

ENCOUNTERING THE BRITISH EXPANSION: VANDULA AND ROPUILIANI

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Abstract

The 19th century Mizo history is marked by encounters with the British which eventually led to the occupation of the Mizo hills by the end of the century. to the British, it was the 'raids', a disturbance in their frontier but to the Mizos, it was an assertion of their territorial claim, a retaliation to the intrusion made by the aliens to their territory. While the British considered that the policy of conciliation proved ineffective, the Mizos as a whole had very little idea about the attempt. Therefore, it was through forceful subjugation that the Mizos were brought under the British rule. Not surprisingly, many chiefs continued to hold their stand against the British even after the Chin-Lushai Expedition of 1889-90 that ushered their permanent establishment in the Mizo Hills. The most famous among them were Chief Vandula and his wife Ropuiliani.

Key words: *raids, expedition, chief, chieftain, encounter.*

Vandula & Ropuiliani:

Vandula was a descendant of Rolura, the famous progenitor of the Southern Sailo Chiefs. Rolura had two sons, namely Lalrivunga and Khawzaluta or Lalhluta. Lalhluta was known locally as 'Tlutpawrha'. Vanpuiliana, known popularly as 'Vandula' because of his heavy belly, was the eldest son of Tlutpawrha.¹

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Vandula was a brave, energetic and intelligent young lad with leadership quality and commanding talent. He was the right-hand man of his father and a worthy elder brother for his younger brothers. He spent his younger days with his father at Chhiphir and at Belpui near Zobawk. He was a young warrior when his father raided the Halkha Pawis of the Chin Hills (Sailo, 1999, p. 24).

Vandula married Ropuiliani, daughter of a great and famous chief of the North, Lalsavunga, chief of Aizawl. This matrimonial alliance had greatly enhanced his power and prestige (Sailo, 1999, p. 53).² Not long after this marriage, the new couples and their followers were allowed to establish a separate village of their own by the father. Accordingly, they started a new village at Kawmzawl near Pukpui (Lunglei). Thence they shifted to Aithur and then to Hnahthial. It was there at Hnahthial that Vandula had enjoyed his heydays. After that they moved to Ralvawng and thence to Denlung. He died in 1889.

Encounter with the British

The occurrence of frequent raids by the Mizos on the British frontiers clearly told that the policy of non-intervention was utterly ineffective (Buckland, 1905, p.461). Therefore, on 20th January 1863, Sir Cecil Beadon, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, had boldly taken up the forward policy in dealing with the chiefs of unfriendly tribes and then “to enter into written engagements for the future maintenance of peace on the border”. Following these instructions, Captain Graham, Superintendent of Chittagong Hill Tracts, proceeded to Rothangpuia’s village, Lungsen and that chief, with nine other leading chiefs of the Lungchem range entered into binding engagement to keep the peace. Messengers were sent thence to the interior hills that brought back a document signed by their principal chief Vandula,

his brother Seipuia and three other chiefs in which they agreed to keep quiet and to meet the Superintendent at Kassalong. Vandula had even sent in an elephants tusk as a token of amity (Mackenzie, 1884, pp. 346-47).

In the month of December 1870, Graham again undertook an expedition into the Hills with a view to open, if possible, a communication through it with Bepari Bazar (Cachar). However, Vandula, in spite of the previous agreement, refused to allow the passage of the Expeditionary party through his country (McCall, 1940, pp.43-44). Hence, the expedition proved to be futile.

The hardened attitude of Vandula and his followers and the unusually extensive and organized raids committed on the adjacent districts during 1870-71 rendered it necessary to follow a more aggressive forward policy on the part of the British. Accordingly, Expeditionary Forces were sent in two columns on 1st November 1871 one from Cachar headed by General Bouchier and from Chittagong commanded by General Brownlow (Elly, 1893, p.7).

