



## TYPE OF SOLDIERS THAT CAME TO MANIPUR IN WORLD WAR II

**W. Jyotirmoy Singh, Ph. D.**

Assistant Professor (Senior), D.M.C.T.E., Imphal

### *Abstract*

*The Second World War reached India with the Japanese bombing of Imphal, the capital of Manipur on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1942. This changed the life of the populaces of Imphal and also that of the people living in the far flung region of Manipur. The people of Imphal immediately fled their home after the bombing. After some months, some of them returned to their home and start settling down. In their locality they saw many soldiers. Some even find the soldiers staying in their house. As the Japanese invasion of Manipur becomes a possibility day by day, more and more soldiers were station in Imphal and other parts where the Japanese are likely to pass through.*

**Key words:** Gora, Mayang, Tondumbi.



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This paper is extracted from a project that records the memories of men and women in Manipur, who witnessed the Nupi Lan (1939) and Second World War (1942 – 1945). The project is funded by University Grants Commission (UGC), New Delhi, India

The primary sources for this paper are collected from Manipuri who are above 75 years and who witnessed the incidents related to the Second World War (by visually recording their statements). All interviews have been video recorded. The interviewees include persons from all walks of life – from the member of the royal family of Manipur (Maharaj Kumari Mangisana Devi, the then king's sister – in – law) to the daughter – in – law of the Durbar member of Manipur to the common masses. As such, most of the sources in this paper are based on the records of the interview of those who experience the Second World War.

Within a short period after the Japanese planes bombing of Imphal on 10<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> May 1942 the local populace saw various races of soldiers in Manipur. They were amazed to see such as cosmopolitan races of soldiers. Hitherto, the Japanese bombing of Imphal, the non-Manipuri familiar

with the local populaces were the Mayang (common term for all Indian common for Marwari, Gujarati, Bengali, etc.) and Gora (also a common term for those who were white in colour).

There were some Manipuri who were familiar with the different community of soldiers that come to Manipur. The same cannot be said for the majority of them. Not knowing the exact community of the soldiers, they gave local Manipuri names when they saw one. All the white soldiers were name as Gora (white soldiers) by them. Some, like the Afghan, were named as Tondumbi, ( for the peculiar hats they wore). Thus it is, hereby deemed significant to state the type of the soldiers witnessed by the Manipuri in the World War II.

**I GORA:** One group of soldier that the local populaces often come into contact was the British soldiers which were often referred as “Gora” by the Manipuri. Many of the interviewees mention their presence in different places of Manipur, especially in Imphal. Many of the residents of Greater Imphal who were interviewed mentions of the presence of Gora soldiers in their localities. (Greater Imphal within the present Imphal Municipal areas and the adajent areas surrounding it).

Ch. Madhumangol of Nongmeibung, adjacent to the present palace compound, says that his house was re-done was by the Gora soldiers during the World War II. They cut through the wall amd makes window. <sup>1</sup> S. Ibemhal of Singjamei (southern part of Greater Imphal) she saw Gora along black soldiers in good number at Singjamei. <sup>2</sup> Ch. Maipaksana living in her maternal grandmother houses at Singjamei Thokchom Leikai (within the central Greater Imphal) says that when her family returned from Ningomthongjao, (about 3 /4 km south of Imphal) they find the British soldiers along with Indian soldiers who were engaged in the distribution of oil staying in their house. The soldiers were also staying in their locality.<sup>3</sup> Maikam Mikoi and Nongmaithem Achou both of Haobam Marak (southern part of Greater Imphal), states the presence of the Gora soldiers in their localities. <sup>4</sup>

K. Hera of Langdum (8 km south-east of Imphal) also witnessed the presence of the Gora soldiers between Singjamei Bazar, to the north of Heirangoithong market (southern part of Greater Imphal). The local populace to the south of Heirangoithong market was not disturbed by the soldiers. During the later part of World War II he stays at his maternal grandfather house, which was at the south of Heirangoithong market. <sup>5</sup>

