

Sal: Slavery in the Lushai Hills

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Abstract

'Slavery is a weed that grows on every soil.' Edmund Burke.

When one talks about slavery in the Lushai Hills, the first thought is often directed towards the Boi system. This system drew the attention of scholarship in the nineteenth century so much so that Lushai Hills came to be associated with it and the 'boi' system came to be a big landmark in the history of the Lusheis. It was on this particular system that a debate arose between the colonial state on the one side and missionaries on the other. Major S. H.G. Cole became the authoritative figure on the side of the state that saw the boi system as a 'charitable institution' that housed the poor. He strongly defended the system and made all sorts of excuse to ban its abolition. John Shakespear, who had disappeared from the direct administration of the hills by that time, came forward to defend the system saying that it would be a foolish move to abolish so useful a system that gave shelter to the poor masses of the hills. On the other hand, the missionaries of the district, under the leadership of

Peter Fraser, moved for its outright abolition on the ground that it was a 'clear system of slavery' and that such abominable system should no longer be practised within the British dominion under which slavery had been abolished in 1843. The debate continued till it was finally abolished in 1927 at the order of Austen Chamberlain, the Secretary of State for India. This debate on the boi system, the so-called system of slavery continued unabated among scholars of the nineteenth century to thisday. However, while this debate continues centering on the Lushai boi system, the real system of slavery called 'sal' escaped the notice of philosophers and social scientists that overlooked this system of slavery. This class of slaves had extinct by the time the colonial masters occupied the hills but remnants still remained. This article therefore, looks into the real slaves of Lushai Hills called "Sal."

Keywords: Lushai Hills (Mizoram), Lushei, Sal, Slave, Bonded Labour, Raids, Chiefs, Tribal Warfare.

Introduction

This paper examines the slave or *sal* of Lushai Hills (now Mizoram) during the nineteenth century. It looks into the practice of slavery where the real slaves of the Lusheis known as *Sals* played the central role in the Lushai economy. The major means of acquiring *sals* were through raids. For this purpose, the Lusheis raided enemy territories within the hills itself and among the various tribes inhabiting the land. Secondly, they ravaged the territories at the foothills of their land, and, ultimately proceeded to British territories where they caught innumerable captives to work in their *jhums*. Regarding the necessity of slaves/*sals* that consequently induced the hill people to raid in search of slaves, it is pertinent to understand the context of Lushai Hills in the period during study. The nineteenth century saw the introduction of firearms in the hills, the influence of which was largely felt among the warring tribes. With the coming of these arms, tribal warfare took a rather serious turn. Petty quarrels assumed greater dimensions leading to what we call 'fights for supremacy or power'. Power-hungry chieftains now sought the strength of firearms and extensively engaged in warfare. Such extensive/constant wars

resulted in a decline of man's labour partly due to regular engagement in warfare activities and partly due to many deaths. Women who worked alongside their husbands, brothers, and fathers now had to depend on their meagre labour that produced no substantial output to feed families which, in some cases, were quite large. Now, a solution to the problem was found in the possible substitution of labour. The void came to be filled by the captives taken from war and raids. With this new discovery, the earlier Lushai raids for the pure purpose of vengeance took a more ambitious turn and converted raids into a "search for labour". Thus we come across many captives-turned bonded labourers in the hills under discussion, who, later became known as '*Sal*' or 'slaves.' This paper looks at who these *sals* were, how they were defined, what place of significance they occupied in the Lushai Hills economy, how they were acquired, how they were looked upon or their social status in the society.

Defining the *Sal*

The term '*Sal*' has been defined in various ways by different scholars but all agreed to the fact that they were what Needham has called "real slaves" of the Lushai Hills. *Sal* is a term in Lushei meaning a *person in captivity*. *Sals* were the personal property

of their captors and could be used in any manner they choose. They could be subjected to several hardships, bought and sold as and when necessary, disposed of in a manner the owner wished as if they were his property, and killed or set free according to the whims of the master. They could also be used as one important medium of exchange, a “not uncommon occurrence” in and around the hill areas bordering the Lushai Hills. The institution of *sal* was entirely a separate entity different from the *boi* system of Lushai Hills. *Bois* could be kept only by the chiefs while *sals* could be kept also by any commoner who made any captive in wars, raids or individual bouts where the weak becomes the slave of the strong. They could also be acquired through gifts and purchase. Judicial decrees or sentences on criminals (hill system) could also reduce one to the status of *sal*. Both men and women captured in wars or raids were clubbed together under *sal*. *Sals* could not purchase their freedom in normal circumstances; only a female *sal*, if married to a free man, becomes free, the master becoming the ‘*loco parentis*’ of her marriage price. The offspring of slaves invariably become slaves. Keeping *sal* or owning them was much meaningful to the commonmen in the hill areas for the interest they brought in service, the

marriage price of female slaves, and the price they fetch in selling them with exorbitant prices. Thus, we can say that the class of *sal* in Lushai Hills could be compared to those slaves in the west, although the harsh treatment with the whips and chains were not heard of among the *sal*-owners here.

The *sals* were, as Needham had rightly noted, the “real slaves” in the Lushai Hills different from the common *bois*. He said that “slavery is very prevalent” among the Lusheis and Lakhers in the form of *sal*:

All captives of war and their descendants are slaves, and there are also a large number of persons who have become slaves from debt or poverty. All such persons are real slaves. They can be bought and sold, and those at any rate who live in the chief’s house cannot acquire any property. Their status is thus quite different from that of the *bois* among the Lushais and administered Lakhers.¹

He also noted a large number of slaves who had run away from their masters in the un-administered parts of Burma to Lushai Hills in 1916.

¹ Assam State Archives, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Political-A, April 1914, No. 27, Needham’s Letter No. 130 D. C., dated the 22nd May 1916, forwarded to Commissioner of Cachar by J. Hezlett, Superintendent of Lushai Hills,

I think I am right in saying that nearly all the immigrants from the trans-frontier tract are slaves, who have run away to escape their obligations. Such persons are never sent back. As soon as they enter British territory they are free. We have had no dealings at all with the trans-frontier chiefs for some years back. It is probable that when we get into touch with them again, they will put in claims for compensation against their run-away slaves. Such claims would have to be decided in the merits. In no case would the run-away be sent back of course, but if a slave ran away to escape payment of a debt it would seem only equitable to allow his former owner to claim the amount lent. It should also be noted that in the trans-frontier tract not only chiefs, but commoners can own slaves.²

In this connection, Shakespear simply remarked that *sals* were “persons captured in raids”. He goes on to say that:

As a rule only children and marriageable women were taken captive, and the latter were disposed of in marriage, the lucky captor acting in loco parentis and taking the marriage price. The children grew up in the captor’s house as his children,

and as a rule were so well treated that they seldom wished to return to their former homes.³

In the postcolonial period most scholars also accepted the existence of “real slaves” in Lushai Hills. Sangkima, for instance, felt that *sals* were “slaves”. He remarked that *sal* “is a Mizo term for slave” and they “were indeed the personal property of their captors”.⁴

Sals were, therefore, persons who were captured in war and raids, who have become slaves from debt or poverty, and who had also been acquired through gifts and purchase. They were owned not only by the chiefs but also by anyone. They were the “real slaves” in Lushai Hills who were bought and sold like the personal property of the master, who may be killed by the master in a fit of rage with no consequence, they could not acquire any property and could not acquire freedom by any means except when a female *sal* married a free man. They, like other commoners, got married and had children but the children of *sals* invariably became

