

The Holocaust and the *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa*: A Critical Comparison

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ABSTRACT

Genocides have become an indelible scar in the history of humankind. These dark historical episodes epitomise power struggles between races and the perils of group identification. One such episode considered a unique occurrence in human civilisation is the Holocaust (1940-1945). Another seemingly forgotten historical episode is the *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* or the Seven Years' Devastation. It took place in the land of *Poirei*, now known as the state of Manipur, located in the northeastern part of India. The Seven Years' Devastation refers to the atrocities committed by the Burmese against the Meitei civilisation from 1819 to 1826. This event, which led to the signing of the Yandabo Treaty of 1826, found a prominent place in the history of Southeast Asia. This paper examines the striking similarities and the cause of genocide between the Seven Years' Devastation and the Holocaust. Moreover, the paper also studies the effects of violence in the Seven Years' Devastation and the Holocaust.

Keywords: Genocides, Holocaust, Manipur, Meitei violence, Seven Years Devastation

INTRODUCTION

In analysing the *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa*, the seven prolonged years of the devastation faced by the people of Manipur during

1819-1826, and the Holocaust, one cannot miss the numerous parallelisms between the two. The *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* that occurred in the land of *Poirei*, now Manipur, India, during 1819–1826, has striking similarities with the Holocaust that happened in Europe during the Second World War between 1941 and 1945. The *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa*, or Seven Years Devastation, was a horrific experience of the Burmese invasion of *Poirei*, now Manipur, to annihilate the Meitei race, the dominant

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race of the Manipur valley. The effect and consequences of this invasion, which nearly killed all the people of Manipur valley, have been recorded in *Cheitharol Kumbaba* or the Royal Chronicle of the Meiteis. However, Manipur was not the only kingdom that bore the brunt of Burmese invasions; Assam, her neighbouring kingdom at the beginning of King Bagyidaw's reign (1819–1837), also faced the same terrifying consequences of the Burmese attacks between 1821 and 1825 (Baruah, 1983).

Similarly, the bitter reality of the Holocaust still haunts us even today, although it happened seventy-four years ago. This horrific event is still fresh in the minds of the readers and those who directly experienced it. Nazi Germany believed in terminating those whose lives they considered worthless, known in German as *Lebensunwertes Leben*, meaning "life unworthy of life." Jason (2016) has given an interesting aspect of the Nazi ideology; he argues that

the targeting of Jews and other groups helped to solidify the regime's nationalistic side of the Nazi ideology. The socialist side of it was that in killing Jews and others, the regime collected much-needed assets with which to pursue its militaristic agenda (p. 67).

This ideology initially targeted the mentally unstable and racially inferior groups of people in Germany. However, later, it took a drastic turn, and its main

objective was eradicating the Jews. This ideology ultimately became a law known as the Final Solution. Baum (2008) examines the Holocaust as

The annihilation of an entire group occurred repeatedly in the twentieth century. While the Holocaust is the best-known example, it is not the only example nor even the one claiming the most victims, it is estimated that 6 million Jews died in the Holocaust (p. 21).

Genocide is a term coined by Rafael Lemkin, a Polish Jew Holocaust survivor. He struggled for recognition of the form of mass killing as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crimes of Genocide, 1948, as actions done with the idea of destroying the whole nation, ethnicity, race, or religious group (Baum, 2008). The United Nations terms genocide as "the ultimate crime and the gravest violation of human rights it is possible to commit" (Sautman, 2006, p. 23). All genocides have their specific context, be it the mass murder in Rwanda, Cambodia or Armenia, but all happened under different circumstances. This study explores the common elements in the two historical events, namely the Holocaust and the *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa*, by exploring the causes and effects of violence. Although the two events took place in different times and places, both share certain similar dynamics of violence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Holocaust is fairly overworked in terms of academic research, and so this literature review will mostly be about the *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa*. Scholars around the globe have conducted extensive studies and research on the Holocaust; however, minimal academic works of acceptable quality have been attempted on the Seven Years' Devastation and associated events. Moreover, there is no evidence of attempts to investigate the commonalities between the Holocaust and the Seven Years' Devastation. Due to a lack of documentation on the Seven Years' Devastation, only limited knowledge can be uncovered in fragmentary forms. This limited knowledge is primarily the product of verbal narratives passed down from generation. As part of the literature review, descriptions from the available limited number of published works on the tragedy that befell the Meiteis shall be discussed so that a proper study of the commonalities between the Seven Years' Devastation and the Holocaust can be conducted.

