



Research article

Battle of Kohima, 1944: An Urban Mediation

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Abstract

The Battle of Kohima (1944) has been called Britain's Greatest Battle. Yet the people on whose land, and through whose labour, it was fought remain largely unaccounted for in its telling. This paper reads Kohima as a space of urban mediation: a city whose landscape, identities, and social fabric were constituted through the spatial violence of colonialism, war, and forced urbanisation. Drawing on Mmhonlumo Kikon's *His Majesty's Headhunters* (2023) and an interdisciplinary framework, the paper examines how the British and Japanese forces assigned exchange value to Naga land, labour, and loyalty as instruments of territorial control. It traces a transformation that no military history has adequately named: how the Nagas, the traditional headhunters who became dobashi, porters, nurses, and scavengers, were remade by a conflict that seized their land and transformed their city. Kohima was not caught in the war; the war was built through Kohima.

Keywords: Kohima, urban mediation, Naga identity, Second World War, postcolonialism.



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Introduction

A military requires both a frontier and a space. During the global crisis of World War II, Kohima was strategically chosen as a significant location for the war's operations. The location served as the administrative capital of the Naga Hills and a critical defensive chokepoint overlooking the vital supply route to Dimapur and the Assam plains. The British had struggled for forty-six years to subdue the Angami Nagas and establish a political headquarters in Kohima, around 1878. This colonial expansion was marked by extreme violence and bloodshed on both sides, as British forces responded to 1878 Angami raids on their camps with brutal reprisals, burning villages and killing non-combatants to crush resistance after years of failed conciliation (Hanneng, 2018, p.47). Verrier Elwin calls this "the loss of many lives, and tremendous expenditure" an attempt to bring the Naga Hills into "notional submission" which restructured the highland societies through abolition of headhunting, imposition of house taxes, and demarcation of the Inner Line in 1873 to separate the "hills" from "plains" (Elwin, 1961, as cited in Wouters, 2018, p.16). Ironically, the British who had previously massacred thousands of Naga headhunters in their efforts to establish control, later relied on the Nagas as "their most trusted ally in the war" (Kikon, 2023, p.113).

In local languages, Kohima was known as *Kewhima* or *Kewhira*, meaning "where the wildflower *Kewhi* blooms". For the Lotha Nagas, Kohima was *Khayima*, meaning "lost in count" as their language did not have a system to count beyond a certain number (Kikon, 2023, p.3). The British, notorious for mispronouncing local names, anglicized it to 'Kohima', a name that has since eclipsed the indigenous ones. Since its establishment as a British colonial administrative headquarter in 1878, Kohima became the capital of Naga Hills, marking a period of tension between the colonial forces and the Angami Nagas, as well as the evolution of a common identity.

Mmhonlumo Kikon (2023) in *His Majesty's Headhunters: The Siege of Kohima that Shaped World History* writes "a biography of how Kohima came to symbolise a people's history and identity from its inception till present, it is also a story of how the hunted became the hunters' best friend" (p.114). During World War II, neither the British nor the Japanese anticipated that Kohima would become the decisive battlefield in 1944. The battle became a collision of global powers- Britain, America, China, Japan, and India- on the frontlines of the Burma Campaign (1939-45). So much so that historians and scholars even contend "that this was the last real battle of the British Empire and the first battle of the new India" (Kikon, 2023, p. xii).

There is a plethora of written records from the British, American as well as the other non-Naga perspectives. Western narratives like Field Marshall Viscount William Slim's (1956) *Defeat Into Victory: Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942-1945*, Arthur Swinson's (1966) *Kohima*, Fergal Keane's (2010) *Road of Bones: The Siege of Kohima, 1944*, David Rooney's (2000) *Burma Victory: Imphal, Kohima and the Chindits March 1944 to May 1945*, Michael

Lowry's (2003) *Fighting through to Kohima: A Memoir of War in India and Burma* are among the popular narratives of the Burma Campaign in India's periphery. These accounts, while detailed in military strategy, centre the British and Allied experience, rendering the Naga presence largely peripheral or folkloric.

