

Ethnic Nationalism in the Cause of the Mizo Independence Movement

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Abstract

It is a well-established fact that the Mizo Independence Movement had been the result of ethnic consciousness and ethnic nationalism, stemming out of the realisation of a pan-Mizo identity, inclusive of all Mizo ethnic tribes, as well as the economic hardships suffered at the hands of the Assam and Indian governments at the peak of the severe mautam famine, that instigated the urge to fight for their autonomy. However, ethnic consciousness and issues of identity have always been a grey area in the Mizo socio-political history, with the influx of Christianity and colonial rule making great impacts and influences on the Mizo identity formation on the one hand and the imprints of the traditional social setup, norms and customs still exerting influence and reverberating across all sections of the society and polity till today. Thus, based on these two outstanding variables impacting Mizo identity formation and ethnic consciousness, the paper aims to trace the development of Mizo identity from the pre-British period to the post-colonial period, up until the outbreak of the Independence Movement in 1966, and attempts to underline how ethnic consciousness was the underlying factor that led to the outbreak of the Mizo Independence Movement.

Keywords: Ethnicity. Independence, Identity, Mizo, Movement

Introduction

The Mizo Independence Movement marked a pivotal phase in the socio-political history of the Mizo. While there is a plethora of literature regarding the course and impact of the Mizo Independence Movement, much is not heard about the role played by ethnicity and identity as the cause for the outbreak of the movement. In the general discourse on the causes of the Mizo Independence Movement, political maladministration and regional negligence are often cited as the most common factors for the discontentment of the Mizo people, which led to the eventual outbreak of the Movement in 1966, spearheaded by the Mizo National Front (MNF). However, the ethnic dimension and questions of identity, which had formed the core ideology of the MNF, the instigator of the movement and the galvaniser of the nationalistic sentiment of the Mizo people, have often been overlooked in the discourse of the Independence Movement. Hence, the main aim of the paper is to trace, examine, and analyse the Mizo ethnic and identity formation from the pre-colonial period, its development throughout the colonial period, and its current state of nature in the post-colonial period, all the while analysing the various factors that contributed to the birth and development of Mizo ethnic identity formation in the general discourse of Mizo socio-political history and how ethnicity and identity served as one of the ideological cornerstones in the outbreak and course of the Mizo Independence Movement.

For our discussion in the paper, it is imperative to discuss the implications of the term 'ethnic identity' from its very root meaning. The term "*ethnic identity*" could be best understood and explained by examining its etymological origins. The term "*ethnic*" has Greek and Latin derivational origins, namely "*ethicus*" and "*ethnikas*", both meaning "*nation*" (Trimble and Dickson 2005). However, the term *ethnic* per se could not be used as a marker for determining a nation's ethnicity or identity; in other words, it requires a context wherein it could derive its meaning and utility. It is at this point that the Greek word "*ethos*", meaning custom, disposition, or trait, comes into the picture. Trimble and Dickson (2005) theorised that '*ethnikas*' and '*ethos*' taken together can mean a band of people (nation) living together who share and acknowledge common customs (Trimble and Dickson 2005). This brings us to the second part of the theoretical

construction of the term "*ethnic identity*", namely, *identity*. The term "*identity*" is derived from the Latin word "*identitas*", which is further derived from the Latin word "*idem*", meaning "*same*" (Simpson and Weiner 1989). Moreover, it could also be defined as an outward manifestation of one's inner self, an individual's understanding of who he is and to whom he belongs. Identity grows in the first place out of a distinction between one's true inner self and an outer world of social rules and norms that does not adequately recognise that inner self's worth or dignity (Fukuyama 2018). Hence, by combining the two terms to form a single entity, it could be concluded that the term "*ethnic identity*" denotes or implies a group or nation of people who shared common customs, practices, traditions, history, or even geographical proximity or territorial sameness. It is this very term, 'ethnic identity', which played a crucial role towards the emergence of the Mizo as a nation, and the underlying principles and conception of ethnicity and identity, in other words, Mizo ethnicity and Mizo identity are the two most, but often, overlooked concepts that had a direct bearing on the outbreak of the Mizo Independence Movement on the one hand and the formulation and development of contemporary Mizo ethnic and identity conceptions on the other.

Based on the above discussion of the term "*ethnic identity*" and its etymological origins and implications, it is now possible to expand our discussion of ethnic identity in the context of Mizo society and how ethnicity and the urge of the need to carve out a distinct identity by the Mizo became the ultimate cause, above all other factors, for the launching of the Mizo Independence Movement in 1966.

Methodology

The research is based on content analysis of social science research. Data for the research are collected through unstructured interviews and existing literature on the subject of study—books, journal publications, articles, etc. For the purpose of the research, manifest content analysis is used to identify and examine the underlying intentions, values, ideologies, and sentiments of the subject group over a period of time based on the available data collected. At the same time, latent content analysis is also used to examine the collected data in order to theorise and examine three main themes within the context of Mizo ethnic identity formation and the role that it played in the course and history of the Mizo Independence Movement, namely, the origin of Mizo ethnicity and

identity, the basic difference and course of development of Mizo ethnicity and identity from pre-colonial to the post-colonial period, and lastly, the significance of and role played by ethnicity and identity in the Mizo Independence Movement.