The Burmese rose in political power in South-East Asia in the middle of the 1st century. Around the same time, they started playing an important role in the politics of North-Eastern India. The relationship between the two kingdoms of Manipur and Burma was always characterized by an alternation of cordiality and hostility in the same mode as any neighbouring communities around the globe. There were periods of harmony, social and cultural symbiosis, matrimonial coalitions, and business trades. However, prior to the

Chahi Taret Khuntakpa, other horrendous activities prevailed within the Manipuri kingdom. It included the delusion of esteeming and entertaining unfamiliar religious indoctrinations from yonder only to find the pure ancestral wisdom repressed and exacerbated. An arrogant apathy over the tribes of Manipur was also exercised through unwarranted struggles by members of the royal family for power and governance. These activities greatly weakened the Manipuri Kingdom and allowed the Burmese to overrun Manipur, almost exterminating the Meiteis. This seven-year-long tragedy, filled with the mass killing of the Meiteis, is engraved in the pages of history as Chahi Taret Khuntakpa (Sanajaoba, 2020). *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa*, the darkest period in the history of Poirei, commenced in 1819 and continued till 1826 when Gambhir Singh liberated Manipur with the help of provincial allies and the British government (Sanajaoba, 2020). In contemplating the atrocity of *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa*, the first and most critical aspect that comes to mind is the term used in the description, '*khuntakpa*.' Presumably, '*chahi taret*' signifies seven years. However, '*khun*' suggests the concept of a settlement or a village. At the same time, '*takpa*' suggests the relinquishment of homes due to defenceless or life-threatening circumstances imposed upon the residing individuals.

Though the task of finding the closest word of conveyance in the English vocabulary becomes a little demanding, overall, it expresses the pictorial of

communities abandoning their shelters and comforts, which would then turn into forgotten ghost towns crammed with memories of trauma. The account of this horrific event introduces readers to the intensity of hatred and apathy capable and projected unto the inhabitants of Manipur by the Burmese supremacy. Through collected pieces of well-founded information and events acknowledged as accurate, the fact of the lesser-known catastrophe, '*Chahi Taret Khuntakpa*' or 'The Seven Years' Devastation' becomes an unavoidable entity that needs to be addressed that the event, *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa*, has ever been remembered from generation to generation by word of mouth. As this event has been enshrined in indelible ink in the history of Manipur, it will remain unforgettable for posterity (Indramani, 2015). The event was characterized by extreme sadism and brutality that remain unnoticed even today when human knowledge about world history has reached its pinnacle. Kamei (2016), in his book *A History of Modern Manipur* (1826-2000), writes:

After the Burmese overran Manipur ...the devastation of Manipur was going on in full swing. After a conflict of a little more than a century, Burma got a splendid opportunity to devastate Manipur. The Manipuris were not very numerous in race. But they gave the Burmese much trouble in the first half of the 18th century. In the second half, the Burmese got

temporary successes over the Manipuris by means of superior arms and numerical strength. But impossible was the task to subdue the Manipuris (pp. 12-13).

