

LUSHAI RAIDS IN COLONIAL ASSAM AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE IN THE LOCAL SYSTEM OF SLAVERY: A SHORT STUDY

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Abstract:

The most significant reason for annexation of the erstwhile Lushai Hills district of colonial Assam was the lawless nature of the occupants. They were marauders and raiders constantly raiding each other. After exhausting their own areas, they entered colonial territories at the foothills of the district, the border areas of Manipur and Tripura and the Chittagong hill tracts. We see many instances of raids occurring around these areas from the 1830s onward. These raids were once looked upon as the stubborn action of the occupants owing to their savagery, natural love of raids and intentional disobedience to law. But there was a genuine reason behind these accusations. Records tell us of captives killed and taken away after each raiding expeditions. These were taken either to work in the houses and jhum fields of the captors and to sell or use them as a medium of exchange for the much needed weapons of war. The excessive raids undertaken by the Lusei tribe from the 1830s is studied in this paper. This article follows a descriptive analysis methodologically and materials necessary are taken from primary sources like various archives of India and colonial records while secondary sources are also used to fill some missing gaps.

Keywords: raids, slavery, captives, jhum fields, colonial records

Introduction:

Academic scholarship is aware of the fact that there existed slavery in the erstwhile Lushai Hills district of colonial Assam. This was often associated with the controversial *Boi*, a Lusei traditional system of relationship between a chief and his dependents. But there was a real system of slavery called *Sal*. They were captives made from internecine wars and various raids both within the district and nearby territories. Needham had written that “All captives of war and their descendants are slaves, all such persons are real slaves. They can be bought and sold¹. Colonial accounts provide us with many raids carried out for the purpose of procuring slaves, either for their labour or to sell them off for money or exchange them for something else like modern weapons much needed by the raiding parties. Frontier areas bordering hilly tracts lying between Araccan, Chittagong, Tripura, Cachar, Manipur and Burmese plains were regions where innumerable raids were committed.

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

Raids committed by the Lusei tribes:

From the 1830s, raids became prominent for reasons like '(a) the recovery of debt, (b) for plunder or to wipe out the disgrace of a previous raid on themselves², or (c) to procure slaves³. Of these, the highest recorded incidents of Kuki raids came from the Chittagong Frontier. Then raids became prominent under 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 incursion of Kukis as they were then called⁴.

In 1847, the Lusei carried out a number of raids in Manipur and Sylhet district (in the areas of Singla river or Thing Tlawnglui, west of Chatachura *Tlang*). In the Singla river area, the shifting of the Sylhet Light Infantry Post up to that part of the border was carried out by the Government of Bengal after a conflict with a large body of tribesmen. Though Lister was wounded in the expedition despatched in 1850, the Sylhet Infantry managed to push back the hillmen⁵. In 1854, the Superintendent of Police reported that there occurred 19 raids in the Chittagong frontiers during 'the past seventeen years', in which 107 people were killed, 15 wounded and 186 taken into captivity⁶.

In 1860, the 'Great Kookie Invasion upon the plains of Tipperah took place in which 15 villages were plundered, destroyed, 185 people killed and about 100 persons taken into captivity⁷ by the Lusei under chief Rutton Poa (Rothangpuia). In 1861, a body of Kukis made fierce attacks on three populous villages and a wealthy mart in hill Tipperah near Odoypore (Udaipur) where they killed 150 people and took 200 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 Luseis under Howlongs (Hualhangs) again witnessed raids as annual occurrences 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 captives⁸. However, peace prevailed during the next seventeen years.

But in 1888, two sanguinary raids were again committed by the Shendus and Sailos. The Shendus attacked a party under Lt. Stewart and two other Europeans, one a sepoy. Then the Sailos attacked Pakuma Rani's village, killed the rani and her 21 subjects. They burnt the village and took away 15 persons into captivity⁹. 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.

² G. C. Rigby, *History of Operations in Northern Arakan and the Yawdwin Chin Hills 1896-97*, Govt. Press, Aizawl, Mizoram, 2000, p. 148.

