zones is Refashioning “Remote” Places

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Memorialization of the Second World War (WWII) in Manipur and Nagaland through tourism in India was fueled by ground-up initiatives in the past decade. This reveals contested historical narratives co-existing with newly re-invigorated transnational commemorative circuits enabled by legacies of a “global” war. This challenges perceived historical amnesia about the war in South Asia, which is encapsulated by a Eurocentric trope of “forgotten war.” Simultaneously, some of these efforts to re-excavate history situate the centrality of what was considered a “remote” frontier region into a place of global commemorative relations that acquire greater significance in light of regional desires for inter-Asian connectivity.



## A “forgotten” global war

At a hotel in the city of Imphal in January 2014, I came across a small brochure by a local battlefield tourism company, which offered a “battlefield tour” of sites in and around the city as well as other areas in Manipur. *Battle of Imphal Tours* was my first encounter with WWII history within the tourist landscape of India’s “Northeast” region. That year coincidentally marked the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Imphal and Kohima that had begun in March 1944 with the Japanese invasion from Burma. Memories of this battle were propelled into the limelight in 2013, after the National Army Museum in the United Kingdom voted that this event was Britain’s “greatest” battle. A host of public events on a relatively grand scale have commemorated the 70th anniversary (2014) and the 75th anniversary (2019).

Such commemorations include the establishment of the Imphal Peace Museum in 2019, funded by the Nippon Foundation and endorsed by the Japanese government, including Prime Minister Shinzo Abe [Fig. 2]. War tourism in Northeast India draws from experiences of becoming part of the China-India-Burma Theatre of war, another “home

front” of a global conflict, which was until then governed as the British Indo-Burma frontier. War tourism is a useful entry point to probe questions of broader significance about how historical pasts are constantly amenable to appropriation, particularly by postcolonial nation-state projects and minority resistance to them. More importantly, in Manipur and Nagaland, WWII memorialization and tourism have opened up possibilities for shifting the historical narrative in a manner that seeks to transcend regional and national competition in favor of fostering global connections of nostalgia and memory.

War memorialization and tourism have enabled a peculiar sort of globalization in the past decade, one in which the relevance of war memories transcends nationalizing discourses (and resistance to them). WWII’s global nature has been the subject of increasing attention by historical and international relations scholarship. In recent years, ground-up initiatives have re-excavated (sometimes literally) historical pasts, revealing narratives that challenge the highly Eurocentric trope of a “Forgotten War.”<sup>1</sup> As such, tourism represents a genre of history production that can reframe historical genealogies made possible by the experience of a “global war.” Some such alternative genealogies may be informed by a nostalgia for empire that remains under-recognized.

These instances become starker in frontier areas, such as the present-day Indian states of Manipur and Nagaland, whose accommodation within national historical narratives after decolonization has been problematic. The problem of WWII memorialization – or *Japan Laan* (Japan war), as it is called in Manipur’s Meitei language – is fraught and has been in competition with other conflicts (e.g., Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891, Kuki Uprising of 1917) that are interpreted by historians as “anti-colonial,” particularly in the postcolonial context. The resurgence of war memorialization, particularly through tourism, has re-kindled global circuits of memory. Unlike in other Asian contexts, here, WWII tourism – fueled by ground-up initiatives – has largely departed from nationalistic agendas and rekindled connections with British, American, and Japanese tourists, for instance. These international connections with Manipur and Nagaland often bypass the Indian nation-state and articulate distinct genealogies created by global imperial warfare. Fraught historical relations of Manipuris and Nagas with Indian national projects can be transcended in favor of these alternative genealogies that posture these places directly with British, American, and Japanese history. Thus, the legacy of global war afforded narrative possibilities through which Manipuri and Naga history are recast as “global” and not solely tied to India.