The conceptual formulation and perception of the very term "*Mizo Identity*" is still a point of contention in academic and intellectual discourse till today. Before the advent of the British, the Mizo were ruled by the chiefs, who possessed and exercised absolute authority in all spheres of public life upon their subjects. Hence, the fact that the Mizo and their territory, the erstwhile Lushai Hills, were a part and parcel of the British administrative setup during the colonial rule and also the fact that the region continued to be a part of the Indian Union, forming a part of the state of Assam after India gained independence, presented a completely different picture as compared to the former self-ruled and autonomous administrative mechanism exercised by the Mizo chiefs upon their subjects in the pre-colonial period. In effect, these three important eras in the socio-political history of the Mizo—the pre-colonial period, the colonial period, and the post-colonial period—were periods wherein the Mizo society underwent drastic and contrasting changes and adjustments that had far-reaching impacts not only on the social, economic, and political development of the Mizo people but also on the realm of Mizo identity formation and the emergence of ethnic consciousness. Mizo identity did not just appear but is the product of specific long-term historical and cultural processes (Pachau 2014). To further understand and analyse the emergence, development, and crystallisation of Mizo identity and ethnic consciousness that came with it, it would be beneficial to trace the emergence and development of identity and ethnic consciousness during the pre-colonial period, colonial period, and post-colonial period.

Mizo Identity during the Pre-Colonial Period

The pre-colonial Mizo history, which was dated by a noted Mizo historian, B. Lalthangliana, as spanning a period of about 300 years, i.e., 1580-1890 AD (Lalthangliana 2014, p. 348), and which, according to another noted Mizo historian, Siama, spanned around 200 years, i.e., 1700-1889 AD (Siama 1953, p. 57), was a period that is unique in itself as compared to the colonial and post-colonial period. During this period, the Mizo (then called Lushai) were ruled by the chiefs. The Lushai chiefs ruled their own villages independently, such that there was no

coherent centralised administrative system that governed the system of governance of the various chiefs. However, the most notable observation could be made of the fact that the chiefs were not referred to by their individual names but were rather identified and referred to based on their clan, i.e., *Sailo* chief, *Fanai* chief, *Zadeng* chief, and so on (Liangkhaia 2002). This form of identification formed the foundational basis upon which the identity of the Mizo was constructed. On the lines of the form of identification of their chiefs, the residents of a particular village (a single village would normally constitute one administrative unit, wherein a chief and his Council of Elders known as *Khawnbawl Upa* were the ultimate source of authority and arbiter over their subjects, i.e., the residents of the village) would identify themselves, not based on family lineage, ancestry, or other markers of identity, but based on their own respective clans, their place of residence, and the clan name of the chiefs that ruled over them. Thus, their affiliation to a particular clan and their belonging to a particular village under a particular chief would define who they were and upon whom they would be identified. Subsequently, loyalties were rendered to their own respective chiefs and villages. However, intra-village migration often occurs, where people would leave one village and reside in other villages. But, since identities are closely linked with the clan of their chiefs and their place of residence, more often, people would shift from the village of one clan chief's village to that of the village of a chief who belongs to the same clan as that of their former chief in their former villages. Hence, during the pre-colonial period, the Mizo would identify themselves, not as the common generic term *Mizo*, as is the case today, but as belonging to a particular clan, having a particular chief or a citizen of a particular village as such that, '*kei chu chu mi kha mi hnam, chu mi kha mi Lal khua-a mi chu ka ni (I am from a so-and-so clan belonging to the village of the so-and-so chief), tends to be the common denominator of their self-identity as well as their Mizo identity. In other words, their identification based upon a particular clan and their belonging to a particular village of a particular chief would be the marker upon which they would be identified and wherein their identity lies. In fact, as Lalvunga aptly commented, "The early Mizo seldom asked strangers to which village they belong. Rather, they asked to whose village, i.e., to which clan chief's village, they belong" (Khangte 2014, p. 156).*

At the same time, inter-village and inter-clan rivalries and conflicts were frequent among the chiefs of various villages during the pre-colonial period. Hence, there exist no markers of common Mizo identity that emerged from within their commonly shared socio-cultural

frameworks, comprehensive of all clans, that would forge them as a single coherent ethnic entity. Although they were aware of the fact that they all shared common ancestry and spoke a common language, they did not seem to conceive a pan-Mizo identity, which would bind them as a homogenous ethnic group (Khiangte 2014, p. 156). As a result, ethnic identity during the pre-colonial period tends to be clan-based ethnic identity rather than a pan-Mizo ethnic identity. Thus, during the pre-colonial period, the Mizo identified themselves from others as well as defined their identity, in other words, of who they are, based upon their collective consciousness of their respective clan sameness rather than on being a homogenous ethnic group. Their profound identification with their respective clans defined the conception of what their *identity* is, as well as their perception of who the *others* are during the pre-colonial period.