³ Lewin, *Wild Races of South-Eastern India*, W. H. Allen & Co, Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl, 1978, p. 139.

⁴ A.S. Reid, *Chin-Lushai Land*, Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl, 2008, p.7.

⁵ C. G. Verghese and R. L. Thanzawna, *A History of the Mizos*, vol. 1, Vikash, Delhi, 1997, p.173.

⁶ Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier*, p. 338.

⁷ Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier*, p. 342.

⁸ Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier*, p. 351.

⁹ Reid, *Chin Lushai Land*, p. 46.

One significant nature of this raid was that the major constitution of captives taken were women and children. W. W. Daly submitted a detailed report of the operations of the Surma Valley Military Police Battalion in the Lushai country during 1889-90 where he states that “on the morning of the 30th January, fifty-eight captives were brought into camp, twenty three women and thirty-five children, and they all seemed to be in good condition. They said one child still remained in captivity, and I sent a demand for its surrender¹⁰. Out of over the 90 captives taken in the raid, a child of eight years who was still held by the Lusei was later surrendered by the order of W. W. Daly.

In the Arracan frontiers ‘between 1863 and 1869, there were 30 separate raids reported in which 65 persons were killed and 268 carried into slavery¹¹. The Mizo chiefs constantly needed more slaves to work for them. These could easily be procured from the territory of another chief or from the area controlled by the British. So they attacked nearby areas and took captives. But when these areas were exhausted, they moved to the plains, raided and took captives. Thus, we see Lister’s expedition released 429 captives from bondage.

The Sylhet-Tipperah-Cachar Frontiers also witnessed series of raids. 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 captives¹². In 1847 Luseis in Sylhet again carried out a series of raids where they killed 30 people followed by an unsuccessful expedition under Hopkinson. The main reasons were lack of adequate foodstuff and supply of drinking water further aggravated by impenetrable jungles, insects and often illness. The tribe also raided three Kuki refugee villages of Cachar in 1849, killed 29 people and carried off 42 persons. At the same time, the Poitoos ransacked two villages and woodcutters in Sylhet¹³. This was followed by Lister’s expedition in 1850. The force marched from Silchar on 4th January and arrived at a village belonging to a chief called Mulla on 14th January. The village was a large one having 800 to 1000 houses. The colonel and his troop burnt this village on the 16th and returned.

The most notable result of Lister’s expedition was that ‘during the confusion caused by the destruction of his cantonment, 429 captives made their escape from the villages dependent on Mullah, and succeeded in finding their way into Cachar¹⁴. These captives have been captured from different areas in the hills and retained for their labour.

In 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 Thannah Rajnugger, 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 and the event came to be known as the Adumpore massacre. About the same time, a village called Lungaibaree was destroyed, and an attack made on a party of men about half a mile east of Kolangat. The people of Chundraipara were emigrants from Hill Tipperah who had settled in the British territory. The raid ensued because the emigrants had settled on the estate of a zamindar with whom the Tipperah raja had a standing feud. The Kookies committing the raid were dependents of Murchoilo (Ngursailo), a son of Lalchokla (Lalsutla) whom the British had made a prisoner in 1844.

¹⁰ Report of W. W. Daly, Esq., Officiating Deputy Inspector-General of Police, Bengal, to The Inspector –General of Police, Assam, dated Calcutta, 2nd June, 1890, NAI, Foreign deptt, Ext B, September, No.179-181, p.137.

¹¹ Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, Vol-1, p. 17.

¹² Mackenzie, *The North East Frontier*, pp. 274-90.

¹³ Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier*, p. 299.

¹⁴ Lister’s report in Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier*, p. 293.

In 1868, some villages in Tipperah were plundered and the Loharband-Monierkhal tea garden houses burnt in 1869¹⁵. Then, in 1871, a united force of Eastern and Western Luseis committed organised raids between 23rd and 28th January. They plundered the tea gardens of Cacharee Punjee (Ainarkhal), Darnierkhal, Nundigram and Kacharipara and burnt them down. The Tipperah Hills recorded around 85 deaths including 6 policemen. These raiders were also reported to have carried off at least 64 captives¹⁶.