S. Haladhara of Sagolband Moirang Leirak (within the central Greater Imphal) says that after the 1<sup>st</sup> bombing many soldiers came to Imphal. They were put up in the houses of different localities in Imphal. He says that in Sagolband, some important officers like Mekong Saheb stayed at the residence of Mutum Ibohal of Meino Leirak and also in the residence of Wahengbam Yumjao Singh, (an important officers of Manipur at that time). There was no case of robbery in the houses resided by the soldiers. Nor do they ill-treat the owner of the house when come to collect their household goods. <sup>6</sup> RK Tamphasana of Tera Sapam Leirak (western part of Greater Imphal) says that when her family came to

their house in December 1942 they found the British soldiers living in her house. At that point of time her family was allowed to stay back in their own house by the soldiers. <sup>7</sup>

The presence of the soldiers in the northern part of Manipur especially in northern part of Imphal were also mention by many of the interviewees.

As mention earlier, L. Bidur of Lairikyengbam (about 2 km north east of Imphal) says that there was no soldier in his locality. There were many of them in Chingmeirong and Laipham Khunou (northern side of Greater Imphal). He also mentions a big cave dug on the eastern side of the foot hill. There big officers like General stay. Near it, there were two big houses. It is said that big officers live there. <sup>8</sup>

Ch. Merajao's families fled to Angom Lawai, about (7-8 km north-east of Imphal). He says that earlier he mostly saw the British soldier. Later on, he says that he also saw **black** (African) and Pathani soldiers. He says that there was an airfield at Angom Lawai. He along with many of the young boys often went there. <sup>9</sup> L. Rabei of Luwangsangbam, adjacent to Koirengei airfield (8 km north of Imphal), says that he saw the Gora soldiers in good numbers in the areas around Koirengei. <sup>10</sup>

Ng. Amrita of Thangmeiband (northern part of Greater Imphal) says that during the Second World War he was staying at Khurkhul, about 17- 18 km west of Imphal. There, he saw all types of soldiers at Khurkhul including the Africans. He also says that Gora (white mainly British) and Africa soldiers stay in Khonghampat about 10 --11 km north-west of Imphal. They stay at the house of the Meitei who fled their house or who were evacuated for the settlement of the British and other allied forces. <sup>11</sup> P. Amar of Sekmai Bazar (18 km north of Imphal) says that he saw English soldier working in the smith at Sekmai. <sup>12</sup>

The presence of the soldier were also mention in the southern part of Manipur in Thanga, Bishenpur, Mayang Imphal, etc., in south – eastern part of Manipur in Kakching, Thoubal, etc., eastern part of Manipur like Heirok among others.

K. Hera of Keirao Langdum (5 km south-east of Imphal), states that he saw the Gora soldiers walking by-passing his village. <sup>13</sup> Kh. Amar of Nambol Naorem also of Bishenpur district (about 20 km south of Imphal) says that heavy guns were kept at hills near his place. (In fact the Battle of Red Hills which decided the fate of the Japan in the World War II was near his house.) There he saw many Gora soldiers. <sup>14</sup> M. Tombiyaima of Heirok of Thoubal district (40 km east of Imphal), M.Amarjit and Y. Yaima both of Kakching (45 km east of Imphal) mentions of the presence of the Gora soldiers in the helipads and airfield built in their localities. <sup>15</sup>

Some that they saw Gora soldiers during their march. S. Ibotombi of Yurembam (about 7/8 km west of Imphal) says that he often saw along with **Gora** (white) soldiers others like African, Punjabi, Nepali and and Mayang (Indian) soldiers marching from the eastern side (Imphal) in the morning.

They passed his village. After sometime they headed back to Imphal side.<sup>16</sup> It seems that the soldiers were keeping themselves fit by marching around the villages before they go to the battle front.

According to the statement of many of the interviewees, it can be deduced that the Gora soldiers and their officers were put up in Greater Imphal areas like Singjamei, Tera, Sagolband among others. They also stay in strategic location like the airfield as mention by Ch. Merajao.