## Resurgence, revival, and remembrance

The resurgence of memories of WWII in the region is most visibly manifested in the realm of tourism. War tourism in Manipur since 2012 was driven by amateur explorers and professional tour entrepreneurs on the ground. More recently, they have been increasingly usurped by state-driven projects, sometimes funded in part by foreign governments. Eventually, private entrepreneurial organizations such as the *Manipur Tourism Forum*, in collaboration with state and foreign governments, came to dominate war commemorations and related tourism infrastructure. The increased interest of the state in upgrading the war memorials of Imphal (Manipur’s capital) is a stark departure from previous policy. It can be read as an attempt to signal the local government’s ability to control what has been a highly militarized landscape of precarity and counter-insurgency. It is also an attempt to brand the city as a world “destination.”<sup>2</sup> The dynamics here diverge from nation-centric war sites like the memorials in Kashmir commemorating the Kargil War, where border securitization and tourism have come together. In such cases, a peculiar form of military tourism deliberately encourages the celebration and consumption of nationalist sacrifice, thereby creating greater presence of state and populations in areas where the territorial integrity of India is fraught with anxieties of Chinese and Pakistani occupation.<sup>3</sup>

The “supply” of war memories is rather diverse, and it is not only catered towards the tourism industry alone. In fact, war memorialization has been a site of global interconnection. On the one hand, it is a phenomena that privileges nostalgia for imperial pasts, while, on the other hand, it manifests ruptures and tensions within minority histories of ethnic nationalism as opposed to histories proffered by the Indian nation-state. For example, the Naga armed political resistance movement against India is based on the founding myths of collaboration and loyalty to the British and Allied forces during WWII. Contrary to this, in Manipur, the royal family sided with the British, while the minority Kuki community is largely held to be disloyal to the Allies. In the Kuki context, scholars and ground activism have interpreted and presented Kuki “disloyalty” as “anti-colonial” credentials. Thus, Kuki soldiers in the pro-Japanese Indian National Army (INA) have claimed compensation in independent India as “national” war veterans.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to Manipur, institutionalized war memorialization linked to tourism has arguably had a longer presence in Nagaland, although this is now changing with more foreign investments (especially from Japan) in Manipur.<sup>5</sup> For instance, state-endorsed mega-events such as the Hornbill Festival cater largely to a big foreign tourist clientele. During this event, a primitive past and “tribal” culture

Fig. 1 (above): B.K. Sachu, in his late 80s, converted a part of his home in Kohima into a museum that houses relics and memorabilia of World War II (Image reproduced courtesy of Tora Agarwala /The Indian Express and captioned by the author).



Fig. 2 (above): The India Peace Memorial, built in 1994 by the Japanese government to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Imphal (BOI). The central shrine of the Memorial includes Japanese inscriptions and the phrase *Jai Hind* ("Hail India"), which was a slogan used extensively by the Axis-Allied Indian National Army (INA) as well as a nationalist slogan today (Photo by the author).

are juxtaposed with wartime memorabilia, including a WWII themed car rally.<sup>6</sup> The Nagaland state-funded Kohima War Museum was built adjacent to the site of the Hornbill Festival in Kisama village. Its architect, Ronojoy Sen, said that he combined the structural features of an airplane hangar with the indigenous architectural features of a Naga *Morung* (male dormitory) to create a design that reflected the global encounter of WWII in Nagaland.<sup>7</sup>

The war encounter is often posited as the coming of "modernity" to Naga Hills and Manipur. This echoes recurring Eurocentric tropes as well, notwithstanding the fact that new material and technological transformations did come into the region as a result of WWII. Previously, the material remains of war were mobilized for quite different reasons than they are today. In 1947, over 300 petitioners from Utluo and Laijnam Sabal villages in Manipur sought war compensation from the Indian government for the wartime destruction of property. These villages preserved the military structures like trenches and barbed wire, and they collected remains of battle as evidence for their claims.<sup>8</sup>