In Manipur, the Suktes (Soktes) carried out raids since the time of Nur Singh (1834-50). They conducted a series of raids in 1856. Hankeep and Saitol villages were raided in 1859 where they killed 15 persons and took 45 captives. The years 1857-71 recorded seven raids by the Kamhow Suktes, and in 1874, Kamsol and Mukoong were ransacked followed by a series of raids during 1876-80¹⁷. In 1847, the Luseis raided a Changsan village where around 200 to 300 people were either killed or carried off¹⁸.

In the Burmese Frontier, the Soktes raided a village in Manipur in 1856. They ravaged the whole country around Champhai with raiding parties that took innumerable heads and some captives. Soktes were joined by Siyins in these raids¹⁹. During the reign of Kochim, many raids were carried out in Burma which were undoubtedly committed by the Thados and Nwites. The Soktes later swooped down into the plains and raided Ateywa, Kambale, Kyigon, Sameikon and Kabungyon. In 1876, the Whenohs, some 300 strong, attacked Tunzan village and killed or carried off 29 persons²⁰. Meanwhile, the Haka and Yokwa Chins committed two raids in the Yaw country, where they killed 8 and carried off 28 persons to captivity. The Tashons also committed two serious raids in the Kale valley on the 4th and 5th May 1887. The first was on Indin, and the second Chingaing. They then committed two serious raids in the Kale valley. Siyins attacked a party of Shans, killed one and carried off four boys. The Soktes swooped down on the Kabaw valley and the Tashons on the plains where they committed the above raids.

During the month of October, Tashons committed one raid, Siyins five and Kamhows one. This resulted in 122 Shans being carried off within 12 days, 12 killed, and 14 wounded, resulting in the complete destruction of the ancient town of Kampat and subsequent loss of 35 houses by Kalemmyo²¹. In this regard, Lewin records that “the Luseis were a standing problem that embarrassed all local administration; continually raided into the Hill Tracts, attacked and plundered the inhabitants, burnt villages, slaying men and carrying off women and children into slavery²². 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 it²³.

During raids, women usually stood their ground, and abused their grim assailants vociferously for which they were sometimes killed, but the major captives taken usually were women and children. The reason for this was that they were easily adaptable to their new society, and were also less likely to attempt escape. Children grew up in the house of the captor ‘as his children’ and were more likely to remain with him than adults would. When married to the

¹⁵ Lister’s report in Mackenzie’s *The North-East Frontier*, p. 301.

¹⁶ Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier*, p. 305-09.

¹⁷ Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, p. 121; Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier*, pp. 165-71, 206.

¹⁸ Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier*, p. 290.

¹⁹ Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, p. 120.

²⁰ Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, p. 125.

²¹ Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, pp. 25-26.

²² T. H. Lewin, *A Fly on the Wheel or How I Helped to Govern India*, Tribal Research Institute, Art and Culture, Aizawl, Reprint, 2005, pp. 189- 90.

²³ Lewin, *Wild Races of South-Eastern Asia*, p. 156.

hill men, women were more easily absorbed²⁴. Besides, women were more in demand for their labour as every activity that supports life in the hills were dependent on female labour. Also, they fetch better price in the exchange market. Their value increased when they were of marriageable age as they bring in marriage price for their masters. A skilled female captive was more in demand than a strong and healthy male.

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 journey²⁵. These raids brought in captives from all tribes, especially the hostile ones that there was already a scarcity of labour forces in the hill areas for which the hill-men had to direct their attention to the plains. Thus, we see the changing phase of raiding in the plains since roughly about the 1840s when the rajas rose to prominence: attacked the villages in the plains, massacre the inhabitants, take their heads, loot and burn their houses²⁶. In all these cases of raids, as many captives as could be laid hands on, were taken by raiders, who were reduced to slaves and formed the backbone of labour in the hill country. The direct treatment of slaves on reaching the raiders' village or sanctuary was recorded by Carey as:

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 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.²⁷

It is known that the captured slaves or *sal* were not simply kept for their sole labour. They were sometimes sold to buyers in the neighbouring areas. They also bought slaves for their own use. Existence of a certain type of slave trade is evident from colonial records. However, this topic is excluded from the present work due to constraint of page.

