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Process of Mizoization and Zo Ethnic Tribes in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Despite being politically divided by state and international boundary, the Zo Ethnic groups, commonly known as Chin-Kuki-Mizo groups are bind together by historical and cultural affinity. The attempt of forging common nomenclature however faced many challenges. The two reality of being of the same group sharing common myth of origin and the political division play their part in the process of identification. The paper would study movement for larger identity encompassing the entire ethnically related group within the umbrella of Mizo by the elites of Mizoram and how this movement is responded by group which they try to encompass, with particular reference to those people who are beyond the international border, namely Bangladesh. The term Mizoization is used in this paper to mean the process of attempt to encompass different Zo ethnic groups within the ambit of Mizo identity.

Keywords: *Mizoization, unification, ethnic identity, Mizoram, Bangladesh.*

Introduction

The Zo ethnic tribes, commonly referred as Chin-Kuki-Lushai group, share a common myth of origin and they are closely related culturally. They are the indigenous inhabitants of different states of North East India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. The reference to the same people by different names shows lack of accepted common

nomenclature on the part of the people as well as imposition of identity by the colonial administrator depending on the place of their inhabitation. In Myanmar they are known as 'Chin'. The origin of the word is not clearly known. The term is a name by which people living in the Northern Chin, comprising of nearly all the people of Haka, Falam, Tiddim of Myanmar, the Lushai and the Lakhers of Assam were known by outsider

at least for some time. Presently, it is used mainly for the people living in Chin State of Myanmar. Kuki is said to be a Bengali word meaning 'wild man', the British appear to have picked up the word from the Bengali and then applied it to all hill people living in the north west of Burma and north east of India. Edgar, officially use 'Lushai' in place of 'Kuki'. Presently, out of the numerous tribes known by this name, only a small section in Manipur retain Kuki as their nomenclature and were constitutionally recognized as such. The origin of the word 'Lushai' appears to be the English transliteration of the word 'Lusei' since the British assume that all the Sailo subjects are Lusei. They picked up "Lusei" as "Lushai" and then applied the term to refer to all inhabitants of the Hills thinking that they all belong to homogenous Lusei tribe. They also call the area as Lushai Hills.

Even though some section of the group accepts and develop an identity on the basis of these imposed names. The people never refer themselves by these imposed names in the pre-colonial time. The people themselves would rather use terms like Zo, Zofa, Zomi or Mizo whenever they make reference of themselves as a group. Commenting on the above discuss names, Sangkima mentioned that following the Bengali identification, The English called the Mizo, whom they found in the Chittangong Hill Tracts as 'Kuki'. Following the Burmese who called the Mizos as 'Chin', The English too called the Mizos living in Burma as 'Chin'. The English called the Mizos of the erstwhile Lushai Hills district as 'Lushai' after the 1871-72 expedition (Sangkima, 1992). The

outsiders' imposition of different names for the same group of people can be understandable in view of the absent of common nomenclature of the people in the pre-colonial time. However, the existence and use of different term to refer to the same people indeed cause considerable confusion not only to outsider but also among the people which in turn has a deep implication in the movement for unification.

Origin, Migration and Identity

All the tribes, whom the Mizo elite included within the umbrella of Mizo share a common myth of origin. In spite of slight difference regarding the name and place, the myth of common origin binds the different tribes together. They all believe that they emerged out of the same place and from there start their migration to their present settlement. However, their history, before their settlement in Myanmar is more of speculation due to the absence of any concrete historical evidence.

Most of the Mizo writer including K. Zawla (1989) believes that the Mizo ethnic tribes settled for several centuries at the Kale-Kabaw valley of Myanmar. During this period, most of the major tribes who now live in different areas of India, Myanmar and Bangladesh have lived together. They were pushed out by the Shan and hence started their migration to their present inhabitation. The route and time of their migration differ from one group to another. Some tribes remain at present day Chin Hills of Myanmar and some crossed Tiau River and settled at present day Mizoram. Some moved further down and settled at different states of India like Assam, Arunachal

Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura. Some of tribes like, Khumi, Kiang, Miria, Bawm, etc. reached Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. The last group that enter the present Mizoram was the Lusei group by around 1600-1700 A.D.