As mentions earlier, many of the interviewees just stated the white soldiers as Gora (white soldier, which was mainly meant for the British). It seems that most of them were not able to distinguish the particular type of the white soldiers from the other. Only a few of them were able to distinguish the particular race of the soldiers.

Thus, of all the interviewees only Ch. Madhumangol of Nongmeibung (who reside just north of the palace compound) mentions the presence of American soldiers in Manipur during the World War II. After his family was driven off from Keibi Loushang khong (8 km north of Imphal) they moved to one of his relative place at Thambalkhong (about 2 km east of Imphal). His new residence was very near to the Kongba Market, which was one of the main markets in Manipur during the World War II. There he says that he saw American soldiers looking for match box (to light his cigarette) made in America. He refuses to when other offer match box to light his cigarette. He also says that he saw some American soldiers going to the movie hall.<sup>17</sup>

Another interviewees, who were able to distinguish state about the community of the white soldiers was M. Borekeshore. During the World War II he worked in the Allied offices, which looks after the collection and distribution of goods. He says that because of his war time experience he is able to speak Ingrezi (English) properly. He also says that he met different type of English speaking people during the war. They did not know Manipuri. He finds it very difficult to listen to their pronunciation. Some had broken teeth where word were not properly comes out, some peculiar vocabulary, some speak from nose, etc. The one, whom they are able to communicate without much difficulty were Scottish, Negros and Australian. He says that they find it difficult to listen to the of speaking of those of pure London and Irish.<sup>18</sup>

M. Borekeshore also states some of his encounters and experiences under the Allied soldiers. He says that earlier he work under Captain Charter, a British Officer, which everyone consider him a good officer. Later on, he was transferred to work under an Irish **Sergeant** called Staff Wells, who was rumoured to be very severe to those who worked under him. Due to an advice of Captain Charter, he was able to work to the satisfaction of that Irish officer. At times he says that he drinks with Staff Wells at the later quarter in Kangla.<sup>19</sup>

From the statement of Ch. Madhumangol and M. Borekeshore, it can be inferred that apart from the English the Scots, Irish, the American and the Australian soldiers also came to Manipur during the

World War II. Most of those who were interviewed were not able to distinguished different type of white so they used the common term “Gora.” Another reasons, maybe due to the fact that they were small children at that time and they were not able to distinguished the types of white soldiers. Thus, only a few, who were familiar with the community of the soldiers like Ch. Madhumangol and M. Borekeshore mentions their community.

**II NEPALI:** Another prominent group of soldier often witnessed by Manipur were the Nepali. Most of the interviewees who had contact with them talk highly of them. At times they seem to be doing the role of the Military Police (MP). They control the others who at times may create disturbances with the local populace.

The Nepali soldiers were found in Manipur before the Japanese plane bombing of Imphal. Many of the soldiers of the 4<sup>th</sup> Assam Rifles stationed at Kangla fort were the Nepali. Ch. Madhumangol of Nongmeibung (who reside just north of the palace compound) says that one of his good friends at the Bengali School was a Gurkhali (Nepali, Ch. Madhumangol used the term Gurkhali instead of Nepali) whose father was a sepoy of 4<sup>th</sup> Assam Rifles. He says that on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1942, on the day of the first bombing he went to the Assam Rifles Canteen to buy soap.<sup>20</sup> S. Ibotombi of Yurembam (about 7/8 km west of Imphal) says that he often saw along with Nepali (white) soldiers others like African, Punjabi, Gora and and Mayang (Indian) soldiers marching from the eastern side (Imphal) in the morning. They passed his village. After sometime they headed back to Imphal side.<sup>21</sup>

