Chapter II

Contextualising the Evolution of Identity Politics in Mizoram

In this chapter, I have explored the complex web of the inter-layered process of identity building or identity formation among the tribes in Mizoram bulwarked against both the notion and the reality of geographical divides. Flipping through the impact of the colonial encounter on politics and society in Mizoram, I bring to surface the myriad strands of contestations over the issue of identity. My attempt here is to contextualise the evolution of identity politics by bringing to the fore the debate on *generic* versus *phonetic* identity; and the contested nature of 'Zo-reunification' process overtime.

2.1. Contextualising the Evolution of Identity in Mizoram

Identity politics among the tribes\(^1\) in Mizoram is not free from the push and pulls of the actors from within and without, invariably supporting the argument that the issue of ‘Identity’ is not a homogenous construct. Before venturing into the issues of ‘Identity’, ‘Ethnicity’, ‘Nationalism’ and ‘Politics’ in the North-East, it will be interesting to delve on the issue of the term ‘tribe’ and the ‘usage of the terminology in the context of Indian politics’ especially the North-East primarily because the region denotes the ‘tribal belt/zone’ of India. The term ‘tribe’ in post-independence India has been used to denote those people who are different from mainstream civilisation.\(^2\)

The problem with tribal identity as officially recognised by the Constitution of India is that no single feature can be taken to be normative in defining the ‘tribe’.\(^3\) The list of

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3 The Constitution of India does not give a definition of the term. Article 342, simply says that the President of India can ‘specify the tribes or tribal communities... to be Scheduled Tribes’ and that the Parliament also has the power to include and exclude groups to and from the list. To justify the enlistment of communities under the “Scheduled Tribes”, the government of India did make several criteria. This may have been done surreptitiously for its existence is not widely known. A minute study of the Constitution of India reveals that the term ‘tribe’/*tribal* is used to designate a whole
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criteria includes “tribal language, animism, primitivity, hunting and gathering, ‘carnivorous in food habits’, ‘naked or semi-naked’, and ‘fond of drinking and dance’”.4 The criterion does not fit the description of over 90 percent of the enlisted groups and also the criterion (itself) conveys the blatant prejudice of the dominant people.5 P. K. Bose divides the whole tribal regions into “two territorial zones”, namely, “the north-eastern or frontier zone and the non-frontier zone”.6 Critics of this grouping, however, argue that it was merely aimed to create separate administrative blocks for different administrative styles fitted to the context.

However, I would reiterate that the case was not so, and that ‘tribal politics’, if we can use such a term,7 is much more complicated than what we can perceive externally from a distance. Contemporary ethnic backlashes and the return to primordial tactics that has marked the politics in the North-East region of India can be considered to be the ‘tip of the iceberg’ reflecting such complexities. Tribal consciousness has been termed as ‘Shifting Identities’ or process of re-inventing, re-formulation of identity based on a wide range of markers such as ‘name change’, ‘Places of origin’, ‘correcting phonetic errors’, ‘Myths’, ‘Hero searching’, ‘re-writing one’s native history’ and such other forms. ‘Shifting Identities’

cluster of diverse non-Indic or semi-Indic communities who are mostly non-Aryan and remained outside the ‘Hindu Varna’/Hindu civilization. Cf, Andre Beteille, Op cit. p. 316.


7 Tribal society is considered or stereotyped to be devoid of any civility that is essentially attributed to the modern, western pluralistic societies. Therefore it is technically not an arena where modern politics can function this naturally makes the use of the two terms ‘Tribal’ and ‘Politics’ into one incorrect as tribal society is not considered an appropriate arena for sustaining modern politics.
just as ‘Shifting Cultivation’ (‘Jhuming’) can be considered to be the prominent and undying markers or trends of identity politics in Mizoram. The ‘Shifting of identities’ has witnessed the development of ‘Imposed Identities’, ‘self construction’ or ‘self definition’ which to an extent has been the underlying theme in the evolution of ‘Identity Politics’ in Mizoram. From the imposed identity of the ‘Kookie’ to ‘the Lushai’ to the more acceptable generic term Mizo or to the phonetically correct term Zo (Zomi) marks the important mile stones in the evolution of identity politics in Mizoram.

The theme of ‘Identity’ thus needs to be studied from multiple levels that is ‘Bird’s eye view’ as well as ‘Worm’s eye view’ keeping in account the group dynamics involved in the complex process of ‘Identity Building’. In short the markers forced/imposed upon a group at two levels namely Internal level i.e. the State/Society (Elites) and External level that is the Outsiders (‘Out-group’); and also the ‘Identity’ that the said group ultimately adopts for itself. The complexities involved in the process of ‘Identity building’ among the heterogeneous (some say homogenous) tribes/sub-tribes in and around Mizoram can be best displayed by the diverse markers that the tribes in the region have attempted to adopt for marking their distinct Identity. From correcting the imposed ‘Kookie identity’ to the abolition of the Lushai identity (which also marked the death knell of the reminiscent of Chieftainship and hegemony of the Lushai-Sailo Clans) and the development of the generic Mizo identity; and the further attempts at revising or correcting the phonetic error and replacing the generic term ‘Mizo’ with ‘Zo’ (Zomi) makes interesting reading in the evolution of Identity Politics in Mizoram. Tracing the process of ‘Identity Building’ in Mizoram through the historical lenses helps one to understand the underlying dynamics, which is fluid and changeable and at the same time is highly complex and contested.

The colonial encounter had an overwhelming impact on the Identity consciousness among the Zo/Mizo people or the Zo hnahthlak. A quick recapitulation of the colonial history would enable us to have a bird’s eye view on the evolution of identity politics in and around present day Mizoram. There is no unanimity among scholars on the issue of the impact of British rule on the Zo/Mizo society. While some consider it to be a sort of ‘Divine Providence’, bringing about change, development and modernisation; Others argue that it led
to division of the ‘Zo’ territory, loss of autonomy and traditional ‘Zo’ way of life, leading to cultural fetishism and artificial imposition of unity and boundaries among previously autonomous tribes and highlight the hegemonic nature of Christianity.\(^8\)

Prior to the British annexation in the 1890s, very little was known about the Mizo tribes to the ‘outside world’. Hence the Zo/Mizo were subjected to externally imposed symbolisms like ‘kookie’, ‘Lankhe’, ‘Lushai’, ‘Chin’, headhunters\(^9\) and so on. The British attempted to impose a constructed unity among the different warring Mizo tribes by referring to them as the Lushais\(^10\) and their territory as the ‘Lushai Hills’. At the same time, through their administrative policies they created difference in identity among the Northerners and the Southerners (Mara, Lai and Chakma).\(^11\) The long term impact of the initial divide imposed by the British on the Zo/Mizo tribes was the creation of a mental divide between South (‘Chhim’) and North (‘Lusie/Hmar’, Aizawl) in Mizoram. One of the striking features of process of identity construction among tribes in Mizoram is the movement for the acquisition of ‘new names’ in place of ‘old names’. However, since time immemorial the different tribes in Mizoram had used the term ‘Zo/Mizo’ to suggest their racial identity and solidarity.


\(^11\) Before 1898, the head of the Lushai District was called a Political Officer. At first there were two political officers- one for the South Lushai Hills and another for the North Lushai Hills. After the amalgamation of the two districts the designation of the head of the district was changed to Superintendent. Shakespear was the first Superintendent of the Lushai District. The Superintendent enjoyed tremendous powers for instance he regulated the successor to the chieftainship, appointed guardians to the minor chiefs, partitioned the existing villages, formed new villages, appointed new chiefs, determined the boundaries of the villages and areas to be occupied by the chiefs etc. For details Cf., V. Venkata Rao. (1978). Chapter 18, ‘The Sociology of Mizo Politics’. pp. 215-232 in S.M. Dubey. (Ed.). (1978). *North East India: A Sociological Study*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
The origin and ‘the history of the Zo/Mizo’ remain shrouded in mystery due to the lack of written evidence.12 The only points of agreement, among scholars being on issues of the racial affinity of the tribes, the great mongoloid migration from the East, forced migrations13 and nomadic lifestyle. The general accepted view speaks of a great mongoloid wave of migration from China into their present habitat in India. The Zo tribes migrated from the nearby Chin Hills between 1750 and 1850 to India, the earliest batch of the Zo tribes who migrated to India were known as ‘Old Kukis’ and the second batch of immigrants were called ‘New Kukis’.14 The Lushais were the last of the Mizo tribes to migrate to India.

The history of the Zo/Mizo in the 18th and 19th centuries was marked by many instances of tribal raids15 and retaliatory expeditions16 for the security of the British Tea

12 Different writers put forward different theories regarding the original homeland of these people, such as the Middle East, South West China and Chin land in Burma. However, the Middle East Theory is the most widely acceptable theory now among the scholars. The expansion of the British Raj into the North East Frontier eventually led to the subjugation of the different Zo tribes or the Zo hnahthlak. Colonialism was a mixed blessing for the Zo hnahthlak for it united as well as divided the Zomi for administrative convenience over the years. For details Cf., Robert Reid.(1942). (Reprint 1976). The Lushai Hills. Calcutta: Firma KLM Pvt. Ltd. pp. 25-28.

13 C.A Soppitt in his work ‘A Short Account of the Kuki-Lushai tribes on the North-East Frontier (Districts Cachar, Sylhet, Naga Hills etc. and the North Cachar Hills) with An Outline Grammar of the Rangkhol-Lushai Language & A Comparison of Lushai with other Dialects’(1976) has aptly observed that ‘while writing on the Lushai and Kukis, it has been pointed out that some tribes are gradually forcing others from beyond our north-east frontier (India) into Assam, and it is of great interest to note that in Burma the very same thing is taking place in our Yunan-Chinese Frontier’(preface- p. vi).

14 The people commonly called ‘Kuki’ occupied the borders long before the British settlement and had frequent contacts with the plains through the tradesmen from the plains who went uphill for commerce and acted as the only links between the plains and the hills. The name styled to them was probably given to them by these traders who through the ages might have mispronounced the name ‘Lushai’ to ‘Lukai’ and thereon took the form of ‘Kukai’ and ultimately ‘Kuki’. A mistake of this sort is perpetuated when the people so referred rarely meet and the error in the pronunciation cannot be corrected by the people concerned. Cf., Chapter-1 The Kuki-Lushai Tribes-Physical Characteristics in C.A. Soppitt. (1976). Ibid. The ‘Kuki’ tribes are said to be divided into four or more sub-tribes: Rangkol or Bang-kol, Bete, Jan-sen and Ta-doi. The two former are known as ‘Old Kukis’ in contradiction to the other two referred to as ‘New Kukis’, as the latter are relatively new arrivals from the Southern Hills between Chittagong and Burma. Cf., L.A. Waddell. (1901). (Reprint 1975). The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley: A Contribution on their Physical Types and Affinities. Delhi: Sanskaran Prakashak. p. 50.