² Assam State Archives, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Political-A, April 1914, No. 27, Needham’s Letter No. 130 D. C., dated the 22nd May 1916, forwarded to Commissioner of Cachar by J. Hezlett, Superintendent of Lushai Hills,

³ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, TRI, Aizawl, 2008, p. 49

⁴ Sangkima, *Essays on the History of the Mizos*, Spectrum, Guwahati, 2004, p.78

sal unless a woman is married to a free man.⁵

The marriage price of a female *sal* was enjoyed by her master and women *sals* may also become the concubines of her master. Generally, marriage price among the Lusheis involved *sial* or *mithun*. This may not be strictly followed in the case of female slaves, but their price was fixed according to their value. The “main price called *manpui* requires three to thirty *mithan*, according to the family of the bride, to the father of the girl or his representative”.⁶ However, for the female slaves, the chief or their captors fix this price and were given sometimes in terms of *mithuns*. Since the chiefs had a number of *bois*, they did not need much service from the *sals*, but they did keep them and were sometimes used as items of exchange. They were treated as human chattel that could be owned like any other commodity. They had limited rights of widely varying proportions in the society. Sometimes, even for the exercise of these rights, they were totally at the mercy of their masters. It is therefore clear that the *sals* were people distinct from commoners, they did not and could not enjoy a similar

status as other common Lusheis. They had no social standing, and could not take part in religious sacrifices. They remained anonymous in society. It is not clear whether the *sals* had any name but the fact that their status was similar to those slaves in the Chin Hills showed that they probably also did not have names, but lost their kinship connection and died as slaves. On this issue, Indrani Chatterjee states, “Anonymity was hateful because it was reiterated during the rituals of “sacrifice,” elaborate funerals, and feasts of others. Only those who belonged to clans and lineages partook of the sacrifices made to the spirit protector of the clan (*sakhua*) at these performances. Estrangement from clanship and kinship led to an undignified funeral, when those without socially recognized descendants received no animal or bird sacrifices to accompany their souls on the journey to *Pialral* (the paradise reserved for great hunters and feast-givers) or *Mithikhua* (the abode of the dead). Hence dispossession of kin led to an undignified afterlife as well”.⁷

Seeing this hard life, the Lushei *sal*s however, were relatively apparently better off than their counterparts in other parts of the world. This is shown besides

⁵Among the Lakhers slave women can only marry a slave man. Marriage between slave and free people were apparently prohibited.

⁶Shakespeare, *Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 197, N. E. Parry, *A Monograph on Lushai Customs and Ceremonies*, TRI, Aizawl, 2009, pp. 24-42

⁷Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton, eds., *Slavery and South Asian History*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2006, p. 298

several other evidences that struck the colonial observers. For instance, Lewin was stunned seeing many of the captives taken by the Lusheis from the plains had vehemently refused to be released during the great Lushai Expedition 1871-72. He notes:

A remarkable circumstance transpired with reference to the people held in captivity by the Lushais, viz., that all unite in describing the treatment they received as *kind in the extreme*. In no case has it been ascertained that any violence had been offered to a female captive, while, as the list shows, many of them have actually married, and becoming incorporated with the tribe, *declined positively to be released*. The captives given up by the Southern Howlongs had *to be brought forcibly* into the camp, and *clung to their Lushai friends, weeping piteously and entreating that they might not be made over to us*. Among the number of these suppliants was the wife and grown up daughter of one of my interpreters, and he was much disturbed by such an inopportune exhibition of unnatural feeling, ascribing it to Kookiemagic.⁸ [emphasis mine]

⁸West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata, Political Proceedings, August 1872, No. 212, Lewin to Civil Officer, Right Column Lushai Expedition, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No. 22, dated Chittagong, the 26th March

He rightly described such ‘magic’ as ‘the white magic of kindness and human sympathy’.

Role of *Salor* slaves in the Lushai economy

Sals in the Lushai Hills had a very significant role in the economy. They had to do all the works that made the hillman’s life better. They worked not only in the *jhum* fields but also did all necessary duties that supported the life of the hill people such as cooking, washing, fetching water, collecting firewood, in crafts and cloth making. This is evident from the account of several captives captured by the Lusheis from the plains. Doimunte, who was captured from Chandroyparah in 1862, for instance, inform us that the Lusheis who captured her kept her in their house and made her “work in the field, hew wood, and draw water” and the other persons “are employed to make cloth, draw water”. Sroop, another captive who later was rescued, also reported that she “was put to heavy work, hewing wood and drawing water”. She confessed that in case she did not understand what they said “they used to beat her, otherwise she was kindly used”. Ghunnu, another captive from Cachar in 1871 and who was rescued later, also said that the Lusheis “did not beat them, nor were cruel to them but they had

to work hard". She also said that captive "women were not insulted, but they had no meat or vegetables: only rice to eat. It was a hard life". Paongti, another captive, also said that after reaching the raider's village the chief's son took a certain Genna Charan's wife "not with a view to marry her, but because she was a good spinner".⁹ Thus, we can see that captives who became *sals* of the Lusheis had to do all sorts of work that supported the hill economy ranging from work in the *jhum* field, hewing wood, drawing water, making cloth, and so on. Although they had to "work hard" and it was really a "hard life" with such "heavy work" they were not insulted, whipped or beaten as slaves in the west, and their masters were not cruel to them but used them kindly.

The works in the *jhum* fields were especially onerous to the *sals* in particular and the hill people in general. It was where most of the slaves' labour was most useful. As it required the hardest labour the demand of slaves in this area was very great. A person had to brave the weather, bear the scorching heat of the sun or the downpour of rain, regardless of health. Situations sometimes arise when a particular piece of work, for instance,

sowing, had to be completed before the first rainfall and this requires many hands to complete the job. In this connection, Malabika states that among the Lusheis "the greater part of *jhuming* operations was performed by slaves who were captives of raids and border forays mainly undertaken to procure such labour. They left the work of cultivation entirely to the slaves".¹⁰ When a certain crop had to be gathered before the season ends, a slave had to, at this stage, compete with time. Even free women at such times were up to their neck in work. These crucial seasons reduced the *sals* to the status of "machines that produce labour" just as their counterparts of western countries. It is the duty of every *malesal* to guard the *jhum* fields against wild animals from the time of sowing to reaping whenever the master had to stay in the village for some festivals, ceremonies or during off season of work. They literally stayed in the fields during the whole agriculture season. A similar practice in the Chin Hills was noted by Carey and Tuck:

Slaves taken were usually hobbled and at once set to work in the fields or on household duties and, to give the savage his due, he did not as a rule

⁹J. Guite, 'Civilisation and its malcontents: The Politics of Kuki raids in nineteenth century Northeast India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, <http://ier.sagepub.com/>, 48, (3) (2011): 339-76, p. 370

¹⁰Malabika Das Gupta, 'Economic Impact of Raids on the Shifting Cultivators of Tripura', Published by Professor Ramakanta Chakrabarty, *The Asiatic Society*, Kolkata, 2008, p. 30

maltreat his captives, provided that they did not attempt to escape. They had to work hard and in return they got their food. If they refused to work or worked slowly they were beaten or starved and, if they attempted to escape and were retaken, their heads were usually cut off and placed on a post. Of course a man's slave was as much his property as his gun or his blanket and he could do what he liked with him.¹¹

Sals or slaves performed all the above besides carrying timber for construction of houses, bamboos to make parts of a house, split them etc., feed and look after cattle and live stocks for their masters, and performed all works that require hard labour. During raiding expeditions, they were used as human shield or as a shield to the brave and famous Lushai warriors. They were made to brave the frontline in the warpath along with the *bois*. When most of the enemy's arrows and bullets were spent, the best of the Lushai raiders, (the heroes and best fighting men) take their stance. Death usually came first to the insignificant slaves who had to obey orders implicitly. Those that rose above occasions earned favour in the eyes of their chiefs and acquire the status of "the chief's favourite slaves."