From the above observation, it could be construed and conceptualised that Mizo identity during the pre-colonial period could be identified and studied within the framework of what Pachuau referred to as 'situational identity', rather than identity based on primordialism (Pachuau, 2014, p. 11). Following from this, the Barthian conception that 'it was not the cultural stuff that the boundary enclosed, but the boundary and the processes of recruitment that were vital' (Pachuau, 2014, p. 20) holds true in analysing ethnicity and identity in the context of Mizo identity during the pre-colonial period, because in the pre-colonial period, the Mizo conception of identity and the way in which they construed themselves, as well as their relationship and identification with and in comparison to others, was not determined by the territories or boundaries within which they are located. Rather, their sense of self-ascription and construction of identity based on their clan-based ethnicity and the fluidity of their conception of identity, i.e., based on whom and which clan they identified themselves with, formed the core of the situational conception of their ethnicity and identity during the pre-colonial period.

Mizo Identity during the Colonial Period

The colonial period, i.e., the period during which the then Lushai Hills was under the administrative rule and authority of the British government, ushered in new systems of administration and altered the socio-cultural norms of the Mizo through the introduction of Christianity by the missionaries as well as the new system of education introduced by them. In short, the advent of the Britishers in the Lushai Hills and the western-orientated administrative

setup and forms of education that they brought along completely changed the socio-political landscape of the Mizo, thereby ushering in a new type of Mizo society and polity. Although the Britishers were wise and careful enough not to intrude into the cultural and social structure of the Mizo society and destroy the existing age-old socio-cultural fabric of the Mizo, it was inevitable that the very presence of the British would lead to changes in the life of the people (Kipgen 1997).

However, it could be safely concluded that the Britishers did not plan to colonise or rule over the Lushai Hills at the very outset, nor did they intend to modernise the Mizo people. In fact, the Mizo were largely unheard of by the Britishers up until when Chittagong was ceded to Robert Clive in 1777, and then when a *Palian* (one of the Mizo clans) chief raided Sylhet (Pachua 2014). From then on, the Mizo chiefs frequently raided their surrounding areas of Chittagong Hill Tracts, Manipur, Silchar, Sylhet, and Tripura frontiers, thereby becoming quite troublesome for the British administrators in the aforementioned areas. Moreover, such raids by the Mizo chiefs became more frequent, both in terms of number and intensity, such that between 1869 and 1871, there were as many as 25 raids conducted by the various Mizo chiefs in their adjoining areas (Lalthangliana 2014). The increasing frequency of these raids by the Mizo chiefs was considered a credible threat and encroachment into their jurisdictional areas that the Britishers felt the need to retaliate against, thereby ultimately resulting in the two British-Lushai Expeditions, also known as the Chin-Lushai Expeditions of 1871-72 and 1889-90. These two expeditions and the Second Chin Lushai Expedition of 1889-90 in particular marked the end of the autonomy and absolute rule of the Mizo chiefs over their subjects. Moreover, the Chin-Lushai Expedition of 1889-90 also marked the formal annexation of the Lushai Hills into the British Union under the Foreign Jurisdiction Act, 1890, and it was also declared as a Scheduled Area under the Scheduled District Act, 1874, and ultimately, in 1898, the Lushai Hills ultimately came to be administered as one of the districts of Assam (Zamawia 2007 and Pachua 2014). These administrative divisions of the erstwhile Lushai Hills by the Britishers and the ultimate submission of all the Mizo clans and their chiefs under one common ruler, namely the British, greatly altered the mindset of the Mizo people, causing them to re-examine their values, ideals, and perceptions to great degrees. Particularly, the imposed boundary demarcation of what they considered to be their homelands and territories for centuries by the Britishers greatly hurt the sentiments of the Mizo people, which, in turn, had a great bearing on their cultural affinities as well as their conceptions and perceptions of Mizo ethnicity and

identity. As Edward Said aptly remarked, on one side of the colonial divide was a white Christian Europe whose various countries, principally Britain and France, but also Holland, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Russia, Portugal, and Spain, controlled most of the earth's surface. On the other side of the divide, there was an immense variety of territories and races, all of them considered lesser, inferior, dependent subjects (Said 1993, p. 171-172). The Mizo are a part of the other side of this colonial divide, and this conception gradually crept into the Mizo psyche, thereby greatly contributing to the transformation of their conception of their identity and ethnicity during the colonial period. Hence, apart from the cultural markers such as language that already existed in the pre-colonial period and which had served as one of the most important markers of ethnicity and identity, the importance of which was although much unbeknownst to them during the time, the Mizo had a new important cultural and ethnic marker in the colonial period, which came into existence as a result of the territorial demarcation and alteration of their erstwhile boundaries by the Britishers under a single common administrative rule, namely, the territorial marker, which further redefined the concept of identity among the Mizo people. Hence, although there seemed to be certain cultural markers, especially a common language basis that has contributed to the formation of Mizo identity, the crystallised form, i.e., Mizo identity, has resulted from the boundaries created as a result of colonialism (Pachau 2014). It is noteworthy that during the pre-colonial period, the Mizo chiefs did not have definitive or detailed boundaries and territorial demarcations to separate or distinguish their own areas of jurisdiction, apart from a loose, verbal, and informal understanding based upon the commonly accepted principle of *Khuavang Ri Kham Sa*.¹ However, as stated above, with the advent of the British, such age-old customs of the Mizo people, which had served the community and society so well for centuries, were drastically altered by the British authorities, who began to demarcate and fix the boundaries of the Lushai Hills solely to serve their own administrative and security needs and conveniences. These actions of the British not only undermined the authority of the chiefs but also greatly affected the definitions of territoriality and identity among the Mizo people. Since the Mizo people and their conception of identity were closely interconnected with their territorial affinities since the pre-colonial period, the alteration of their erstwhile territories into various administrative units by the Britishers not only affected changes in the territorial dimension of the Lushai Hills but also in the cultural and ethnic identity formation of the Mizo people itself. As Joy L.K. Pachau aptly observed, "The

