Identity Politics In Mizoram, India

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Abstract

Identity politics in Mizoram presents three perspectives. One is the movement for abolition of chieftainship with the goal of acquiring democratic self-government. Second is 'Greater Mizoram' under the banner of the Mizo and the full independence from India. The third is tribe-based politics against the dominant tribe of the Mizo in general. The genesis in the Mizoram context was the failure of the Indian government to provide a genuine political template which would accommodate the immense differences and the second is due to the fluid nature of Mizo identity. Through democratic process, the Mizo abolished Chieftainship system. To achieve independence from India, they undertook armed rebellion against the Indian government. But, they are still struggling to accommodate the wished of other minorities under the Mizo fold. This paper delves all these issues in details.

 Keyword: Chieftainship, underground, politics, identity, assimilation

The term 'Mizo' in the present context may be normally understood as the main population of the Mizoram state of India, who trace back their history to a common ancestor. Putting all the population of Mizoram under the banner of Mizo poses a problem due to their own clan centricity. Clearly majority of the population accepted Mizo as their first identity. The term 'Mizo' is officially a recognized tribe in 1954AD. Apart from the Mizo, there are other recognized tribal too in Mizoram like Mara, Hmar and Lai etc. But these smaller tribes generally accepted Mizo as their larger identity.

Politics is synonymous with political party in the modern context. It generally means a group of persons organized to acquire and exercise political power. Political parties originated in their modern form in Europe and the United States in the 19th century, along with the electoral and parliamentary systems, whose development reflects the evolution of parties. The term party has since come to be applied to all organized groups seeking political power, whether by democratic elections or by revolution. In addition, there are different means to attract the voters by using different methods.

In earlier, prerevolutionary, aristocratic and monarchical regimes, the political process unfolded within restricted circles in which cliques and factions, grouped around particular noblemen or influential personalities, were opposed to one another. The establishment of parliamentary regimes and the appearance of parties at first scarcely changed this situation. To cliques formed around princes, dukes, counts, or marquesses there were added cliques formed around bankers, merchants, industrialists, and businessmen. Regimes supported by nobles were succeeded by regimes supported by other elites. These narrowly based parties were later transformed to a greater or lesser extent, for in the 19th century in Europe and

America there emerged parties depending on mass support. (**Encyclopedia Britannica Ultimate reference suit, 2007: Political party.**)

The 20th century saw the spread of political parties throughout the entire world. In Africa large parties have sometimes been formed in which a modern organization has a more traditional ethnic or tribal basis; in such cases the party leadership is frequently made up of tribal chiefs. In certain areas of Asia, membership in modern political parties is often determined largely by religious factors or by affiliation with ritual brotherhoods. Many political parties in the developing countries are partly political, partly military. Certain Socialist and Communist parties in Europe earlier experienced the same tendencies.

In India, the real foundation of political party may be attributed to foundation of All India Congress in 1885. The early leaders were the product of western education. In the context of Mizoram, the first political party known as Mizo Union was established in 1946 by the educated middle class. In order to have a clear picture it is imperative to look at the background and manner in which the political party in Mizoram tried to gain the popular support.

Post colonial India is a story to describe the deconstruction of hegemonic discourses that colonize the subjects. There is strong cultural resistance to the domination of a perceived Indian culture, which in its dominant construction is an accommodative and synthesizing cultural space, comprising of varieties, fails to assure minorities and smaller marginal cultural group a safe and fair treatment. Moreover, in N.E. India, the space of Indian culture does not provide accommodation to their distinct cultural identities; rather it poses a homogenized space with dominant value-system. (**NK Swain, 1994:82**)

The echo over identity has been an inherent historical phenomenon of individuals, collectivities and nations. The problematic of Ethnic-Nationalism which has become an undeniable reality of the Post-colonial period world can be heralded as a form of identity assertion. The emergence of new social movements in the form of Ethnic-Nationalism in the north-east is a revolt against the hegemonic domination and cultural impoverishment by the dominant centre of these margins.