¹¹Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, p. 230

Female slave labour also included collecting firewood for daily use as well as for the purpose of storage for rainy days and winter, carrying water from water-pents usually situated far away either downhill or uphill sometimes several distance away. During autumn days, women collect cotton grown in the *jhum*, dry and separate the seed from the cotton, spin and weave them into cloth. These cloth pieces were again weaved into dresses and other clothes needed to cover and warm the whole family members. As this cloth making activities were considered to be women's work, the burden of its production fell on women alone, be they free or slave women. Therefore, all female slaves had to learn this art of cloth making. It was said that female slaves were expected to do more than what free women did. The more skilful were more in demand. For instance, we have noted that one GennaCharan's wife was taken captive for her skill in spinning. Female slaves with talents were highly in demand as they were most useful. Their sale earned more for the master. However, these were seldom sold for they were too useful to be parted with.

Slaves were also used as messengers of war. In this respect, Lewin states that "The messages and errands of a *lal* or chief, are done by his favourite

slaves. They are his ambassadors in war”.¹² To collect his people or in fact to authenticate any order, the chief’s spear, which is usually carved and ornamented, is sent by a messenger from village to village. Such a messenger needed to be fleet-footed, one ready to die till the message has reached its stipulated place or performed his job. Slaves wanting to please their chiefs in all possible manner, were more faithful to the chief’s orders. They were most useful in running this sort of errand as they could be compelled to lay down their lives in case of necessity. They were most suited as they had no need to consider kith and kin. For reasons such as these, “The residence of a powerful chief is generally surrounded by the houses of his slaves, who marry and cultivate, enjoying undisturbed the fruits of their labour. On the death of a slave, however, his wife and children and all his property go to the chief.”¹³ The houses of slaves acted as a fortress to the chief.

Children of *sals* also contributed to the labour of their parent *sals* in accordance with their capacity. When the crops were about to ripen, pests, animals, birds, rodents, and thieves frequent *jhums* and become the first reapers of the harvest.

¹²Lewin, *Wild Races of South-East Asia*, p. 133

¹³Lewin, Lewin, *Wild Races of South-East Asia*, W. H. Allen & Co, Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl, 1978, p. 132

These needed prevention or there was no harvest at all. Families who do not have regular guards usually stay in their *jhum* huts during this crucial period. But those who could manage to have *bois* or *sals* reserve this duty for them. Carey again noted that:

Prior to and during harvest or whilst the crop is in the ground “a couple of boys, usually slaves live in the *jhum* houses to defend the crop from the wild animals and birds; bears, deer, and monkeys are killed in numbers in the fields. The boys keep off sparrows and parquets by hammering a hollow trough and by pulling strings connected with the four corners of the field to which are attached bamboo rattles, and which all lead to the platform of the house.”¹⁴

As for female slave/*sal* children, they helped in carrying water in bamboo tubes, where the streams were usually miles away. They carry babies and look after the younger siblings, run errands for their mothers who worked for their masters, and helped in the household work. “In the north the wives and daughters of all work alongside the slaves in the fields, but in the south no women of good family work in fields and the social position of a woman

¹⁴Bertram S. Carey and H.N. Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, Gian, Delhi (1896), 1987, p. 211

is thus always betrayed by her hand.¹⁵ Although *sals* could not be easily distinguished from commoners, they were often betrayed by their looks and physical appearance.

Besides the above role played by the Lushei *sals* in the economy, and their immense value as the labour force, their centrality in the hills was yet manifested in other purposes like:

- (a) Payment of tribute: Apart from forming the labour force of the Lushai Hills economy, *sals* or captives also “formed part of their ‘tribute’ to Poi rajahs: Venolel, one of the most powerful Lushei rajahs, used to pay tribute to Falam rajah ‘in cotton clothes and slaves’”.¹⁶ The Pois or Shendus who had never been conquered by the Lusheis were forced to pay tribute to them. Payment in cash not being possible at all times, captives replaced the money transaction which was fully accepted by the other party as an apt means of payment.
- (b) Source of earning profit through trade: The sale of *sals* was one way of earning profit. That many instances of sales took place had

been noted, which served one or other purpose, viz., procurement of labour and exchange of items. Chiefs and common people mostly benefitted through the “selling and buying of people”.¹⁷ These categories of slaves were the *sals* of the hills. It is a fact that chiefs possessed *sals* besides their *bois*. This buying and selling offered ample benefits in procuring items like guns and salt which were not easily available in the hills.

- (c) Exchange for guns: Colonial administrators like Shakespear, Lewin and Carey noted the centrality of captive utility. The earlier use of captive *sals* as labour forces or “means of procuring labour” changed with the coming of firearms. They now, came to serve as “means of procuring guns” where their value came to be stated according to their sex. Female captives being more in demand, fetched more in cash or in guns. Thus we came to find instances of “a strong male slave being equivalent to two guns, a female captive fetching three guns, gun-powder obtained from Burma

¹⁵ Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, p.213

¹⁶West Bengal State Archive, JP: June 1860, No. 79

¹⁷See Peter Fraser, *Slavery in British Territory, Assam and Burma*, Carnarvon, Gwenlyn Evans & Son, Pool Street, 1913, p. 1

through these slaves” and many more.¹⁸ It was no wonder therefore, that poor households which hardly had enough food were found to own guns.

Sources of *sal* or slaves

The major means of procuring slaves was raids. Slaves could also be a product of purchase and sale of individuals like chattel under a variety of compulsions (satisfying debt, escaping starvation, etc.). Colonial accounts of these raids show the innumerable captives taken for the sole purpose of making them unpaid labourers. We have noted that the Lushei chiefs alone did not possess the right to purchase slaves, it was allowed to the common people as well. Many wars took place between inter-clan groups, and between tribes where the “true Lushai method of making war was to raid the enemy’s villages and carry off as many captives and as much loot as possible.¹⁹ Colonial accounts supply us with a substantial record of slaves captured in raiding expeditions.

Raiding the villages in plain areas became prominent since the 1830s

¹⁸See Shakespear *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, Lewin, *Wild Races of South-East Asia*, Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, Indrani Chatterjee, ‘*Slavery, Semantics and the Sound of Silence*’.