delineation of boundaries linked the people with the land in a way that was unknown in earlier times, providing scope for a broader macro-identification amongst the people as well as distinguishing them from others” (Pachua 2014, p. 99). The imposition of the Inner Line Regulation through the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873 and the Chin Hills Regulation of 1896 further reshaped the conception of identity and ethnicity among the Mizo people such that the concept of 'outsiders', a term particularly used to denote those living outside the Inner Line areas, emerged as one of the outstanding markers of the Mizo people in defining and differentiating their identity from that of the others. Hence, the 'Hills', i.e., the Lushai Hills, a creation of the Britishers, wherein the Mizo people found their homeland and where they could be 'themselves', began to occupy a sentimental place among the Mizo people and also greatly contributed to the creation and emergence of their ethnic distinctiveness. As a result, the hills were often used to distinguish themselves from the people of the plains, like a hills-plains dichotomy, and ultimately became a potent symbol of nationalism (more often translated into 'Mizo Nationalism' today) (Pachua 2014). Hence, it was from this instance, when the Britishers confined the Mizo people under a single colonial administration, that the perceptions of the Mizo people about their own identity began to undergo a gradual and long-lasting change. The Britishers also, on their part, whether knowingly or unknowingly, by altering the existing boundaries and territories of the Lushai Hills through various decrees, acts, and legislation that they believed to be in the 'best interests' of the people, had interfered, with long-lasting consequences, with the culture and identity of the Mizo people.

In fact, the term 'Lushai' itself was not conceived by the Mizo themselves but rather a colonial construction.² In the same vein, the classification of the Mizo as 'tribals' by the British administration had a great bearing on the conception of Mizo identity. In other words, bounded notions of identity were consolidated through the practice of classification: the 'tribes' recorded initially as 'marauding hordes' were in time given an identity, i.e., tribal identity (Pachua 2014). From the preceding observations, it could be concluded that the British system of administration caused a shift of perception about the notion of Mizo identity, both from the perspectives of the Britishers as well as of the Mizo themselves. Under the colonial rule, the Mizo, both common people and their chiefs, were now subjects of the British empire on equal footing. This led to the emergence of common ethnic consciousness and a common identity, i.e., Mizo identity, that cut

across all clan-based identifications in the pre-colonial period. They no longer see the other Mizo clans as constituting the ‘other’, as was the case in the colonial period, but rather, as their brethren. An inference could be drawn here from the African experience of European colonialism, wherein the British government took it upon themselves that their policies of imperialism and colonialism were justified because the colonial government and their administration rendered far better governments for the colonies, which they had never experienced before, and which not only is a benefit to them but is undoubtedly a benefit to the whole of the civilised West (Said 1995, p. 33).

To further substantiate and underline the impact of colonialism on the Mizo ethnic identity formation, it is imperative to examine the development of various events during the British colonial rule from three different perspectives, as propounded by a noted Mizo historian, C. Hermana. According to Hermana, the Britishers administered the Mizo people under two types of administration—autocratic administration, where the superintendent assumed the role of the overall source and administrator of law and order, the role that was previously assumed by the Mizo chiefs. Secondly, a customary administration, an administration run by the Mizo chiefs under the aegis of the Mizo chiefs, and thirdly, a theocratic administration, spearheaded by the Christian missionaries (Hermana 1999, p. 4), which ultimately brings us to the discussion of Mizo Christianity, an ideal that had far-reaching impacts on Mizo ethnicity and identity formation, an ideal that reverberated throughout the course of the Mizo Independence Movement and even till today.