The Zo ethnic tribes were known by different names depending on their area of inhabitation. When the British annexed the land of the Zo ethnic tribes, they usually follow the names given by the neighboring community. Some group accepted the name imposed by the British administrators and formed their identity on the basis of the imposed name, while some group renounced the imposed name and search for a new nomenclature for their group, while others are fighting for their own tribe identity.

Mizo Identity and Movement for Unification:

The British initially thought that all Lusei speaking people under Sailo chieftainship are of Lusei tribe and adopted 'Lushai' an Anglicized form of Lusei as a common name for all the people inhabiting the present Mizoram. However, the local elites realized that Lushai identity could not cover the entire group hence they popularize the already existed term Mizo in their attempt to unify and build a larger identity encompassing all *Chhinlung chhuak*. They contended that the people already identify themselves as Mizo in the pre-colonial time. However, the fact remains that in the pre and early part of colonial time, the Mizo identity was not crystallized as it is used today. The new educated elites who emerged during the colonial period seek for

a broader identity to replace the existing identity like Lushai identity which could not encompass the non Sailo subjects. Mizo, as a political identity has emerged in the colonial time colonial time and was cemented with the change of Lushai Hills to Mizo District (Khangte, 2018).

The Mizo Union, the first Political Party formed in Mizoram attempts to unite all the *Zohnahthlak*¹ under the Mizo umbrella. The Mizo Union, right from its inception asserts for distinct identity of the Mizo. The Mizo Union held its first General Assembly in Aizawl in 1946 and the Mizo conference held under the initiatives of the Union in the same year at Lakhipur (Cachar) sought to uphold the protection of the cultural identity of the Mizo. In pursuance of these resolutions, the Union submitted a memorandum to the British Government and to the Constituent Assembly through the Advisory Sub-Committee in 1947. While claiming to represent all the Mizos in Lushai hills, Manipur, Cachar, Tripura and Chittagong Hill Tracts, the Memorandum of the Mizo Union claim that certain words which were used to denote them like Kuki and Lushai were imposed names by outsiders and therefore, were not accepted by the people.

In fact, Lusei, from which the British coined Lushai is nothing but one tribe; the big Mizo groups composed many but closely related tribes like- Lusei, Hmar, Ralte, Paite, Zo, Darlawng, Kawm, Pawi (Lai), Thado, Chiru, Aimoul, Khawi, Anal, Puram, Tikhup, Vaiphei, Lakher (Mara), Langrawng, Chawrai, Bawng, Baite, Mualthum, Kaihpe, Pangkhua, Tlanglau,

Bawmzo, Hrangkhawl, Miria, Dawn, Kumi, Khiangte, Khiang, Tlau, Pautu, Pawite, Vangchhia, Zawngte, Fanai, Pangte, Khawlhiring, Changthu, Vanchiau, Chawhte, Ngente, Renthlei, Hnamte etc. Consequent upon this claim, the Mizo Union asked for the territorial unity and solidarity of the whole 'Mizo population' to be known henceforth as 'Mizo' and 'Mizoram' for Lushai and Lushai Hills. The movement of the Mizo Union for unification was initially well accepted by the *Zohnahthlak* in the Northeast India. But after the formation of Mizo District Council, many tribes felt left out of the Mizo Union movement and hence, Mizo movement became curtailed within the territory of the Mizo District Council.

The MNF justified their movement on the basis of the claim that Mizo is a distinct nation. The MNF defines Mizo as a blanket term for all *Zohnahthlak*. Some of the tribal heroes of the region were eulogized and battalions were named after them. Alongside such selective tribal symbolism, Christianity and its values were also harnessed. The party's plea to safeguard Christianity amid the rising nationalism of 'Hindu India' touched the people who are predominantly Christian and win the moral support of many church leaders. The tribal-Christian component of the MNF ideology had, as its broad reference groups, the non-tribal/ non-Christian plains people whom they called as '*vai*'.

The MNF used the term used *vai*, which in origin simply means foreigner, and later, in a somewhat derogatory sense to mean plain people in India who are projected and perceived as 'intruders' and

'exploiters'; the Centre government and the state government of Assam were viewed as symbolic of such reference groups against whom the distinct identity of the Mizo needs to be protected. The Mizoram Accord of 1986 which led to the formation of a separate state of Mizoram, cemented the existence of Mizo as a distinct nationality. Even though the MNF could not realize its goal of forming a sovereign state for the Mizo, it succeeded in strengthening ethnic solidarity and propagating the idea among the Mizo that they belong to a distinct nationality. The MNF movement is, therefore, regarded as both a product of identity negotiations as well as instruments through which identity was formed (Pachua, 2005).