¹⁹Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 55

although we also have some vague evidences before that. They were carried out for reasons such as recovery of debt, for plunder or to wipe out the disgrace of a previous raid on themselves,²⁰ or to procure slaves.²¹ Frontier areas bordering the hilly tracts lying between Araccan, Chittagong, Tripura, Cachar, Manipur and Burmese plains were regions where raids were committed. Of these, the highest recorded incidents of Lushai raids came from the Chittagong Frontier. These raids became prominent from the 1830s in the Kalindi Rani and the Phru country. “The first record of raids of these savages”, states Col. Reid, “dates from 1777, when the chief of Chittagong, a district which had been ceded to the British under Clive by Mir Kasim in 1760, applied for a detachment of sepoy to protect the inhabitants against the incursions of the Kukis as they were then called”.²² In 1854, the Superintendent of Police reported that there occurred 19 raids in the Chittagong frontiers during ‘the past seventeen years’, in which 186 were taken into captivity.²³ The year 1860 marked the ‘Great Kookie Invasion upon the plains of Tipperah

²⁰G. C. Rigby, *History of Operations in Northern Arakan and the Yawdwin Chin Hills 1896-97*, Mizoram Government Press, Aizawl, 2000, p. 148

²¹Lewin, *Wild Races of South-East Asia*, W. H. Allen & Co, Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl, 1978, p. 139

²²A.S.Reid, *Chin-Lushai Land*, Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl, 2008, p.7

²³Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier*, p. 338

where 15 villages were plundered, destroyed, and 100 persons taken into captivity under chief Rutton Poea (Rothangpuia).²⁴ Early 1861 witnessed a body of Kukis making fierce attacks upon three populous villages and a wealthy mart in hill Tipperah near Odoypore (Udaipur) where they took 200 people into captivity. This body of attackers cut up and burnt several villages belonging to Kalindi Rani and attacked the British outpost at Kurkurea on their return journey. Between 1864-1870, Shendus and Lusheis under Howlongs (Hualhangs) again witnessed raids as an annual occurrence into the country of the Poangs, Mrungs and the Mughs, especially in the Sungoo valley where several villages were plundered and cut up among which, 8 incidents were recorded. Here, 7 policemen and several people including 80 persons of three villages near Khokheong were taken as captives.²⁵ Peace prevailed for the next seventeen years. But in 1888, two brutal raids were again committed by the Shendus and Sailos. On one side, the Shendus attacked a Survey party in which Lt. Stewart and two other Europeans and one sepoy were killed and their heads taken away. On the other, the Sailos attacked Pakuma Rani's village, where

they killed the Rani and her 21 subjects. The village was burnt and 15 persons were taken into captivity.²⁶ The next year in 1889, between 8th and 10th January, the Sailos under Lalpunga and Zaroka, carried out raids in the Upper Chengri Valley. They cut up 24 villages, killed 101 persons and took 91 persons as captives.

The Arrakan frontier, for the Lushei raiders, had the same story of several incidents of raids. In this connection, W. W. Daly reported that "between 1863 and 1869, there were 30 separate raids reported in which 65 persons were killed and 268 carried into slavery".²⁷ Raids were also carried out time and again in the Sylhet-Tipperah-Cachar Frontiers. The first such report was the massacre of a party of woodcutters in 1826 followed by a raid on Kundul village in 1836. Kochabari village was attacked in 1844 where 20 people were killed and 6 taken as captives.²⁸ In 1847 the Lusheis again carried out raids in Sylhet where they killed 30 people. This was followed by an unsuccessful expedition under Hopkinson. Unprecedented hardships were encountered in the course of such raids due to lack of adequate foodstuff and supply of drinking water, further aggravated by impenetrable jungles, insects, and often

²⁴Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier*, p. 342

²⁵Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier*, p.351.

²⁶ Reid, *Chin Lushai Land*, p.46

²⁷ Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, Vol-1, p.17

²⁸Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier*, pp.274-90

illness. In 1849, Lusheis also raided three Kuki refugee villages in Cachar where they killed 29 people and carried off 42 persons. At the same time, the Poitoos ransacked two villages and woodcutters in Sylhet.²⁹In January 1862, a series of three outrages by Kookies were reported from Sylhet. Three villages viz., Ramdulal's Bari, Rammohun's Bari, and Chundraipara in the jurisdiction of ThannahRajnugger, Sylhet were plundered and burnt and "a large number of the inhabitants were massacred or carried off." These villages lie close together, about eight miles from Adumpore. The incident came to be known as the Adumpore massacre. About the same time, a village called Lungaibaree had been destroyed, and an attack made on a party of men about half a mile east of Kolingat. The people of Chundraipara were emigrants from Hill Tipperah and had settled in the British territory. The cause of this raid was that, some emigrants had settled on the estate of a zamindar with whom the Tipperah raja had a standing feud. The Kookies, who committed the raid were dependents of Murchoilo (Ngursailo), a son of Lalchokla whom the British had made a prisoner in 1844. Then, the year 1868, saw some villages in Tipperah plundered and the LoharbandMonierkhall tea garden houses

²⁹Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier*, p.299

were burnt down in 1869.³⁰ In 1871, the united force of Eastern and Western Lusheis committed organised raids between 23rd and 28th January. They plundered the tea gardens of CachareePunjee (Ainarkhal), Darnierkhal, Nundigram and Kacharipara and set the villages on fire. In the Tipperah Hills, around 85 deaths including 6 policemen were recorded. These raiders were also reported to have carried off at least 64 captives.³¹ In Manipur, the Suktes (Soktes) began raids since the time of Nur Singh (1834-50). They undertook a series of raids in 1856. The raid carried out on the villages of Hankeep and Saitol in 1859, resulted in 15 persons killed and 45 captives taken. The years 1857-71 recorded seven raids by the KamhowSuktes, and in 1874, Kamsol and Mukoong were ransacked followed by a series of raids during 1876-80.³² The Lusheis also raided a Changsan village in 1847 where around 200 to 300 people were either killed or carried off.³³

Thus, we can see that several number of people were captured in different incidences of raids during the colonial period. Lewin had reported that

³⁰Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier*, p.301

³¹Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier*, p.305-09

³²Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, p.121, Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier*, pp.165-71, 206

³³ Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier*, p.290

“the Lushais were the standing problem which embarrassed all local administration; they continually raided into the Hill Tracts, attacking and plundering the inhabitants, burning the villages, slaying the men and carrying off the women and children into slavery”.³⁴ When raiders have completed their slaughter, loot and diversion, they take all their prisoners, fastened together by a cord through the lobe of the ears, and the Looshai set out with their plunder on the return journey.³⁵ Lewin also noted that raids were so excessively and continuously committed that “the people say that from the source to the junction of the Pee Kheong with the Kolodyne there is not a single inhabitant. Two hundred years ago the valley was thickly populated, but the Kookies and Shendus have emptied it”.³⁶ At times, the actual number of captives was often not given but comments such as ‘countless captives/slaves,’ ‘either killed or carried off,’ ‘a large number of captives were taken,’ or ‘all the women and children were taken,’ filled colonial accounts. Where numbers are recorded, they are terrifyingly greater when compared to those killed or wounded. Although the main purpose of raids was

procurement of captives, money and utensils were sometimes taken along with slaves. The enormity of such raids may be gleaned from its description in colonial account: attacked the villages in the plains, massacred the inhabitants, took their heads, loot and burn their houses.³⁷ Therefore, raids as a means of procuringsals were a well-established system in Lushai Hills. The question then arises: why did the hill people need slaves or captives? This may be explained in two ways: the predominance of slavery and slave trade in the region and more importantly the political economy of the Lushai Hills that emerged at this period.