One of the foremost and arguably one of the most influential developments with regard to the evolution and transformation of the Mizo society and polity in general and in the Mizo identity formation during the colonial period could be attributed to the advent of Christianity in Mizoram. Political stability and a centralised administration brought about by the British in the Mizo Hills paved the way for Christian missionaries to venture into the Hills and begin their work of evangelisation. The first Western missionary to set foot in Mizoram, the then Lushai Hills, was a young Welsh Presbyterian missionary working at Shella in the Khasi Hills (Kipgen 1996). The arrival of Rev. Williams at Aizawl on the 20th of March, 1871, marked the first advent of Christian missionaries in the Lushai Hills. However, the first organisation to send their missionaries into the Lushai Hills to spread Christianity among the Mizo people was the Arthington Aborigines Mission, whose two missionaries, J.H. Lorrain and F.W. Savidge, reached *Sairang* village, on the

outskirts of Aizawl, on 11th January, 1894 (Kipgen 1996). Unlike their predecessor, Rev. Williams, these two missionaries stayed on in the Lushai Hills and thereby laid the foundation for the establishment of a Christian mission in the Hills and the eventual evangelisation of the Mizo as a whole. The pioneer Christian missionaries were followed by other missionaries, most notably from the Welsh Presbyterian Mission in 1897, the Baptist Missionary Society in 1903, and the Lakher Pioneer Mission in 1907, among others (Kipgen 1996). The advent of these Christian missionaries and the various initiatives that they started as a part of their evangelisation work gradually altered the socio-political landscape of the Mizo society and eventually, the formation of a new concept of Mizo identity in the later years.

The advent of Christianity and the transformative work carried out by the Christian missionaries greatly altered and changed the socio-political landscape of the Mizo society and polity. The preaching methods of the Christian missionaries were based upon the foundations of social and moral reformation and restructuring through Christian principles, which they embarked on to achieve through social activities and initiatives such as the establishment of schools, hospitals, churches, etc. With it came a new definition of Mizo identity, a definition not based on lineage, chiefs, or villages, the most common markers and identifiers of Mizo identity, namely, a 'Mizo Christian' identity. After the introduction of Christian teachings and ideals by the Christian missionaries, being Mizo came to be synonymous with being Christian. In fact, as one of the notable Mizo historians, Siamia noted, "It had become a shameful thing not to be a Christian" (Siamia 1953, 169). Hence, a new Mizo identity, namely, a 'Mizo Christian identity', began to emerge as an ethnic marker for the Mizo. Religion, i.e., Christian religion, now became the main denominator of their identity, the defining characteristic of who they were. Many of what used to be part and parcel of Mizo customs, traditions, and social setup withered away in the face of the introduction of Western-orientated Christian ideals and principles, the most notable of which was the abolition of *Zawlbuk*,³ one of the pillars of Mizo society in terms of security and an effective social training centre for the youths. This traditional institution of the Mizo society was abolished by the then Superintendent of the Lushai Hills, N.E. Parry, in 1938. The reason for the abolition of *Zawlbuk* was mainly because the Christian missionaries and early church leaders considered it 'worldly' in the sense that *Zawlbuk* was a place where every male adult and middle-aged man, even teenagers, was expected to be present every night, which, therefore, was a hindrance for

Christian churchgoers and the missionaries alike to conduct fellowship and church meetings. Hence, it could be concluded that it was Christianity that rendered the institution of *Zawlbuk* obsolete, based on Christian ideals and principles. The abolition of the institution of *Zawlbuk* created a vacuum in the society. There exists no other social institution as effective as *Zawlbuk* that could impart social values and ethics nor an efficient mechanism to undertake public affairs in the village. The situation was further aggravated by the fact that the Mizo chiefs and their council of elders had lost much of their authority and sovereignty as the sole administrators of their respective villages, thereby losing the significance and respect of their people at the hands of the British colonialist administrators. Moreover, the emergence of more and more enlightened and educated youths from amongst the social ranks resulted in the birth and emergence of civic and political consciousness among the Mizo. This resulted in the birth of civil society organisations, most notably the Young Lushai Association (later renamed the Young Mizo Association) on 15th June, 1935, with Rev. L. Evans, a Presbyterian missionary, as its first president, and the *Mizo Zirlai Pawl* (MZIP), a student body, on 27th October, 1935, and eventually, the establishment of the first political party in the history of the Mizo, namely, the Mizo Union, on 6th April, 1946. It was against these social and political backdrops that the Mizo National Front (MNF), the organisation that launched the Mizo independence movement, emerged in the early 1960s.

In other words, the conception of ethnicity and identity during the colonial period was largely shaped by the administrative and evangelistic missions of the colonial rulers, not only among the Mizo but in all colonised areas around the world. This phenomenon was most clearly defined and elaborated by Edward Said when he commented on Sir Arthur James Balfour's address to the British House of Commons on 13th June, 1910, regarding the British imperial and colonial policies in Egypt. The whole speech was logically summarised by Said with these intriguing observations: "England knows Egypt; Egypt is what England knows; England knows that Egypt cannot have self-government; England confirms that by occupying Egypt; for the Egyptians, Egypt is what England occupies and now governs; foreign occupation therefore becomes the very basis of contemporary Egyptian civilisation" (Said 1995, p. 34). Drawing an inference from this observation, it could be safely concluded that what the Mizo knew outside of their pre-colonial primitive socio-political administration was whatever the colonial rulers imposed and imbued upon them. Hence, their notion of who constitutes the 'other' for themselves as well as their conceptions

of who they were – in short, their identity – was limited within the framework of the colonial rule and administration. In other words, colonial administration shaped the conception of Mizo identity during the colonial period, and as Pachuau puts it, belonging was now conceived of as being to a specific territory (Pachuau 2014, p. 221), a territory specified and demarcated by the British colonisers, within which Mizo ethnic identity assumes a new entity, a colonial-induced and defined identity.