The Naga narrative is rarely given its due credit in print or any other popular media. Kikon's (2023) work offers a much-needed exploration of Kohima's role in shaping local identities amidst the larger forces of war and colonialism. The spatial and temporal history of Kohima is one of the central themes of Kikon's work and Kohima is its central character, continually (re)constituting the Naga identity. The main objective of the study is to comprehensively analyse the spatial practices as a reading of the social practices, daily performances, "architectural signs", and relational network of the highly polyvalent structure of the city (Eco, 2004, p.187).

The militarization of the Northeast Region (NER) has a long history that has significantly shaped its urban development, which remains predominantly military in character. Western notions of urban life began influencing the region as early as the colonial era, when the British introduced Christianity through missionaries, schools, and churches. The violent colonial expeditions in the Naga Hills were a turning point for the tribal Nagas, who encountered firearms for the first time. For them, the gun "spewed a ball of fire accompanied by a loud noise...the bullets were regarded as fire released from a gun" (Kikon, 2023, p. 39). Accordingly, the Nagas reasoned that to quench the fire, moisture was needed and hence, a strange practice "of covering their shields with strips of plantain bark which made them glisten most brightly" was adopted (Woodthorpe, 1969, pp. 53-56). However, the undeniable power of these new weapons led to a shift in traditional warfare as well as spatial practices. For instance, the spears and daos that were once central to headhunting were replaced by guns, which became crucial for guerrilla resistance against the foreign enemy forces in the subsequent decades. Hence, historically, violence from external incursions were perceived by the Nagas as alien intrusions that disrupted their rhythm of daily life:

The enemy had no assigned names as they were from places they have never ever heard of or seen. There was Burma and then there was China far east of the Naga Hills. But to even think that the Japanese would one day descend on the Naga Hills and fight a bloody war was inconceivable to the Nagas. The White men from Europe and America were an inescapable reality then as they had visited and settled in the Naga Hills for more than a hundred years by then and didn't seem to be in a hurry to leave. And their stay cost so many lives that it was impossible to ignore. (Kikon, 2023, p.129)

The traditional Naga warrior had to undergo a transformation in order to effectively encounter the distant powers that have strangely occupied their homeland. Spears and

daos which were once employed in practices of village defence and territorial defence, were forced to fight a much bigger machine- the colonial regime. The Naga story is not just one of resistance but also one of transformation and adaptation necessitated by constant external domination.

Urbanizing the Frontier: Military Modernity in Northeast India

Meriam-Webster(n.d.) defines a *frontier* as "a border between two countries" (Definition 1a). A region that forms the margin of settled or developed territory or the farthestmost limits of knowledge or achievement in a particular subject. The *Oxford English Dictionary* characterise the *frontier* as the 'front' or 'forepart', the 'furthest limit' from settled or inhabited regions, from the centre: "remote from the comforts of civilisation" (Oxford University Press, n.d., sense 1). Most of the North Eastern Region (NER) of India is then, by definition, a frontier. Since the NER shares approximately more than 88% of its border with other countries- Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Nepal than India; it has historically been a geography of conflicts. For most its past and present, the NER has been and is a militarized landscapes "of contact, tension and negotiation between civilians and the military, soldiers and the environment, and between humans and non-humans" (Pearson, 2012, p. 126). Therefore, the conventional viewpoint of the State "as a container, from which nothing spills out, and conversely, nothing from outside spills in" is inadequate to define India and specifically its Northeast region which has been a geography of conflict from its genesis (Taylor, 2003, as cited in Phanjoubam, 2018, p. 1). Kohima as the administrative centre of this contested geography has always been a difficult city to contain within neat boundaries of colonial and post-colonial state.

One of the most significant transformations in the NER today is the rapid urbanization of this frontier region which remains relatively understudied. The expansion of NER land classified as "urban" has opened new opportunities for developers and capitalists, both within the region and beyond. Existing urban areas are becoming denser, more diverse, and more "developed". As the urban geographer Duncan McDuie-Ra (2021) has suggested, this urbanization is not just material (driven by state and private finance) but also ideational, as planners, consultants, and citizens continue to imagine and reimagine urban modernity (McDuie-Ra & Kikon, 2021, p. 3). Kohima follows a similar urbanisation pattern as it is shaped by successive waves of military infrastructures, colonial administration, and wartime necessities; rewriting the city's spatial as well as the social fabric.