23
Plantations in the North-East of India.\textsuperscript{17} The occupation of Cachar by the British in 1832 inaugurated the Lushai-Chin-Kuki \textit{colonial encounter}. The 19\textsuperscript{th} century brought the \textit{East India Company} into direct contact/confrontation with the wild tribes of the North-East Frontier region. The tribes of Mizoram, who had so long remained unaffected by foreign political influence, began to feel the push and pulls of the British annexation of Assam post-
\textit{Treaty of Yandaboo}.\textsuperscript{18}

Colonialism marked an interesting phenomenon namely the institutionalisation of migrations in the form of the permanent entry of the 'Vai' and the 'Arakanese', 'Hakka' tribes of Burma conveniently clubbed as 'Poi' or 'Burma Mi' (Burmese); and also of the \textit{Gorkha} into the Zo territory. The 'imposed' unification of the Mizo tribes coupled with the migration of the others was bound to have its repercussions and fanned an undercurrent of identity consciousness among the various Zo/Mizo tribes. However, the entry of the 'Others' was limited by the Chin Hills Regulations of 1896\textsuperscript{19} and the Inner Line Permit.\textsuperscript{20} The British through the politics of the Line System maintained its monopoly and gave a free-hand to the Christian mission to penetrate in these remote areas.\textsuperscript{21} The British Government occupied the

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\textsuperscript{16}The Mizos frequently raided the adjacent plains and it was Colonel Lister’s expedition to the Lushai Hills in 1850 that opened the doors for the annexation of the territory in 1895. The first expedition to the Lushai Hills was marked by the destruction of the village of Lalngura Sailo, who was one of the Chiefs associated with raids on the British territory.

\textsuperscript{17} H.K. Barpujari. (Reprinted 1980). \textit{Assam in the days of the Company 1826-1858}. Gauhati: LBS. p.242.


\textsuperscript{19} The Chin Hills Regulations was passed on 13\textsuperscript{th} August 1896. It authorised the Superintendent or the Deputy Commissioner to order any undesirable outsider to leave the area and tax the residents, permanent or temporary, houses, clans and villages.


\textsuperscript{21} A.C. Ray. (1982). \textit{Mizoram Dynamics of Change}. Calcutta: Pearl Publishers/ICSSR. p. 69. In a letter written to the treasurer of the Lakher Pioneer Mission, Shakespear wrote in 1906 while he was the British Resident at Manipur: ‘Your remarks as to the danger of these Hills tribes becoming
Lushai Hills to keep the frontiers quiet. Hence the administration was least concerned so long as the Lushais did not break the law.22

The introduction of “Circle Administration”23 in 1910-1902 facilitated the smooth relations between the Chief24 and the Officer-In-charge of the Circle. Each circle administration had a Circle Interpreter who was a New Elites25 at the administrative level much like the ‘Black Coats’ (New Elites) at the religious level. The emergence of the ‘New Elites’ marked the birth of a ‘Middle class’26 which was conspicuously absent in the traditional Zo society. The creation of the New Elites at the administrative level and also the religious level was fuelled by the Missionary activities of education. ‘A new class of educated Lushais came up under the sponsorship of the Missionaries. This middle class explanation is effective for understanding ‘identity politics’ among the tribes in Mizoram.


23 The British introduced the system of “Circle Administration” and the Mizo Hills was divided into 18 Circles, 12 in the Aizawl sub-division and 6 in the Lunglei sub-division.

24 The institution of chieftainship, which was hereditary, underwent certain changes under the influence of the British for instance the eldest son began to inherit chieftainship. In the administration of a village the chief (Lal) was assisted by a Council of Elders (Lal Upa). These Elders were selected or nominated by the Chiefs themselves. E.J. Thomas. (1993). Mizo bamboo Hills Murmur Change (Mizo Society Before And After Independence). New Delhi: Intellectual Publishing House

25 The New Elites were the direct product of British colonialism and their existence totally depended on their allegiance to the foreign rulers. McCall traced the origin of a new class, the intelligentsia, to the spread of Christianity. The mission employed local people as salaried Church executives and school teachers in the villages. In none of the villages the Government maintained any salaried staff. As the mission had to rely on the willing support of the people this class was heavily courted by the Mission. McCall observes: “we cannot blame the missionaries for this but the administration would be open to blame if it did not take count of this situation”. A.G. McCall. (1949).(2003). Lushai Chrysalis. Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute. pp. 216-217. Naturally the nouveau elites eulogised and emulated the colonial masters and in doing so they became the ‘mimicked man’, the ‘kala sahebs’, the new privileged class in the Mizo society.

The introduction of money economy thus boosted the emergence of the middle class in the Zo society. The common people were gaining new status and acquiring purchasing power and in turn felt confident enough to challenge and raise their voices against traditional autocratic authority of the chiefs. The exposure to the outside world through foreign travel during the world wars opened the gates of consciousness and the overwhelming ‘tidal wave of colour’ which had been influencing other colonised people began to have its ripples even in the Zo Hills.

Despite these changes, the internal affairs were left to the chief and his elders who ruled their units according to the customary laws of the land and the British administration intervened only when the chiefs went beyond their jurisdiction. Initially, the British manipulated the traditional chiefs and their elders and later when these traditional power structures were fully under their control, they increased their numbers by acting as ‘kingmakers’ in the Zo hills or Lushai Hills as it was called then. When the Lushai Hills were taken over by the British, there were sum odd 60 chiefs but when the British left the Lushai Hills in 1940s their number increased to more than 400. The increase in the number of new chiefs speaks in volumes about the divide and rule policy of the British and their role as ‘King-makers’.

The pattern of the policy of the British towards the Chiefs in the Lushai Hills was a mirror-image of the policies followed elsewhere in the colonial world having tribal

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27 A new class of educated Lushais came up under the sponsorship of the Missionaries. Western Education of the middle class made their entry into government and non-government services easy. Tribes were ably aided into this through the provision of reservation, which were available not only for employment purposes but also in higher education and politics. These measures and avenues made possible the emergence of the middle class. Christianity meant medical care, education, English language and a richer material life. The education policy generated a feeling that ‘education’ and ‘Christianity’ were the only means to salaried jobs, which would bring freedom from the drudgery, toil and uncertainty of cultivation. Having a missionary education thus began to signal the sure possibility of securing government jobs or such other modern salaried occupation. This permanent ‘paid-in-cash’ (‘pawisa’/’sum chhuana’ in Mizo) occupation seemed to be a ready made solution to all ailments of semi-migratory tribes and Jhum economy.

Initially the British supported and relied on individual Chiefs and after sometime they strategically created newer centres of power and gradually ousted the traditional structures. The British skilfully manipulated both these elites to maintain its indirect hold over the Zo territory.

In effect, the British Superintendent and the Mizo Chiefs continued to rule as virtual dictators, and no organised protest was possible due to the support provided by the District Superintendent to the Chiefs. Towards the end of colonial rule, the resentment against the Chiefs had gained momentum all over the Lushai Hills. Western education, occupational security along with a sense of economic confidence and the exposure to the foreign worlds made the first generation youths confident to control their own destiny. They found it difficult to accept the traditional authority and the unquestioning obedience that it called for that is they wanted freedom from the chiefs and the customary discipline. This individualism was principally based on their superior academic qualification cemented by comfortable salaried jobs. The formation of the Young Lushai Association in 1935 accelerated the anti-chief wave and also McCall's District Chiefs Durbar (1941) helped shape the political consciousness in the Lushai Hills.


Similar trends took place in Africa where experience in Foreign Service during the wars increased the political consciousness among the people. The discontent of the returned soldiers led to the demands of the Africans for control of their own destiny. Cf., Mair Lucy. (1963). Op. cit.


McCall's Durbar had a strong impact on politics in Mizoram; First, it united the Chiefs (traditional as well as ascribed) on a common platform, made them coordinate and voice their feelings against the British and also it led to a new found oppressive psychology among the chiefs. Second, the main objective of McCall was to keep down agitation of the commoners and New Elites and Neo-rich in Mizoram. But the British objective boomeranged and the voices of commoners' had to be given an outlet in the form of political self-assertion in the 1946 Durbar elections under A.R McDonald. The commoners' were given right to elect their own representatives (A.C. Ray. Ibid.). The British objective also boomeranged at another level that is at the level of the unity among the two types of chiefs namely 'traditional chiefs' and 'ascribed chiefs'. The British did not apprehend the possibility of a unity between the two types of chiefs.
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The political consciousness among the Zo/Mizo began to grow with the formation of the Young Lushai Association (YLA). The apprehension among the New Elites during the last phases of the ‘Colonial Rule’ in the Lushai Hills about the possibilities of reverting back to the pre-colonial system of Chieftainship resulted in the birth of a political party called the Mizo Common Peoples’ Union (MCPU) on April 9, 1946.\(^{34}\) The Mizo Union zealously led to the ‘Commoners’ Movement’ or ‘Lai Sawi’ (Shaking/dismantling the Chieftainship).\(^{35}\) This was one of the first instances of rebellion against tradition in the Mizo society, resulting in the permanent displacement of the Traditional Elites by ‘the Politicians’ (political parties) at the political level. The commoners’ movement initiated by the MCPU (or the MU) was constantly opposed by a new political outfit named the ‘United Mizo Freedom Organisation’ (UMFO) formed under the instrumental guidance of Phizo on July 4, 1947.\(^{36}\)

During the later part of the British rule, the people in Lushai Hills as well as in Manipur Hills had begun to realise that the British administration was trying to adopt the policy of control through the chiefs of the community. This was further reaffirmed by the British attitude towards the anti-chief movement of the commoners'.\(^{37}\) The British

\(^{34}\) The party was later renamed as “Mizo Union” so as to de-strain the relations between the chiefs and the commoners. The ‘Mizo Common Peoples’ Union’ (MCPU) which was initiated at Lungleh (Lunglei) in 1946 had the following objectives: First, to unite all the people in the Lushai hills and adjoining areas. Second, to abolish chieftainship and Third, to join the Indian mainstream instead of being kept aloof as a private property of the Viceroy of India or his representatives. Brig. Verghese & C. L. Thanzawna. (1997). A History of the Mhos. Vols. I & II. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, p.4; N. N. Acharyya. (1984). Ibid.; C.R. Nag. (1998). Ibid. p. 72.


\(^{36}\) The UMFO was essentially a pro-chiefs party and openly declared the merger of all Zo/Mizo inhabited territory into one and secession from India.