The ethnic dimension of the Mizo independence movement

To have a clear picture of how ethnicity and ethnic nationalism played a key role in the outbreak of the Mizo independence movement in 1966, it is imperative to examine the nature of the birth of the Mizo National Front (MNF) and the underlying ideals and principles that led to the formation of the organisation in its formative years prior to the launch of the independence movement.

Two notable civil society organisations predated the MNF before its eventual establishment as a political party in 1961. The first organisation was the Mizo Cultural Society, and the other was the Mizo National Famine Front (MNF). The Mizo Cultural Society was founded in 1958 as a purely non-political organisation with Laldenga, the founder and president of the MNF, among the office bearers as junior secretary. Along with Laldenga, the Society was the product of the ethno-political consciousness of some Mizo intellectuals for promoting and preserving the customs, traditions and values of Mizo society and polity during the time. The founding members of the Cultural Society were concerned about the impact that Western culture and mainland Indian entertainment culture had on the Mizo society, especially the youths during the time. In many public places, variety shows, birthdays and wedding celebrations, etc., ‘non-Mizo’ songs and music have become a regular feature and popular theme among the Mizo youths. This was perceived as a threat to Mizo cultural values and its ethnic foundations, which would turn out to be a dangerous cultural invasion by the Cultural Society. It was against this backdrop that the Mizo Cultural Society was formed, with the principal motive of protecting and promoting Mizo ethnic cultural values. The foundational principle upon which the Society was founded and built was best summarised by R. Vanlawma, one of the early Mizo politicians, one of the founding members of the Mizo Union, the first political party in Mizoram and educated youth, when he stated that,

“During the time of the establishment of the Mizo Union, we began our build-up to establish the party by creating awareness among the members of the Young Mizo Association (YMA) to convince and unify the general public to support the establishment of a political party. Likewise, we conceived the idea to establish an organisation by the name of Mizo Cultural Society, within which we shall promote and preserve Mizo traditional custom, tradition and culture and the notion that our land, i.e., Mizoram, belongs only to the Mizo. In that way, we hope to guide the consciousness of the Mizo towards the importance and necessity of self-sufficiency and autonomy” (Vanlawma 2006).

From the above statement, a clear inference could be drawn about the fact that the underlying principle that guided the founding members of the Mizo Cultural Society was deeply rooted in Mizo ethnic nationalism and a patriotic zeal to be self-sufficient and independent. Hence, the main objective of the Society was to inculcate a sense of Mizo identity, promote nationalistic feeling, and lay stress upon the integration of all Mizo contiguous areas of the neighbouring states (Chawngsailova 2007). Basing itself upon the above-stated ideals and principles, the Mizo Cultural Society began to organise public meetings at various places to disseminate their propaganda and popularise their principles, which had a great appeal among the public and attracted large gatherings. However, before much could be done, the entire Lushai Hills was gripped by the severe *mautam*⁴ famine from early 1959. The famine could be considered a blessing in disguise for the Mizo Cultural Society, which had already popularised itself among the public; in fact, the *mautam* famine provided ample opportunity and platform for the leaders of the Society to further their ethnic claims and appeals among the general public. Incidentally, in 1959, during the initial stage of the famine, a rumour spread about an alleged starvation-related death in the western part of Mizoram, to which the Assam Government sent one of its Cabinet Ministers, Capt. W.A. Sangma, to verify the matter. The arrival of Capt. Sangma at Aizawl provided a golden opportunity for the Mizo Cultural Society leaders, who organised a massive protest rally to express their discontentment and condemnation of the Assam Government and the Mizo District Council government⁵ for their alleged failure to address the hardships caused by the famine. This was the ultimate precursor of the MNFF, after which the leaders of the Society started to be heavily involved in the famine relief efforts. Besides, the Cultural Society was ill-equipped to handle severe famine conditions, at which point the Mizo National Famine Front (MNFF) was formed in

1960 with R. Dengthuama as president and Laldenga as the secretary (Dutta 2013). The MNFF, although a famine-relief organisation, still carried upon the patriotic zeal, ethnic nationalism and the will to protect Mizo identity and culture. Moreover, it could now add to its repertoire the sentimental appeal to the famine-stricken public about the importance and need to be self-sufficient and independent. In short, it exploited the famine situation by making the Mizo's cultural and religious differences from the rest of India seem incompatible with Mizo identity (Pachua 2014).

By the time the famine was over and things began to gradually return to normalcy in the district in 1961, the MNFF had become greatly popular among the Mizo people due to their anti-government slogans and the support that they had meticulously built and drawn since the days of the Mizo Cultural Society. With the famine now over, the MNFF, an offshoot of the Mizo Cultural Society, instantly and virtually lost its significance and importance, and the need started to be felt among the leaders of the MNFF to establish a political party. Conveniently, the election to the Third Mizo District Council was also only a year away, slated to be held in 1962. Hence, the erstwhile leaders of the Mizo Cultural Society and the MNFF, notably Laldenga and R. Vanlawma and other like-minded persons, formed the Mizo National Front (MNF) party on 22nd October, 1961 (Zamawia 2007).