Wendy Pullan (2011) argues that a frontier is fundamentally about remoteness. It is defined by what it is distant from, particularly the 'centre'. Further, Anderson & O'Dowd have explained this relationship in disputed territories, where regions of "infiltration, transition or separation, [act as] defences for the supposed 'purity' of the 'centre'"

(Anderson & O'Dowd, 1999, as cited in Pullen, 2011, p. 15). Consequently, it can be drawn that frontiers also represent the margins/periphery which are associated with lawlessness, wildness, chaos, hybridity, and fluidity. This dynamic space is one where urbanization and development processes unfold in unconventional ways. The frontier is not simply a place of disorder, but a site where authority, lawlessness, and chaos coexist. A space where the margins can become the centre, and the centre can be displaced. As such, the frontier allows for the unimagined to manifest beyond conventional spatial boundaries, shaping the region's material real and lived experiences. Kohima is perhaps the most concentrated example of this frontier dynamic. It is a city that was simultaneously the furthest edge of British imperial control and, in 1944, the very centre of a global war. The margins, quite literally, became the centre.

In her study of early twentieth-century Calcutta, Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay (2022) discusses the challenge of "taming the frontier" which is required for a considerable logistical mobilization. While the centre attempts to impose its systems and structures on the frontier, it often fails because the frontier, even as it urbanizes, retains its own fluid, dynamic lifeworld. This dialectical relationship between centre and frontier mirrors Anderson & O'Dowd's (1999) notion of contested borders. As they note:

...the legacy of undemocratic and often violent origins- whether in national conflict, political revolution or the slaughter of native populations- needs to be played down or concealed for territorial democracy to perform its legitimizing functions. The contemporary relevance of the origins has to be officially 'forgotten'. The problem with contested borders is precisely that 'origins' remain a live issue and cannot be 'forgotten'. (Anderson & O'Dowd, 1999, p. 596)

In Kohima, these origins have never been successfully forgotten. The colonial violence that established the city as a British administrative headquarters in 1878, the wartime destruction of 1944, and the post-colonial militarisation that followed. Each constitutes an 'origin' that the colonial and post-colonial state has attempted to officially suppress but which the Naga people continue to carry as living memory.

Thus, the NER exemplifies a frontier where the traditional distinctions between centre and periphery, law and lawlessness, and order and chaos are constantly in flux. Urbanization in the region is complex for the NER cities are neither urban nor rural. Military infrastructures and institutions further complicate this space dynamic by blurring the lines between the frontier and the centre. In this context, the NER challenges conventional understandings of both borders and urban development, making it a crucial site for examining the intersections of conflict, space, and modernity. It is within this framework that the Battle of Kohima (1944) must be understood, not merely as a military event, but as a moment when the frontier became the front, and the Naga city became the contested ground upon which global empires staked their survival.

War, Incentives, and the Making of Exchange Value in Nagaland

The mobilization of space ... begins ...with the land.... The mobilization is next extended to space, including space beneath the ground and volumes above it. The entirety of space must be endowed with exchange value. And exchange implies interchangeability: the exchangeability of a good makes that good into a commodity, just like a quantity of sugar or coal; to be exchangeable, it must be comparable with other goods, and indeed with all goods of the same type. The 'commodity world' and its characteristics, which formerly encompassed only goods and things produced in space, their circulation and flow, now govern space as a whole, which thus attains the autonomous (or seemingly autonomous) reality of things, of money. (Lefebvre, 1999, pp.336–337)

During the Second World War, both the British and the Japanese sought to tame the urban frontier of the Nagaland. The period saw intense spatial mobilisation, with fluid boundaries between private property, public property, and the commons revealing "a horizon of peril and possibility" (Bandyopadhyay, 2022, p.170). Scholars Subhra Gururani and Rajarshi Dasgupta (2018) describe the category of frontier as a "generative space"-volatile and active landscape, caught in a vortex of change. It is a place full of potential but equally fraught with danger, existing both inside and outside of capital accumulation (Gururani & Dasgupta, 2018, p. 42).