Role of Slaves in the Lusei economy:

Slave labour ranges from household duties to being political ambassadors from ancient times. Their labour was employed according to the demands of the slave-holding communities. They were seen as workforce that made life easier for masters and slave-holders. Scholars differ in their evaluation of slavery – where some portrayed it as benign, others depicted it as exploitative. While this is so, some scholars look not what slavery did to the slaves, but what the slaves themselves did. In this same light, the slaves of Lushai hills are studied as mere labour force for better economic stance of their owners.

The main economy of the Luseis in the early years was jhum cultivation that involved many hands. The *sal*/slaves not only filled the gap for the need of extra hands, but bore the labour necessary in the hill areas and serve as medium of exchange in the absence of money economy where female captives and *sals* earn more in the slave market. Colonial accounts record that “the men employ themselves chiefly in making forays upon weaker tribes, or in hunting. Of household work, they only clear the ground and help to carry the harvest; they also build the house. The

²⁴ Jangkhomang 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.

²⁵ Lewin, *Wild Races of South-Eastern Asia*, p. 140.

²⁶ Lister's report as quoted in Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier*, p. 287.

²⁷ Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, p. 230.

men are generally to be seen lounging about, cleaning their arms, drinking, or smoking²⁸. All labour pertaining to maintenance of the household needs and economic necessities were borne by women. This made up the free man's labour in the hillman's economic life. Therefore, slaves carried timber for construction of houses, bamboos to make parts of a house, split them etc., fed and looked after cattle and live stocks for their masters, and performed all works that required hard labour.

In the homes, men engaged 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 similar in shape to the *em*, but with open work sides, used for conveyance of wood, bamboo 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 quantity²⁹.

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 bamboo more loosely woven. These baskets are quite waterproof³⁰. 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. 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.

Men were also engaged in brass works, "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 them³¹. 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.

Weapons of war manufactured in the hills consisted 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 other weapons of war.³² Bamboo spikes completed the manufactured weapons of the Lushai hills.

In war, slaves served as forefronts in the war-path along with men from the subjugated tribes and the class of *bois*. During raiding expeditions, slaves were put in the forefront to meet the advancing enemy. When most of the enemy's arrows and bullets were spent, the best part of the Lusei raiders, (the heroes and best fighting men) take their stance. Death usually comes first to the insignificant slaves who had to obey orders implicitly. This was one reason why the Lusei heroes and fighters had survived many internecine battles and became legends and heroes to this day.

Slaves captured from the plains also served as good teachers in the manufacture of weapons, and 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

²⁸ Lewin, *Wild Races of South-Eastern Asia*, p. 134.

²⁹ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p.27.

³⁰ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 27.

³¹ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 28.

³² Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 14.

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, 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 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 bazaars³³.

In times of war or sudden attacks "Messages and errands of a *lal*, or chief, are also done by his favourite slaves. They are his ambassadors in war³⁴. 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. Should the message be a hostile one, the messenger carries a fighting dao, to which a piece of red cloth is attached.

Another method of dispatching messages in war time is by the "phuroi" which is a species of wand made out of strips of peeled bamboo, about eight inches long. If the tips of the cross-pieces be broken, a demand for black mail is indicated: a rupee to be levied for each break. If the end of one of the cross pieces is charred it implies urgency, and that the people are to come even by torch-light. If a capsicum be fixed on to the "phuroi," it signifies that disobedience to the order will meet punishment as severe as the capsicum is hot. If the crosspiece is of cane, it means that disobedience will entail corporal punishment and so on. Such a messenger needed to be clever, alert, and one ready to die till the message has reached its stipulated place or performed the 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 were ready to lay down their lives, for they had no other care left to them. This fighting strategy was mostly employed by the Lushai raiders, the result of which was that important and good warriors seldom die in battle.