S. Thapa of Moreh Neplai Basti, was a World War II veteran Nepali soldier. He says that he came to Manipur in 1942 as a sepoy of 4<sup>th</sup> Assam Rifles. He had his training at the 4<sup>th</sup> Assam Rifles camp at Kangla. After his training he says that he along with other soldiers of 4<sup>th</sup> Assam Rifles fought the Japanese in various parts of Manipur – in Moreh and Pallel in the east, Ukhrul in the north - east, Kanglatombi in the north and Tamenglong in the west.<sup>22</sup>

M. Borekeshore of Khongman Pandit Leikai says that he once saw Nepali soldiers reprimanding a Tondumbi (for raise cap the Afghan soldier were known as Tondumbi to the Manipuri). The Tondumbi destroyed the eggs of a Muslim women vendor after a dispute between the two in respect to the price of the egg.<sup>23</sup>

M. Borekeshore Singh also mention about the Nepali soldiers going round the Kongba Keithen (Market) the main market during the World War II to safeguard it from any unwanted incident likely to be created by the soldiers.<sup>24</sup> M. Amarjit of Kakching Paji Leikai also mentions the presence of Nepali soldiers **in Kakching.**<sup>25</sup>

**III AFRICAN:** Another group of soldiers whose presence was significantly highlighted by the Manipuri was the black soldiers. The Manipuri call this group of people by different names. To those who do not know who this black soldier are they are simply called as black soldier, as Negroes by some

and as African by others. The presence black soldiers were also mentioned by many interviewees in different places of Manipur.

Ch. Maipaksana of Kwakeithel (but living in her maternal grandmother house at Singjamei Thokchom Leikai, southern part of Greater Imphal) says that when her family came to maternal grandmother her home after staying for some time at Ningomthongjao she saw Gora, Indian and **black** soldiers occupying her and her neighbourer houses. The Gora soldiers gave her and her family foods like biscuits, salt, fish etc. She however, says that the Negro soldiers did not give any to them.<sup>26</sup> Ch. Merajao's families fled to Angom Lawai, about (7-8 km north-east of Imphal). He says that earlier he mostly saw the British soldier. Later on, he says that he also saw **black** (African) and Pathani soldiers. He says that there was an airfield at Angom Lawai. He along with many of the young boys often went there.<sup>27</sup>

Ch. Merajao says that he saw Black Abyssinia, Madagacar and Niger soldiers putting up at at Angom Lawai, jumping naked into the river.<sup>28</sup> M. Borekeshore of Khongman Pandit Leikai says that during the World War II he was once posted at Heingang (about 7/8 km north of Imphal). There was a Negro Company at the hill of Heingang. He says that the Negroes soldier gave him a big sambhor (which was used in place of salt during the World War II).<sup>29</sup> M. Borekeshore also says that there was a Battalion of Black soldiers at Luwangsangbam.<sup>30</sup>

Ng. Amrita says that during the Second World War he was staying at Khurkhul, about 17- 18 km west of Imphal. There he saw all types of soldiers including the Africans at Khurkhul (17-18 km north- west of Imphal). He also says that Gora (white mainly British) and Africa soldiers stay in Khonghampat (about 10 --11 km north-west of Imphal). They stay at the house of the Meitei who fled their house or who were evacuated for the settlement of the British and other allied forces.<sup>31</sup>

RK Tamphasana says that there were no black soldiers her localities she perceives them as not good one. She says that their attitudes towards the women was not good<sup>32</sup> S. Ibemhal of Singjamei (southern part of Greater Imphal) says that she saw black soldiers along with the Gora soldiers in her locality.<sup>33</sup> Y. Yaima of Kakching (45 km east of Imphal) says that he saw black soldiers participating in the construction of the Kakching airfield.<sup>34</sup> K. Hera of Langdum who stay at Heirangoithong (southern Greater Imphal), in his maternal grandfather house during the World War II says that he saw black and white soldiers. Most of them were black soldiers. They wear Khaki and olive green dress and boot.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, like the Gora and the Nepali soldiers the blacks soldiers were also found in different parts of Manipur.

