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Review Article

From Hill Warriors to Sepoys: The Induction of Nagas, Lushais (Mizos), And Kukis into the British Colonial Army

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Abstract

This paper explores the historical trajectory through which the British colonial state in India inducted tribal communities from Northeast India, specifically the Nagas, Lushais (Mizos), and Kukis into their military forces. Originally resistant to colonial incursions, these hill communities were gradually integrated into the British Indian Army, particularly through auxiliary units such as the Assam Rifles. This study analyses the transformation of indigenous martial traditions, and the Socio-Political impacts of this militarization. Drawing on colonial records, military documents, and secondary literature, the paper highlights how colonial military strategies intersected with tribal identities, laying the foundation for their continued involvement in postcolonial armed forces.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The British expansion into the north-eastern frontier of India during the 19th century, which was driven by a combination of strategic, economic, and geopolitical motives, brought them into contact with various tribal communities that inhabited the rugged hills and valleys of the region. Among the most prominent groups were the Nagas, Lushais (Mizos), and Kukis, known for their fierce independence, martial traditions, and resistance to external domination. Initially perceived as "wild" and "unruly," these communities were the target of multiple British military expeditions, which were aimed at pacifying the tribal communities of northeast India. However, over time, the British began to recognise the strategic and martial potential of these groups, leading to their gradual induction into the colonial military organisation. This paper investigates the historical process through which these tribal groups transitioned from

resisting colonial rule to serving as Sepoys within British forces. It explores the socio-political context, recruitment policies, institutional structures like the Assam Rifles, and the impact of global conflicts such as the World Wars. The study ultimately reflects on how this colonial legacy of militarisation continues to shape the identity and socio-political role of these communities in modern India.

2. Colonial Perceptions and the Martial Race Theory

The British colonial administration in India developed complex and often contradictory perceptions of the indigenous populations it governed. Among the most influential ideas that shaped the military recruitment policy of the Northeast tribes was the concept of the "Martial Race Theory." **(**Roy, 2010**)** After the Indian Revolt of 1857, which exposed the vulnerabilities of relying on large numbers of high-caste Hindu and Muslim sepoys from the Bengal Army, the British restructured their recruitment strategy. They began to favour communities that they believed were more loyal, less politically conscious, and inherently martial in temperament.

The Martial Race Theory was rooted in Victorian racial pseudoscience and ethnographic essentialism. It proposed that certain ethnic and tribal groups possessed innate physical strength, endurance, loyalty, and bravery traits deemed ideal for military service. At the same time, it excluded groups perceived as effeminate, intellectual, or politically volatile. The British considered martial races to be those who lived in tough climates, practiced hunting or warfare as a way of life, and showed stoicism in the face of their hardship (Allen, 2001).

Initially, this classification favoured groups from the North Western regions of India, such as Sikhs, Pathans, Dogras, and Gorkhas. In contrast, the tribal populations of the North-Eastern hills were first viewed through a lens of suspicion and hostility. The Nagas, Lushais (Mizos), and Kukis were described in colonial texts as savage, head-hunting, and unruly (McDuie-Ra, 2008). They resisted early British incursions into their territories through guerrilla tactics, ambushes, and raids, leading to multiple punitive expeditions by the colonial military in the North-Eastern part of India throughout the 19th century.

However, as British interactions with these groups deepened, often through both conflict and diplomacy, the colonial perception began to shift. British officers on the frontier started to appreciate the martial qualities of these hill communities. Their intimate knowledge of the mountainous terrain, physical resilience, and guerrilla warfare capabilities made them valuable assets for frontier policing, scouting, and jungle warfare (Baruah, 1999). More importantly, their relative isolation from the mainstream nationalist movement and the plains-dwelling population made them appear politically dependable and unlikely to join uprisings.

By the early 20th century, the British began actively incorporating the selected north-eastern tribal groups into auxiliary and paramilitary forces such as the Assam Rifles. The recruitment was framed not only as a practical necessity but also as part of a broader colonial civilizing mission (Van, 2005). Tribes once labelled as hostile were gradually rebranded as Loyal Warriors, a transformation that reinforced British paternalism and the empire's self-image as a bringer of order and discipline.

The Martial Race Theory, while ostensibly a military doctrine, thus served broader colonial objectives. It helped maintain social hierarchies, divide potential resistance movements, and cultivate indigenous support for imperial rule (Allen, 2001). In the case of the Nagas, Lushais, and Kukis, it also began a long process of militarization and integration into colonial state structures, processes that would have enduring effects on their social and political identities well into the postcolonial period.