The British and Japanese attempts to control Nagaland were not only about military strategy, but also about economic and social control. Both powers used material incentives to win the loyalty of the Naga people. The British, for instance, incentivized collaboration by offering rewards in exchange for loyalty or the capture of Japanese soldiers, including cash payments to villages such as Lazami for the capture of twenty-six Japanese and payments in salt for captured equipment (Swinson, 1966, pp. 114-31; see also Lowry for ground-level observations of such exchanges). The British also provided food supplies, circulated legitimate exchange currency, shared medical infrastructures, offered employment as porters, guides, labourers and interpreters, and supplied cigarettes; these socio-spatial practices created what can be interpreted as a hyperreality through illusions of urbanism where temporary modern enclaves of rations, medical posts, paid labour and consumer goods (cigarettes) amid the Naga hills lured local Nagas to their side and fostered dependency and alliance (Slim, 1956, pp. 334-35; Keane, 2010, pp. 43, 55- 57; Rooney, 2000, p. 64).

What the British constructed in the Naga Hills was, in Jean Baudrillard's (1994) terms, a hyperreality- a seductive simulation of modernity and benevolence designed to displace the lived reality of colonial violence (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 1). Consumer goods, medical relief, currency, and paid labour together manufactured an experience of British civilisation that was compelling precisely because it was temporary and conditional. These socio-spatial practices created illusions of urbanism where temporary modern enclaves of

rations, medical posts, paid labour, and consumer goods amid the Naga hills lured local Nagas to their side and fostered dependency and alliance (Slim, 1956, pp. 334–335; Keane, 2010, pp. 43, 55–57; Rooney, 2000, p. 64).

Obviously, the British won despite having perpetrated unaccounted massacres against the Nagas in the early colonial period. They had issued monetary reward for the local population:

If a Japanese officer was captured alive, 1000 rupees was to be given to the villager. If the villager captured a Japanese soldier of any other ranks below, the reward was 500 rupees. For a dead Japanese officer, the reward was 100 rupees, while a dead Japanese soldier would fetch 50 rupees for the villagers. Interestingly enough, a person who was not a Japanese but hostile to the British, if reported or brought, would fetch the villager a handsome amount of 75 rupees. A dead hostile would bring also him a reward of 25 rupees. The entire operation was incentivized by the British and attracted the Nagas to do their best to earn the rewards offered. It was critical since they could not till their fields and were dependent on the food supplies of the British army. The supplies were therefore not only for the British but also for the local population. (Kikon, 2023, p. 95)

Such an incentivized operation by the British was critical for the survival of a war-torn local population whose land had been ravaged by artillery and foreign invaders. In addition to these provisions, the British introduced American cigarettes to the Nagas. "It was the first time that Nagas were exposed to the use of factory-manufactured tobacco and the first time that American cigarettes found their way into the hands of the Nagas" (Kikon, 2023, p. 117). Over 40 million cigarettes were distributed during the three months of intense fighting.

These material incentives helped solidify the British position, despite their brutal colonial history with the Nagas. The British shared food, provided medical supplies, and even offered cigarettes to create a sense of camaraderie in the midst of war. As Slim himself reflected on the Nagas invaluable role- "They guided our columns, collected information, ambushed enemy patrols, carried our supplies, and brought in our wounded under the heaviest fire- and then, being the gentlemen they were, often refused all payment" (Slim, 1956, p. 341). Yet even in admiration, Slim cannot escape the colonial gaze; to praise the Nagas as 'gentlemen' for refusing payment is to measure their dignity by the very imperial standard they were never meant to equal.

Arthur Swinson in Kohima (1966) also records the Naga contributions by highlighting the endurance and intelligence of the Nagas who helped evacuate the wounded:

As the battle went on, the Nagas added another field to their activities: the evacuation of the wounded down the slippery hills, a job they carried out with great

endurance and courage. If it weren't for them, hundreds of men must have died; no European could possibly have taken stretchers over that country. All the troops knew, when they first encountered the Nagas, was that they were head-hunters, who had been forcibly restrained from this practice by the Indian Government. But soon they were struck not only by their cheeriness and eagerness to help but by their intelligence. (Swinson, 1966, p. 145)

Such integration amplified British effectiveness in the rugged Naga Hills during the 1944 battle where the Nagas support was instrumental in sustain defence and enabling counterattacks against the Japanese army.