Subsequently, as the name suggests, it was an incident of the Burmese auxiliary ravaging everything in its path, trying to wipe out the Meitei race and other fellow tribes of Manipur from 1819 to 1826. Furthermore, thus, an indelible shadow still looms even to this day, for the people did not know that these premeditated causalities would lead to a horrifying event of disgrace and dishonour (Ningthoujam, 2021). This unsavoury event could have been averted if the Manipuri monarchy of that era had not been plagued with disunity and jealousy among the royal family members. The root cause of the devastation must be attributed to the turmoil raging in the relationship between the two brothers from the royal family and their strategic shenanigans to capture the throne of Manipur. The dethronement of the previous king, his brother Marjit evidently with the support of the Burmese, resulted in forging an obligatory tie with the Burmese. Hence, their implicit nefarious activities within Manipur began from then on.

However, by declining the invitation to the wedding of the Burmese king, King Marjit, who shamefully took their support in dethroning his elder brother, showed a lack of thankfulness and gratitude towards the former. Consequently, the Awa king felt snubbed, and he attacked the

kingdom of Manipur with intense hatred towards the progress and prosperity of various tribal civilizations flourishing in the valleys and hills of Manipur (Harvey, 2019). Furthermore, unfortunately, being a repulsive, crafty and ignoble character, King Marjit fled to the Cachar district for his life's safety and preserved his sanity, leaving behind thousands of innocent children and incapable parents their parents to be crucified and tormented by the Burmese auxiliaries. Many men were taken away with their palms pierced and nailed to wooden structures, thus reminiscent of the biblical suffering of the pure, the innocent and the Christ-like. As the helpless men were humiliated in front of their wives and children, women and children were not spared. In an estimation of the deaths, Kamei (2016) writes, "the population was reduced to 10,000 souls or 2000 families. Such a terrible visitation of destruction and death came rarely in the destiny of a nation" (p. 13). In addition, Singh (2009) estimates that:

About five lakh fifty thousand Manipuris were killed during this period ... More than three lakhs thirty thousand Manipuris were carried as captives. Those who refused to go were killed mercilessly on the way. It is said that about one lakh of the prisoners were executed on the way. The captive Manipuris were sold as slaves in the markets of different parts of the world. But some of them were allowed to settle in Burma (pp. 60–61).

In addition to the trauma of the warfare, certain precursor events that triggered the war must also be laid out. Long before the infamous "Merger Agreement" of 1949, which coerced the small sovereign country of Poirei into joining India as a state, alien castes and religions had always been influencing the Meitei culture, much to the dismay of many puritan and elitist believers and followers of Sanamahism (Parratt, 2009). Sanamahism or Meiteism refers to the worship of the household deity, Sanamahi. An unshakeable impression of the religion is witnessed as interlopers of foreign beliefs, though keeping their religion would also allocate a corner in their households for the same deity. Moreover, there are epistemological narratives behind the tussle to ascend to the throne between Sanamahi and the serpentine god, Pakhangba, which is philosophically striking for enthusiasts of mythology; a topic far too gargantuan and tangential to be discussed within this paper. However, attending to the history behind the interlopers that encroached and diffused their religion into the authentic customs of the Meiteis, one incident among the countless setbacks of Manipur, the '*Puya Mei Thaba*' comes to mind. It was yet another existential blow comparable to that of *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa*. It was an outrageous attempt to obliterate the theological origin of the Meiteis, and accounts of history, medicine, art, and philosophy were the prizes at stake. Many saw that event as an act of absolute treason. The incineration of all written evidence of divine wisdom obscured an unrecoverable

amount of knowledge, wisdom, and guidance for the Meitei society. That evil act destroyed completely all the age-old sources of ancestral enlightenment that had existed for so long within the safeguard of the old tradition. Furthermore, previous attacks waged by Garibniwaz and the spiteful circle of attacks and counterattacks on the Burmese and by the Burmese were the immediate cause of the Seven Years' Devastation. However, the conversion of Meiteis into Hindus, much to the dismay of many who wanted to stay true to the old convictions but feared the wrath of the monarch, was also one of the indirect causes of Seven Years' Devastation. Such an incident can be considered 'cultural genocide. Sautman (2006) described cultural genocide as any undesired, exogenous change in a subaltern ethnic group's culture; regrettably, that was precisely what happened in the case of Manipur.