Geography also plays an important role in shaping the economy, culture, and society of the region. There are distinctly dominant tribes or communities in each of these seven states which constitute this region. Apart from other smaller factors, there are demographic and cultural factors leading to what they describe as identity crisis. Writing about this problems Vidyadharan says: "The problem of insurgency in the entire northeast has one common underlying factor: safeguarding the prominence of tribal society and its culture and preventing it from being swamped by nontribal settlers" (**T.B. Subba, 1994:81**)

Even in the Mizo context, modern identity had emerged with the advent of colonial rule and under the initiative of the Christian Missionaries who were the agents of westernization in these hills. This changed orientation towards identity both in terms of notion and reality, formed the basis of the formulation of national identity of the Mizo leadership. (**Sajal Nag, 2000:26**)

In order to understand the general frame work, let us look in brief the political parties who took the Mizo identity for their political manifesto:

Mizo Union

It is very important to know the background of the Mizo during the British rule. The British superintendent and the Mizo chiefs used to rule the Mizo people as virtual dictators. The chiefs became the main plank of alien rule over their own people. The Mizo people fully realized that the chiefs' rule was oppressive and unbearable. But they could do nothing because the position of the chiefs was fully safeguarded by the District superintendent. But the war and the political enslavement of the Mizo commoners brought a rapid change in the social and political outlook of both the educated Mizo youths and the common people. Besides, the Second World War also brought a drastic change in the social structure and economic condition of the Mizo people. Flow of money and the experience of the Mizo serving in the army getting recognition in government service profession, trade and commerce and living outside the confines of the hills were the main causes of emergence of a new class in the Mizo society who wanted recognition of their status and hence they came in to conflict with the local chiefs.

The educated Mizo youths also never wanted the British to hand over powers to the autocratic local chiefs towards the end of their rule. The feeling of resentment against the chiefs' oppressive rule started gaining momentum all over the District, which led the common people to organize themselves into political party. In this background the Mizo Union was came into being. Mizo Union was the first regional party in Mizoram which was born on April 9, 1946, under the leadership of R.Vanlawma, Lalbuaia and Hrangaia. It was the time when the Britishers were about to leave India by which they encourage the Mizo to formed into a political platform. In the beginning the party was named as 'Mizo Common Peoples Union'. (**Thanhranga, 2007:49-51).** Among the many objectives, some important points to be mention are as follows: (1) To protect the Mizo Identity. (2) Integration of all the Mizos living outside the present boundary in a homogenous unit. (3) To improve the standard of living of the common people. (4) To ventilate the grievances of the masses through constitutional method (5) To enrich the Mizo language. (**Vanlawma, 1973:43**)

The party worked very hard to attract the rural areas and all the educated section of the Mizo. The party submitted their memorandum to the Bordoloi sub-committee visited Aizawl in April 1947 and raised its demand for self-determination where as the other Mizo Union faction favoured to be associated with India for a period of ten years and thereafter, they would their future. With the introduction of the constitution in 1950, a new life began and the first election of Assam Assembly took place in 1952. The Mizo district was allotted three seats which were captured by the Mizo Union securing 75% of votes.

The Mizo Union fulfilled most of its promises except independence for the Mizo nation. The party secured the abolition of chieftainship in 1954 thereby reorganizing the rights and privileges of the 259 Lushai chiefs and 50 Pawi-Lakher chiefs by Assam government with effect from 1 April 1956 and 15th April 1956 respectively.

Another significant contribution of the Mizo Union was the change of the name Lushai (mostly dominated by the Sailo chiefs) into the new name 'Mizo' in 1952. They championed the use of the name Mizo rather than Lushai, by which till now, the name for all the clans and tribes of the Mizo. (**R.N. Prasad, 1994:14-21**)

Mara Freedom Party

The political consciousness of the Mara people began in the early forties of the 20th century. The Mara chief's conference was convened at Serkawr in January 1945 which was attended by twenty three Mara chiefs. They passed a resolution demanding a Mara District Council and accordingly submitted a memorandum to the Additional Superintendent, South Lushai Hills, Lunglei. At first they felt uneasy in the year 1946 when the Mara assembly at Tuipang passed the introduction of Lushai as medium of instruction for Schools in Mara.