By contrast, the Japanese, who had initially been welcomed as allies, quickly became oppressive occupiers. While the Nagas had been "benevolent hosts" at first, the Japanese soon began seizing their rice, livestock, and other resources. "The uninvited guests had become the never-imagined oppressors" (Kikon, 2023, p. 101). The myth of racial brotherhood propagated by the Japanese military quickly unravelled as food shortages and rising tensions fractured their relationship with the local population.

Under the leadership of Lt. General Sato and General Mutaguchi, the Japanese pursued an aggressive campaign in Burma and the surrounding territories, and "confiscated all currency notes in circulation in these territories" (Kikon, 2023, p. 107). Kikon notes the invading Japanese spirit who "in their dream of successfully swaying the result of the war in their favour, wanted to overrun the monetary economy of western South-East Asia, including Burma, moder-day Myanmar" (Kikon, 2023, p. 108). They introduced the Japanese currency into the Burma theatre of World War II. However, by the end of the war, the Japanese currency lost all value, and its remnants were either discarded or seized by the authorities.

The Japanese defeat in the Naga Hills during the Battle of Kohima, 1944, was not primarily due to the superiority of their enemies but rather stemmed from their internal failures (such as severe logistical breakdowns leading to starvation and disease) and their notable brutal treatment of the Nagas (Callahan, 2017, pp. 120-125). Indeed, the British were effective and charming in their policies and strategical tactics, emphasizing indirect rule and non-interference in Naga customs, which fostered peaceful coexistence and loyalty (Khrienuo, 2013, pp. 62-64). But the trust of the natives was discarded based solely on the Japanese misbehaviour and brutality. The Japanese were continuously in search of shelter for which they would raid villages, granaries, and even massacre the natives, treating inhabitants with the same cruelty that marred Japan's expansion throughout the war (Callahan, 2017, pp. 122-124; Khirenuo, 2013, pp. 64-65). While the British provided incentives, such as rewards in salt for captured Japanese equipment and post-war relief aid, the Japanese offered none and executed the natives on mere disobedience (Khirenuo, 2013, pp. 65-66). Over time, the war exposed the true brutality of the Japanese occupation, dispelling the myth of racial solidarity, false promises of independence for

Nagas, and demonstrating the ultimate failure of Imperial ideology. Nagas overwhelmingly sided with the British despite historical rivalries and appeals from strong nationalist leaders like Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. The Japanese mistreatment of the Nagas pushed them directly into the arms of the British. As:

Many Nagas remember to this day that it was not just the simple sight of the aircraft spraying bullets from their machine guns on the Japanese that both mesmerised and fascinated the Nagas, but it was also the sharing of supplies in times when food was scarce that rejected the theory of brotherhood based on race proposed by the Japanese. Veterans say that the war was won not just by the surplus of food available with the British but because the Allied forces could convert the best locally available human resources to their side. (Kikon, 2023, p.120)

The ability of British to use the “locally available human resource” is precisely what granted them victory (Kikon, 2023, p. 120). The British recruited the Nagas into the Labour Corps and formed the V-force, a local militia that supported the Allied forces with reconnaissance, intelligence gathering, guerilla operations, guiding patrols, portering supplies, evacuating wounded, and providing early warnings of Japanese movements (Khrienuo, 2013, pp. 59-62). Unlike the Japanese, who viewed the Nagas as mere spectators that can be coerced into labour, imprisonment, and brutality; the British converted the local populations into active participants in the war by fostering voluntary loyalty through incentives (like salt, medals, equipment, payment and relief-aids).