\(^{37}\) The British attitude in this respect was exactly the same as the European attitude in Africa. ‘The attitude of the European rulers was on the contrary, to keep up the authority of the Chiefs and the move against the chiefs was regarded as an undesirable creation of trouble making politicians’ (A.C. Ray. (1982). Op. cit. p.41). “So opposition to rule by Chiefs comes to be linked with opposition to rule by Europeans”. Mair Lucy. (1963). Op. cit. pp.108-109.
Superintendent and other officials regarded the opposition to the chiefs as an opposition to the British rule.\textsuperscript{38} It was because of this attitude of the British that the nascent Mizo Union had declared that in the event of India being independent, the Mizos should be included within Assam. Thus, the sole motive behind the formation of the political party (parties) was the desire of achieving a democratic system of administration for the Mizo and limiting the hold of the local stakeholders such as the chiefs.

With the end of colonial rule the Constituent Assembly of India set up an Advisory Committee to deal with matters relating to the minorities and the tribals and the clash of interest between the Integrationists and the Secessionists.\textsuperscript{39} Following the Bordoloi Sub-Committee’s suggestion, a certain amount of autonomy was accepted by the Government and enshrined in Article 244 (2) the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.\textsuperscript{40} Consequently the Lushai Hills was divided into Mizo Hills District Council (for the Zo/Mizo tribes in the north) and the Pawi, Lakher and Chakma Regional Council (for the tribes in the south) on 25\textsuperscript{th} April 1952 and on 23\textsuperscript{rd} April 1952 respectively (refer to Chapter IV for details). The nascent autonomy introduced greater sense of democracy in the Lushai Hills through the Sixth Schedule scheme and the abolition of Chieftainship in the Mizo society. However the autonomy under Part ‘A’ of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India met the aspirations of the Mizo only partially as the fear of being submerged under the Assamese hegemony\textsuperscript{41} remained.

\textsuperscript{38} A.C. Ray. \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{39} The case of the North-East tribal region was placed under a sub-Committee, headed by Gopinath Bordoloi known as ‘North East Frontier Tribal and Excluded Areas Committee’.

\textsuperscript{40} Ambedkar justifying the rationale of the Sixth Schedule mentioned that ‘the tribal people in areas other than Assam are more or less Hinduised, more or less assimilated with the civilisation and culture of the majority of people in whose midst they live. With regard to the tribals of Assam, that is not the case. Their roots are still in their own civilisation and their own culture….Their laws of inheritance, their laws of marriage; customs and so on are quite different from that of the Hindus’. Karna. (1990) cited in B.G. Verghese. (1996). \textit{Op. cit.}

The Mizo Union submitted a resolution of this Sub-committee demanding inclusion of all Mizo inhabited areas adjacent to Lushai Hills\textsuperscript{42} thus reviving the move for administrative unification of the 'Zo hnahthlak', 'Greater Mizoram',\textsuperscript{43} that was proposed by the Chin-Lushai Conference at Calcutta way back in January 1892.\textsuperscript{44} Representatives of the District Council and the Mizo Union pleaded the States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) in 1954 for integrating the Mizo dominated areas of the neighbouring States of Tripura and Manipur with their District Council in Assam. The inability to reunify the Zo hnahthlak resulted in a severe split in the Mizo Union. Dissatisfied with the States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) recommendations, the tribal leaders of the region met at Aizawl in 1955 and formed a new political party, Eastern India Tribal Union (EITU) and put forward a demand for a separate State comprising of all the Hill Districts of Assam.\textsuperscript{45} The breakaway factions of the Mizo Union and the UMFO joined the EITU; however, the demand for a separate Hill State was kept in abeyance due to the lack of understanding of the Hill problems by the B.P. Chaliha Ministry.\textsuperscript{46}


\textsuperscript{43} H. K Bawichhuaka was one of the first leaders to spearhead the movement for 'Greater Mizoram' or unification of the Zo hnahthlak or Zomi. Bawichhuaka and his friends through the Mizo Union spread the message of the unification of the lost Zo territory. Bawichhuaka travelled extensively to preach the gospel of Zo unification among the Zo hnahthlak in and around the Mizo Hills. He and his Mizo Union were in favour of the unification of the Zo territory within the framework of the Indian Constitution and unlike the MNF did not favour secessionism to achieve 'Greater Mizoram'.

\textsuperscript{44} The Zo reunification process was foiled by Alexander Mackenzie, the then Chief Commissioner of Burma, who persuaded the Government of India against too much administration of the Lushai. The Chin Hills thus remained with Burma. For details Cf, The Chief Commissioner's letter dated 17th July 1897 to the Government of India. The result of the partition of India was that the gateway of the Lushai Districts via Chittagong was sealed off and the Mizo people found themselves abruptly separated from their kinsmen in the Chittagong hill tracts and also in the Chin Hills of Burma (Myanmar). Verghese \& Thanzawna. (1997). Op. cit. p. 1.


This marked ‘The Phase One’ in the Evolution of Identities and Politics in Mizoram and the ‘Construction and Deconstruction’ of identities in the Zo Hills. The Mizo succeeded in achieving autonomy in the socio-political and economic spheres as with the introduction of these Councils, the post of the Superintendent was abolished and the whole Lushai hills district was placed under a “Deputy Commissioner” and the “Chief Executive Members” of the District and Regional Councils.

2.2. Contextualising Identity Politics: Mizoram vis-à-vis India

The complex pre-colonial, colonial and post-independence histories of Mizoram just as the rest of the North-East India in toto, does not fit easily into the jigsaw of the standard narratives of Indian political history. The name Mizoram, for most Indians faintly rings the bells of ‘Laldenga and the insurgency in the Christian dominated area, the erstwhile primitive head hunters’, ‘the Looshais’ and the success of India’s democratic mechanisms at taming ‘Them’ as reflected through the dual processes of: (1) the signing of the Peace Accord (1986); and (2) the implementation of ‘Cosmetic Federalism’. To the other less-informed majority it remains a geo-political puzzle, mapping its geographic location and its habitants becomes a quest in itself.

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47 This group of Indians can be broadly categorised into 3 distinct groups: (a) Those who directly served in the Indian Army or Administrative circles. (b) Those whose relatives had served in the Indian Army or Administrative circles in the northeast. (c) Those who were working as migrant labourers with the BRTF, BSF and others, which includes a significant population of Santhal tribes from Jharkhand/Bihar belt.


50 Lalhmingthanga former Finance Minister of Union Territory of Mizoram has mentioned similar experiences in his Foreword to A.C Ray’s Mizoram Dynamics of Change, 1982. Op.cit.
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According to the Anthropological Survey of India’s monumental “People of India” study\(^51\), most communities in India see themselves as migrants. The bulk of them would be internal migrants within the confines of the Indian Territory, whereas most communities of the North-East either have their roots outside India or have migrated into the region from the Indian heartland. In some ways, therefore, the feeling towards foreigners and “outsiders” is surprising and manifests itself in the form of contemporary localism or defence mechanism against being overwhelmed: demographically, culturally and in terms of ownership of land and access to economic opportunity by “the other”\(^52\).

The very term ‘Mizo’, ‘Mizoram’ just like the term ‘North-East’ evokes in the minds of the mainland Indians an ‘alien culture’, Chinkys, backward tribals, Christian tribals, ‘Open sex societies’, underdeveloped area, forests, jungles\(^53\) (Wild, Uncivilised), tribes with weird food habits infamously known as the ‘dog-eaters’ and so on. Few citations from the booklet issued by the West Delhi Police, titled, ‘Security Tips for Northeast Students/Visitors in Delhi’\(^54\) which claims ‘to help the people from the region to overcome the handicap of their “foreign” features’ supports such stereotypical images or ‘social profiling’:

“Dress code: when in rooms [sic (Rome)] do as Roman does”, the police’s immortal prose tells the 45,000 odd North easterners living in and around the capital.

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\(^{53}\) In the “Life of the Lindsays” mention is made of a tribe living in the depths of the jungle, called “Cookies”. At that date, they were evidently looked upon as wild men of the woods, reference being made to one who was captured but afterwards succeeded in escaping to the woods much in the same manner as a strange species of wild animal would be spoken of. Cf., Chapter-1 The Kuki-Lushai Tribes-Physical Characteristics in C.A. Soppitt. (N.A.). Op. cit. The debates at the academic circles in post-independence era marked by the tussle among scholars like Ghurye, Elwin, Srinivas and others and the policies adopted by the independent Indian leaders from Delhi also reflected the reminiscent of such mental blocs.

"Revealing dress be avoided. Avoid lonely road/ by lane when dressed scantily. Dress according to the sensitivity of the local populace", it adds.

As for food habits, "bamboo shoots, akhuni and other smelly dishes should be prepared without creating rukus [sic (ruckus)] in the neighbourhood".

The depiction that their women do not cover up enough, they mix with no one and their food smells so awful that it is a threat to public order signals that mainland India treats 'its people' from the hill states as if they were aliens. The Delhi Police or to over generalise the people of mainland India seem to be perplexed by this strange tribe of the North-East. For the mainland Indians 'North-East' is a blanket term irrespective of ethnic, linguistic, cultural as well as other seen and unseen differences that exist between and among the plethora of tribes or peoples in the region, just as 'mainland India' is used as a referent for the whole region beyond the frontiers of West Bengal.

Beyond these stereotypical images of the people of the North-East and especially the Mizo, mainland Indians are perpetually perplexed by the external features of the people of the region and club them into a neatly compartmentalised category of 'Chinkys', or Chinese, totally bypassing their identity as Indians and pushing them at the realms of the 'final Other'. The underlying realities of 'Politics in Mizoram,' more specifically the construction of identities, its contestations and the associated 'Politics of Silencing' which exhibits its expressions in the from exclusions and inclusions- justified in the name of 'State-Building', hardly echoes beyond the Zo tlang ram. The outside world beyond the Zo Hills are hardly aware of the underlying politics of identity, culture, space, 'continued colonisation' and

55 Films in parts do represent reality. For instance, Shamit Amin. dir. Chak De India. (2007). India: Yash Raj Films International Ltd. Amin's Shahrukh Khan starrer film based on sports (Hockey) has two characters from the North-East (Manipur and Mizoram) who are meted out a 'foreigner' treatment and referred to as 'Chowmein' (Chinese, chinky) by their bully team-mates. The internal conflict of the characters from the North-East on the issue of being recognised as authentic citizens of their own country is well summed up by a dialogue of the characters from the region: 'there is no pride(happiness) in being treated as foreigners in our own country' (direct translation: Mine).
'internal colonisation,' patriarchal hegemony, religious persecutions and also of state led 'victimisation of the marginalised- women and others'.