Public as well as individual initiatives to collect material remains of war have continued over the last decades. For instance, B.K. Sachu, a Naga octogenarian in Kohima, has been collecting wartime artefacts and created a small but remarkable museum [Fig. 1]. However, Sachu said that he had not heard about the government-sponsored year-long commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the war in 2019 in Kohima and Imphal. He made sense of these exclusions by suggesting that the "celebrations are at ministerial level, so they are not inviting villagers."<sup>9</sup> Other groups, like the 2nd World War Imphal Campaign Foundation – led by Yumnam Rajeshwor and Arambam Angamba Singh, with support of the Manipur government – have been engaged in the researching and collection of relics since 2009. More recently, the Japan Association for Recovery & Repatriation of War Casualties (JARRWC) visited Nagaland and Manipur to collect remains of Japanese soldiers and has been facilitated by the Imphal Campaign Foundation and Manipur Tourism Forum.

War tourism in Imphal initially came from ground-up entrepreneurship in Manipur, pioneered through the *Battle of Imphal* (BOI) tours started by Hemant Singh Katoch and Yaiphaba Kangjam, both of whom are long term informants for my research. Hemant is an entrepreneur, international development professional, and author from Delhi. Through his work on this war, he wants to regularize and professionalize "battlefield tourism" in the region, going beyond the usual "remembrance tours" that do not really cover the wider and expansive landscape beyond war cemeteries and usually excludes stories of individuals. He expressed his desire to see Manipur emerge "as India's pre-eminent destination" for WWII "remembrance tourism" as well as to contribute to Manipur's growth after decades of insurgency and wars with India since the mid-1960s.<sup>10</sup> In doing so, Hemant is reviving a memory repository that draws from an alternate historical genealogy of Manipur, one which moves away from the traditional emphasis on Manipur as an ancient Hindu civilization and/or a Princely State. It also engages the question of belonging in India, as well as the state's troubled past, marred by brutal counterinsurgency undertaken by

Indian armed forces.<sup>11</sup> Hemant has published two books with well-known international publishers. Intended as "battlefield guides,"<sup>12</sup> both books underscore how Manipur was arguably the part of India most affected by WWII. Yaiphaba, who now leads most of the tours in Imphal, has authored a collection of oral histories of the war.<sup>13</sup>

### Locating a forgotten war in time and place

Hemant opined elsewhere that, after the war, Manipur supposedly went back to being a "quiet corner" of the world, despite having been globalized by wartime encounters. Scholars tend to view the wartime experience as a critical event. The war momentarily opened up trans-regional connections across the frontier, thereby challenging the exclusion of tribal inhabitants from modernity caused by colonial frontier policy of territorial enclosure since the 19th century. This brought them greater material and political leverage. This was concomitant with a uniquely intensified form of Allied state-extension, through road-building for instance. Additionally, there was a humanitarian crisis caused by the mass exodus of refugees and troops from Burma after the Japanese occupation of most of the former British territory in 1942. The encounter with modernity was thought to be short-lived. With the re-imposition of a single, Old Standard Time upon the region in 1945, the region was thought to return to a "less modern" temporality as some historians tend to suggest. The idea of a temporal break due to war and to the official end of colonial rule in August 1947 is also problematic since it obscures the continuities of violent militarization and policies that continued to resemble colonial frontier-style governance.

Moreover, Independence – followed by the violence of Partition – created conditions for "forgetting" the war and creating greater distance from it. WWII was portrayed as irrelevant in Indian national history narratives because it was, after all, a war between imperial powers. The Indian political establishment, led by the Indian National Congress, had sided with the British in return for a promise of Independence, while the Bose-led INA allied with Nazi Germany and Japan to overthrow British rule. These dynamics created complications for national memory and thus presented a vested interest in forgetting. In short, war memory in the late 1940s did not serve either British interests nor Indian national ones.<sup>14</sup> In Northeast India, however, war tourism – as a means of transcending the territory's historical relegation as "peripheral" – is key to the current rhetoric of development in the region. In light of recent decades of political and policy desires for inter-Asian connectivity, it is important to note such transnational aspirations that inform demands for the revival of wartime infrastructure like the Stilwell Road that began from Ledo in Assam. This road once connected a larger transport corridor from Kolkata in India with Kunming in China.