The Mizo Union and MNF movement for unification became curtailed territorially to the state of Mizoram. But the movement for unification did not die down. Several organizations like YMA, MZP, Zofa Global Network, etc. continue to pursue the unification movement. However, they are more concerned with cultural or emotional unification rather than administrative unification. The ZORO movement for unification has a peculiarity for being stood for administrative unification. Upon realizing the fact that many tribes outside the state of Mizoram are restrained by the territoriality of Mizo identity and to strengthened unity of the Zo ethnic tribes in different areas of India, Myanmar and Bangladesh, the Zomi National Congress (ZNC) of Manipur and People's Conference (PC) of Mizoram convened an international convention of the *Zohnahthlak*. The First World Zo Convention was held during 19-

21 May, 1988 at Champhai. The convention was attended by delegates from Mizoram, Manipur, North Cachar Hills of Assam, Zampui Hills of Tripura, Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, Arakan and Chin Hills of Myanmar. The convention agreed the name for the whole ethnic group as 'Zo'. The Convention made a declaration (ZORO pamphlet, 2010) that -

- (i) the nomenclature of the Zo ethnic group of people who traced common origin from Chhinlung should be 'Zo'.
- (ii) steps should be taken up to integrate the Zo ethnic tribes who are already scattered in territories of three sovereign countries.
- (iii) appeal should be made so that accommodative approach should be adopted by various groups and tribes of better unification and integration.
- (iv) political forum should be formed so as to initiate necessary steps for speedy pursuance of unification campaign.

In pursuance of the declaration, a political forum known as Zo Re-unification Organization was formed (ZORO). But the ZORO movement faces many limitations due to its close relationship with certain political parties. The leaders began to feel that ZORO should be an independent body to really realize its objectives. Then, ZORO disassociated itself from the influence of political parties and became full non-governmental organization (NGO) and is recognized as International NGO in 1999. ZORO stood for unification and integration of the *Zohnahthlak* under one administrative head (ZORO Pamphlet. 2010).

Zofa of Bangladesh and their Perspective on Unification Movement

The Zo ethnic tribes of Bangladesh are mainly concentrated in the three districts of Chittagong Hill District -Rangamati Hill Tracts, Bandarban Hill Tracts and Khakrachari Hill Tracts. The whole District of Chittagong covers an area of 5093 sqm. which is one third of the total Bangladesh area. There are eleven tribes settled in Chittagong Hill Tracts - Chakma, Mogh (Marma), Tripura (Tuikuk), Mro (Miria), Tonchongya, Khumi (Khaileng or Matu), Khiang (Asho), Chak, Bawm (Bawmzo), Pang (Pangkhua), Lusei (Laldova, 2014, 49). Among these tribes, Mro (Miria), Khumi (Khaileng or Matu), Khiang (Asho), Bawm (Bawmzo), Pang (Pangkhua) and Lusei are *Zohnahthlak* living in Bangladesh. The present population of Zo ethnic tribes counts not more than one lakh. They are numerically and economically weak and hence, are marginalized as compared to other Zo ethnic tribes in India and Myanmar (Laldova, 2014).

The first record of *Zohnahthlak* inhabitation of Chittagong Hill Tracts was in the year 1777 CE (Lalthangliana, 2014). The Miria/Mro were among the first group who migrated out from Myanmar and moved towards Bangladesh. It is assumed that the Miria entered Bangladesh in the year 1418 CE (Fanai, 2005). In the 1991 census of Bangladesh, the population of Miria is 22,167. It is believed that Khumi or Matu tribes reached Chittagong Hill Tracts around 1800 CE. The same census recorded the population of Khumi as 1241 in number. The Khiang or Asho entered their present

inhabitation in around 1800 CE and there are 1954 Khiang as per the 1991 census. The Bawm or Bawmzo entered the Hill Tracts in the beginning of 19th Century. The Bawm consists of 1782 houses with total population of 9283. It is not known since when Pang or Pangkhua is used for referring a sub-tribe who call themselves Zo. The Pang tribe settled in Chittagong Hill Tracts before 1870 CE. The present population of Pangkhua at Bangladesh is around 3,500. Their population has decreased due to migration to Mizoram. A small number of Lusei tribe who inhabited Bangladesh are mostly of the descendants of Pastor H. Dala, a Christian Missionary under North East India General Mission (NEIGM), and C. Danga, a retired army personnel and Pu Taia a retired Police Inspector. The 1991 census of Bangladesh shows that there are 662 Lusei in Bangladesh (Laldova. 2014).