This dissertation on the 'Identity Consciousness' among the various Zo tribes can be linked to the gradual migration of Vai and other ethnic communities into the Zo territory. Since Colonial times, there has been a slow, yet sure encroachment of the Vai or 'Outsiders' in Mizoram especially over the Mizo economy. The resurgence of the 'Zo' identity in varying degrees has successfully curbed further entry of the Vai as well as resulted in their absorption in varying degrees. Ethnic identity formation in Mizoram reaffirms that identity formation is a process created through the dynamics of elite competition within the boundaries determined by political and economic realities.

The identity articulation among tribals in post-independence India has more to do with the drawing of distinctions between tribes and non-tribes with a view to gaining more economic and political powers, however limited it may be. The articulation of identity is again most pronounced among tribes where an educated middle class has emerged. However, the consciousness evident in such articulation is not the consciousness of tribe as a category but consciousness of being a people different from the others and especially the dominant regional community. As Xaxa (2005) maintains:

The identity manifest in this kind of articulation is one of being either a Santhal or Khasi or Bodo, who are at the general level, described as tribes. Whereas, the articulation of tribal identity has taken a more generic name such as the Naga, Kuki, Adivasis, etc. when it concerns securing political rights.56

2.3. Emergence of the Generic Mizo Identity: Mizo versus Lushai

A number of ethnic groups of distinctly mongoloid origin inhabit the territory of present day Mizoram. The present ethnic population of Mizoram according to K.S. Singh, B.B. Goswami, C. Nunthara, & N. N. Sengupta. (Ed.). (1995). People of India: Mizoram, Vol. XXXIII. Anthropological Survey Of India. (Calcutta: Seagull Books) is composed of

MAP 2.2

The cultural map of Mizoram depicting the division of space between the different groups

# Shows the eight districts in the state of Mizoram and also the over-lapping cultural spaces of the various ethnic groups in Mizoram. The over-lappings in the cultural boundaries stand as instances of ‘bleeding boundaries’, adding to the contestation over the issue of original territorial spaces; and the non-acceptance of existing administrative territorial zones as marked in the official map.
broadly 15 distinct communities. The several communities, which were mentioned in the earlier books dealing with Anthropology and the History of the region, have lost their separate identities and have mingled with the larger groups. The communities that still maintain a sort of identity of their own are the Lusei, the Hmar, the Paitie, the Lai (Pawi), the Bawm, the Mara (Lakher), the Tlau, the Ralte, the Pang, the Hualngo, the Biate, the Thadou, the Bru (Reang), the Chakma, and the Magh. The Chakma, Magh and Reang are quite different from other communities and have their own distinct way of life. The other ethnic groups, though different from each other, have many cultural similarities amongst them.

The mushrooming of identities based on ethnic lines in the Zo Hills has to be understood against the backdrop of the process of partition of the Zo territory. The result of the partition of India was that the gateway of the Lushai Districts via Chittagong was sealed off and the Zo/Mizo people found themselves abruptly separated from their kinsmen in the Chittagong hill tracts and also in the Chin Hills of Burma (Myanmar). The formation of the Lushai Hills District offered an opportunity for contact between the different sub-tribes of the region especially the Zo/Mizo and the Chakma. The hills districts developed a special kind of identity which remained crucial for subsequent political developments in the region and the trauma of the village regrouping during the insurgency. Mizoram witnessed the clash between ethno-centric affiliations strengthened by 'primordial attachments' and the broader generalised commitment to the nation (India) with its plural characteristics.

During the course of their migration from the Chin Hills, potential core clans or tribes appeared from time to time like the Thado, the Sukte, the Zahau, the Kamhau, the Sailo and others but none so were as successful as the Sailo clan. The Sailo-Lushai clan unified the various Zo tribes under their rule, introduced a uniform code of administration and social and moral codes of conduct and introduced cultural community consciousness. Being the most powerful group and one of the first Zo hnahthlak to come in direct contact with the British naturally the colonial administration conveniently named the people and their territory as 'Lushai Hills' after the Sailo-Lushai clan. Though people from the Lushai Hills were then

classified as ‘Lushai’ majority of the inhabitants belonged to other Zo tribes such as Hmar, Lakher (Mara) Pawi (Lai), Paite (Tiddim), Ralte, Thado etc., and amongst them they unmistakably addressed to each other not as Lushai but as ‘Mizo’ or Zo or Zo hnahthlak (children of the Zo people).

The Colonial imposed identities and also the new self-constructed identities provided a rallying point for ethnic movements among the tribes in Mizoram, thus ‘creating difference’ or artificially imposing ‘identity markers’ in terms of ‘official names’, ‘territories’, ‘zones’ among the ‘Zo/Mizo’ tribes. One of the striking features of process of identity construction in Mizoram is movement for the acquisition of ‘new names’ in place of ‘old names’. However, since time immemorial the different tribes in Mizoram had used the term ‘Mizo’ to suggest their racial identity and solidarity.

The common interpretation of the term ‘Mizo’ is ‘Hillman/Highlander’ but this interpretation may not stand a close scrutiny. The intrinsic meaning appears to be much deeper and therefore should not be deduced by attaching a locational connotation to the term. The term Mizo is a generic term and it stands for several major and minor tribes in Mizoram. Etymologically, Mizo means Hillman (‘Mi’ meaning man and ‘Zo’ meaning hill). The liberal interpretation of the term is inclusive of all ethnic hill tribes living in Mizoram including the Chakma, Gorkha, Bru (Reang) and the ‘Zo hnahthlak’. The Zo/Mizo were migratory tribes living in the area between the Chittagong Hill Tracts in the west, Chin Hills in the east and Cachar Hills in the north and Arakan Hills in the south.

Since the Lushai Hills District (change of name) Act of 1954, a number of communities have preferred to identify themselves as Mizos. However, recently the Zo hnahthlak who form the majority have been advocating for an inclusive Zo identity exclusively meant for the Zo hnahthlak and their sub-clans. There is a general tendency among those who call themselves Mizo to impose the ‘Zo/Mizo identity’ on other minor tribes like the Mara, the Lai, the Chakma and the Bru (Reang). One of the binding factors for this Zo identity or ‘Zomi’ identity is the nostalgia of having originated from the mythical cave of ‘Sinlung’ (‘Chhinlung’, or ‘covered stone cave’) somewhere in the north. The term
Zo/Mizo is difficult to explain and has been interpreted in many ways. According to one interpretation, ‘Mi’ means person and ‘Zo’ means highland that is highlander or people living in the high hills. Another interpretation says ‘Zo’ may also mean cold region and therefore Mizo signifies people of the cold region. Lehman (1963) however, argues that the interpretation of Mizo as ‘Cold’ stems from an error of understanding on the part of the missionaries and administrators.

Another view is of the opinion that the people were named after the area of their habitation called ‘Zopui’, west of Tiau valley. However, it is difficult to accept this argument as because various Chin groups and Lushais use the word ‘Zo’ for themselves and all these Chin people do not come from that village. According to another interpretation the word ‘Zo’ is traced back to the Burmese word “Yaukkya” meaning man, and is suppose to have been derived from the Tai Chinese word “Yoe”. The word is pronounced as “Dzo”. B.S Carey, then the political officer of the Chin Hills, said in his accounts of the British invasion of the Chin Hills that the Chins used to call their race by the general name “Yo” (pronounced as “Zo”) meaning ‘man’. However, the above interpretation does not appear to be philologically sound. Lehman opines that the word ‘Zo’ has a basic meaning relevant to the symbolic context of the plains cultivation of the ‘Vai’. ‘The Chins are described as Zomi because they lack the civilization of the Burman whose culture they envy, however, still will not emulate’. So by this account Zo means, ‘uncultivated, relatively crude and unsophisticated’.

Whatever may be the case, the term ‘Mizo’ gained popular acceptance in the Lushai Hills as a common nomenclature for all the Zo descent. Consequently, the name of Lushai Hills was changed into Mizo Hills and when it attained the status of Union Territory and later Statehood it became ‘Mizoram’, a land of the Mizo or Zo people. This was the first time in Zo history that their land or territory had been named after their own given name. It may be pertinent to mention here that the nomenclatures like ‘Chin’ and ‘Kuki’ are derogatory terms.


given by outsiders to the Zo people whereas ‘Zo’ is a self-given name that is dignified, honourable and all embracing. It now virtually stands as the collective name of the Zo descent. And Mizoram can claim a pride of place as a land where every Zo descent is fully integrated in ‘Mizo’.

The Identity formation around the generic identity ‘Mizo’ successfully replaced the hegemonic imposed identity ‘Lushai’ constitutionally from the mid 50s. However, even the generic identity has invited micro-national responses of myriad hues. The generic identity created ripples of micro-national response from the three prominent southern tribes namely Mara, Lai and Chakma. The ‘Southern identities’ or ‘Chhim lam mi’ and ‘khawthlang mi’ like the Lai, Mara, Chakma and others continued to challenge the generic Mizo identity. These local marginal identities preferred to be recognised by their clannish sub-tribal identities rather than generic identities.

2.4. Contesting the Generic Identity ‘Mizo’: Politics of Reconstruction of Identity

The process of identity-formation over the years Mizo-ised the ethno-cultural proximates belonging to the larger or more amorphous Kuki-Chin groups in India and Burma, with a majority of the 15-17 local tribes assuming a more distinctive Mizo identity by virtue of adopting Christianity, a Lushai dialect (Duhlian), with roman script. The group of tribes in the present day Aizawl circle commonly referred to as the ‘Lusei-Mizo group’ believe they are the real ‘Mizo’ and expect other peripheral and southern tribes and western tribes to accept the generic Mizo identity. They also expect the marginal tribes to speak the Duhlian dialect which has been elevated to the position of the lingua franca of the state of Mizoram.60 The great debate on whether to be called ‘Mizo’ or ‘Zomi’ has shadowed the politics of identity building in Mizoram for a long time. The general accepted term to refer to their identity is ‘Zofate’ or ‘Zo hnahthlak’ (children of the Zo people). It became important for the

Zo tribes to distinguish themselves from the other tribes in Mizoram for the following reasons:

1. Historically and ethnically the Zo tribes belong to an entirely different ethnic category. Therefore, it became glaringly necessary to mark themselves different from the other ethnic tribes living in and around Mizoram.

2. Moreover, the term Mizo was the result of a phonetic error and this error had to be corrected to suggest and maintain the domination of the Zo tribes who are a majority in Mizoram.

3. At the same time, this strategy of unifying the Zo tribes will be a step towards the achieving the goal of ‘Greater Mizoram’ or ‘Zoram’, however elusive.

4. Last but not the least, this hegemonic stand over the others will enable the Zo tribes to counter the Pan-Indian identity with equally strong force and enable the Zo tribes to maintain and sustain their provincial national identities. It will enable to balance the reaction between national identity and sub-national identities.

