

The Battlefields of Imphal: The Second World War and North East India, by Hemant Singh Katoch, Oxon: Routledge, 2016, South Asia edition, pp. 179, Rs 695

*Y.M. Bammi**

In 2013, in a poll on ‘Britain’s Greatest Battle’, the twin victories at Imphal–Kohima during the Second World War were voted as the winner of the poll. If one recalls popular representations of World War II in this part of the world, what comes to mind immediately is the film *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, starring Alec Guinness. That the Japanese had reached the eastern borders of British India and posed a great threat to the war effort is something that people may take time to recollect. And despite the growing interest in military history, there are very few writers and books that tackle this subject. Hemant Singh Katoch’s book *The Battlefields of Imphal, the Second World War and North East India* thus fills a gap in our understanding of modern military history, and is a great effort in writing that brings to light one of the most important battles fought during the war.

The book is unique. Besides covering the military aspects of the fighting between the Japanese and the British Indian Army, it takes the reader along important landmarks and places related to the military and civil actions and events that took place between 1944–1945 in the hills around Imphal and Kohima. The author has produced a ‘tourist

* Lieutenant General Y.M. Bammi, PhD, has wide experience of command and staff appointments during peace and war, including at Army HQ. He has researched and published five books on security matters, participated in international seminars, and lectured on strategic topics in the USA.



history' in simple language, and describes military actions fought by the troops of 15th Army of Japan and the INA troops on one side, and the British 14th Army (with soldiers comprising of a mix of British, Indian, Gurkha, American, Canadian, African, Chinese, Australians and New Zealanders), against them, in the isolated and un-developed hills of the North East.

That this book is a form of tourist history in no way takes away from its content or presentation. In fact, the author's narrative is very engrossing and imaginative, as he has taken great care in describing the events of the War, and gives much credit to troops who fought in this far-off and often forgotten region of India. The events have been realistically described, and are accompanied by photographs of the important landmarks as well as a few maps, which will enable even a civilian reader to follow the action.

Katoch vividly describes the problems of logistics, firepower, climate, terrain, and war fighting in the hills between Burma and Imphal by both sides, and how the troops overcame them by grit and determination. The intensity of the fighting can be judged from the casualties suffered by the two sides (30,000 Japanese soldiers and 16,000 by the British-Indian Army). He is able to lucidly demonstrate the impact of the war from 1942 (when the Japanese captured Burma) to April 1944 (when they attacked Imphal and laid siege to Kohima) on the people of Manipur and Assam (then covering whole of India's Northeast).

The real value of the book lies in the fact that Katoch has physically traversed all the routes, and visited the features where the troops moved and fought during the war. Katoch's passion for military history shines throughout the book and contributes to making his account very authentic. In 2014, he also conducted group tours to the battlefields around Imphal, and brought to India the concept of 'Battlefield Tourism'.

The narrative is spread over five chapters. The first chapter covers the region of Northeast India, and how it got embroiled in the Second World War. While the Japanese advanced and captured Burma, they overstretched their logistic reach, and paused at River Chindwin in 1942. The British Indian Army retreated, and was driven back to take a stand in the last mountain ridges of Manipur around Imphal—the first open valley surrounded by low mountains, and from where the roads led down to the plains of Assam, via Kohima. In between, the Indian population of Burma was also driven back to India, resulting in an exodus of over 1 lakh refugees to Imphal, and then to Assam.

The British Indian Army, under Lieutenant General William Slim, decided to stand up to the Japanese 15th Army by occupying the mountain ridges dominating the Imphal Valley, which was developed into a logistic and support base. Its rice fields soon became airstrips, where troops and logistic support were created. The year 1943 also saw operations by the British Forces under Major General Orde Wingate (also known as the Chindits) behind Japanese forward lines. This may have given the idea to the Japanese Army to by-pass Imphal and secure Kohima, and then threaten an advance to the plains of India via Dimapur.

Slim adopted a 'Hub and Spokes' deployment. Being a Hub, Imphal was considered vital to halt the Japanese advance; and the roads and tracks leading from it to Dimapur, Ukhrul, Tiddim, Moreh, Silchar were the Spokes. However, the Japanese isolated Imphal, and managed to send a column via Ukhrul to Kohima, which cut the road between Dimapur and Imphal. This resulted in increasing British reliance on air maintenance. The Royal Air Force (RAF) and the United States Air Force (USAF) played a vital role in airlifting troops and ammunition from Arakan to Imphal, and evacuating casualties on returning flights. Despite underdeveloped communications, adverse weather, and a heavy monsoon that year, the British Indian Army fought with courage and determination, and finally halted the Japanese advance. Thereafter, the tide of fighting in the area was turned, and Slim launched the offensive to drive back the Japanese and recaptured Burma.

Katoch has covered details of the fighting adequately. Besides brief descriptions of the terrain and the opposing sides, he narrates how the operations progressed at different places even down in the trenches, bringing out the valour and courage of the soldiers. The crucial role played by the air forces, tanks, and artillery fire is covered in a story-telling style from a vantage/observation point, with the narrative highlighting the tell-tale signs and landmarks which still exist on the ground. Events of gallantry and bravery have also been included. The names of features, villages, and roads/tracks have remained the same as during the war; this makes future visits, ongoing research and study even more interesting.

In the penultimate chapter, Katoch gives his views and suggestions for improving and enhancing Battlefield Tourism in Imphal, and in the rest of India. He has already done pioneering work in this field and conducted nearly 80 group tours to Imphal. He feels that this new venture, started by him in 2013, needs more support from the institutions and the authorities. Also, there is need to have War Museums, and the

maintenance of existing War Memorials needs to be ensured. Having conducted the 70th Anniversary of the War in Imphal in 2015, he feels that the 75th Anniversary, coming up in 2019, should be planned on a grander scale and preparations for it should begin in advance.

During his research, Katoch interviewed and collected materials from a large number of actual participants who saw the war in Imphal as well as from abroad. The fact that Dr Hugo Slim (son of late Field Marshal Slim who was GOC 14 British Corps and fought and won the Battle of Imphal, and later recaptured Burma) has written the Foreword to the book indicates the significance of the subject. The author needs to be complimented for tackling a military event in a very simple and yet exhaustive manner, and pioneering the idea of Battlefield Tourism in India.

The book is recommended for all military and civil libraries. Also, it is suggested that Battlefield Tourism be given official fillip, not only in Imphal but also in other areas/battlefields of the country. One wishes that the publisher consider translating the book into Hindi and other vernacular languages, so that it reaches a wider readership.