3. Military Campaigns and the Pacification of the Hills

The British encounter with the hill tribes of Northeast India during the 19th century was initially marked by violent confrontation. The Nagas, Lushais (Mizos), and Kukis, known for their fierce independence and martial traditions, saw the encroachment of colonial forces as a direct threat to their autonomy and way of life. As the British expanded eastward from Bengal and Assam, they faced repeated resistance from these tribes, who utilized guerrilla tactics and deep knowledge of the terrain to launch raids on British outposts and frontier settlements. In response, the colonial state initiated a series of military campaigns aimed at pacifying the region and bringing it under imperial control (Reid, 1942).

The Naga Hills were among the first to experience British military expeditions. Starting in the 1830s, British administrators and soldiers attempted to subdue various independent Naga tribes who frequently raided British-controlled plains. The campaigns were sporadic but intensified after incidents like the 1879 killing of British officer G.H. Damant by Naga warriors in Khonoma. This led to the Angami Campaign in 1879 to 1880, which was a significant operation aimed at crushing resistance and establishing a permanent military presence (Das, 2020). The British ultimately imposed a system of indirect rule, allowing traditional chieftains to retain authority under British oversight while stationing outposts in key areas.

In the Lushai Hills, the British faced similar challenges. The Lushais, organized in chiefdoms and known for their mobility and resilience, frequently raided the plains of Cachar and Sylhet, prompting a full-scale punitive expedition from 1871 to 1872. This was known as the Lushai Expedition, it involved coordinated columns advancing from both the Chittagong and Cachar fronts (Suanlian, 2025). Though militarily successful, the campaign also aimed to open routes into the hills, build administrative centers, and establish permanent colonial control. The British eventually created the Lushai Hills District and incorporated it into Assam, bringing the area under direct administration.

The Kukis, a trans-border tribal group spread across Manipur, Mizoram, and western Myanmar, posed a more complex challenge. They were often involved in inter-tribal conflicts and, at times, acted as auxiliaries for the British against rival groups. However, tensions erupted into open conflict during the Kuki Rebellion (1917–1919), partly fuelled by British attempts

to conscript forced labour during World War I. The rebellion led to widespread fighting across the Manipur hills and required a major military response. While the British suppressed the uprising, it marked one of the most sustained and organized tribal resistances in the region (Guite, 2021).

These military campaigns served multiple colonial objectives. Beyond subjugation, they aimed at mapping and surveying the hill regions, establishing outposts, and initiating indirect rule through local chiefs and village councils. The British combined military force with strategic alliances, offering subsidies, weapons, and administrative posts to cooperative tribal leaders. This helped legitimize British authority while beginning the process of integration into colonial structures.

The pacification of the hills was thus not merely about quelling unrest. It was a complex political project involving coercion, negotiation, and co-optation. It laid the groundwork for the eventual recruitment of these communities into colonial military service, as former rebels were reimagined as reliable defenders of the frontier (Guite et al.,2019).

4. Formation and Evolution of Forces

The incorporation of the Nagas, Lushais (Mizos), and Kukis into the British military establishment was neither immediate nor uniform. It evolved over several decades, shaped by the British Empire's growing need for frontier security, intelligence, and local intermediaries (Jamir, 2020). The earliest efforts to formalize indigenous military participation began not through Grand National regiments, but through local militias and paramilitary forces, established specifically for frontier policing and small-scale operations in the challenging terrain of the north-eastern hills.

One of the earliest such forces was the Cachar Levy, raised in 1835. Initially composed of men from the plains, it was tasked with protecting British interests in the Cachar district. However, as the British expanded into the surrounding hills, they realized the limitations of deploying troops unfamiliar with the geography and warfare style of the region (Jamir, 2020). Over time, local men, particularly from tribal communities, were gradually recruited into these forces due to their deep knowledge of the terrain, tracking skills, and ability to withstand the climatic and logistical challenges of the region.

The Assam Military Police, which was established in 1891 by the British colonial administration, played a critical role in the transformation. The primary aim of this was to maintain internal security and frontier control in the strategically sensitive and ethnically diverse regions of Northeast India. The force was an important precursor to the Assam Rifles, which officially took on that name in 1917 (Shakespear, 1929).