From the financial perspective the move for the unification of the Zo tribes will enable to check and restrict the flow of resources to the minorities and other tribes and also keep the Vai at the receiving end thereby, psychologically quench the thirst of an ethnically based ‘home-rule’ and give the Zo tribes a feeling of security and peace from the threat of the others. The term ‘Zo’ has been employed in academic as well as popular usage in a rather complex manner. For instance, the same signifier ‘Zo’ has different significance. Scanning through the colonial records one becomes familiarised by the different names imposed on the group of tribes living in and around Mizoram such as ‘Yo’ or ‘Yaw’, ‘Zo’. The term ‘Zo’, ‘Mizo’, ‘Zomi’ or Zo hnahthlak is used interchangeably in everyday language by the people living in and around the region. To add to this confusion of names, the marginal tribes in Manipur and Myanmar call themselves exclusively as ‘Zou’. However the term ‘Zo’ or ‘Zomi’ is used to replace the hyphenated term ‘Chin-Kuki-Lushai’ in current academic and political discourse as well as the generic term ‘Mizo’ in everyday language in Mizoram.

The term ‘Zomi’ (‘Zo People’) is derived from the term ‘Zo’. The Zo have been subjected to externally imposed identities by the non-tribal plain peoples of Burma,
Bangladesh and India as Chin, Kuki, or Lushai. The British kept alive the tradition and used these terms to refer to the ‘wild hill tribes’ living in the ‘un-administered area’, and subsequently legalised these names for the Zo people. However, they called themselves Zomi since time immemorial. The Zomi are found mainly in western part of Burma (the Chin State) and in Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura and Assam on the Indian side.

‘Zomi’ reflects the primordial connectedness of the Zo people as single ethnic entity in their presumed historic homeland from where they dispersed and settled in areas now occupied by them in Myanmar, India and Bangladesh with each group identifying itself as a separate tribe. This is known as ‘ethnic dissolution’ through fusion, fission or proliferation. The term ‘Zo’ represents the Chin, Kuki and Mizo/Zomi (Chikumi) group as defined by G. A. Grierson in the Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. III Part III, as one linguistic ethnic community belonging to the Tibeto-Burman group. The fact that the Zomi were known as Zou or Yo or Yaw, before their society evolved into clan based organisation and lineage segmentation, was pointed out by G.A. Grierson in his survey thus, ‘the name (Kuki and Chin) is not used by the tribes themselves, who use titles such as Zou or Yo or Cho’. T.H. Lewin during the Lushai Expedition of 1871-72 concluded that ‘the generic name of the whole nation is Dzo’. Captain Pemberton mentioned Zo or Jo in his ‘Reports on the Eastern Frontiers of British India, 1835’. F.K. Lehman on the basis of his extensive study on the Chins of Burma, has observed:

No single Chin word has explicit reference to all the peoples we customarily call Chin, but all or nearly all of the peoples have a special word for themselves and those of their congeners with whom they are in regular contact. This word is almost always a variant form of a single root, which appears as Zo, Yo, Ysou, Shou and the like.

Zomi thus is considered to be the correct historical name of the people living between the Naga Hills to the Bay of Bengal. To the north of Tedim, the Thadous and other tribes call themselves Yo; in Falam, Laizo. The Tedim people call themselves Zo; the Lushais, Mizo; in Haka, Zotung, Zophei, Zokhua. In Gangaw area Zo is pronounced as Yaw, in Mindat Jo or

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Cho; and in Paletwa Khomi. In Prome, Thayetmyo, Sandoway and Bassein areas they call themselves A-Sho. Regional variations aside 'Zomi' seems to be the original historical name of the people. Bertram S. Carey and H.N. Tuck mentioned that 'those of the Kuki tribes which we designate as "Chins" do not recognise that name...they call themselves Yo (Zo)...and Yo (Zo) is the general name by which the Chins call their race'.

It is, therefore, no wonder that the people in the region use the term Zo, Zou, Zhou, Chou, Shou, Yo, Jo, Yaw, Shu in their speech as well as in naming their territorial spaces as Zoltang, Zopui, Zokhawtlang, Zobawk and such other. All these have a common derivation from the generic name, 'ZO'. Scholars like Vumson, Mangkhosat Kipgen, K. Zawla, T. Gougion, L. Keivom and many others conclude that 'Zo' or 'Zomi' or Zo hnahhlak is the phonetically correct identity of the people rather than 'Mizo'.

2.4.1. Zomi Identity and Chhinlung Theory

The mythical belief of the Mizo people is that originally they came out from "Chhinlung" which means ‘covering rock’, which may perhaps be a place now called Silung in China, bordering the Shan State in the East. Several attempts have been made to rationalise the myth “Chhinlung. For instance, some argue that Chhinlung refers to the Great Wall of

62 Lt. Col. J. Shakespear in his monograph ‘The Lushei-Kuki Clans’, mentioned that ‘there is no doubt that the Kukis, Chins, and Lushais are all of the same race’ and used the term ‘Clan’ in place of ‘tribe’ for denoting the different Zomi groups because of the high degree of identity found among the people in terms of language, culture and history. On a similar note William Shaw in his monograph ‘Notes on the Thadou Kukis’ (1919) mentions that ‘The Koms, Aimols, Khothang, Thadous, Chins, Lushai, Pois, Soktes (Sukte), Paites, Gangtes, etc. are undoubtedly connected. The language alone has many similarities and the syntax is not dissimilar. Again these are their customs which have a common principle running through them all’. Col. E. B. Elly (Asst. Quarter Master General) made a similar comment that ‘All these were people of the same race, speaking dialects of the same language, wearing the same dress, and having the same customs, form of politics, and religious belief’ in his book titled ‘Military Report on the Chin-Lushai Country’ (1893) (Reprinted 1978). Betram S. Carey, the political officer of Chin Hills (Burma), and H. N. Tuck his Assistant, in their book, ‘The Chin Hills: A History of the People, our dealing with them, and their customs and manners, and a Gazetteer of their Country’, Vols. I & II (1896) (1976) (Calcutta: Firma KLM/ TRI, Mizoram), initially commented that ‘the Chins have nothing in common with the Lushais of Assam’ and later after a thorough study of the Zo people modified their position and concluded that ‘Without pretending to speak with authority on the subject, we think we may reasonably accept the theory that the Kukis of Manipur the Lushai of Bengal and Assam and the Chins originally lived in what we know as Tibet, and are of one and the same stock: their form of government, method of cultivation, manners, and customs, beliefs and traditions all point to one origin’.
China; others argue that it is neither a wall nor a cave but the name of a Chinese Prince Chin Lung the son of Huang Ti of the Chin Dynasty, who built the Great Wall. The Prince incurred the displeasure of his father and left his kingdom and settled in Burma.\(^{63}\) Whatever the case may have been, it strongly hints at forced migration across the region from Khampat. They are said to have planted a banyan tree at Khampat before the left as a sign that settlement was made by them.\(^{64}\)

The Zo, in course of their migration moved further west into the Chindwin River and the Kabaw Valley and branched southwest and spread over in the present Rakhine (Arakan) State in Myanmar and Chittagong Hills Tract in Bangladesh. The major bulk of them continued to move westward, climbed the rugged Chin Hills and settled in its mountain fastnesses undisturbed from outside forces for a period long enough to establish their own pattern of settlement and administration, socio-cultural norms and practices, beliefs and rituals, myths and legends, folk tales, music and dance and many other customs and traditions which they handed down from generation to generation and to the present time. The further branching-off of the Zo people made them more and more isolated from each other and encouraged narrow clanish loyalty. Consequently, inter-tribal rivalries and wars marked the condition when the British came to the picture.

The inability of Zo people to accept a common nomenclature to represent their collective identity has result in them being identified as ‘Chin’ in Myanmar; ‘Lusei’ or ‘Mizo’ in Mizoram; and ‘Kuki’ in Manipur, Nagaland, Assam, Tripura and Chittagong Hills Tract. The Linguistic Survey of India published in 1904 identified more than 40 Zo dialects of which the Duhlian-Lushai dialect, now known as ‘Mizo twang’, is the most developed and understood and is gradually evolving to become the lingua franca of the Zo people. Many


tribes within the Zo group have also identified themselves as separate tribes and are recognized as such under the Indian Constitution. For instance, in Manipur, though a good many of the Zo tribes have been listed as Scheduled tribes under the 1956 Tribe Reorganisation. A large section of Zo tribes such as the Anal, Lamkang, Maring, Monsang and Moyon who ethnologically and historically speaking belong to the Zo group, have politically inclined themselves with the Naga group and adopted the ‘Naga Identity’.

2.4.2. Zo Consciousness

The history of the ‘Zo consciousness’ can be traced back to the Chin-Lushai Conference at Fort William, Calcutta in January 1892 where it was unanimously agreed that “it is desirable that the whole tract of country known as the Chin-Lushai Hills should be brought under one Administrative head as soon as this can be done”. The proposal of Robert Reid to integrate the Zo inhabited areas of the Arakan Hill Tracts into the Lushai Hills District could not be implemented for political reasons. The British Raj thus had two prominent impacts on Zo politics. The first was negative in nature, in the sense that they divided up all the Zo inhabited areas under different rulers and reduced them to a miniscule minority. The second was positive in nature, in the sense that they established law and order that consolidated the Zo people in their respective areas under a settled administration. Though the proposal to bring all Zo inhabited areas under one administrative head did not materialise, the introduction of the Chin Hills Regulation 1896, and its subsequent extension to all Zo inhabited areas as mentioned earlier could be regarded as a partial fulfilment of the Calcutta resolution. The ‘Chin Hills Regulation’ and its implementation to all Zo inhabited areas reflected the recognition by the British ‘of the oneness and indivisibility of the Zo people as well as their desire for territorial unity’. Another important impact of the British rule was the introduction of elementary education via Christianity. They produced a new kind of people who could not only read and write but think and reduce their feelings and knowledge into written word. They became the elites and intelligentsias who played an important role in national rediscovery.

The Mizo Union, realising the emotional appeal of Zo reunification had mooted the cause of the amalgamation of all Zo inhabited areas to form a ‘Greater Mizoram’ or ‘Zoram’
way back in 1946 based on the 'Reid Plan'. The armed rebellion of the Mizo National Front (MNF) following a series of mismanagements and the experience of the 'Great Famine' encashed on this Zo Consciousness. The main objective of the MNF was to declare Zo right of self-determination and to establish 'Independent Zoram' for all the Zo inhabited areas. The movement rekindled national sentiments throughout the Zo territory and many young men from all corners joined the movement and fought for Zo rights. Mizo Integration Council and later Mizo Integration Party were formed in 1970 with its headquarters in Churachandpur, Manipur. This party was the progenitor of the Zomi National Congress (ZNC) born two years later and its offshoot, the Zo Re-unification Organisation (ZORO).