The Lushai Political Economy

The Lushai economy, as had been evident, was based on agriculture in the form of dry or jhum cultivation. The labour involved in such cultivation was immense. Every member in the family helped in their own capacity to reap a good harvest at the end of the working year. This way, each family was dependent on the fruit of their labour for subsistence. However, the Lushai migration from the Chin Hills to the Lushai Hills acted as an indirect consequence of a decline in the labour power of families and subsistence

³⁴T. H. Lewin, *A Fly on the Wheel or How I Helped to Govern India*, Tribal Research Institute Art and Culture, Aizawl, 2005 Reprint, pp.189- 90

³⁵Lewin, *Wild Races of South-East Asia*, p. 140

³⁶Lewin, *Wild Races of South-East Asia*, p. 156

³⁷Lister’s report as quoted in Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier*, p. 287

level went down. The main cause of this was the petty clan feuds for land. These increased in dimension when the Lusheis came in contact with other tribes who had been settling in the Lushai Hills prior to their migration into the hills. Although they were the last group to enter the hills, the Lusheis began to wage wars with their neighbours in the area. In the face of such clan and inter-tribal warfare for land, the population of abled bodies or working members in families began to dwindle. Situations took such a turn that, for instance, in the Chin Hills, Carey stated that “it became necessary to proceed armed and in force to the distant fields, which were cultivated, sown, and the crop gathered under the protection of guards and sentries”.³⁸ The Lushai method of warfare being based on surprised raids, none was secure. Protection in the fields and in the jungles while women sowed seeds, weeded, gathered crops or firewood etc., came to be a necessity. Fathers, husbands and sons acted as sentries and guards, while women alone had to put in every ounce of strength in their bid to labour to produce enough for their respective families. With the diminished labour power, the yearly production suffered sometimes leading to food scarcity. To find a solution to this, captives

came to be taken from the vanquished clans and tribes within the hills. These captives substituted the loss of working members in families. This method of labour substitution was so effective that it became a common practice to take captives made in every raid. The situation reached a height during the later part of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century which saw the introduction of firearms. Petty tribal warfares assumed a race for power and political control of the hills. Firearms acted as an incentive to gain power and prestige. Raids and warfare were conducted excessively, while every captive made in such were taken to labour in the jhum fields of the hill people. By the time the Sailo supremacy was established in the Lushai Hills, all other weaker tribes in the hills had been “vanquished, absorbed or reduced to subjects” in the service of the Sailo chiefs. However, the more powerful tribes like the Pois/Shendus and the Lakhers were still a constant nuisance to the peace of the hills for which the Lushais continued to maintain a standing army of fighters. This persistently spelt the need to procure more labour. With tribes having been vanquished, the Lushais paid attention to the nearby areas for more slaves, engaging in constant raids as had been seen. All such captives were made to work in their

³⁸Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, p. 211

own capacity as far as they could fill the void of those engaged in raids and wars.

Here, it becomes necessary to look into the general work of freemen, Lewin states:

The men employ themselves chiefly in making forays upon weaker tribes, or in hunting. Of homework, they only clear the ground and help to carry the harvest; they also build the house. The men are generally to be seen lounging about, cleaning their arms, drinking, or smoking.³⁹

With regard to division of labour, a common expression usually used was that “A man should spend his life in fighting, hunting, and drinking, whilst labour is intended for women and slaves only”.⁴⁰ As is stated, the Lushai economy was entirely dependent on the labour of womenfolk, free and slaves alike. On this issue, Lewin notes:

Upon the women falls the whole burden of the bodily labour by which life is supported. They fetch water, hew wood, cultivate and help to reap the crop, besides spinning, cooking and brewing.⁴¹

While labour of free men constitute raiding, hunting, clearing jhum land, and to help carry the harvest, women were

engaged in home-work and jhum work, not to mention weaving, spinning, stitching, looking after children and livestock that every Lushai kept.

In the homes, men engage themselves in basket works where “they manufacture the *thul*-a basket with four legs about twelve inches square at the bottom, widening till the mouth is a circle with a diameter of about thirty inches, *deron* (doron)-a basket for carrying goods; it is a truncated cone 30 to 36 inches long with a diameter at its mouth of about 24 inches, holding about 24 inches, holding about 50 lbs. of paddy; the *em*- similar to the doron, but about half the size, the *bomrang*-an open work basket with an oval mouth, 15 inches by 12, which is used for carrying goods on long journeys, the – similar in shape to the *em*, but with open work sides, used for conveyance of wood, water tubes, &c. There are also several sorts of flat baskets for holding grain, each with its particular name. The containing capacity of these is approximately constant, and they are used as measures of quantity.⁴² The first basket is supplied with a conical lid and is chiefly used to keep valuables in. The outer layer is of finely split bamboo closely woven, and this is lined with broad leaves well dried, which are held in their place by an inner layer of

³⁹ Lewin, *Wild Races of South-East Asia*, p. 134

⁴⁰ Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, p. 134

⁴¹ Lewin, *Wild Races of South-East Asia*, p. 134

⁴² Shakespear, *The Lushai-Kuki Clans*, p.27

bamboo more loosely woven. These baskets are quite waterproof.⁴³ Basket works were mainly woven out of bamboo. For this purpose, one had to fetch the best kind of bamboos for the particular basket, cut it in small pieces, trim the sharp (blade-like) edges of the finely peeled out pieces of bamboo from cutting the man to handle them. These pieces of bamboos were sometimes dried in the sun or in the rack above the hearth. Sometimes they are used in their raw state. Canes were also used for the purpose and the most valuable baskets were those made of these. However, canes were rare in the hills, and bamboos were commonly used for their bounty. Men engaged in rough brass works which were probably taught to them by men from other regions like captives taken in the raids. Shakespear notes:

Rough specimens of moulding in this metal, which show considerable if untrained talent, but they are very rare, and I attribute them to captives taken from the plains of India or Burma, or to persons who have learnt from them.⁴⁴

Another work that engaged a man's labour was iron-work. This job was however, assigned solely to the village blacksmith who was paid in kind for the work.

⁴³ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 27

⁴⁴ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 28

Weapons of war manufactured in the hills consist of spears and dahs, shields of bison hides eighteen inches wide and about two feet long-used especially in the chase when the arrows were poisoned. Bows and arrows were another weapon of war.⁴⁵ Bamboo spikes completed the manufactured weapons of the Lushai hills. Besides, those captured from the plains served as good teachers in the manufacture of weapons, in making items that were not available in the hills. For instance, the Lushais have blacksmiths who were engaged in the manufacture of small items of daily necessities like the hoe, and axe, needed in their *jhums*, sickles for cutting, reaping or harvesting the crops and coarse knives or *daos*. Beyond these, they hardly had any knowledge of manufacturing more sophisticated tools or implements. However, every village had a rough forge in which they made these simple tools of daily necessities. On this subject too, Lewin notes:

They work in iron. A rough species of forge is found in every village, and they have made some progress in iron-working, having been taught by Bengallee captives to repair the lock of a gun, as also to make spear-heads and fish-hooks. They cannot, however, make a gun-barrel. They are ignorant

⁴⁵ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 14

of the art of making pottery. Their plates and bottles are the leaves of the jungle and gourd; they use brass and earthen vessels when they can obtain them either in war or by barter at the frontier bazaars.⁴⁶

These in general, were the constituents of the labour of free-men. With slaves to substitute their work, men engaged fully in wars, raids and hunting or fishing. When not in such activities, men sat around smoking and telling tales of their physical prowess in earlier encounters with enemies or their hunting and raiding expeditions. Their great deeds worn about them as protective shields against labour, men loved to be served and respected by wives and slaves alike for their heroic deeds, while women suffered in silence. In the midst of such manly conduct, women had an unfair share of labour. Female slaves had to undertake double share of the free women.