As for children of *sals*, their contribution lay in enhancing 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. 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 had *bois* or *sals* reserve this duty for them. So, prior to and during harvest or whilst the crop is still 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 paraquets 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 house³⁵.

As for female slave 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 is thus always betrayed by her hand.³⁶ Every available labour was performed by the slaves of the Lushai Hills, for the Lushai was

³³ Lewin, *Wild Races of South-Eastern Asia*, W. H. Allen & Co, Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl, 1978, p. 142.

³⁴ Lewin, *Wild Races of South-Eastern Asia*, p. 133.

³⁵ Bertram S. Carey and H. N. Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, Gian, Delhi (1896), 1987, p. 211.

³⁶ Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, p. 213.

recorded by colonial administrators as “lazy, strong-willed, and loves lying in the sun and smoking rather than work”. It is no wonder that some of them were enslaved as Dun states, “due to sheer laziness”.

Slaves were an important asset to the common population of the Lushai Hills. Their overall usefulness was evident from the kind of labour they performed which were those of the lowest that the common folk detest. When someone dies, they were made to dig graves, village paths and jungles that needed clearing were kept aside for slaves or captives. In war and peace, they were the first and last to suffer, in the village they worked from dawn to dusk doing all those that commoners shunned, in the jhums they sow, weed, carry food-grains and store them in barns. Even the joy of community work like construction of *zawlbuks* was reserved for slaves. Malabika writes:

Captives were highly valued among the Lushais as the greater part of jhumming operations was performed by slaves. They were used as coolies and for tilling the soil. They were engaged by the chiefs to clear the jungle paths during the winter to facilitate raids. The slaves also constructed the bachelors’ dormitory or *Zawlbuks*, erected graves and stored food grains in the granaries. The Lushai aristocracy took pride in warfare, raids and hunting but were averse to manual labour. They left the work of cultivation entirely to the slaves. Slaves accompanied the chief’s daughter when she proceeded to her husband’s home at the time of the marriage ceremony³⁷.

With regard to division of labour, the Siyins use the expression that “A man should spend his life in fighting, hunting, and drinking, whilst labour is intended for women and slaves only³⁸. Accordingly, women slaves whether acquired in raids, bought or received as gifts were reserved as slaves to perform jhum labour like sowing, weeding, reaping, gathering and winnowing. Even transportation of the harvested crops had to be done from the jhums to the village granaries, which came to be borne by the women slaves while the men of the house engage in hunting, fishing or waging wars. The confession of slaves captured in raids bear witness to the labour performed by female slaves. Guite writes,

It is in this connection that ninety percent of captives taken in raiding expeditions always consist of women and children. Doimunte, who was captured from Chandroyparah in 1862, informed that the Kuki raiders 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 also reported that she ‘was put to heavy work, hewing wood and drawing water. In case I did not understand what they said, they used to beat me, otherwise I was kindly used. Ghunnu, another captive from Cachar in 1871, also said that the Lusheis ‘did not beat us, nor were cruel to us but we had to work hard. Our women were not insulted, but we had no meat or vegetables: only rice to eat. It was a hard life’. Paongti also reported 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 is a good spinner³⁹.

Work in the jhum fields required the hardest labour. A person had to brave the weather bear the scorching heat of sun or the downpour of rain. Situation sometimes arise that a particular piece of work for example sowing, had to be completed before the first rainfall. As many hands as could be found were usually engaged to complete the job. This is still the norms in rural areas where people still depend largely on products from their jhums. In this connection, Malabika writes that, “among the Lushais, a greater part of jhumming 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 slaves⁴⁰. When a certain crop had to be gathered before the season ends, a slave had to at this stage, compete with the time. Even free women at such times had their own share of workload. These crucial

³⁷ Malabika Das Gupta, *Economic Impact of Raids on the shifting cultivators of Tripura*, Asiatic Society, Kolkata, 2008, p.30.

³⁸ Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, p. 134.