Under the banner of ZORO, the First World Zomi Convention on Re-Unification was held at Champhai from May 19-21, 1988 which was attended by representatives from all Zo inhabited areas (see Appendix I). The armed struggle for Zo independence lasted twenty years and peace returned only in 1986 with the granting of Statehood for Mizoram. The Statehood boosted the Zo peoples' search for a political identity and a formal recognition of

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65 An instance of the mismanagement of resources was the air-drooping of food-supplies in wrong zones or at times over supplies in same villages resulting in abundance of supplies and resultant rotting of food. Due to inclement weather, the Air Force had to offload supplies meant for the Southern Villages in areas which had clear weather. In other words some areas got surplus while others suffered acute shortage of food supplies which resulted in anger against the State Government. During the 50s there were no proper road linkages to remote villages of the Mizo Hills and naturally the only means to supply resources and food supplies was the Air Force helicopters. However, air-droppings had its own limitation namely lack of organised porters, animal transport or mule tracks (Verghese & Thanzawna. (1997). Op.cit. pp.11-12) to reach the dropped food supplies to the target group. Another instance to cite the mismanagement or unpreparedness of the Government to handle the Mautam was the defective packaging unsuitable for air-dropping which led to waste of food grains.

66 For instance, the Assam Government supplied wheat to the famine stricken Zo Hills being unaware of the fact that the Zo/Mizo are a 'rice eating community'. Pi Rochhungj, a lady in her early 60s originally from Champhai and now living in Zarkawt who happens to be my aunt shared her experiences during the famine and the insurgency and the Government response that it generated in the form of supply of items which were of no use to the Zo/Mizo community during that time. Also confirmed by Pu Zaliana (Senior Research Officer, 'Tribal Research Institute', Art & Culture Department, Government of Mizoram, McDonald Hill). Personal Interview. Zarkawt, Aizawl: 22nd, 23rd and 24th January 2008.

their existence. It was the first time in Zo history that a full-fledged state had been established through and around which 'Zo reunification' could eventually evolve and grow.

2.4.3. The ‘Zomi’ Territory

The Zo occupy the mountainous region between India and Bangladesh in the west and the Chindwin-Irrawaddy valleys in the east, and the plains and valleys adjacent to these hilly regions (Cf., Map Verso). The following Zo folksong speaks of the ancestral homeland of the Zo:

"Penlehpi leh Kangtui minthang, A tua tong Zouta kual sung chi ua;
Khang Vaimang leh tuan a pupa Tongchiemna Kangtui minthang aw"
(between the two famous waters Penlehpi (Bay of Bengal in Burmese) and Kangtui (‘Tuikang’/Chindwin River) lies the Zomi country. "Tuan a pupa leh Khang vaimangte, Tongchiam kangtui minthang aw, Pu leh Pi leh kangtui minthang, A tua Zota kual hi e" ('Our fore-fathers had a promise with the Meiteis of Loktak': Loktak to Chindwin, It is the land of the Zomi. The Southern King and our forefathers made an agreement at the famous Kangtui. This was the Zo territory where the Zos settled for centuries before the advent of the British). 68

Post Treaty of Yandaboo (1826) the British penned an imaginary line across the Zo territory and divided the Zo territory between two British administrative units, one in Burma and the other in undivided India. In the words of Alexander Mackenzie:

...according to the boundary laid down by Captain Pemberton...part of the Sootie (Zomi) tribes at present live in Manipur and part in Burmese or independent territory... So far as our records show, the Burmese government do not appear even to have exercised any control over the Sooties (Zomi) to the south of the Manipur boundary line. The whole tribe seems to be practically independent.... ...and the Burmese and

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Manipuris alike appear to have treated the Sooties (Zomi) as wild and hostile tribes not amenable to their territory.69

The Zo thus became divided as boundaries were drawn across their traditional territory by the British colonisers without their consent. Post-independence ‘state reorganisation’ in India further fragmented the Zo territory among the states of Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura, and Assam.70

2.4.4. A Unifying Religion and the construction of Identity: Zomi, Christianity and the solidarity of Zo People

The open reception that the ‘wild tribes’ gave to the alien region infused enthusiasm in the Colonial Administrators who in turn began to employ suitable tactical moves to suit the psychology of the tribes and their understanding of the divine. For instance, the introduction of the ‘Customised-Localised Gospel’71 facilitated to an extent the unification of the different warring clans under a common ‘Lushai’ identity and common ‘Duhlian’ dialect in the Zo/Mizo Hills. The introduction of the ‘Localised Gospel’ was not easy for the Missionaries as is evident from the B.M.S. Report presented by R.A. Lorrain in 1913 where he mentions:

Our first message as soon as we could speak the language was a Saviour from Sin. But the people had no sense of sin and felt no need for a Saviour. … We proclaimed Jesus as a vanquisher of the devil…This to the Lushais was “Good News” indeed and exactly met with great need.


The Christian Church rendered three major services among the tribes of the region: first, it liberated the tribes from the fear of evils spirits and from the evils of head-hunting and continuous war-fare and blood-revenge; second, it established centres of education and; third, it provided extensive medical service at a time when no Government or other private agency bothered about the tribals.\textsuperscript{72} Christianity, through the weapons of Education and Medicine, attracted the savages, mostly in the case of the Zo Hills as is evident from the accounts of Missionaries like Lorrain ((1912)1988). The attraction to ‘Western Medicine’, on the part of the ‘wild tribes’ can be rationalised through the logic of ‘Social healing’ and ‘physical healing’.\textsuperscript{73} Medicine brought about emancipation from ‘pain’ which had always been the innate desire of the tribes lacking indigenous medicinal knowledge. For instance, the Zo/Mizo tribes had limited knowledge of ‘herbs and cure’, and relied more on the ‘ritualised nature of treatment’, that is sacrifices and appeasing evil spirits/demons.\textsuperscript{74} These ‘ritualised treatment’ were slow and the success rate were poor. On the other hand western medical science provided instant remedy to physical ailments. Naturally, western medicine began to have is large following and the Missionaries exploited this faith and ready acceptance of ‘western Medicine’ to their advantage. For instance, D.E Jones in the 1st Years Reports mentions that ‘Some are ready to believe in Christ if they will be kept from illnesses’. And the attraction to ‘Education’ can be rationalised through the logic of the incentives added to the education process in the initial stages. For instance, Lorrain ((1912) 1988) mentions about the ‘free food’, ‘free lodgings’ etc. provided to the tribes as incentives to attract them to schools. Such incentives like ‘free food’, ‘free shelters’ would mean great things for tribals residing in the remote inaccessible hilly terrain without a permanent economy and productive agricultural know how.


The most important factor that contributed to the popularity of Christianity among the Zo tribes was the psychological emancipation that it promised. These tribes were not ‘demon worshippers’ but ‘demon appeasers’ as is evident from their rituals and practices. The Gospel with message of a powerful male God and promise of emancipation from pain not just in this life but also the next attracted the wild tribes all the more. Naturally the Missionaries were successful in winning the confidence of the tribes of the region. The Khasis were the first among the tribes of the region to have converted to Christianity way back in 1812-13 and the Missionary activities were initiated in the Naga Hills in 1840s and in the Zo/Mizo/Lushai Hills in 1894-95. In this sense of time frame the Zo/Mizo were late arrivals to the Evangelical missions. However, the success rate in the Zo Hills has been the maximum in terms of mass proselytisation.

The spread of Christianity in the Zo Hills was partly due to the waves of revivalism which, paradoxically, converted more people in a wave than could be done by sustained proselytisation. In these revivalist movements large number of people would profess their oracle-like powers. There would be great mass dancing, with drum beats, hysterical singing of hymns and sometimes, also bouts of Zu (rice beer) drinking. These moves made Christianity more adoptable to the people with their age-old superstitions, habits and customs, and provided the meeting grounds of the new religion with the old animism, drawing more and more people to the new faith. The missionaries by highlighting the issues of exploitation, oppression and domination and by addressing the issues of health, disease, education and language, tried to construct or help construct the contrasting nature of tribal-‘non-tribal’ identity/culture. The Missionaries and the Colonial Raj thus helped in the


76 The administration and the mission were both equally adverse to revivalism. McCall thought that the periodic revivalist movements showed that the Lushais had a tendency to fall back upon irresponsible behaviour. He suggested that the mission should be able to keep these movements under control. Much would depend “upon the ability of the Missionaries and their supporters to correlate Christianity and Lushai agriculture, homes, industry, schools and in fact, every and all the practical experience of Lushai life. This task will be difficult. But if the Mission do fail, great lawlessness may prevail”. A.G McCall. (1949).(2003). Lushai Chrysalis. Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute., pp. 49, 228.

construction or imagination of a distinct tribal identity. All geared to accelerate the dual process of proselytisation of tribes and taming of the 'head-hunters' so as to benefit their larger interests that is 'Tea Gardens (Tea Industry)' and the security of 'its people' (natives; and immigrant labourers (who today form the category of 'Tea-Tribes') in the adjoining territories of the Raj.

Christianity, at one level, brought about 'temporal relief to women' through the systematic decline of the traditional symbols of patriarchy namely the Zawlbuk and the Chieftainship. The oppressed sections of the 'Zo society' passively welcomed the change and failed to understand the underlying politics of Proselytisation. The missionaries


79 The 'Zawlbuk' was the male dormitory and symbolised male hegemony and vigour in the Mizo society. It was one of the pillars that upheld the chieftainship in traditional Mizo society; however, it was not practised among all the Zo tribes. McCall traced the extinction of Zawlbuk to the antipathy of the Lushai Church leaders. As the Mission did not take a positive attitude either to preserve the institution or to abolish it, the local Church executives and the local school teachers took an active lead in abolishing the Zawlbuk in the villages. Some of the practices in the Zawlbuk were not strictly in conformity with the Christian ideals. This led most of the Lushai religious leaders to condemn the Zawlbuk....It was the Lushai mission employees who were the prime movers in abandoning the Zawlbuk. Some of the Missionaries were aware of the danger of blindly abandoning the old practices. Hence, there was an attempt to provide a substitute in the Young Lushai Association (YLA) originally initiated by Rev. David Edwards (A.G McCall. (1949). (2003). Op. cit. pp.211-212; Chatterji, N. (1975c). Zawlbuk as a Social Institution in the Mizo Society. Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute; Sangkima. (1987). Zawlbuk and its abolition: A significant event in the history of the Mizos. Proceedings. NEIHA, 8th session).


cleverly modified the teachings of the Gospel and presented a ‘Customised-Localised Gospel’ to suit the understandings of the primitive tribes. The Missionaries and the ‘Black-coats’, in order to win over the natives, also began to simultaneously equate ‘Pathian’ (the traditional Zo/Mizo male divinity of the heavens) with the ‘image’ of the Biblical ‘God’ (Father) of the Trinity; and projected Jesus as the son (‘Fa-pa’) of ‘Pathian’, and also Pu Pawla with St. Paul in order to suit the sensibilities of the Zo tribes. The localisation of the Gospel contributed to the dual process of the assimilation of the chauvinistic traditional Mizo practices into the already male centric Christian religion82 and vice versa. Here we see how the traditional element of the Zo religion constructed strategies for survival amidst the onslaught of proselytisation.83


82 Christianity as a religion is male centric it moves around the pivot of the Trinity- the Father, Son & the Holy Spirit. Christianity revolves around the ‘Father-Son Axis’ and this axis gets filtered into the individual family system itself. Thus the male gets to play a more prominent role while the female get to play a subservient role. In case of the Mizo society this filtering of the ‘Father-Son Axis’ psychology led to the further male-ifying of the already male society.