On April 7, 1947, just before the visit of the Bordoloi committee to the Lushai Hills, another petition was submitted to the Governor of Assam. But since no action on petition was taken, Chhohmo chief of Serkawr on behalf of Mara chiefs submitted to the Governor of Assam another representation on July 1947 regarding the Mara people willingness to join Burma rather than Mizo Union. **(R.T. Zachono, 1994:41)**

In 1953 the joint Regional Council for the Mara (Lakher) and the Pawi was granted. But, the Mara felt that the Pawi-Lakher Regional council is dominated by the advanced Pawi-tribe. Hence, they took initiative to organized separate regional party for the welfare of the Mara. The founder president the Mara Freedom Party was V.Hlychho, the son of Chhohmo (L) Chief of Serkawr in 1963. **(HC Thanhranga, 2007:48)** The aims and objectives of the MFP were to secure a separate Lakher District Council for the development of the region. It also aimed at uniting all the Lakhers into a single administrative unit for the sake of preserving distinct culture, tradition and customs and to promote Mara dialect.

MNF

The great famine (Mautam) in 1959-60 was a turning point in the history of Mizoram. The Mizo Union Party was the then ruling party in Lushai district. The Assam government decided to distribute the relief material to the famine affected people directly in order to by to by-passed the rival Mizo Union. This was done to marginalize the party. With the blessing of Chaliha the almost defunct Mizo cultural society was converted into a famine relief non-governmental organization called the Mizo National Famine Front. Laldenga joined it and breathed fresh life into it. Chaliha's patronization made him *supremo* in the organization. He harboured hatred towards Indian plainsmen, which he combines in his faith in the sovereignty of Mizoram. The MNFF was also successful in promoting its own agenda during the operation. It recruited Mizo youth and sent them to remote villages. The villagers only saw the MNFF volunteers delivering foodstuff in their village and gave all the credit to Laldenga and his bands of volunteers. Meanwhile the MNNF volunteer secretly, spread canards against the Chaliha government. After the famine, it was suspected that Chaliha had inspired the MNFF leaders to transform into political party to challenge the Mizo Union. The formal announcement was made on 28 October 1961 when MNFF was declared to be a political party called MNF with Laldenga as its president. (**Thanhranga, 2007:49)** Its formulated objectives are mentioned as below:

1.   To achieve the highest sovereignty and to unite all the Mizos to live under one political boundary.
2.   To uplift the Mizo position and to develop it to the highest extent.
3.   To preserve and safeguard Christianity. **(Sajal Nag, 2008:28)**

The MNF stepped up its activities quickly; campaigning, indoctrination and mobilization. It made nationalism its primary instrument of mobilization. The MNF leaders declared in their speeches that freedom was their basic human right. It asserted that the Mizo should refuse to be dominated or assimilated into the fold of idol-worshippers. They promised that under MNF rule, Mizo would be free to practice their Christian religion without any hindrances. To counter the MNF, the Mizo Union also initiated a movement for the separation of the Mizo Hills from Assam and to constitute it into a state within the Indian Union. The situation became explosive due to the confrontation between the Mizo Union and the MNF. To avoid the possible conflict between the two parties the neutral Mizos organized a conference at Churachandpur in January 1963. The Mizo Union agreed to postpone the statehood demand for Mizoram while the MNF agreed to drops its demand for secession of the Mizo Hills from the Indian Union and adopt constitutional methods to achieve its end. The conference however resolved to work for the integration of all the Mizo areas of north-east India into a single state. Accordingly, a MU delegation met the Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and submitted a memorandum demanding the formation of a Mizoram state. The Prime Minister assured the Mizo Union leaders that he would have a word with H.V. Pataskar, Chairman of the Hill Areas Commission. But the sudden death of the Prime Minister and the refusal of the Pataskar Commissiom to consider the demand for separate state made both the Mizo Union and MNF active again. Dissatisfied, the MU boycotted the Pataskar Commission. The rejuvenated MNF submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister demanding complete freedom to the Mizo. **(Sajal Nag, 2008:31)** Accordingly independence was declared and attacks the symbol of the Indian government from 28 February 1966, till they surrendered on 1886.