An important observation that has often been overlooked with regard to the study of the history of the Mizo independence movement was how the slogan of the movement, popularised by the MNF, had a direct bearing on the Mizo conception of identity and ethnicity. The slogan of the MNF (which is also the slogan of the party till today) since its establishment is *Pathian leh Kan Ram Tan* (For God and the Nation). The very essence of this slogan was closely linked with the Mizo conception of identity in the post-colonial period, i.e., a Mizo Christian identity. By skilfully combining their cause for instigating an armed independence movement as embedded upon the principles of their religion and for the betterment of the Mizo nation, the MNF succeeded in depicting their independence movement as an ethno-nationalist movement, a movement which they believed was required to preserve their Christian ideals and to carve out a separate Mizo ethnic nation for the Mizo people. In other words, Christian identity gave the Mizos a sense of collective identity and belonging. This further paved the way for the creation of a unified political identity that overrode former inter-tribal differences (Pachua 2014, p. 173). Hence, it is in this context that the Mizo identity in the post-colonial period, leading up to the outbreak of the Mizo

independence movement, could be conceptualised and analysed. From the situational conceptual framework of identity during the pre-colonial period and the colonial-induced and defined identity during the colonial period, the Mizo's conception of ethnicity and identity had been redefined and reconceptualised as a 'Mizo Christian identity', meaning being Mizo is fully intertwined with their religious beliefs and Christian ideals and principles. It is this very conception that the MNF skilfully employed to justify the need and importance for the Mizo to rise up and fight for their freedom and independence, at the core of which was the preservation of Mizo ethnicity, identity and religion against what they labelled as '*ram dang mi*' (all non-Mizo people, particularly their Indian brethren) and '*ring lo mi*' (non-believers, specifically referring to all those professing religion other than Christianity). This is what constitutes the ethnic dimension of the Mizo independence movement, one of the most important dimensions for studying the movement.

Conclusion

As discussed, and outlined in the preceding sections, the development and transformation of Mizo identity from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial period had great ramifications for the outbreak of the Mizo independence movement. The conceptions of ethnicity and identity were directly linked to the establishment of the Mizo National Front (MNF) in 1961 as well as the conception of nationalism in the Mizo psyche.

Since its very inception, apart from independence, the MNF ideology was based on the idea of ‘greater Mizoram’, that is, the bringing together of the various Mizo tribes and clans scattered in the neighbouring countries and states under one umbrella (Nunthara 1996). The same was also reiterated by R. Zamawia when he stated that, “Right from the time of its establishment, the ultimate objective of the MNF was to procure freedom for Mizoram and the Mizo people. However, to put that in writing seems improper, and hence, it was written as ‘to exercise one’s own highest will power for one’s own political administration’, in other words, ‘political self-determination.’”⁶ This secessionist tendency and political motives were also at the core of both the Mizo Cultural Society and the Mizo National Famine Front, although, at the outset, both organisations presented themselves as voluntary civil society organisations, intended to be purely non-political. The nationalistic tendencies and the urge to promote, protect and preserve Mizo ethnic nationalism and distinct identity had always been the underlying guiding and foundational principles, the driving force that had instigated the leaders of the MNF to launch an independence movement and who were all quite familiar with the Mizo Cultural Society and the MNFF, the

predecessors of the MNF. Hence, as one of the noted Mizo scholars, Chawngsailova aptly observed, “The MNF movement was not accidental nor a sudden occurrence but was the outcome of a clandestine plan and preparation.” It was deeply rooted in the social, political and cultural milieu of the society which supported the movement” (Chawngsailova, 2012, p. 44). In other words, the Mizo independence movement was not simply a result of anti-Indian or anti-government sentiment as a result of the *mautam* famine or just a result of an ulterior political motive. Rather, the ground for the independence movement had already been laid way back in the colonial period, wherein the erstwhile cultural, ethnic and identity markers of the early Mizo were redefined, altered, reshaped and restructured by the incoming British colonial administration and the subsequent advent of Christianity among the Mizo. Colonialism ushered in a new definition of Mizo identity, which was alien to the Mizo people and which shook the foundations of their ethnicity, their sense of belonging and even their perception of ‘others’, i.e., the way they see and perceive all those who do not belong to the Mizo tribe or clan. Although the definition of ethnicity by and large remains virtually the same throughout the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods, the definition and perception of Mizo identity, as stated above, underwent massive transformation and redefinition. This clash of the ideals of ethnicity and identity was the main factor that led to the emergence of various factionalism within the social ranks, such as *Kristian leh Kristian lo* (Christians and non-Christians) during the early periods of the advent of Christianity, *Lal ban duh leh duh lo* (those in favour of abolishing chieftainship and those opposing it), etc., that resulted in deep fractures and cleavages within the social milieu.