The Chittagong Column, after subduing a number of frontier chiefs, encamped at Savunga's village, Buarpui. From Buarpui, chief Rothangpuia Thangluah and Subahdar Mohamad Azim were sent out to invite the chiefs of the interior hills to come to amicable terms. They had reported that the chiefs of the interior hills-Seipuia, Vandula and those they controlled were prepared to submit and surrender their captives provided this must take place at Rothangpuia's village (Whitehead, 1992, pp.237-38). This act on their part had clearly showed their anxiety to prevent the entry of the soldiers into their country. However, in spite of their fair words there was no sign of them. With this, Captain Thomas Herbert Lewin, Intelligent Officer, recommended a show of force against them, having reason to

believe that this would make the chiefs to come out and surrender. This, the General concurred. When the soldiers reached the outskirts of Seipuia's village Zopui, the chief came out and oaths of friendship were taken and captives were handed over to the forces. Even then, Vandula and his followers failed to come out to make peace.

After the return of the Expeditionary Force, their dealing with the chief Vandula was appeared in the *Pioneer*, thus:

During the course of the Expedition of 1871-72 the General was met by Vantonga, one of the leading chiefs, and by the sons of the great Vandoola, who brought in captives and did homage for their father's behalf... and general Brownlow accepted this and returned, to save the force the three days eastward march which lay between the river and Vandoola. We cannot blame him for this, but of all the chiefs in that quarter, Vandoola is the one whom we should have most wished to be humbled. There are, however, good grounds for hoping that the permanent establishment of a strong post at Demagiri will secure his good behavior for the future (*The Pioneer* 10th May 1872, appended in Mackenzie, 1884, pp. 852-53).

From the above statement it is quite clear that Vandula had never presented himself in person before the British authority. He always tried to escape from having direct and personal contact with them and used to send his sons or representatives in his place in times of heavy pressure. He had, as long as possible, prevented the entry of Britishers to his village (Reid, 1893, p.52). His staunch opposition of the British imperialism had earned him notoriety with them (Sailo, 2005, p.64). Captain John Shakespear, the second Superintendent of South Lushai Hills remarked of him thus: "Tlutpawrha's eldest son was the most powerful chief in the South

Lushai Hills” and that unlike his other brothers, “his influence was hostile to the British” (Sailo, 2005, p.64).

It is to be noted that under the constant pressure of the British forces, the younger brothers of Vandula swarmed one by one and promised to be faithful. However, Vandula stood still in the midst of heavy pressure and under compelling circumstances. The *Observer*, a Calcutta paper of high repute of that time, observed of the works of the Expedition of 1871-72 thus:

...not a single blow had been struck against the most powerful and numerous of all the tribes the Expedition had been directed to operate against, viz; the How longs, As things turned out, the How longs did send in their submission, or at least, professions of amity.. perhaps so much so that another expedition to reduce the How longs would still be necessary (Appended in Lewin, 2005).

This remark proved to be true that Military Expeditions were sent consecutively in 1889-1890. That time Vandula was overtaken by old age and was predeceased by most of his sons except Lalthuama. He died in 1889 at Denlung.

Vandula’s Descendants

<i>Name of Relatives</i>	<i>Relationship with Vandula</i>	<i>Dead or Alive</i>	<i>Name of Village</i>	<i>No of Houses</i>	<i>Present rulers</i>
Ropuiliani	Window	Alive	Denlung	200	Ropuiliani
Thansanga	Grand-son	Dead	Chelkai	95	Thansanga’s widow
Hrangphunga	Son	Dead	Thiltlang	150	Darchokpuii widow
Sangliana	Son	Dead	Narchung	130	Widow of Sangliana
Dotawna	Son	Dead	Aithur	60	Lianteva grand son
Lalthuama	Son	Alive	Mualkham	150	Lalthuama

(Mizoram State Archives (MSA), 1893)

It should be noticed here that all villages of Vandula’s descendants, except Mualkhang and Aithur, were ruled by

widows. Lianteva, the nominal chief of Aithur was 15 years or so. Consequently, Lalthuama was virtually the chief of all those villages. While Lalthuama himself was a young man with force of character whereas his mother Ropuiliani was a strong minded woman and hence she really rules and controls all those villages (MSA, 1893). Shakespear remarked of her in the following words:

Her influence is distinctly hostile to us. As is only natural when it is considered that she is the daughter of one great Chief who always opposed to us and the widow of another. Since her husband's death she has seen his brothers becoming more and friendlier with us and increasing their prestige by virtue of this alliance. She has held steadily aloof from us keeping entirely in the background. So much so that I overlooked her entirely and attributed Lalthuama's frequent faults to his own youthful folly (MSA, 1893).