**IV INDIAN:** Many of the interviewees also mentioned of the presence of the Indian soldiers in Manipur. They, however, did not state the community of the soldiers. This may be due to the fact that

they were indistinguishable to the Manipuri of the time. Moreover, as mention earlier, most of the interviewees were very young at that time and they were not able to distinguish one Indian soldier from the others. Thus, they simply used the term “Mayang” for this group of people.

Ch. Maipaksana living in her maternal grandmother houses at Singjamei Thokchom Leikai (within 1 km south of Imphal) says that when her family returned from Ningomthongjao, (about 3 /4 km south of Imphal) they find the British soldiers along with **Indian soldiers** who were engaged in the distribution of oil.<sup>36</sup> S. Ibotombi of Yurembam (about 7/8 km west of Imphal) says that he often saw many soldiers marching from the eastern side (Imphal) in the morning. They passed his village. After sometime they headed back to Imphal side. The soldiers were not of particular type. Some of them were Gora (white). Others were African, **Punjabi** and Nepali. Most of them were Mayang.<sup>37</sup>

Ch. Madhumangol says that during the World War II, stay at Keibi Loushang from 1942 to 1943 (around 1 year). At the beginning of 1944, Japanese forces marched up to Langthabi Hill which lies in the front direction of Keibi Loushang khong. On the further side of Keibi Loushang khong lies Lamlai Chalou. In between the two there was a tribal settlement. There was rumour of the Japanese reaching up to place. Further in the north lies Pukhao. There was a report Japanese reaching up to that place. It seems that the Japanese and the British forces met each other. There was one British officer leading the Indians. There was no sound of gun firing /battle fought between the Japanese and the Allied forces. Did not see any Japanese forces but heard of their approaching.<sup>38</sup> The presence of Indian soldier is also corroborated by Th. Bidhu Singh of Sagolband Meino Leirak. He says that in one of his neighbor live some Indian soldiers. One of the soldiers regularly gave hot roti to him when they had meals. After the war, he says that the Indian soldiers came to his and ask about the welfare of his family.<sup>39</sup>

Though, most of the interviewees did not mention the particular type of the Indian soldier they all label them as Indian like the Gora for all the white soldiers. The Indian soldiers also seem to be found in various parts of Manipur.

**IV SIKH:** Many of the interviewees, however, do mention of certain section of Indian soldiers who were distinguishable like the Sikhs, the Afghani and the Pathani soldiers.

Ch. Maipaksana living in her maternal grandmother houses at Singjamei Thokchom Leikai (within 1 km south of Imphal) says that she find the British soldiers along with Indian soldiers who were engaged in the distribution of oil staying in their house. She says that she also saw black soldier and Sikhs near her house.<sup>40</sup>

As mention earlier, S. Ibotombi of Yurembam (about 7/8 km west of Imphal) says that he often saw soldiers like Punjabi along with Gora (white), African, Nepali and Mayang marching from the eastern side (Imphal) in the morning. They passed his village. After sometime the soldiers headed back

to Imphal side. <sup>41</sup> S. Haladhara of Sagolband Moirang leirak says he also saw Sikh soldiers and talked highly of them. <sup>42</sup>

**V TONDUMBI:** Many of the interviewees also mention of witnessing the presence of Pathani and Afghani soldiers in Manipur during the World War II. Like the Manipuri calling all the non-Manipuri Indian as Mayang, most of them often interlope when they speak of one or the other. Most of them often used the Manipuri term “Tondumbi” based on the type of the cap they wore, while some few of them who were familiar with them label them as “Pathani” or “Afghani” soldiers.