³⁹ 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.

⁴⁰ Malabika Das Gupta, *Economic Impact of Raids on the Shifting Cultivators of Tripura*, The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, 2008, p. 30.

seasons reduce the *sals* to the status of ‘machines that produce labour’ just as their counterparts elsewhere. As it is, even free women who hold their husbands as Gods determines their status as “slaves to their husbands” (*pati*) meaning authority, employer or hero, and he is simultaneously mentioned as having the quality of dominance as God, referred again as the possessor of the woman⁴¹. Wood was the only fuel used for burning in the hills. Jungles were scoured to find fallen dry boughs and branches of trees ready for use. Besides collecting these, firewood needed to be stored for the rainy season. Big trees or boughs were felled by men in the jungle which were hewed by women. These were either left to dry in the sun or carried home in their green state and stored in stacks in one corner of the verandah beside the mortar.

During the whole year round after a whole day’s labour in the *jhums*, women would be seen carrying wood in their *paikawng* or baskets along with the tools they use during the day, a few vegetables gathered from the *jhum*, water bottles made of gourds and sometimes even the man’s bag containing his tobacco rolls, knife and cloth used to cover his head. This dry wood was hewed during the lunch break in the *jhum* hut, for a woman was never idle even during the lunch break. She prepares some simple curry which she collects while weeding. At lunch time, she had to prepare the vegetable as best she could, while the man rests in the *jhum* hut, smoking his tobacco rolls at leisure. After lunch, while the man rests, the woman had to hew firewood to be carried home in the evening. The second half of the day sees the woman weeding alongside her husband while she goes on collecting vegetables, chilly and other things necessary for the evening meal at home. Sometimes, she had to find some eatables that would delight her children on reaching home. All the things collected and the firewood were carried on their return journey home.

Water was another problem in the hills. Villages were usually set up by a source of water. But these were usually very far away either downhill or uphill. Bamboo tubes were prepared by men by which women carry water from the far-off streams, which were sometimes several miles away. The women carry six to eight such tubes filled with water at a time. During dry seasons, they had to wait in line for the small water-hole to be filled up so that they could fill their tubes with cups of dry gourds. The operation usually takes hours not to mention the time taken in coming and going to the stream or water-hole. Therefore, women had to compete in reaching the water hole first so as to get hold of the water that had gathered during the night. They had to wake up at the first cock’s crow while the men sleep in blissful peace, with very little care for the sacrifices that the woman made to give him all the comforts that allowed him to enjoy his arrogant manhood. Once at home, she had to cook, feed the pigs and chicken, attend to her children, pound rice in the mortar placed in a sort of verandah outside the door. All these being completed, she had to serve the food, pack a big lunch to be taken to the *jhum*, put out baskets-full of unhusk paddy to dry in the sun, while throwing hurried instructions to her children to guard the paddy from chicken, birds and cattle, and to fetch water at least once during the day or to look after the younger ones in her absence. The meal ends with the woman hurriedly cleaning the sparse wooden plates and pots. She was then expected to carry the tools to be used during the day along with the lunch pack, a gourd of water, the man’s tools and bags on the way to the *jhum*. This was the same story all throughout the year.

During autumn days, women collect cotton grown in the *jhum*, dry them in the sun, separate the seed from the cotton, spin them and weave them into cloth. These cloth pieces were again stitched into shirts and dress according to the need of the family members. It was a slow process as every cloth-piece was to be stitched with needles. A woman

⁴¹ Periyar E. V. Ramasami, *Women Enslaved*, Critical Quest, New Delhi, 2009, pp. 9-10.

good at needle works or spinning and weaving was highly qualified for wife-material as the manufacture of clothes was one important activity. Besides, embroidered cloths had to be weaved for the women folk to be worn at different festivals or occasion. A skilful woman was always the envy of other women folk in the village, for, she could wear the best designed cloths.

Female slaves with talents were highly in demand as they were most useful. Genna Charan's wife was taken captive not for the purpose of marrying her, selling or exchange, but for her skill in spinning. If such a slave was ever sold because of some pressing need or any other unavoidable circumstance, they earned more for the master. However, these were seldom sold for they were too useful to be parted with.