However, one of the most outstanding ethnic and identity issues that had the most profound impact till today regarding the ethnicity and identity debate among the Mizo, which could also be regarded as one of the foremost factors that culminated in the independence movement, was the emergence of a new definition of Mizo identity. This new definition, the foundation of which was laid by the Christian missionaries during the colonial period, was popularised and propagated by an educated class of people who emerged in the Mizo society under the aegis of the Christian missions. This new class of people, often referred to as the educated elite, developed nationalistic tendencies and political consciousness, which sowed the seeds of Mizo ethnic nationalism. In this context, the constructivist approach to the study of nationalism could be applied, wherein it is argued that national identity arises from the specific interactions between the modern states and

the elites of dominant regional groups (Brass, 1991, p. 75). The emergence of new elites, presumably Christian-educated elites, further strengthened the notion of Mizo Christian identity. This new class of educated Mizo, influenced by the ideals and guidance of Christian missionaries, viewed all socio-political issues from the standpoint of Christian doctrines and principles. As a result, from a clan-based identity during the pre-colonial period and the addition of a religious-based element of identity definition during the colonial period, a new version of Mizo identity, based on geography (those residing within the geographical boundary of Mizoram), language (the language spoken by the majority in Mizoram) and religion, emerged as an 'Ethnic Mizo Christian identity' in the post-colonial period. This new version and perception of ethnicity and identity is embedded in the minds and perceptions of the leaders of the Mizo Cultural Society through to the MNF, which was the ultimate cause of the independence movement, and what constitutes the foundations of their ideologies to unify all neighbouring areas of Mizoram, inhabited by Mizo clans and tribes, and the main reason for considering the Mizo as distinct from their fellow Indians. However, a definitive explanation of the extent to which 'ethnic Mizo' entails or whether 'being a Christian' ought to be considered as a marker of Mizo identity has never been conclusively defined till today, and the debate still rages on. Nevertheless, it is worth concluding that the ethnic dimension of the Mizo independence movement, the dimension that emerged in the post-colonial period as discussed above, cannot be sidelined or considered an understatement, since it was and will always be at the core of what the Mizo are and will always be, in short, what being a Mizo means to themselves and the rest of the world.

To conclude, this paper underlines the importance and role played by Mizo's conception of ethnicity and identity and the conceptual framework of 'us' and 'others' that follows it based on their conceptions of ethnicity and identity. The ethnic dimension in the framework of Mizo nationalism and particularly in the independence movement discourse is a concept which has often been largely overlooked by scholars studying the contexts and courses of the Mizo independence movement, a monumental event in the history of Mizo polity and society. Hence, this paper will shed new light on the significance and importance of the ethnic dimension, among various other dimensions of the Mizo independence movement, and provide another important framework for scholars to study and analyse the underpinnings and history of the movement as a whole.

Notes

¹ In Mizo conceptional terminology, *Khuavang Ri Kham Sa* referred to the informal understanding or agreement between the Mizo with each other (inclusive of both understanding between chiefs with regards to their area of jurisdiction, as well as among the common people to demarcate or represent certain boundary marker, for example, the separating line of one's jhumland to that of their immediate neighbouring jhumlands etc.), which would be commonly based upon the existing topography of the land, say, a riverine, mountain range, valley etc that served as the natural demarcation line or boundary for differentiating one's own territory from that of the territories of others.

² Although the term 'Lushai' was commonly used to refer to the Mizo people in all official documents during the colonial rule, it is evident that the term 'Mizo' had been used by the Mizo themselves, which had been substantiated by the fact that the term 'Mizo' was mentioned in the first newspaper published in Mizo language, *Mizo Chanchin Laisuih*, published in 1898.

³ *Zawlbuk* is a kind of boys' dormitory, where all male adults in the village, ranging from teens to middle-aged men gather each night and slept in it. *Zawlbuk* served as a place where elders taught the young ones about life skills and social skills. More importantly, it served as the security centre of the village, in times of emergencies due to enemy attacks or any other form of emergency where swift action is required. In the pre-colonial period, each Mizo village had a *Zawlbuk* of its own and all adult males of the village are expected to spent the night together in it for the good of the community

⁴ A famine caused by the flowering of bamboos which is said to occur every 50 years. The bamboo flowers are an ideal food for rats and thereby, when bamboo flowers, it attracted large population of rats, that consumed not only the bamboo flowers, but also ravaged farmlands, eating up and destroying acres of crops, thereby resulting in a famine.

⁵ The Lushai Hills District was renamed as the Mizo District in 1954 under the Change of Name Act, 1954, when it was elevated as an Autonomous District Council under the state of Assam in

1952, until the conferment of the status of Union Territory in 1972. Under the same Act, Lushai Hills was also renamed as Mizoram.

⁶ An interview by the scholar with R. Zamawia at his residence at Beer Sheba, Tanhril, Aizawl on 26.1.2016. Mr. R. Zamawia served as the Defence Secretary in the self-proclaimed Mizoram Government during the Mizo Independence Movement.

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