The Slave trade

We have already noted that *sals* were sold and bought by masters as any property. In fact, slave trade was a well-established phenomenon in Lushai Hills during the nineteenth century. The subject of slave trade have been well incorporated in early

⁴⁶ Lewin, *Wild Races of South-East Asia*, W. H. Allen & Co, Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl, 1978, p. 142

colonial accounts where the hillmen captured captives from one part of British territory and after taking over the hills they were again sold in other parts of British territory. So great was their irritation of the practice that the colonial government was trying its best to stop the practice. Yet the system remained unabated until the hills was occupied.

In the Lushai Hills, British administrators had all at some time or other, come in contact with the practise of slavery or its other forms of servitude (*boi* system). The prevalence of trade in slaves was a recognised fact evident from colonial accounts. For instance, Shakespear states that “Slavery by purchase was recognised and was not restricted to the chiefs.⁴⁷ Besides the captives acquired in raids, commoners in a position to purchase them kept slaves to perform the most arduous tasks. It was a glorious day when captives were made, for they achieved much from their labour and sale or exchange. Carey and Tuck, the authorities on the Chin Hills noted:

The Siyins and the Soktes were the professional slave-dealers of the Chin Hills and raids were regularly organised on account of the profitable trade, and also in order to get slaves to cultivate the fields and perform all menial services. The

⁴⁷Shakespear, *The LusheiKuki Clans*, p. 196

prices paid by the Burmans for the release of parents, wives and children average from Rs. 100 to Rs. 1,000, and until the money was paid, the captive, be he pongyi or official's wife, worked in the fields or lay in heavy stocks.

The Northern Chins armed themselves with guns with the proceeds of their Burman slave traffic, and the extent to which the traffic was worked is explained by the fact that in the last five years we have recovered some 700 slaves from the Northern Chin alone.⁴⁸

When people were captured and led away to the hills and disappeared after sometime, the only explanation seemed to be that they had been sacrificed or killed to adorn the graves of their dead chiefs. But what actually takes place is stated by Guite as:

An explanation to this reality was rooted in two hill practices: slave trade and absorbing them into the hill society.⁴⁹

Thus, we see many instances of lies told by the Lushais that the captives taken in the various raids were either sold or had died.⁵⁰ Repeated orders usually force them to bring back hidden captives, but they persistently deny and state:

The Lushei chiefs for instance, consistently insist that their captives were

either dead or sold to the Pois whenever their return was demanded; a young man of 4 ½ feet usually fetched them two guns... slaves also formed part of their 'tribute' to Poi rajahs: Venolel, one of the most powerful Lushei rajahs, used to pay tribute to Falam rajah 'in cottonclothes and slaves.'⁵¹

Similarly, during the Chengri Valley raid, Lengpunga, (Lianphunga) the Lushei chief involved in the raid confessed and states:

The raid was made, and all the prisoners brought to my punji. There were about 70 captives. I killed none. Those not given up died of sickness or committed suicide. About two months after the raid a Tipperahjemadar, saying that he was in the Tipperah Raja's service, came to the punji, and suggested that he should be allowed to release the captives, but that he had brought no money with him for the purpose. He said 'If you will lend me money I will release the captives and pay you interest.' The jemadar borrowed Rs. 50 from me and Rs. 360 from the people of the punji. He promised to pay interest to all. He released eight captives, and paid the whole of the money he had borrowed to me, promising to return with the money to pay the loans, and to bring more for the release of the other captives. We have heard nothing more of this man. After this

⁴⁸Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, p. 204

⁴⁹J. Guite, 'Civilisation and its Malcontents: The Politics of Kuki Raid in the nineteenth century Northeast India', p.371

⁵⁰NAI, Chengri Valley Raids, Foreign Dept, Extl B, September 1891, Nos. 179-181

⁵¹J. Guite, 'Civilisation and its malcontents: The Politics of Kuki raids in nineteenth century Northeast India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, <http://ier.sagepub.com/>, 48, (3) (2011): 339-76, pp.371

GauriCharanchaprasī and Jadab came, but as I have been cheated by the jemadar, I was suspicious, and I said to them ‘The captives are not British subjects, you don’t ask for their release. If they had been British subjects, the RaiBahadur would have been sent or Sib Charan.’ I said ‘If they are British subjects, take them.’ GauriCharan said he could not take so many men. He said ‘Take care of them and don’t sell them.’⁵²

Selling slaves was a common practise and a well-known fact in which 700 slaves had been recovered from the Chin Hills alone within five years of British occupation. By 1893 more than 2,000 slaves were estimated to be recovered during the Lushai Expedition of 1871-72. These were evidences of captives surrendered to the Colonial rule, but those that have never been recovered or surrendered have a completely different story to narrate. Colonial records for instance, note:

In our frontier districts the severest punishments should be inflicted on all who possess slaves, no matter from whence obtained, for, *so long as there are markets for slaves*, the Savage Tribes will supply them, bringing the fruits of their raids into Tipperah for sale to my District or

Araccan and vice versa.⁵³ [emphasis added]

Here, it is imperative to look at the general layout of the country. The Hill Tracts of Chittagong was bounded on the west by the maritime district of Chittagong on the south and east, as far as the blue mountains, by the province of Arracan on the north, by the fenny river which divides the hill tracts from Hill Tipperah, a semi-independent state, while to the north and northeast the country is undefined, and may be said to be coterminous with the extent to which the influence of the British Government is acknowledged amongst the hill tribes in that direction. Of the rivers flowing in and around the tract, the Karnafuolee is the principal which remains navigable at all seasons of the year, for boats of considerable size, as far as 20 miles beyond Kassalong. The depth of water in the Karnafuolee averages from 8 to 30 feet. From the banks of the Fenny river, perched on the ridge of some adjacent hill, could be seen the houses of the hill men.⁵⁴ The Eastern Frontiers were not more than 300 miles from the western boundary of China and the tribes living in that direction are known to have intercourse with the Province of Meckley,

⁵²Statement made by Lengpunga at Camp No. 12, outside Lengpunga’spunji on the 9th February 1890, NAI, Foreign Dept, Extl B, September 1891, Nos. 179-181, p. 3

⁵³West Bengal State Archives, Judicial Proceedings, May 1861, No. 17

⁵⁴Lewin, *The Hill Tracts of Chittagong*, p. 1-2

subject to the King of Burmah.⁵⁵ Trade of some sort, was at one time or other, present between the hill tracts and the countries nearby. Slaves were also traded to purchase the much needed guns for raiding expeditions as well as fighting enemies and safeguarding territories. The Chittagong Hill Tracts, divided into four river valleys, marked out more or less distinctly by well-defined chains of hills running parallel from the south in a north-westerly direction offered them paths that were greatly needed for communication, although these were not well-defined routes. The presence of a maritime trade made it possible to ship slaves from the hill areas to the immediate neighbouring countries. The Sungoo and Matamoreeriver run parallel to the hill ranges, till they enter the plains, forming two river valleys. On the other hand, the Kurnafoolee and Fenny run transversely across the line of the hills and the river valleys here, which were formed by large tributary streams entering the Kurnafoolee at right angles to its course. The hill areas were accessible through these rivers where the hill people went to and fro, back and forth, mainly on rough boats or rafts. However, slave traders need these but little from the fact that all the captives taken were usually made to walk, the weaker

⁵⁵Lewin, *The Hill Tracts of Chittagong*, p. 5

ones being killed to avoid prevention of slow progress. This is evident from Rothangpuia's treatment of the young female captive whom he killed without much ado on their return journey after the Great Kuki Raid of 1860.⁵⁶ Captives not fit to be sold were killed by captors. This fact is revealed by Colonel Phayre in his letter to the Government of India where he states:

In former years I have myself been a good deal among all tribes except the Shindus. With continued intercourse, personal influence among them is readily acquired. But this intercourse must be constant, and it must be personal. If from any cause it be interrupted, the wild and fickle people soon forget their promises, and a chief of whom one may have formed good hopes, will perhaps next be heard of as heading a raid on a neighbouring tribe and killing all who are not fit to be sold as captives.⁵⁷

Lushais, Shendus, Pois, Soktes, Siyins and other tribes indulging in war, needed guns for warfare. Money being scarce in the hills, other means used to acquire these guns was best served through the sale or exchange of slaves captured in raids. Here, one can see the exchange value of slaves

⁵⁶Lewin, *Wild Races of Southeast Asia*, p. 140

⁵⁷Letter from Colonel Phayre to the Government of India as quoted in Mackenzie's *The North-Eastern Frontier*, p. 352

who served to barter firearms. Shakespear, noting the centrality of slaves, states:

The Lushais have been in possession of firearms for the last sixty or seventy years. These weapons are flint-locks bearing the names of many European makers; many are Tower muskets, and guns bearing the marks of French Customs Department are not at all rare. These guns came into the country in the first instance chiefly through Burma, though no doubt, some came through Chittagong, and much money must have been made, for the demand was large. When the weapons first began to appear, the Lushais and other western tribes used to obtain them from the tribes on the Burma border, giving slaves in exchange, a strong male slave being equivalent to two guns.⁵⁸

IndraniChatterjee states the value of female captives, who brought in more than the men from their sale. "A young male captive cost three mithuns whereas a single female fetched five mithuns; women and children captured by the Shendus were 'sold to the Sailoos for two old tower muskets.'⁵⁹ She states that the geographical and social distances traversed by female captives were evoked in songs of contiguous regions, for instance, one in which a Mizo 'princess' is described as

having been taken 'from a far-away village' to be 'like a slave' to her husband. Emotional, social, and geographical distances are also recorded in anecdotal accounts of "a woman in a village in the Rangamati area [in Tripura], who had been taken captive by another group of raiders (Howlongs) and been sold by them to Sydoha[Burma]." Women and children captured by the PuiShendu were "sold to the Sailoos for two old tower muskets, and the Sailoos carried them off to the village of their chief, Johwata, beyond the KainsaThoung or Blue Mountains" in Burma in 1878. Such anecdotal evidence highlights the wide network of exchanges that local war-machines fed.⁶⁰ In spite of the fact that there was a "wide network of exchange", all tribes in the Lushai Hills did not follow fixed/common rates of exchange. There were differences among each group of communities.

Among the Lakhers, the price of a good male slave was 170 to 180 rupees, while healthy young female slaves easily fetched 200 rupees, or if sold to the Khumis, who gave high prices for slaves, even as much as 300 rupees. If given as part of a marriage price the value of a slave, whether male or female, was

⁵⁸Shakespear, *The Lushei- Kuki Clans*, p. 14

⁵⁹IndraniChatterjee, *Slavery, Semantics and the Sound of Silence*, p. 292

⁶⁰ John Beames, *Memoirs of a Bengal Civilian*, written in 1896 (London: Chatte and Windus, 1961), p. 286.

assessed at 100 rupees. If a chief's slave was killed by a free man, the murderer had either to pay the chief 200 rupees as a *luteu*, or became a slave himself.⁶¹ Among the Shendus, a slave among them is valued at eight muskets to two guyals.⁶² After the Chengri Valley raid of 8th January 1889, J. D. Anderson wrote to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Cachar on 13th July 1889 wherein he recounted Lengpunga's own account of the raid. Regarding the captives they had taken, he admitted that "eight souls, seven women and a boy were released two months ago, being ransomed by a "jemadar from Chittagong" who paid Rs. 185 in cash, and promised to pay Rs. 515 subsequently; the latter sum to be treated as a loan from Lengpunga to him at a rate of 10 per cent per mensem. He had not received the money subsequently and says that, if more money be not forthcoming in two months' time, he would raid again.⁶³ Following this further threat of Lengpunga, the Deputy Commissioner had to agree to a payment of Rs. 3,300 for the release of all the captives the Lushais had taken, who, if sold all, would have received much cash. In

⁶¹N. E. Parry, *The Lakhers*, Omsons, Delhi, 1988, p. 226

⁶²Lewin, *Wild Races of South-East Asia*, p. 150

⁶³ Letter of J. D. Anderson to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, the Deputy Commissioner, Cachar, 13th July 1889, in Robert Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam from 1883-1941*, Spectrum, Guwahati, 1997, pp. 8-9

1864, Captain Stewart, Deputy Commissioner of Cachar sent word to Sukpilal (Suakpuilal) to surrender the captives he had taken in the Adampore raid. He made an excuse of being too ill to meet the Commissioner and sent his mantri, who, on being asked about the captives confessed that "some of the captives had been sold to the Pois in the south."⁶⁴ In this event, Suakpuilal's mantri was instrumental in declaring that the captives had been sold.

Guns were not the only commodity the hill people bought or exchanged slaves for. They needed gun-powder as well which they obtained from other regions through the sale and exchange of slaves. Lewin states that "Gunpowder they obtain, it is said, from Burmah, and, until lately, from the Bengallees of Cachar and Chittagong. Latterly, however, increased vigilance from the part of the authorities has driven them to manufacture a rough sort of powder; they learnt to do this from the Shendus."⁶⁵ Guns used in raids and wars were usually obtained through Arrakan. Colonel Phayre again states:

No doubt that those tribes are in part supplied through Arrakan: every possible precaution has been taken to check this pernicious trade. Last year a large seizure of arms was made in the

⁶⁴ Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier*, p. 299

⁶⁵Lewin, *Wild Races of South-East Asia*, p. 141

Myoo River by Captain Hamilton, the Superintendent of Police; they had just been brought in, and, no doubt, would have been carried into the hills and sold to the adjoining tribes. Two men of substance were convicted and sentenced on this occasion under the Arms Act. I have orders that a close watch is to be kept on all Native vessels entering the bays and rivers on the coast of Arrakan: I consider it very necessary that similar measures should be adopted with reference to Cox's Bazar, where formerly I know a trade in arms and ammunition was carried on with the view of supplying the Hill tribes.⁶⁶

Out of the total of 90 captives taken during the Chengri Valley raids, Lengpunga stated that he had received only 70 out of which "three of the original number are said to have committed suicide, rather than continue in captivity; eight are reported to have died, or four or five to have been sold to other tribes. They destroyed a punji in British territory, killing a number of our subjects, and selling others to tribes living beyond them".⁶⁷

⁶⁶Letter from Lieutenant-Colonel A. P. Phayre, Chief Commissioner of British Burmah and Agent to Governor General, to the Officiating Secretary to Government of India, Foreign Department, Fort William, (No. 185-3020, dated Rangoon, the 20th July 1863), National Archive of India, Foreign Department, Political-(A), No. 5, August, 1863
⁶⁷ Report of W. W. Daly, Esq., Officiating Deputy Inspector-General of Police, Bengal, to The Inspector –General of Police, Assam, dated