The British strategy was multifaceted: they mobilized the city of Kohima by first assigning an exchange value to its land and resources, using currency and rewards as incentives to gain local support. Over time, the British commodified the Naga people, turning them into army recruits, guides, spies, stretcher-bearers, labourers, and employees, offering them salaries, medals (like the Burma Star), and recognition in the form of pensions and awards (Khrienuo, 2013, pp. 60-62). Charles Pawsey, the British Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills, played a significant role in organizing this mobilization, leveraging local intelligence and recruiting Naga employees to assist in British operations. He sustained Naga loyalty through personal trust, food/medical relief to villages, and aid amid destruction (e.g., burned paddy fields). So much so that post-war, Pawsey “stayed on as deputy commissioner and oversaw the construction of a new Kohima, and the creation of a war cemetery on the grounds of his old bungalow and tennis court” (Keane, 2010, p. 439).

Pawsey’s post-war decision to construct the Kohima War Cemetery on the grounds of his own bungalow and tennis court is perhaps the most eloquent spatial gesture of the entire campaign. Once an emblem of colonial leisure, the tennis court was transformed into a memorial for the martyrs. For the British, the space symbolises both imperial privilege and imperial sacrifice. A single plot of land that once represented the colonial comfort was

post-war consecrated to its cost. The space where British civilisation had transplanted itself into Naga soil is no longer a mere biographical footnote but a spatial statement signifying loss, mourning, and memorialisation. Kohima, under British administration, was never built for the local Nagas. In dominant war narratives, the city remained an urban landscape that legitimised the British presence on Naga territory- first through administration, then through war, and finally through memory (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 336–337).

Despite these efforts, World War II was not a Naga-war. The Nagas, like many other indigenous peoples, were caught between larger geopolitical forces:

America and England had different agendas but faced a common threat in Japan. Britain had more to lose in this battle than America. But the geographical game was lost on the Nagas as it was not their war. Some Nagas had been to France in the First World War as part of the Labour Corps and had seen the devastation of such a war first hand. But it was in Europe and they themselves never imagined what it would be like to be at the heart of the fiercest battle in the history of His Majesty's war. (Kikon, 2023, p. 110)

For many, the choice between the British and Japanese was a matter of survival, as much as it was a matter of loyalty or ideology. Kikon's narration of a nameless Naga from Ralan in the chapter titled "Ralan: The Headhunters' Battlefield" brings forth an original voice presenting an alternative history. The narration, interestingly, put forward the elided truth that the Nagas' involvement in the war was not always based on aspirations for the rewards offered by the British, such as medals or monetary compensation. The Nagas, rooted in their own cultural and historical identity, resisted the commodification of their lives and lands. Kikon's nameless Naga from Ralan did not care for the Burma star or any extra incentives. "The war was not his, nor did he think much about it" (Kikon, 2023, p. 128). He negated the capitalist "hyperreality" offered by both the British and the Japanese, choosing instead to prioritize on his own survival and agency in a war that had little regard for the Nagas' autonomy.

The Naga Experience: From Cannon Fodder to Caregivers

The Nagas' experience of the Second World War, shaped by histories of militarization, capital, and violence, remains largely undocumented. Although writings from the Northeast region (NER) have garnered increasing recognition in recent years, it is undeniable that these voices have long been marginalized, overshadowed by the dominant literary traditions of mainland India.

In 2013, the British National Army Museum named the Battle of Kohima and Imphal 'Britain's Greatest Battle', surpassing iconic events like the Battle of Waterloo, the Normandy landings, and the Battle of Stalingrad. Kikon comments:

Ironically enough, the battle of Kohima is often referred to as the 'Stalingrad of the East' in keeping with the trend to situate historical events within a context which the audience in the west can identify with. Almost 90 percent of the accounts available on the Battle of Kohima are written by the British, American or even non-Naga writers focusing primarily on the experiences of the British and the Allied forces. Even when the Japanese have not much in this regard. There have been attempts by local authors to write, but most of the authors wrote on the battle of Kohima and Imphal under the empire's shadow. (Kikon, 2023, p. 84)

The struggle to document the life, history, society, and culture of the NER stems from the trauma and scars left by political, economic, geographical, and social conflicts-insurgency, war, violence, and a troubled history of territorial disputes. The region's diverse identities, the intersection of cultures, and its ethnic multiplicity have made it difficult to create a coherent and unified narrative. Furthermore, the geographical marginalization of the NER from mainland India has transformed the region into an urban frontier, where military modernity has manifested in the form of infrastructure, communication lines, transport, and cantonments.