Further that,

All the villages belonging to this group have been more or less troublesome, not actively hostile but passively obstructive. It has always been difficult to get tribute or labour from them (MSA, 1893).

She and the only surviving son Lalthuama, following Vandula's footsteps, refused to comply with the British dictated terms.³ Ropuiliani had her own reason of enmity towards the English because her husband died defying the power and might of the British. In March 1892 one Satinkhara, an interpreter, was murdered by Hlawncheuva and Pavunga in Dokhara's village.⁴ The murderers were given shelter at Lalthuama's village. When ordered to surrender them Lalthuama flatly refused. This resulted in the arrest of Lalthuama in July 1893. He was ordered to produce the murderers or pay a fine of 100 guns. However,

Lalthuama absconded and refused to return. Only 13 guns out of the fine of 100 were paid by him.

In the midst of such encounters Ropuiliani, Lalthuama, Dokhama, Thangtuala chief of Khawngbawk and other chiefs were planning the attack of Lunglei Fort. To restore the honour and independence of the people it was necessary to drive the alien rulers bag and baggage. “Just as they had come, they should go back” was their inspiration. This meant war. In July 1893, when the news of the plot was heard by the Superintendent, Captain J. Shakespear, he made a dash with 100 men from Lunglei and captured Ropuiliani and her son, Lalthuama (MSA, 1894).⁵ On this, Shakespear was greeted by the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal. The Letter said,

...reporting the result of his expedition against Vandula’s village and the capture of Lalthuama and his mother, I am directed to say that the Lieutenant Governor has read the Dairy with interest and congratulates Captain Shakespear on the successful accomplishment of the expedition in spite of the difficulties occasioned by very unfavourable weather (MSA, HJS Cotton to the Commissioner of Chittagong. Date 12th September 1893).

Their capture also resulted in the arrest of Hlawncheuva and Pavunga, who had murdered an Interpreter named Satinkhara in March 1892. Both the murderers were tried by Captain Shakespear and convicted and sentenced them to transportation for life (MSA, 1893). The capture of two murderers under her orders had clearly revealed how strong and powerful and influential Ropuiliani was. Before her arrest no chief, who were on the British side, were strong and powerful enough to capture them. Ropuiliani could have easily arrested them as was clearly shown by the fact that the moment she was captured she sent

out orders to have them caught and they were brought in at once (MSA, 1893).

Ropuiliani and Lalthuama were detained at Fort Lunglei. Soon afterwards, Shakespear had recommended for their deportation. In this, he said,

From personal observation as well as from information collected from various sources, it is clear to me that all Lalthuama's obstinacy and troublesome has been due to the influence of his mother. It is clear that her influence is great from the manner in which on her arrest the guns and murderers were given up. Therefore, I asked for her and her son to be deported and detained until the villages at their influence have settled down (MSA Shakespear, 1893).

While forwarding Captain Shakespear's Report, Oldham, Commissioner of the Chittagong Division, applied for warrants to confine Ropuiliani and her son as State prisoners under Regulation III of 1818. In doing so he stated,

The presence of these two persons in the Hills is mischievous, even in confinement; and for sometime to come they cannot be enlarged. Ropui Lieni should in my opinion be kept in the Chittagong jail where her loyal kinsmen, some of whom have often expressed a wish to come to Chittagong, can visit her. The accommodation is sufficient for a State prisoner of her rank and class and she would be frequently allowed to go outside the jail and see the land sights (MSA, Oldham, 1893).

Further that'

Lalthuama could also be confined in the Chittagong jail though special accommodation for him as a State prisoner would have to be arranged for. Both he and Ropuiliani

should be under restraint for at least a year, and I doubt if it will be wise to release Lalthuama for some years to come. The only object therefore in keeping him in the Chittagong jail instead of the Hazirabagh jail would be for his mother's sake (MSA, Oldham, 1893).

In reply to these, the Lieutenant Governor suggested that if it was inconvenient to detain them at Lunglei, arrangements should be made for their confinement in Chittagong. Accordingly, warrants were issued for their deportation to Chittagong Jail. The warrant against Ropuiliani, addressing the Superintendent of Chittagong Jail and signed by J. Cunningham, Secretary to the Government of India, dated 9th March 1894, runs as follows:

Whereas the Governor General-in-Council, for good and sufficient reasons, has seen fit to determine that Ropuiliani, a Lushai Chieftains shall be placed under personal restraint at Chittagong, you are hereby required and commanded, in pursuance of that determination, to receive the person above named into your custody, and to deal with her in conformity to the orders of the Governor General-in-Council and the provisions of Regulation III of 1818.