Though still dominated by non-tribal recruits in its early years, it set the organizational precedent for a more formalized, hybrid paramilitary structure, and then this eventually evolved into the Assam Rifles, which became the most prominent institution through which north-eastern tribal groups were inducted into the colonial military apparatus. By the early 20th century, the Assam Rifles had shifted its recruitment focus to include a significant proportion of hill men, particularly Nagas, Kukis, and Lushais (Jamir, 2020).

The shift toward tribal recruitment was not merely tactical, it was also ideological. British officers posted to the frontier began to document and romanticize the martial culture of these tribes. Reports and ethnographic writings described the Nagas as "fierce yet loyal," the Lushais as "natural scouts," and the Kukis as "courageous fighters." (Jamir, 2020) These portrayals justified and encouraged their inclusion in forces such as the Assam Rifles, where they served in roles ranging from scouts and porters to full-fledged riflemen.

Recruitment was frequently mediated through tribal chieftains, who acted as intermediaries between the British authorities and local communities. These chiefs were given honorary titles, small pensions, or official recognition in return for supplying men to the British forces. This system not only facilitated the expansion of tribal recruitment but also reinforced existing social hierarchies and the authority of loyalist leaders. For young men from these communities, military service became a new route to honour, income, and adventure further enhancing its appeal.

Training and organization within these forces were influenced by British military standards, but they also retained flexibility to accommodate local conditions. Soldiers from hill tribes were often given leeway to use traditional weapons, dress, and tactics, especially in reconnaissance and jungle warfare. Over time, however, increasing professionalization led to a more standardized military culture, albeit one still marked by ethnic identities and affiliations.

By the outbreak of the First World War, the foundation had been laid for the significant involvement of North-Eastern tribes in broader imperial military efforts. Their integration into forces like the Assam Rifles and their experience in localized security roles provided the British with a reliable, mobile, and effective frontier force (Guite, 2019). This institutional legacy would continue through the colonial period and into the post-independence era, establishing the military as a central institution in the lives and identities of many hill communities.

5. World Wars and Expanded Roles

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 marked a turning point in the relationship between the British Empire and its colonial peripheries, including the tribal populations of Northeast India. As the British faced a growing need for manpower across multiple fronts from Europe to Africa and the Middle East, they turned to regions previously regarded as marginal or militarily insignificant. The martial reputations of the Nagas, Lushais (Mizos), and Kukis, already cultivated through frontier service and colonial discourse, suddenly became a critical asset (Baruah, 2005).

Although these hill tribes were not enlisted in large numbers into the British Indian Army's mainstream regiments during the First World War, their contribution was significant in auxiliary roles. Many were recruited as porters, scouts, guides, and labour corps, particularly for the Frontier Labour Corps, tasked with logistical operations in difficult terrains such as

Mesopotamia and East Africa. While not combatants in the strict sense, these roles were often dangerous and physically demanding, exposing tribal recruits to new forms of discipline, hierarchy, and military engagement.

Back home, however, the war effort deeply impacted the tribal societies. British recruitment drives strained local economies and labour systems, and in some cases sparked resistance. The most notable of these was the Kuki Rebellion of 1917–1919, where British demands for forced labour and porters during the war led to a widespread uprising across the Kuki-dominated hills of Manipur. The rebellion was violently suppressed, but it underscored the contradictions of colonial military policy, simultaneously seeking loyalty and cooperation while imposing coercive demands (Guite et al., 2019).

The Second World War (1939–1945) brought even more profound changes. The war came to the very doorstep of the Northeast with the Japanese invasion of Burma and the fierce Battle of Kohima in 1944, widely regarded as one of the turning points of the Allied campaign in Southeast Asia. This time, the Nagas, Lushais, and Kukis were not just porters or scouts but they played crucial roles in combat**,** intelligence**,** and guerrilla warfare. Although they were not formally enlisted as combat troops, many Nagas and Kukis engaged in direct fighting alongside British and Indian soldiers, especially in ambushes and skirmishes**.**

The British, recognising the strategic importance of local support, recruited hundreds of hillmen into irregular units and intelligence networks. The V Force, a British-led guerrilla intelligence and resistance unit operating in the border areas of India and Burma, actively recruited and trained Nagas and other tribes to gather intelligence, conduct sabotage, and assist Allied troops navigating dense jungles and mountain passes.

In the Battle of Kohima, Naga villagers provided not only logistical support but also vital intelligence about Japanese troop movements. Some were even armed and organised into self-defence groups under British supervision. Their loyalty and bravery during this period left a lasting impression on British officers and helped solidify the reputation of the Nagas and other hill tribes as reliable allies in warfare (Jamir, 2020).