The Seven Years' Devastation occurred due to several internal and external factors. The internal influence was due to the incompetent rule by successors after Garibniwaz and conspiracies and treacherous war plans within the same lineage. The external factor was the imperialist expansion of the Burmese kingdom. Mackenzie (2012) has stated that the main outbreak of Seven Years Devastation occurred "with the death of Garibniwaz there now began a war of succession of the most savage and revolting type in which a single trait of heroism to relieve the dark scene of blood and treachery" (p. 149). Garibniwaz is a significant figure in the discussion of the

Seven Years' Devastation, whether for a good or bad cause. Written illustrations exist of him invading Burma several times during his power. However, the attacks were fuelled by mawkishness as Garibniwaz revolted against the Burmese as a form of avenge for his aunt, Princess Chakpa Makhaongambi (Parratt, 1989). King Charairongba's father gave his sister's hand in marriage to the Burmese king, Sanay. The gesture was to strengthen the ties and communion between the two kingdoms. However, Sanay manifested infidelity when he decided to marry another woman and inducted her as his queen instead of Garibniwaz's aunt. King Charairongba perceived this as a grave insult to his sister and himself. Ironically, he passed away before he could avenge the ill-treatment of his sister; but he made it a point to remind the young Garibniwaz that he must get even the score with the Burmese. The impact of the genocides and the maladies in both these historical events, namely the Chahi Taret Khuntakpa and the Holocaust, require further investigation inside and outside the academic domain.

METHODS

The study analyses and compares the *Chahi Taret Khutakpa* with Holocaust, as Holocaust is the most widely known genocide and holds a unique position recorded in human history. This paper conducts a comparative study of the employment of violence in both two events. The paper focuses on two essential aspects to achieve these objectives: (i) Comparison and analysis of the causes

of genocide in the *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* and the Holocaust and (ii) Examination of the effects and partial erasure of violence. This study employs historiography, critical analysis of theories regarding violence and close observation of human existence. The data used in this paper have been collected from various historical writings on Manipur and Europe written by various scholars. This research aims to add to the discourse on the *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa*, as there are minimal resources and documentation on this historical event.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The causes of the *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* have been elaborately discussed in the Literature review section. The direct and indirect causes have been analysed and discussed. The indirect cause was the internal conflict between the two brothers of the royal families, which weakened the Manipuri Kingdom. The direct causes are the rise of Burmese imperialism and King Marjit's act of ingratitude toward the Burmese King.

After the broken alliance with the Soviet Union, in 1941 June 1941, the two enemies killed civilians in a pattern of belligerent complicity. "Hitler envisioned a racially conceived colonial demodernisation of the Soviet Union and Poland take tens of millions of lives, which gave way to a final solution as anti-Semitism goals proved to be more attainable than other" (Snyder, 2012, pp. 149-150). Bergen (2009) writes on the rise of the Nazi party:

Smooth functioning of the system did not require all Germans—or even most—to share every tenet of Nazi ideology. Enough enthusiasts could always be found to stage enormous public shows of support, such as the annual Nazi Party rallies. On a day-to-day basis, the Nazi regime only needed most people to obey the law, try to stay out of trouble, and promote their own interests as best they could under the current circumstances (p. 75).

There was social and psychological fear of the Jews occupying Germany; hence the Nazis desired to create a nation only for the Aryan race. Thus, the leading cause of the Holocaust is mainly considered due to anti-Semitism. In an interview, Primo Levi, a Holocaust survivor, says

anti-Semitism has ancient and multiple roots: at times, it has been religious in character, at other ethnic or economic. But in Germany, in its most virulent form, it was an irrational impulse, intimately biological and its make-up, even when dressed up in low-grade Romantic philosophy (Belpoliti & Gordon, 2001, p. 181).