Excavation of war memories and materials from the ground seeks to retrieve something that had been "lost" and is to be salvaged and recovered. Such attempts at memorialization incorporate WWII within local historical geography, and in so doing lay claim to a

Fig. 3 (below): Hemant and Yaiphaba at the India-Myanmar border, between the "Twin Cities" of Tamu and Moreh. BOI Tours expanded into Myanmar in 2018 (Image courtesy of Hemant Singh Katoch).



globality and modernity long claimed to be absent. The past can be brought back to life through the excavation of other memories, thereby producing a new narrative of place. The idea of "recovery" may resonate with "imperialist nostalgia" (among other nostalgias), particularly because tourism narratives are deeply embedded within Eurocentric triumphalism of Allied victory and Japanese defeat. It is also true that multiple nostalgias and competing temporalities co-exist in the memory landscape. For instance, the postcolonial Indian state and local Manipuri state (incepted in 1972) privileged movements that were later interpreted to be "anti-colonial." For example, the Anglo-Manipuri "war" of 1891 is commemorated preeminently by the Hindu Meitei majority with support of the Manipuri state. Such narratives celebrate the valor of Prince Tikendrajit as a martyr of the anti-colonial cause. However, opposition to the official narrative of this "war of Independence" has been met with violent public reactions in the past.<sup>15</sup>

After the release of his first book in the form of a battlefield guide, Hemant appeared in a video interview, where he highlighted two key ideas. First, he pointed to the ambivalent attitudes of Indians, especially in Manipur, towards WWII: despite mass participation in resisting the Japanese, the conflict is hardly thought of as "our war." Second, the well-researched battlefield tours – and, subsequently, the books authored by both Hemant and Yaiphaba – have underlined the need to go beyond the identifiable British, INA, and Japanese war cemeteries and memorials. Instead, such resources explore how battlefield sites are embedded in Manipur's landscape. According to Hemant, some of these sites could be a short drive from home for residents of Manipur, who could look at a familiar place (and its connections to the rest of the world) differently.<sup>16</sup> Hemant and Yaiphaba emphasize the battlefield landscape of peaks, streams, and abandoned airfields that dot the Imphal valley and its surroundings. This is a unique feature of their tours, whereby battles can be brought back to life, beyond the typical memorials and museums. They recently expanded the scope of battlefield tourism across the border in Myanmar with the *Burma Campaign Tour* circuit, but these excursions could not continue due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the civil strife after the Myanmar's 2021 military coup.

The tours in Manipur are often customized. For instance, some clients come in search of a particular family member who fought there. They are also personalized and lively due to the interesting oral histories collected by Yaiphaba, which are often peppered with amusing anecdotes and his sense of humor. It is the rootedness in local historical geography, the human stories, and the simultaneous connection to a shared global wartime past that advance alternate renderings of history [Fig. 3]. These alternative renderings are more subtle than top-down historiography, and they allow navigational possibilities that state-owned sites and narratives lack. However, while such ground-up initiatives scale up local places and histories, there are also limits to being able to transcend triumphalism and colonial knowledge based stereotypes. This is partly due to the fact that such narratives are still based on Anglophone sources (although this may now change with greater Japanese and local participation).

The past and present are intertwined, and different, often competing histories overlap with each other as well as with global connections that are not limited to linking memory to particular places. War tourism and the resurgence of these memories has ultimately stirred local recollections of WWII, and these are, in turn, producing new knowledge and a remembrance culture. On the one hand, these can challenge and diversify predominant Eurocentric and nation-centric narratives; on the other hand, there is a danger of reproducing and perpetuating tropes that are easily appropriated by nationalistic jingoism. On a parting note, Hemant tells me, "It is interesting to see how often Western authors and media use the word 'forgotten' to describe the battles of Imphal and Kohima or even the entire Burma Campaign in general. But this is a very Eurocentric perspective and, until recently, even an Indian one."