The Lushais, too, were drawn into the war through similar means. British officers organised Mizo Levies, who engaged in guerrilla operations and supported supply lines along the Lushai Hills and Burma front (Zama, 2006). Though their numbers were small, their effectiveness in the difficult terrain was widely acknowledged.

The war also catalysed profound transformations. Exposure to global military culture, technology, and a broader sense of political belonging left deep impressions on tribal communities. Returning veterans brought new ideas about identity, nationalism, and modernity. Simultaneously, their wartime service enhanced their claims to respect, autonomy, and rights in the emerging postcolonial Indian state. Thus, the World Wars served as both crucibles and catalysts, expanding the military roles of the Nagas, Lushais, and Kukis while also shaping their trajectories in the years to come.

6. Socio-Political Impact and Legacy

The induction of Nagas, Lushais, and Kukis into British military and paramilitary forces had profound and long-lasting socio-political implications for their communities and the broader Northeast Indian region. What began as a colonial strategy to pacify and control rebellious hill tribes gradually evolved into a relationship that reshaped identities, power structures, and political aspirations during the postcolonial era.

One of the most significant impacts was the militarisation of tribal society. For many young men from the hills, military service became a primary route to economic stability, status, and exposure to the wider world. In communities where traditional livelihoods such as shifting cultivation offered limited returns, military service provided a stable income, access to modern amenities, and a sense of purpose and pride. This militarisation also altered intergenerational relationships and gender roles, with veterans often assuming leadership positions and becoming intermediaries between their communities and the state (McDuie-Ra**,** 2007).

Moreover, the British reliance on tribal intermediaries and loyalist chiefs during recruitment and governance led to the institutional strengthening of certain traditional authorities. Tribal leaders who cooperated with the colonial regime were rewarded with recognition, resources, and influence. This selective empowerment created internal hierarchies and sometimes tensions within tribes, as colonial authority reshaped leadership legitimacy around loyalty to the empire rather than communal consensus (Hasnu, 2005).

Perhaps most notably, military service played a critical role in shaping political consciousness and identity formation. During the World Wars, especially the Second, exposure to global political currents, anti-colonial movements, and nationalist ideologies through interaction with Indian and Allied soldiers catalysed political awakening among many tribal youths. Veterans returned home with new worldviews, which in some cases fuelled demands for greater autonomy, self-determination, or even secession.

In Nagaland, for instance, wartime service and subsequent alienation from postcolonial Indian governance contributed to the rise of nationalist movements in the 1950s. Naga soldiers who had served in the Assam Rifles or the British Indian Army became early members or sympathisers of the Naga National Council (NNC), which led the demand for an independent Naga homeland (Baruah**,** 2005). Their military experience gave them organisational skills, access to weapons, and legitimacy as defenders of the Naga identity. Similarly, Mizo nationalism found momentum in the post-war years, culminating in the formation of the Mizo National Front (MNF), which engaged in an armed struggle for independence before Mizoram was granted statehood in 1987 (Nunthara, 1989).

The colonial legacy of differentiating hill tribes as distinct and martial also influenced post-independence administrative frameworks. Separate legal and constitutional provisions under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution reinforced the idea of tribal exceptionalism (Nunthara, 1989). Moreover, the Indian state inherited and expanded many of the colonial

paramilitary forces, such as the Assam Rifles, where tribal recruitment remained strong.

Today, the legacy of military service continues. These communities still contribute significantly to India's armed and paramilitary forces. The socio-political capital gained through military service remains visible in the form of veteran networks, ex-servicemen's associations, and political leaders with military backgrounds.

In sum, the induction of North Eastern tribes into British military service did serve imperial ends, but more than that, it set in motion a series of transformations that redefined tribal society, political engagement, and the nature of state-tribe relations in the region. The echoes of this militarised colonial legacy are still felt in the political aspirations, administrative structures, and security dynamics of Northeast India today.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of Nagas, Lushais, and Kukis from colonial resisters to sepoys exemplifies the adaptability of British colonial policy and the complex ways in which indigenous societies negotiated with imperial power. Through a combination of coercion, co-optation, and strategic engagement, the British succeeded in integrating these communities into their military structure.

This history is crucial to understanding not only colonial governance but also the postcolonial state's relationship with the Northeast. The martial legacy continues to influence regional identities, social structures, and political dynamics. Future research could further explore how these militarized identities intersect with contemporary issues of autonomy, insurgency, and integration in Northeast India.

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