The irrational impulse of the authoritarian and the conviction that he/she instils in the thoughtless and impulsive masses prompts the existence of such an unwarranted phenomenon. The masses

that believed in the extremely romanticised version of a totalitarian philosophy of the Aryan race led to the establishment of ghettos where Jews from different parts of Europe were deported, and mass executions were carried out. The extermination was performed systematically, where all the Jews undergo a process called 'selection,' and through this process, they undergo execution. German thinker Hannah Arendt (1951), at the outset of her work *The Origin of Totalitarian*, writes about the Holocaust stating that "a victory of the concentration camp system would mean the same inexorable doom for human beings as the use of the hydrogen bomb would mean the doom of the human race" (p. 443).

Arendt (1970), in her book on violence, remarked that "violence is nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power" (p. 35). Arendt asserts this statement by quoting C. Wright Mills's definition, saying, "All politics is a struggle for power; the ultimate power is violence" (p. 35). The Burmese and the Manipuris lusted for power and strongly believed in exacting retaliation by inflicting acts of violence. One of the Burmese's most prominent methods of violence during the Seven Years' Devastation was the mass killing of helpless folks by setting ablaze chillies within unventilated halls. Singh (2009) reports that a

big crowd of civilians consisting of women and children were forcibly pushed into big houses where there were no ventilation. When the houses were full of victims' dry chillies were burnt inside the houses

till the crowd dies of suffocation ... so ferocious and heartless were the Burmese that they felt joy to see the agony and sufferings and laughed heartily when they heard the cries of the Manipuris (pp. 60-61).

Less than a century later, synchronicity in the continuum of warfare circles back and makes itself visible in the form of the Holocaust. The sort of torture with the use of smoke as an instrument of genocide makes one wince at the thoughts of the concentration camps of the Holocaust, which applied the same form of torture. Though the smoke used for mass killing in the concentration camps was a slightly modified version of Zyklon B, a cyanide-based pesticide manufactured in 1920s Germany, made famous but disreputable by the Nazis during the war to clean the factories from rats and insects. Rosenbaum (2009) described the event of eradicating the Jews as frightening. He noted:

The Nazis intended to destroy all Jews. That aim was neither restricted to specific territory nor based primarily on what Jews had done. Instead, the Nazis' apocalyptic ideology defined Jews to be so inferior racially, so threatening, that their existence had to be eliminated root and branch (p. 28).

Furthermore, although the *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* and the Holocaust share many similar elements, these elements are distinctive in their ways. The scale of mortality due to genocide is unparalleled

in the Holocaust. Sautman (2006) quotes Winston Churchill's comments about the Nazi genocide: "There is no doubt that this is ...the greatest and most horrible single crime ever committed in the whole history of the world" (p. 3). The anti-Semitism of the Nazis was the main reason that led to the deaths of millions during the Holocaust.

The Nazis constructed concentration camps in which the deported Jews from other parts of Europe were held as captives and later exterminated through a systematic process called 'selection' by burning them inside the concentration camp itself. In the process, they selected the weak and the sickly, whom the Nazis believed would be of no use inside the camp. Comparably the Burmese used a similar method, an attempt to eradicate the whole Meitei race. The Burmese used a similar method; they burned chillies in a closed house without ventilation until the captives died of the smoke. The Burmese and the Nazi Germans shared a similar objective: their well-defined strategy to rid the world of the Meiteis and the Jews. Interestingly, the asphyxiation of the captives with smoke was not the only similar feature of the two genocides; the dictatorial character was relentless in wiping an entire race or civilization out of sheer repugnance, and outrage sparked by a sense of rejection and insult was present in both events. Skloot (2004) saw the Holocaust in the book *Literature of the Holocaust*:

By accepting the historical, inevitable fact of the Jews' persecution across centuries and by focusing his attention on the

irrational terminus of irrational behaviour, the Holocaust, Steiner edges closer to relocating the true tragic material for contemporary literary and dramatic expression in the murder of six million Jews between 1939 and 1945 (p. 51).