In this way both the chieftains and her son were deported to Chittagong jail as State Prisoners. To look after them four additional warders on a salary of Rs 7/- each per mansam were employed. Ropuiliani died in the jail on 3rd January 1895 (MSA, Under Secretary, 1894). Her death was reported by C.W. Murray, Superintendent of Chittagong Jail, in the following words,

The State prisoner Ropui Lieni Lushai Chieftainess died on the 3rd instant of sheer old age. Her alleged age was 60 years, but she looked anything over 70, and was very infirm on admission on the 18th April last. Since that time her health gradually failed until her death. She was attacked

with dysentery for a few days in a mild form in the month of August. This weakened her very much and no doubt tended to hasten her end, although she had quite recovered from the actual attack (MSA, Superintendent, 1895).

Though Ropuiliani had enjoyed a 'comfortable life' as a State prisoner with 4 warders at her beg and call, she suffered the agony of being a prisoner at Chittagong jail. When her death was heard, the Superintendent of South Lushai Hills had made arrangement for the bringing back of her corpse as the Report says, "A party of 10 Lushais came down to Chittagong and carried back Ropuiliani's corpse. This was the first voluntary visit ever paid by a Lushai party to Chittagong" (Note on the South Lushai Hills Administration Report for 1894-95. Para 14).

Even after the death of his mother, Lalthuama was still detained. On 7th March 1896 Major Shakespear had recommended his immediate release. In doing so he stated thus,

I do not consider that it is any longer necessary to keep Lalthuama in confinement. The utter collapse of the Kairuma-Zaduna group has had made such a good effect on the rest of the inhabitants of the Hills that all thoughts of resisting our authority have been abandoned (MSA, Shakespear, 1896).

He had, therefore, recommend that Lalthuama be released under the following conditions:

- 1) That till he receives permission from the Superintendent his village shall not exceed 105 houses.
- 2) That he shall have no claim to any of the village sites, which were formerly his but which have since his arrest been given to others.

- 3) That he shall in no way interfere in the affairs of any village except his own, at present situated on the Lumte Hill.
- 4) On his release he should be warned that any disobedience of these orders will be severely punished (MSA, Shakespear, 1896).

Accordingly, Lalthuama was released on 1st April 1896. He was completely subdued. In this way, the sovereignty and independence of the great Vandula's clan came to an end.

Notes:

¹ Vandula was the one and only son of Tlutpawrha and his wife Lalchhingvungi Pachuau daughter of Khawzalula. He was believed to be born around 1825 and his birth place was thought to be Diarkhai or Bawngthah. His mother Lalchhingvungi died while he was an infant and was brought up by his step mother Bawngkhawli. Tlutpawrha had other four sons with his second wife, namely-Vanhnaichhana, Seipuia, Lalthangvunga and Lалуauva. All the five brothers with their followers were commonly known by the British as the "Southern Howlongs".

² Vandula and Ropuiliani have six sons and two daughters, namely; Savuta, Hrangphunga, Lalropuii, Sangliana, Thanhulha, Dotawna, Darpuiliani and Lalthuama.

³ The British demand of coolie labour (impressed labour) and house tax was a new thing to them. The people looked on the supplying of coolies as the sign of complete submission not so much because of their aversion to the labour but because to be obliged to send a certain number of his men to work at Lunglei was considered as a conclusive sign of submission of a chief and the mere fact of having to obey orders galled their independence.

⁴ Dokhara's father was not a chief but having married to Vandula's daughter the latter gave him a few households and was in every way subject to his father-in-law and in the same way his son Dokhara was subjected to Lalthuama.

⁵ Charges against Lalthuama: 1) Harboursing Hlawncheuva, a murderer of a Government Interpreter. 2) Breaking his parole and absconding from Lunglei 3) Refusing to obey my orders to go and live with Lalluauva. 4) Being concerned in plots against Government. Ropuiliani was charged with inciting Lalthuama to the above and being actively concerned in plots against government.

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(Endnotes)

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