The condition of slave women was a double case of enslavement with regard to exploitation of their labour and womanhood. In ancient India in general and in the Vedic society in particular, the status and condition of women slaves were far deplorable than their male counterparts. They also outnumbered male slaves in population and acquisition just as their labour far outshone male slaves. Apart from being sources of unpaid labour and producers of slave labour, their comparatively higher utility flowed from their sexual and biological attributes. This was tied to the fact that their status was no higher than goods and commodities for trade in the market. As women slaves combined the dual function of domestic and biological reproduction, they were seen as indispensable for many ordinary, as well as royal households. They were subjected to threats of physical violence and insufferable abuses from their masters. "Indian history has recorded some of the worst forms of cruelty, vengeance, and perversion which went unchecked and unabated for generations despite rigid rules/codes of conduct of the master and punishment of the offender for violation of the provisions laid down in the Arthashastra⁴². This vulnerability from exploitation came from a situation of powerlessness, helplessness, as well as fragility of physical strength in women, which was more so in the case of slave women who were even deprived of speech and thought.

Slaves captured from the plain areas were a constant source of utility to the remote hill tribes who had little knowledge of the world outside their own for the knowledge they impart to them, however slight. But they were most useful in supplying labour. For the Lushai chiefs, "during certain seasons, when workload becomes generally too heavy even for the slaves, small parties of the common people are told off during the whole season to assist his own domestic slaves in tending the crop, repairing his house, and in supplying wood and water for the family⁴³. Women captives taken in wars, raids, bought and acquired through gifts were clubbed together in the category of slaves or *sals*.

Generally, women and children constituted the captives taken in various raids. Women were easily adaptable to their new situations and once they were married to the hillmen, they were less inclined to leave and settle down quietly. This was one common answer British administrators received whenever demands were made for the return of the captives they had taken in certain raids. For instance, Captain Stewart's order for the return of the captives taken during the Adampore raid was met with the answer that, "many of the captives, were married to Lushais, and unwilling to leave them⁴⁴. The role played by this section of humanity was immensely significant and great. The Lusei economy or for that reason, tribal populations greatly depended on the labour of womenfolk, free and slaves alike. Free women in patriarchal societies could also be compared to slaves as their condition was hardly different

⁴² Lakshmidhar Mishra, *Human Bondage: Tracing its Roots in India*, p. 27.

⁴³ Shakespear, *The Lushai-Kuki Clans*, p. 192.

⁴⁴ Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier*, p. 300.

from them. In this respect, 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 brewing⁴⁵. This being the case even with free women, one can imagine the role played by enslaved women.

The immense role played by captive slaves in the hills was marked by their influence in the biological features of the hill men. This was particularly the result of union that took place between free and slaves or between slaves of different communities in the hills. We have seen that those retained could marry and have families however insignificant. It was from this that Lewin noted “the growth of long, bushy beards in the otherwise smooth and hairless Lushai face were the result of a mixture of Bengalee blood, from the many captives they have from time to time carried away⁴⁶. They married, had off springs and multiplied in number. But they remained slaves and serfs throughout their lives unless freed or ransomed which was very rare. Their children inherit their fathers’ status.

Conclusion:

Reasons such as the stubborn nature or love of lawlessness, need for captives to bury along with the dead body of chiefs to serve them after death were attributed to the excessive Lusei raids. However, it is seen that the most significant reason for raids were the procurement of captives for labour forces as well as medium of exchange in the absence of money economy. This was so because hill tribes in very remote areas still depended largely on barter system then. These raids ended with the colonial occupation of the hills and missionary zeal. Their subsequent conversion to Christianity and the influence of western education has made the people of the hills one of the most peaceful citizens of the country.

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⁴⁵ Lewin, *Wild Races of South-Eastern India*, p. 134.

⁴⁶ Lewin, *Wild Races of South-eastern India*, p. 135.