83 Indigenous Zo/Mizo religion that had positions even for women deities - ‘Khuamu’ amidst the male god- ‘Pathian’ and neutral divinity- ‘Khuavang’ was completely erased (L.H. Chhangte. (1987). The Life and Witness of the Churches in Mizoram. Bombay: GLS Press/ Serkawn, Lunglei: Baptist Church of Mizoram, pp. 32-34; Lalrinawmi Ralte, 1993. Op.cit. pp. 130-131). ‘With the spread of Christianity, belief in all the multifarious spirits and the efficacy of appeasement was replaced by the new faith. But belief in ‘Pathian’ continued with a new connotation as of ‘God’ of Christianity’. Ray (1982) is of the opinion that the transformation is so complete by now that none of these old rituals is practiced anywhere in Mizoram today. The young generation does not even know about their ‘Indigenous faith’ and the religious customs. These are now recalled, and not very readily, by some very old people, in the villages or are known from the descriptions in the books of Shakespear and Parry. The role of women attaining or being capable of attaining divinity was totally wiped-out by Christianity, which prescribed and reserved such positions ‘Only for Men’ (Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad & John. L. Esposito. (Ed.). (2001). Daughters of Abraham- Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity & Islam. Gainesville, U.S.A: University Press of Florida p. 66), and this resulted in ‘God’, being imagined and perceived only as a male (Ruether in Haddad & Esposito, 2001. Ibid. pp. 65-80). The exclusion of women and its justifications resulted in a systematic distortion of all the symbols of Christian theology by patriarchal bias (Rosemary Radford Ruether. (1993). Sexism and God Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology. Boston: Boston Press).
The transition from the indigenous traditional religion to Christianity led to the wholesale slaughter of the indigenous Zo/Mizo culture\(^8^4\) on the one end and at the other it ushered the high tide of western enlightenment, rationality, education: scientific temper, morality, politics, and the power to read and internalize the 'Holy Gospel'. Infact few British administrators like McCall and Parry felt that Christianity and British rule had done more harm than good to the Zo traditional social structure.\(^8^5\)

To conclude, 'Identity Politics' in Mizoram in the pre-Independence times was moulded and shaped by the 'colonial encounter' and experience which elevated the Colonial Masters and their Religion as being superior.\(^8^6\) The two external symbols of power namely the British Superintendent (Politico-Administrative head) and Christian Missionaries were referred to by the primitive tribes as 'Lai man tu' ('one who catches the chiefs') (for the


\(^8^5\) McCall said the history of the first 40 years (1898-1938) of contacts “has been over-shadowed by a full –scale assault upon the people by the missions, and a watching brief by Government operating chiefly without much positive policy”. “Against these varying contacts the Lushai had had no equipment on which to fall back for strength, except the tradition and the stories of their grandfathers. But the pillars of their strength had tumbled down with shame and humiliation before these new and irresistible British invaders”. In this situation McCall observes, “the missions destroyed more than what they could build up. The Missionaries brought about spectacular changes with attack after attack on tradition. “It is however, one thing to eradicate and another to build up....Herein lies the whole secret of the modern problem of Lushai in her chrysalis stage” (A.G. McCall, 1949. Op. cit. p.198,199). Parry also was highly critical of the mission’s destruction of the Lushai customs. He said that the wholesale destruction of the Lushai custom created “havoc”. N.E. Parry. (1927). (Reprint 1976). A Monograph on Lushai Customs And Ceremonies. Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute. p.22.

\(^8^6\) The Zo tribes used the word ‘Sap’ a corrupted form of the Hindustani word ‘Sahib’ to refer to the Europeans that is white men. B.B Goswami observed during his field work and interaction with the local people in Mizoram that “There is not a single Mizo either in urban or in rural areas who told that the Mizos in general can become better or superior than saps”; and also that ‘the saps are better than the Mizos for they have golden hair, beautiful eyes, tall and white complexion’ etc. For detailed reading on the construction and imagery of the Superiority of the white races in the minds and psychology of the Zo tribes Mizoram, Cf., B.B Goswami. (1978). “out-group from the point of view of In-group: A Study of Mizos”, in S.M. Dubey. (1978). North East India: A Sociological Study. pp. 99-110. However, A.C. Ray seems to be of the opinion that the Missionaries had an upper hand as evident from the statement mentioned in his seminal work Mizoram Dynamics of Change. (1982) Op. cit., ‘While the government only sustained the law and order, the Mission provided dynamic leadership. The government personnel changed frequently, while the Missionaries, actuated by religious fervour, remained years on end at their posts’, p. 65.
Superintendent)); and 'Thlarau man tu' ('one who catches the spirit' (for the Missionaries)). The Whiteman's way of life and religion87 delivered the tribes from fear of evil, death and uncertainty of a war prone migratory life at the psychological level.88 'Religion and Politics' thus began to play an overwhelming role in Mizoram and began to be considered superior, powerful and therefore more alluring.

A great force in the process of Zo integration has been the Christian faith, which in fifty years turned Mizoram and many Zo inhabited areas into a Christian land. The newly zealous Zo converts took it as their privileged burden to tell the Good News to their kindred tribes and many had volunteered to go to the heathen Zo areas to preach the Gospel. These apostle-like preachers carried the good tidings along with new Christian hymns in the Lushai dialect, which the pioneer missionaries employed as a vehicle to spread the Gospel. As a result, Lushai (Duhlian) dialect quickly developed into a rich language to become an effective instrument for spreading the gospel and Zo integration. The first Bible translation and many other pioneering publications among the Zo tribes were in Lushai that subsequently came to be known as the ‘Mizo language’, a language that became the link language of the Zo people. Wherever Zo preachers carried the Gospel and new churches were planted, they also implanted Zo-ness, thus paving the way for a re-unification. Therefore, next to their common ethnic root, Christianity has become the most important bonding force of the Zo people. A ‘Zo’ professing any other faith except the traditional religion (animism) is considered by the majority Zo Christians as not only a renegade but an alien. Being a Zo and a Christian is like a coin with two faces.

The realisation that the Zo are of one stock and share common dialectical root and customs even though separated by international and state boundaries brought about movements for ‘Unification’ of the occupied territories and of the Zo people. The MNF

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movement was one of the first aggressive movements aimed in this direction. Although most of these movements have been short-lived, they represent the aspiration and will of the people to be unified and live in a unified territory. At present, a number of organisations like, the ZORO (Zo Re-Unification Organisation) idealise the formation and unification of ‘Greater Mizoram’ or Zoram. The nostalgia of their ancestral home remains a major unifier. The Zomi/Zo hnahthlak Movement has multiple strands appended to it. However, the claim for territorial unification of the lost Zo territory with or without de-territorialisation from the Union of India remains the dominant strand.

2.5. Zomi in Mizoram

‘The Mizo Union’s move to merge with India’, adds Lalchungnunga (1994) ‘was not without conditions’. ‘They reserved the possibility of opting out again after ten years, if the future trends did not seem to favour the fulfilment of their aspirations.’ The internal tensions within the Mizo Union on the issue of the merger led Vanlawma to come forward with the ‘Mizo Cultural Society’. The Mautam famine in the 50s provided an opportunity for the ‘Mizo Cultural Society’ to transform into a special combat committee called ‘Mizo National Famine Front’ to render voluntary service to the people most affected by the famine. In 1964-65, ‘independence’ became a burning issue among the Mizo intellectuals and college students. With the end of the famine was born a new political party: the Mizo National Front (MNF) under the leadership of Laldenga. The original aims and objectives of MNF, according to a booklet published by the party include, ‘integration of the entire Mizo ethnic group under one government processing the highest degree of freedom’. The re-unification movement launched by the MNF culminated through different phases, and eventually entered the constitutional fold through statehood. However, the attainment of statehood halted midway, the dream of total re-unification of Zomi/Mizo of the region (refer to Chapter III for details).

2.6. Zomi in Manipur

Zo re-unification has been the cherished dream of the Zomi of Manipur region. The peculiarity of Zomi politics in Manipur has been that petty clannish divide continues to cloud the effort towards the process of reunification. For instance, the predominant Kuki-Chin-
Lushai groups such as the Anal, Chothe, Maring, Monsang, Moyon and Kabui which populate the present Chandel and Tamenglong Districts of Manipur have since joined the Naga polity and now prefer to be identified as Naga. Similarly the Aimol, Chiru, Kom, Purum and some other smaller tribes are still unable to decide although there are enough evidences that they are descendents of Zo. Whereas, some of the Thadou speaking tribes are still unable to accept any other nomenclature, except Kuki, and in their intense desire to impose the name Kuki they have driven others away. The Thadou speaking tribes even took up arms to force other tribes to accept Kuki as a common nomenclature without considering the fact that the main objection by all to the term Kuki, is that, as a word, it was an imposed name and it does not exist in any Zomi dialect.

In fact, from the 40s and 50s onwards, almost all the ethnic groups of the Zo nhahthlak have formed independent and distinct organisations of their own with the term ‘national’ or ‘union’ or ‘council’ appended to it. For instance, the ‘Tedim Chin Union’, the ‘Vaiphei National Organisation’, the ‘Simte National Council’, the ‘United Zoumi Organisation’, the ‘Gangte National Union’, the ‘Gangte Tribes Union’, the ‘Hmar National Union’, the ‘Hmar People’s Conference’, the ‘Mizo National Front’, the ‘Paite National Council’ etc. The mushrooming of all these organisations reflects the rejection of the term ‘Kuki’ and at the same times the inability to accept a common generic (‘Mizo’) or phonetic (‘Zomi’) term.