Mainly due to the early migration, insignificant number of population and fragmented tribe identity coupled with the political turmoil in Chittagong Hill Tracts, the Zo ethnic tribes of Bangladesh are isolated from the rest of the Zo ethnic tribes until MNF underground took shelter in their inhabited area. Apart from mentioning them as belonging to Mizo group, there is no serious attempt to integrate them on the part of the Mizo leaders in the immediate post-colonial period. The Mizo Union movement did not influence them deeply. Among the six tribes, Bawm, Pangkhua and Lusei seems to lean more towards Mizoram than the other tribes. The Khumi, Miria and Khiang accepted that they belong to Zo ethnic tribes, but now, they are deeply influenced by Bengali cultures.

With the absence of any constitutional protective discrimination for them, the Zo ethnic tribes are dominated by other tribes, not to mention the plain people. They are also fragmented by the absence of common nomenclature and platform for unification. They do not stand a chance in getting any important government jobs, as recruitments of only third and fourth class of government works are done by their representative in the District Council. Due to this reason, there is a general feeling of discontentment with the Bangladesh government.

Interview conducted by C. Lalhmingliana among different Zo ethnic tribes in Bangladesh during his field work in the month of May 2018 reveals some interesting response towards Mizo unification movement. Majority of them accepted that they are Zo ethnic tribes and hence, do not have any particular objection to being referred as 'Mizo'. But the reality of a citizen of foreign country posed certain problems since Mizo is not a recognized tribe in Bangladesh. Hence, Mizo identity does not have much meaning for them. At the same time, due to the negligence of the Bangladesh government, many of them are eager to migrate to Mizoram provided provision and accommodation could be made. They also felt neglected considering their support to the MNF volunteers while the MNF took shelter in Bangladesh. Some of the interviewees mentioned that the MNF army promised to look after them when the MNF movement became successful; but after the signing of the Peace Accord, the case of the Zo ethnic tribe in Bangladesh was somehow neglected.

One of the interviewees mentioned that he felt more secure after crossing the Bangladesh border and on reaching Mizoram.² One Pangkhua college student mentioned that she cried when she participated in Chapchar Kut; she envies the development and freedom the people in Mizoram enjoys to express their culture.³ A primary teacher in one Bawm village mentioned that she would readily give up her job if there is an opportunity to settle in Mizoram with proper arrangement.⁴ To quote one interviewee, who is more than 60 years old,⁵ “We do not need to think for the next generation, my worry is for the present generation in Bangladesh. We are few in numbers and the Bengalis’ took whatever they want from us, like our tourist spot where they can generate revenue; we are left with nothing except our home and our crops. We have no control over our crops as well, the Bengalis’ fixed all the price. If we do not sell in their price, what shall we eat? Such is our conditions. I still do not lose my hope in our brothers out there in Mizoram, that they will concern our problems and help us out by any possible means.”

Conclusion

From the above, we can see some history about the Zo ethnic tribes living in Bangladesh and their present status. Talking about the unification movement led by MNF, they could not achieve their demand, which is ‘independent Mizoram’. This may be the reason why the MNF do not take any steps to solve the problems of the Zo ethnic tribes in Bangladesh during their rule in the state of Mizoram as they promised them during their fight for freedom. But the Zo

ethnic tribes in Bangladesh do not completely lost their hope in the people of Mizoram at large. The question is not much of supporting or not of the Mizo unification movement. The real issue is assimilation, under development, fragmentation on the basis of particular tribe, lack of common organization to raise effectively their concerns and relative numerical insignificance. It is more a story of isolation from other Zo ethnic tribes and the dream of unification which was curtailed by the political reality of being a citizen of other country.

Notes

- ¹It covers all Zo ethnic groups.
- ²An interview conducted on 5th May, 2018 at Laimi Para, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh.
- ³An interview conducted on 19th May, 2018 at Rangamati, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh.
- ⁴An interview conducted on 12th May, 2018 at Laimi Para, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh.
- ⁵Zirkung Sahu interviewed by C Lalhmingliana on 12th May 2018.

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