Ch. Merajao’s there was an airfield at Angom Lawai. He says that earlier he mostly saw the British soldier. Later on, he says that he also saw **black** (African) and Pathani soldiers. <sup>43</sup> S. Haladhara of Sagolband (Greater Imphal) also says of witnessing the presence of the Pathani soldier in Imphal. <sup>44</sup>

M. Borekeshore says that he once saw a Tondumbi soldier (for raise cap the Pathani and even the Sikhs soldiers were known as Tondumbi to the Manipuri) involving in a brawl with a Muslim vendor in Khwairamband market. <sup>45</sup> M. Borekeshore of Khongman Pandit Leikai also mentions of the presence of Afghani and Pathani soldiers. He says that the Afghanistan were locally known as Tondumbi. <sup>46</sup>

M. Borekeshore of Khongman Pandit Leikai says that during the World War II, in the house of Sougajjam Ibocha of Sougajjam Leikai (within Greater Imphal), stay Major Ayub Khan of Pathan Battalion. Here, it is worthwhile to state that one needs to study the biography of General Ayub Khan of Pakistan to determine if this Major is Genral Ayub Khan. For, it is mention that General Ayub Khan fought in the Burma front during the World War II. <sup>47</sup>

To conclude, in the aftermath the Japanese bombing of Manipur on 16<sup>th</sup> may 1942, many Allied soldiers came to Manipur. They were stationed in various parts of Manipur. Their presence is recorded by those who were interviewed. To most of the Manipuri, who till the other day, was living in their own inclusive world without much contact with the outside world must have been wonderstruck to see races of soldiers in the next. From their statement, it can be inferred that they were not able to distinct one the group soldier from the other. Nevertheless, from their statement it can be known that different soldiers from different parts of the world came to Manipur to fight the Japanese in the World War II.

#### **Notes**

- 1 Ch. Madhumangol, Nongmeibung.
- 2 S. Ibemhal, Singjamei .
- 3 Ch. Maipaksana, Kwakeithel Thokchom Leikai
- 4 Maikam Mikoi and Nongmaithem Achou both of Haobam Marak (southern part of Greater Imphal),
- 5 K. Hera, Langdum



6. S. Haladhara, Sagolband Moirang Leirak
7. RK Tamphasana, Tera Sapam Leirak.
- 8 L. Bidur Singh, Lairikyengbam Leikai
- 9 Ch. Merajao, Thangmeiband.
- 10 L. Rabei of Luwangsangbam
- 11 Ng. Amrita Singh, Thangmeiband Meisnam
- 12 P. Amar, Sekmai Bazar
- 13 K. Hera
- 14 Kh. Amar, Nambol Naorem
- 15 M. Tombiyaima, Heirok; M.Amarjit and Y. Yaima, Kakching
- 16 S. Ibotombi, Yurembam
- 17 Ch. Madhumangol, Nongmeibung
- 18 M. Borekeshore, Khongman Moirang Pandit Leikai
- 19 M. Borekeshore
- 20 Ch. Madhumangol
- 21 S. Ibotombi
- 22 S. Thapa, Moreh, Nepali Basti.
- 23 M. Borekeshore
- 24 M. Borekeshore
- 25 M. Amarjit, Kakching
- 26 Ch. Maipaksana
- 27 Ch. Merajao
- 28 Ch. Merajao
- 29 M. Borekeshore
- 30 M. Borekeshore
- 31 Ngangbam Amrita Singh
- 32 R.K.Tamphasana
- 33 S. Ibemhal, Singjamei
- 34 Y. Yaima of Kakching
- 35 K. Hera, Langdum
- 36 Ch. Maipaksana
- 37 S. Ibotombi, Yurembam
- 38 Ch. Madhumangol
- 39 Th. Bidhu, Sagolband Meino Leirak

- 40 RK Maipaksana
- 41 S. Ibotombi
- 42 S. Haladhara
- 43 Ch. Merajao
- 44 S. Haladhara
- 45 M. Borekeshore
- 46 M. Borekeshore
47. M. Borekeshore

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Mikoi Maikam, Haobam Marak  
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Singh L. Bidur, Lairikyengbam Leikai  
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Tamphasana RK, Tera Sapam Leirak.  
Thapa S., Moreh, Nepali Basti.  
Tombiyaima M., Heirok; M.Amarjit and Y. Yaima, Kakching  
Yaima Y., of Kakching