HMAR

Hmar People's Convention (HPC) came into existence in 1986, as a political party spearheading a movement for self-government in the north and northeast of Mizoram. They are one group under the Mizo in Mizoram. Hmar were disappointed with the contents of the Mizo peace accord of 1986, which failed to address their demand of a 'Greater Mizoram' integrating all areas inhabited by Hmars in Mizoram, Assam and Manipur under a single administrative unit.   (**http://satp.org/countries/india/mizoram/1986,htm**). Since April 1987, the HPC waged an armed struggle for autonomy, which touched extreme levels of violence towards 1991. The fire of autonomy demand has engulf the Hmar inhabitants of Barak Valley, North-Cacher, and Manipur area and they have unanimously support the agitation launched by the H.P.C **(Barkataki, 1969:129)**

In 1992, HPC representatives and the Government of Mizoram mutually agreed to hold ministerial level talks. Consequent to nine rounds of such talks, a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) was signed at the Mizoram capital Aizawl on July 27, 1994, for establishing the 'Sinlung Development Council' and subsequently, 308 HPC militants surrendered along with their arms.

However, dissatisfied with the implementation process, a section of the cadres parted ways with the over ground HPC and formed the HPC-D in 1995. The purported objective of the outfit over the years has changed from an autonomous district covering the north and northeast Mizoram to an independent Hmar State (Hmar ram) consisting of the Hmar inhabited areas of Mizoram, Manipur and Assam. The growing unrest and frustration among the Hmars has surfaced a separatist tendency. The problem of identity crisis has virtually challenged the ethnic homogeneity of Mizoram. The geopolitical aspect of the Hmar unrest is much more significant, whose far reaching consequences may threaten the ethnic solidarity of

the so-called Kuki-Chin groups of people. Its long term impact on the body of politics of Mizoram in particular and India as a whole in general, foretells significant points, which are link up with the security and stability of the region. (**S.N. Singh, 1994:129**)

Analysis

When we look at the Mizoram situation, identity politics present three perspectives. One is the movement for abolition of chieftainship with the goal of acquiring democratic self-government. Second is 'Greater Mizoram' under the banner of the Mizo and the full independence from India. The third is tribe-based politics against the dominant tribe of the Mizo in general. The genesis in the Mizoram context was the failure of the Indian government to provide a genuine political template which would accommodate the immense differences. The second point is the led by the fluid nature of the Mizo identity.

The first one originated in the demands for abolition of the Bawi system where the chiefs were the owner of the Bawi. Another significant contribution of the Mizo Union was the change of the name Lushai (mostly dominated by the Sailo chiefs) into the new name 'Mizo' in 1952. They championed the use of the name Mizo rather than Lushai, by which till now, the name for all the clans and tribes of the Mizo. But the road to success was not easy; many people were beaten up in the clash between the commoners and the chiefs' supporters.

The second was the outcome of Mizo nationalist aspiration for unification of 'Greater Mizoram'. In order to take advantage some significance event took place; A famine occurred in Mizoram in 1959-60. The official Language Act was passed by the Assam government in 1960. Statehood was granted to Nagaland in 1962. These events greatly contributed to the unrest that post-independent Mizoram had to experience. Finally, the MNF declared independence against the Indian government in 1966 in that thousands of people were became homeless and perish, many innocent people suffered from the Indian army and the MNF volunteers. In short, insecurity was the order of the day during the war of independence. When we look at the background of the insurgency movement, it can be assumed that if the Indian government had granted the so-called 'Greater Mizoram' in the Patasker Commission the MNF might not go for the independence Movement. In short, the economic backwardness coupled with the apathy of the Assam government (symbol of Indian government) to manage to the problems of the Mizo during the Mautam famine of 1959 prepared the ground for the MNF's independence movement.

The third was the tribe-based consciousness among the umbrella of the Mizo. The Mara and the Hmar tribes claimed that they were economically and linguistically different from the Mizo. The economic backwardness of the Hmar and the Mara areas and a cute unemployment has engulfed such ethnic movement, which was lying dominant in the recent past. It may be important to give more attention on socio-economic development of the two areas, which remains neglected for many decades. The Geographical locations are conducive for foreign aid in terms of arms smuggle as they bordered Myanmar and Bangladesh.

It is very clear that there is also an intimate relation between language and nationalism especially between vernacular and nationalism. Vernacular provides the masses with an emotionalized link between language and nationalism.

In a nutshell, when we look at the rise of identity politics in Mizoram, economic backwardness coupled with the remote geographical location have always presented at the background. Fear of cultural assimilation also greatly contributed towards identity movement. Looking at the present context, there is a tendency towards development as the

bait of political parties rather than integration or greater Mizoram. This heralded the importance of economic development including greater autonomy to the smaller groups to tackle the problems of Mizoram and the whole north east India.

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