One important factor that helped the rise of the Kuki (Lushais as they were known earlier) rajas or chiefs in the hills was the advent of firearms. From the late eighteenth century, firearms began to enter the Kuki country from Burma which brought the whole region into a state of confusion: 'exterminating warfare', deaths, mass displacement, migration and subjugation.⁶⁸ Within a span of half a century, the Kuki tribes were armed with firearms. Of these, the first tribe to use guns were the Pois who became formidable to other tribes that had had no possession of firearms yet. The Tashons, the Siyins, Hakas, Suktes and the Lushais also appeared to have at some point paid tribute to Falams.⁶⁹ The Shendus, becoming powerful due to the possession of firearms, drove out the Lusheis across the Tyao, the Suktes also having come to possess firearms rapidly expanded northward until the Manipur valley, subjugating their kinsmen and northern tribes like the Guites, Zous, Thadous and Vaipheis. Thus a large number of them fled to the Lushai Hills

Calcutta, 2nd June, 1890, NAI, Foreign deptt, Ext B, September, No.179-181, p.138

⁶⁸J. Guite, Civilization and Its Malcontents: The Politics of Kuki raids in nineteenth century Northeast India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, <http://ier.sagepub.com/>, 48, (3) (2011): 339-76, pp. 352

⁶⁹NAI, FPP-A: August 1872, No. 70, Mackenzie, *The Northeast Frontier*, p. 443

and Manipur. The Lushais also fled to the Lushai Hills in about 1810. After procuring firearms, the Lushai chiefs also became formidable to the other tribes from the 1830s. This forced the Old Kuki groups to flee from the hills as the New Kuki groups entered it. It was this new group's forays and raids first into the hills and then the plains that came in contact with the British which, in short, led to the British annexation of the hills.

Firearms became so prominent in the subjugation of other tribes and consequent formation of state in the Lushai hills that they went to the extent of selling *sals* captured in the hills and in the plains. The firearms were so instrumental that in the 1860s and 1870s guns had almost replaced the Kuki's traditional weapons like bows and arrows.⁷⁰ Lalsukla was said to have possessed 100 guns in 1844, Suakpuilal was said to possess fighting men 'entirely armed with guns', Gobind Ram, a Bengali interpreter told Lister that there was one musket 'in each house in the raja's village.'⁷¹ By 1866, Lewin described the Lushais as "having every man his guns."⁷² 1871 saw Edgar the then Deputy Commissioner of Cachar passing through the poor village of Dhurmongpi who noted

several guns in almost every house, in spite of the poverty of the village. In 1872, Vandula was reported to have 'at least 4,000 fighting men, 2,000 of them armed with guns. By 1875, the Suktes had 'at least 2,000 men, two thirds of them armed with muskets.' E. W. Dun noted that in Manipur the Simmtes (Guites) could master 850 fighting men with about half of them armed with guns, and 250 Chassad men with 20 per cent armed with guns.⁷³ During the Lushai expedition of 1871-72, 156 guns were carried away by those Kukis who migrated to Manipur. Col. Nuthall, Political Agent of Manipur reported that 225 muskets (173 brought by runaway Kukis and 52 seized from Kokatung) were brought into Manipur during the expedition. When the Chin Hills was occupied, over 6986 guns were confiscated by 1897-98. In 1892-93, of the total estimate of 1,700 guns with the Lushais in the North Lushai Hills, about 601 guns were seized and, during the same year, 287 guns were 'fined' in the Lushai Hills. According to one estimate, over 10,000 guns were confiscated from both the Chin and Lushai Hills after annexation.⁷⁴

⁷⁰A. S. Reid, *Chin Lushai Land*, p. 231, Soppit, *Kuki-Lushai Tribes*, p. 6

⁷¹Mackenzie, *The Northeast Frontier*, p. 296, Shakespear, *Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 14

⁷²WBSA, JP, April 1871, No. 272

⁷³E. W. Dun, *Gazetteer of Manipur*, pp. 33-35

⁷⁴J. Guite, *Civilization and Its Malcontents: The Politics of Kuki raids in nineteenth century Northeast India*, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, <http://ier.sagepub.com/>, 48, (3) (2011): 339-76, p. 355

Sad to say but above 95 per cent of the confiscated guns in the Chin Hills were made in England. In this connection, Carey states:

Most probable explanation is that barrels were cut in half and thus more easily smuggled into Upper Burma, when they were pieced together again by Europeans in the service of the King, or by agents of the shippers. So well were these half barrels been joined that it is often impossible to break them. It is more than probable that when the flint lock gave way to the percussion-cap gun, the obsolete weapons were sold as old iron in England, but, instead of being broken up, they were shipped to ports such as Rangoon and Chittagong to be sold to the natives; and when one sees one's comrades shot, or the tribesmen out of hand, it is very bitter to think that the weapons which are killing the people and causing us so much anxiety were manufactured by ourselves and were formerly held by our own troops.⁷⁵

The presence of slave trade was largely necessitated by the need to procure guns by the hill men. But, with money being scarce, there was no other option except purchase through exchange of slaves which was extensively dealt with. Thus, the need for guns and labour were the main driving force that led to the raids among

the Lushais themselves and in the foothills of the country.

Thus, although *bois* in the Lushai Hills were often called slaves, what we have seen of all captives of war and their descendants, persons who have become slaves from debt or poverty, those who can be bought and sold, and those immigrants from the trans-frontier tract, points to something else and these so-called *Sals* were in truth, the real slaves of the Lushai Hills.

Conclusion

Bois in the Lushai Hills were often called slaves while the prevalence of the trade in slaves was highlighted both by colonial accounts and some contemporary scholarship. The major section of scholarship claims that *bois* were not slaves, while some make loud claims that slavery was very much prevalent in the hills concluding with strong evidences that reduced the poor *bois* into the "undisputed slaves" of the Lushai Hills. But what is most strange is the fact that although scholars and historians writing on the *boi* system of the Lushai Hills, make flitting remarks of the institution of *sal*, who they were, and who could own them, they barely go beyond a paragraph or investigate these *sals*. While the true slaves of the hills escaped attention or

⁷⁵Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, pp. 222-223

could not be perceived beyond the description given of these by Shakespear, slavery in the Lushai Hills came to be associated with the *boi* system, which was, altogether, a different institution. *Sals* captured in raids and remnants of wars were the true slaves of the Lushai Hills. They were the personal property of captors who were bought or sold according to the whims of their captors or masters. Used earlier as the chief labour force, they served later as mediums of exchange mainly for firearms. Theirs was the lowest status that any inhabitants of the Lushai Hills ever occupied. Their centrality in the hill economy came not only through labour, but, through their value in exchange. Taken as captives, they formed the *Sal* entourage, remained slaves all their lives, and died as unknown human beings, unsought and unsung. They could not enter “*pialral*” the ultimate resting place of the death as they were not allowed ritual ceremonies or to perform “*sakhua*” or religious sacrifices like the common masses. They were a class distinct in character and treatment, forming parts of the property of chiefs and common people. Similar to those slaves of the west with the exception of the proverbial chains and whips, they were relegated to the backwater of the social structure. Although treated kindly, they remained slaves all

their lives and no condition, except their sale to other regions saw them free from their yoke of *salhood* in the Lushai Hills. Considering their anonymity in the society, their presence in the houses of chiefs with *bois*, and in the homes of common people, those *sals* were a class of their own, remnants of war and raids who were still in the houses of chiefs and in the homes of common people during the advent of colonial occupation. After all, it was for those extensive wars and raids that carried away captives that forced colonial entry into the hills. As slavery is a weed that grows on every soil, plains and hills alike, although in different ways, it is imperative that these true forms be properly analysed instead of insinuating and incorporating other forms of serfdom into the world of true slavery.

Notes

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