Unlike the *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa*, the Holocaust has many documents. Survivors had given their testimonies in witness writings, and most of these documentations are now categorised as 'Holocaust Literature'. Survivors have testified to their experiences and how they resisted the brutality inside the concentration camp. Captives in the concentration camp hoped to survive only to bear witness to the horrendous criminal activities of the Nazis. Primo Levi in *The Voice of Memory*, when asked about his Auschwitz experience, replies:

It has been the sad privilege of our generation to witness the resurgence of these monsters. Perhaps there have been, in distant times, other massacres of people, but none so ferocious, so total in both intention and effect, as that willed by Hitler's Germans in the heart of Europe, a Europe which proclaims itself the world's teacher in matters of civilization (Belpoliti & Gordon, 2001, p. 180).

Violence is a human flaw, and one can assert with these observations that the events, namely the *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* and the Holocaust, occurred under extreme

atrocious conditions violating basic human rights.

In both events, the perpetrator worked in the same ideology, 'ethnic cleansing.' Both the massacre aimed to destroy almost the whole Jewish and the Meitei race. They implemented the 'utilitarian' role to reach an inclusive goal which comprises a progression of criminality in the name of nationalism. Both atrocities can be asserted by reflecting on the planning and deliberate calculation, which became extreme and killed millions. The Burmese and the Nazi auxiliaries consisted of laymen, convinced to the core that the Meiteis and Jews were the enemies. The unthinking nature of such a kind of collectivism is what Nietzsche would call the "herd." The unconscientious shepherd of the herd directs the thoughtless herd to perform and bend in whatever conduct he/she desires. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he writes

the oddly limited character of human development—its hesitancy and lengthiness, its frequent regressions and reversals—is due to the fact that the herd instinct of obedience is inherited the best and at the cost of the art of commanding (Horstmann & Norman, 2001, p. 86).

The obedience of the herd does not undergo any critique or judgement. Furthermore, in truth, a command for violence or war is accepted without much hesitation by those that obey. It is one of the many problems of humankind and its actualisation in degeneration.

The effects of both genocides have impacted the young generations. The dispersed groups of Meiteis and Jews because of the genocides are still evident today. Many Meiteis who fled Manipur and settled in neighbouring states and countries like Assam, Tripura, and Bangladesh reminiscence the Meitei culture, even when they have created their diaspora. Similarly, Jews who settled in different parts of the globe still remember the heinous act of the Nazis and have written remarkable works as part of their Holocaust experience. From several perspectives, the Seven Years' Devastation, which is still considered an ill-fated phase in the history of Manipur, is very much like the Holocaust. Both genocides left an indelible mark on the collective consciousness of the following generations.

CONCLUSION

As per the discussions above, it can be concluded that the causes of these genocides are completely different. The causes of the *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* are the treacherous plotting among the royal family and the rise of the Burmese kingdom. In contrast, the cause of the Holocaust is the hatred against the Jews and anti-Semitism. However, the desire to exterminate a whole race can be seen in historical events. Moreover, the tool used in effecting the mass killings has certain similarities, especially the use of Zyklon B in the concentration camps in the case of the Holocaust; and the burning of chillies in closed chambers in the case of the *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa*. Thus, the incident of *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa*

parallels the decimation of Jews in 1940s Germany in terms of the insanity and the Godlessness it brought about during the war, as both instances witnessed a relentless massacre of races in its entirety. There is also a similarity in both events wherein the survivors dispersed far and wide.

The immaturity of humankind led to horrific events such as *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* and Holocaust, an extreme example of humans subjugating, tantalizing, and brutalizing other humans under the unexamined conception. The problem in group conflicts, as such, is that the individual identity and reasoning capabilities dissolve into what the group recognizes as hindrances and threats. The group then echoes their superiority and collectively envisions a delusional threat. It is shameful to admit that this is still an ongoing problem in many parts of the world. Furthermore, one can never be too safe from engaging in one of these conflicts as humankind belongs to countries that neighbouring other countries with artilleries. Moreover, though instances of percussive wars will remain mournfully vibrant, the bloodshed demands great introspection and retrospection through knowledge of violence and polity: the knowledge to reduce, if not erase, violence.

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