As Anna Tsing (2005) points out, frontiers are liminal spaces where boundaries between "law and theft, governance and violence, use and destruction" become blurred. She writes, "these confusions change the rules and thus, enable extravagant new economies of profit-as well as loss" (Tsing, 2005, pp. 26–27). In such a blurring, the city which is suburb and not fully urban becomes constituted of identities which are in turn constituted by the confluence of diversity at a particular spatiality. Situated at this intersection of rural and urban spaces, Kohima, serves as a prime example. It represents a spatiality in the temporality of Burma theatrics of war where diverse global identities as well as the local identities collide, at a uniquely contested space which is neither rural nor urban but a mediation between the two.

Understanding Kohima's spatial politics is crucial for grasping the complexities of Naga culture and identity. At the onset of the war, the Nagas, once headhunters, were merely passive observers. War came to them. It was not their conflict. Khirenuo Ltu (2019) in *World War II in Northeast India: A Study of Imphal and Kohima Battles* describe the astonishment of Viswema villagers when the Japanese arrived in early April 1944. One villager exclaimed, 'The whole forest is moving! So many of them have come!' (Khirenuo, 2013, as cited in Kikon, 2023, p. 109). As Kohima became a centre of wartime activity, the everyday lives of the villagers were disrupted. They could no longer cultivate their fields, and their movements were restricted. Both the Japanese and British forces caused

widespread destruction, and innocent Nagas were killed for even the smallest act of disobedience. Entire villages and granaries were destroyed, and the Japanese executed villagers by gunfire or hanging.

The war profoundly transformed both the city of Kohima and the Naga people, altering their identities. Once mere spectators, the Nagas witnessed “giant winged birds flying over their villages” dropping supplies, and it was even more horrific to watch fighter aircraft bomb the forests and Japanese positions (Kikon, 2023, p. 117). As the war unfolded, the Nagas gradually became participants. The British initially employed them as *dobashi*: interpreters who not only translated Naga dialects for British administrators but also conveyed Naga customs and laws (Kikon, 2023, p. 170). The term ‘*dobashi*’ comes from the Naga words ‘*do*’ (two) and ‘*bashi*’ (language), referring to someone who is bilingual.

As previously mentioned, the Nagas worked as porters, spies, scouts, stretcher bearers, and were recruited into locally raised military units like the Labour Corps and the V-force. This practice of recruiting locals for labour was not new; the British had long relied on local manpower for colonial projects. The first Naga Labour Corps was formed in 1917 and sent to France. During Charles Pawsey’s administration, the British expanded their recruitment of “able-bodied farmers, mostly new Christian converts who were serious about their newfound religion” (Kikon, 2023, p. 123). The Labour Corps served two primary functions: to supply manpower for the Burma campaign and to address the problem of refugees seeking asylum in Indian territories. These recruits were paid in rupees but remained temporary, their roles ranging from cannon fodder to caregivers for the refugees. The experience was described as a ‘traumatic ordeal’ for the locals, who were tasked with “addressing the never-ending flow of zombie-like humans into Kohima” (Kikon, 2023, p. 123). An influx of around 500,000 Burmese refugees had crossed into India. Many arrived with flesh worn-off their feet in states of extreme exhaustion and starvation (Chasie & Fecitt, 2020, p. 105). The devastation of the war had extended to the stench of rotting corpses and maggots infesting boots amid the rubble of shell-shocked Kohima (Chaise & Fecitt, 2020, pp. 77, 94). So much so that “Naga sores” became a medical condition peculiar to the geography where refugees who were badly undernourished, and whose food had been lacking in vitamins and calcium, developed an ulcer that would eventually be infested with maggots. In his book *Forgotten Frontier*, Geoffrey Tyson (1945) describes the condition:

The Naga sore, or ulcer, starts as a small blister, usually on the leg or foot, in a place where there is not much flesh. It develops rapidly for four or five days and then stops. By this time, it may be five inches in diameter and half an inch deep, destroying all the upper layers of skin and often the tendons and muscles as well. Though it often has a clean appearance when washed, the underpart frequently stinks to high heaven, from the pus which rapidly accumulates in the cavity. The

possession of a Naga sore or sores was a very considerable handicap to a refugee who was making his way on foot, and every camp doctor tried to find a cure, but without final success. (Tyson, 1945, pp. 84-85)