Far from being a 'forgotten' war in a remote periphery, the view from India's Northeast also suggests how the region was the epicenter of a global imperial war, one that shaped a new international order. Even if momentarily, Manipur, Naga Hills, and adjoining areas in Burma had become a center of worldwide significance, and today the memory of that significance is also tied to regional aspirations of inter-Asian and global connectivity.

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#### Notes

- 1 This term that was in use in the 1940s and was popularized more recently by two classic and wide-reaching books by Cambridge University historians. See Christopher A. Bayly and Timothy N. Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005) and *Forgotten Wars: The End of Britain's Asian Empire* (London: Penguin Books, 2007).
- 2 Duncan McDuie-Ra, *Borderland City in New India* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 90.
- 3 Alexander E. Davis, "Transboundary Environments, Militarisation and Minoritisation: Reimagining International Relations in the Himalaya from Ladakh, India," in *Environmental Humanities in the New Himalayas*, ed. Dan Smyer Yü and Erik de Maaker (London: Routledge, 2021), 220–38.
- 4 Jangkhomang Guite, "Representing Local Participation in INA–Japanese Imphal Campaign The Case of the Kukis in Manipur, 1943–45," *Indian Historical Review* 37, no. 2 (December 1, 2010): 291–309.
- 5 Yaiphaba Meetei Kangjam and Hemant Singh Katoch, "Northeast India, World War II and Japan: Past, Present and Future," in *Northeast India and Japan*, ed. Mayumi Murayama, Sanjoy Hazarika, and Preeti Gill (Routledge India, 2021) 252.
- 6 Arkotong Longkumer, "'As Our Ancestors Once Lived': Representation, Performance, and Constructing a National Culture amongst the Nagas of India," *HIMALAYA* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 51–64, 56.
- 7 Interview Ronojoy Sen, December 2015. The *Morung* was a political center in a Naga village and place where training to hunt and fight were imparted.
- 8 Deepak Naorem, "Remembering Japan Laan: Struggle for Relief, Rehabilitation and Compensation," *NeScholar* 4, no. 2 (2018): 21–26, 25.
- 9 Tora Agarwala, "In Kohima Village, an Octogenarian Is Preserving a Treasure Trove from World War" *The Indian Express*, September 20.
- 10 Hoihnu Hauzel, "A Walk Through Battle of Imphal" *NE Travel and Life*, March 19, 2014.
- 11 For instance, the controversial and draconian Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958 that gives unbridled extra-judicial powers to the armed forces, creating almost martial-law like conditions for use of force.
- 12 Hemant Singh Katoch, *The Battlefields of Imphal: The Second World War and North East India* (Routledge India, 2016) and *Imphal 1944: The Japanese Invasion of India* (Osprey Publishing, 2018).
- 13 Yaiphaba Meetei Kangjam, *Forgotten Voices of the Japan Laan: The Battle of Imphal and the Second World War in Manipur* (New Delhi: INTACH: Aryan Books International, 2019).
- 14 Indivar Kamtekar, "A Different War Dance: State and Class in India 1939–1945," *Past & Present* 176, no. 1 (August 1, 2002): 187–221.
- 15 Jangkhomang Guite, "Monuments, Memory and Forgetting in Postcolonial North-East India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 08 (February 19, 2011): 56–64, 61.
- 16 "Video and Podcast: Imphal, Scene of the Greatest Battles of World War II," *Hindustan Times*, 26 August 2016. Hemant also refers to the fact that it was now possible to travel places like Manipur, which was formerly restricted on account of insurgency, and more places of leisure were necessary not only for visitors to the state but also for local residents.