The spatial changes in Kohima were staggering. It transformed the “headhunters to nurses in a day”, answering to care for the “nearly dead upon arrival” refugees. In times of crisis, the temporal daily performances and social practices are suspended, and new practices emerged which designated new roles, signs, and performances, expanding the intricate relational networking of the highly polyvalent structure of the city. The transformation from headhunters to nurse, from spectator to stretcher-bearer, was not merely a wartime role change. It was a fundamental rewriting of Naga identity in and through the space of Kohima itself.

Conclusion

Conflict is central to the narrative and theoretical conceptualisation of cities. The Battle of Kohima becomes integral for our understanding of NER and its contemporary affairs. As urban theorist Gabriela Kindermann (2020) argues, a city is not a stable space, it is “continually reconstituted through various performative acts” and identity is similarly fluid and interconnected (Kindermann & Rohleder, 2020, p. 10). The interplay between ‘central’ identities of the British, Japanese, mainland Indian, and local Nagas, at a ‘peripheral’ region like Northeast, during this battle have led to cultural productions which has transformed and challenged the dominant epistemologies and grand narratives of war and nationhood. By focusing on ‘margins’ as sites of cultural conflict and hybridity that challenge ‘central’ epistemologies, this research paper has attempted to explore how both- the city and identities are constructed through complex entanglement.

After the Battle of Kohima ended, the city became a grim testimony to the brutality of war, its landscape piled with the bodies of thousands who had perished. Phrases like “a town of dead bodies”, “ghost town” and “the road of bones” encapsulated the horrific and traumatic reality that the people of Kohima endured (Kikon, 2023, p.119). Yet, in the aftermath of this devastation, the survivors were forced to adopt new roles. The Nagas, once headhunters, became scavengers, sifting through the ruins for “weapons and anything useful...the Nagas emerged from the battle as graduate of the new form of warfare where technology and superior weaponry was required to beat the enemies in addition to courage and skills” (Kikon, 2023, p.119). In this temporal and spatial violence, the relationship between the living and the dead in Kohima holds profound significance for understanding militarized urbanism. The frontier, as a contested space of conflict,

produces such violence on a scale that transforms its inhabitants and their environment in ways that are both immediate and long-lasting.

Herscher and Siddiqi (2014) in *Spatial Violence* underscore the importance of recognizing the histories of spatial violence and how narratives of peace and progress are often used to obscure or legitimize the violence that shapes contested spaces (p. 270). The spatial violence of 1944 did not leave Kohima. It simply changed uniform. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1958, imposed on Nagaland for over six decades, is the post-colonial state's continuation of the same militarised logic that first remade Kohima as a frontier to be controlled rather than a home to be protected. Kohima, today, exists in a state of transition between past and present. While peace may appear to reign on the surface, beneath it lies a current of insecurity and instability, as the city grapples with the legacies of its violent past. The city manifests itself in many war memorials, cemeteries, rituals and practices about the dead including the exhumation of dead soldiers back to their homeland. The Nagas themselves are firm believers of the paying homage to the dead. For in their ancestral wisdom, the spirit of the dead is a seed that needed to be buried back in its birthplace (Kikon, 2023, pp. 79-80).

Kohima's evolution from a battlefield strewn with the wreckage of war to the capital of Nagaland, mirrors the resilience and transformation of Naga identity. The city's growth reflects a complex interplay of military, market, conflict, crisis, and culture. The legacy of the Second World War irrevocably altered the Naga people, but through collective endurance and adaptation, they redefined their place within a shifting world order. The simplicity with which many Naga survivors recall their wartime experience as "having a good time with the British army", captures the paradox of war: that even in the midst of violence and destruction, moments of human connection, survival, and even unexpected camaraderie can emerge (Kikon 119). And Kohima remains a place suspended in time- a city where the past's violence, the present's peace, and the uncertainty of the future intertwine, constantly redefining the relationship between margins, memory, identity, and the challenges of a post-colonial, post-conflict world.

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