2.7. Reality Check on the Zomi Movement: ‘The Moment of Truth’

In the Post 1986 period, things have changed and so has the attitude towards the feeling of Zomi nationalism among the Zo tribes. The awareness of their true national identity has increased manifolds with the impending perceived threat of extinction. The initiative taken by the Zomi National Congress (ZNC) for national awakening during 1970s and 1980s has crystallised into an organised unification movement, under the banner of ZORO. The Zo tribes however are still posed with the dilemma of accepting a common name Mizo or Zomi. The dilemma has resulted in the quick rechristening of tribe-based organisations, from ‘Simte National Council’ to ‘Simte Tribes Council’; ‘Paite National Council’ to ‘Paite Tribes Council’ to cite few instances.
Though the attitude towards 'Zomi Identity' has softened over the years, few tribes who have not yet taken to the nomenclature, do agree that they are the descendent of Zo or Zo hnahthlak. The ZORO has been relentlessly mustering efforts to bring all the Zo tribes under a common platform for the ultimate objective of reunification. The Zomi movement has witnessed an increased participation of the Zo tribes from Burma, India and Bangladesh. The debate on the nomenclature 'Mizo or Zomi is highly contested and never ending'. For example, we say 'lu met' literally translated it 'means to shave or to cut the head' but it signifies the act 'to cut ones hair'. So Zomi or Mizo remains all the same. It is interchangeable to refer to the same set of people. Moreover, among the Paite in Manipur there is a group which calls itself by that particular name. So it's almost unacceptable to have 'Zomi' as the group identity as it would lead to further confusion.90

The political dust kicked up by the MNF movement in 1966 settled with the grant of Statehood and the return of the MNF outfits in 1986 from their Arakan hideout and the euphoria over the new status also soon waned and evaporated. Soon, the heavily deficit Mizoram State began to bite the reality of governance. Corruption of all kinds and the spirit of insulation and intolerance seep in. As it comfortably settled in its State cushion, the core State has begun to slowly abandon its role model as a forerunner of Zo integration and has become less and less accommodating. The increasing intolerance shown to the non-Mizo speaking Zo community from within and outside Mizoram by the Mizo speaking community has caused ripple effects on the progress of Zo unification and put the process of integration in a reverse gear.

The attainment of Statehood for Mizoram was expected to play a major role in shaping the call for 'Zo reunification' or the 'Zomi' movement, however, the post-Statehood era has witnessed mushrooming of armed ethnic movements within the Zo community. The magnitude of these ethnic feuds has been almost unimaginable especially in Manipur where the armed outfits barred others from entering into their area without permission. These 'inter/intra tribal' feuds among the Zo tribes has turned the clock back, by resorting to the

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barbaric headhunting tactics of their forefathers, leading to self-annihilation. Mutual intolerance has increased which seriously hinders the progress of Zo unification.

How fast consideration for ethnic national survival will supplant petty tribalism from the Zo mind remains to be seen. There lies the fate and destiny of the Zo people. The following blog on Zonet (Fri, November 29, 2002 8:07 pm) reflects the present day response to the Zomi Movement:

Some say we are Zomis. Some say we are Chins. Some others say we both Zomis and Chins as if the two are synonymous. ... But to say that Zomi is the meaning of Chin is totally wrong. Zomi is not the meaning of Chin at all. Even a primary school student in Burma knows the meaning of chin. Chin in Burmese means either ‘friend’ or ‘basket’. Therefore if we say we are Chins, it simply means that we are just ‘friends of others’ or worse yet we are ‘baskets’. ... In good mood, we have been treated as friends; otherwise we are treated derogatorily as baskets. ...

... If you cannot accept Zomi ... read the following finding by three anthropologists...Although these Chin speakers as a whole have no single word for themselves, any groups use what appear to be variant forms of one word, Zo (yo, sho), as in Laizo, Mizo, Hyou, Asho, Zo ... Let us be honest, and let us be transparent. Do we really want to be united under a name, or are some of us only trying to dominate others? If we cannot agree even on a single word, how dare we even try to be united under a guise name? ...

The process of Zo integration does not necessarily imply immediate political integration of all their inhabited areas in exercise of their right of self-determination. The first step in achieving integration is the creation of an atmosphere congenial to the growth of emotional integration and the sense of oneness within the community. Therefore, the visions and focus of Zo integrationists have been first and foremost the promotion of emotional integration amongst the dispersed and disparate Zo tribes by constantly reminding them of (a) their common ethnic or ancestral root, historic homeland, myths and historical memories, culture, language, hopes and dreams; (b) that their only chance of survival as an ethnic nation is to unite into a cohesive force under a collective proper name with a common dynamic
language and (c) if they do not heed the writings on the wall and continue to maintain fissiparous tendencies, they are digging their own grave and will soon be wiped off without a trace.  

Through my study I have identified that the Zo unification programme suffers from the following loopholes:

*First,* by giving a call for Zo unification both within Mizoram and beyond, the movement increases the populational strength of the Zo tribes. Which goes to suggest that sidelining the other tribes and the *Vai* will not be a solution to the *equal and fair* distribution of the resources (socio-economic-political) in Mizoram. The struggle for the economic-pie will continue. The only difference is that the *actors* of the struggle will be changed. While in the first case the struggle was between the Zo tribes and the others and the *Vai*; in the second situation the others and the *Vai* will be replaced by the Zo tribes from the surrounding areas, leading to an internal economic struggle among the Zo themselves.

*Second,* the move for the unification of the Zo territory and Zo tribes includes international as well as national concern. The proposal has been challenged by other tribes living in the *claimed territory* and has resulted in ethnic clashes between Kukis and Meiteis.

*Third,* the move has at the initial stage itself popped up the problem of Internally Displaced People (IDP) and Human Rights Violation and Minority Rights Violation in the region.

Vanramchhuangi (one of my respondents) brings out the true nature of the inbuilt tensions when she observes:

*Lushei twang hmang in ti Mizo bik, Aizawl bial a awm hian kan va hmsuit a kan awp lum thei lo’* (the ‘Lushei’ group, those who belong to the dominant group in the north belt in and around Aizawl and speak the Duhlian language consider themselves to be the real Mizo, superior to other groups; have failed to incubate the other marginal groups. Hence there is rising discontentedness). Therefore there is a danger that they

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Chapter II
Contextualising the Evolution of Identity Politics in Mizoram

(southern tribes and microscopic tribes) will under a leader rebel against the Mizo state. If we use the phonetically correct 'Zomi' then we will be able to even-out the rough edges in the identity formation politics in Mizoram. Mizo has an inherent Lushei bias and superiority in the term.  

A substantial number of educated working respondents cutting across age, gender, and denominational divide felt that the Zomi movement for reunification has a political motive behind it.

Another respondent who preferred to be anonymous said:
If they really want to integrate under the changed condition they are welcome to live in Mizoram and contribute to greater resource building. But they will not do that they have a specific agenda behind it; their present territory is under tension and armed conflict. They want to garner support to free their contested area so that they can later free themselves from the reunification movement once the object is attained. Zo-reunification is a construction of the elites seeking power.

The post independence Identity Movement in Mizoram can thus be broadly divided into 3 segments for convenience:

1. 1940s-1970s - from 'Lushai' to 'Mizo'
2. 1970s-1980s- debates on 'Mizo' or 'Zomi'
3. Post-Peace Accord onwards- clash of identity 'Mizo' or 'Zomi' or Indian: emergence of hybrid-identities.

During the second phase, the Zo factor got a kind of political acknowledgement, with speeches and literary works romanticising 'Zo/Zomi leh sa', 'Zo hnahthlak' from within and without. The outside or Manipur/Tripura factor strongly influenced the direction of the Zomi movement in Mizoram. The Zomi Identity directly challenged the legally/constitutionally recognised generic identity 'Mizo'. Side by side the 'Southern identities' or 'Chhim lam mi'

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(Lai, Mara, and Chakma) and ‘khawthlang mi,’ continued to challenge the legality of both ‘Mizo’ and ‘Zomi’. These local marginal identities prefer to be recognised by their clannish sub-tribal identities rather than generic or phonetic identities.

The different actors who played the Zomi card linked the idea of this phonetic identity with that of the call for Greater Mizoram or Zoram. The attraction to this call largely harped on the nostalgia of once belonging to the famed ‘Zopui village’ and belonging to a rather civilized past unlike the other neighbouring tribes in the region. Greater Mizoram thus became an intrinsic part of an imagined community of the ‘Zomi leh sa’, ‘Zo hnahthlak’. The intensity of the Zo/Zomi movement was so alluring that almost all politicians gave due recognition to it during the pre-statehood period so as to swing the public mood towards their respective parties. For this end they linked this Zomi movement to a common unifying religion: Christianity (the Zo Church). Thus began the politics of ‘Ideal Zo Christian State’.

The politicians manipulated the Zomi trump card as a cheap and efficient card to win over the new immigrants fleeing from surrounding politically unstable areas and make them feel at ‘Home’. Zomi had deep similarities or in a sense mirrored the nostalgia of a ‘Desh’ (here ‘Zopui’). Zomi thus was converted into vote-bank politics and also functioned as instruments of mass appeal for leaders; this was evident from the modalities adopted by all the leaders: Laldenga, T. Sailo, and Lalthanhawla contributing to their own popularity and the popularity of their political parties (refer to chapters III & IV).

The third phase shows the complexes in undoing the constitutionally (legally) recognised generic identity ‘Mizo’ and replacing it with the phonetically ‘correct’ ‘Zomi’. The Peace Accord came as a ‘cold water therapy’ on the highly contested and sensitive issue of Zo-reunification. The microscopic minorities like the Mara, Lai and Chakma sighed with relief from what they believed to be hegemonic phonetic identity. Not to say that the generic identity ‘Mizo’ is not or was not hegemonic to them. However, a general accommodative reading of the generic term ‘Mizo’ had given scope for the accommodation of microscopic identities within the pluralistic encapsulation of identity politics.

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Conclusion

'Zomi' conveys messages of 'one nation, one ethnicity, one territory'. The call for correcting the phonetic error has not been able to sustain its forceful impression on the common people. However, the call for 'Greater Mizoram' continues to manifest itself during election campaigns. The Zomi movement at a positive level has made the microscopic identities like the Mara, Lai, Chakma and Reang (Bru) more responsive to the generic identity 'Mizo'. At the negative level it has contributed to the mushrooming of armed/semi-armed outfits in and around present day Mizoram like the KNA, HPC etc. Overtime the imagined space of the community in terms of an 'Ideal Zo Christian State' has shrunk to within the borders of present day State of Mizoram.93 For instance, if a Paite stays in Manipur she defines herself on the basis of her minority identity as a Paite. If the same person were in Mizoram she would define herself in terms of the generic identity 'Mizo' and still give recognition to her phonetic identity 'Zo'. Though 'Zomi' claimed to be inclusive in a sense and better than generic term 'Mizo', as it brought all the Zo people living outside Mizoram within its fold. It had elements of exclusiveness as it marked itself distinct from marginal tribes living in Mizoram such as the Chakma, and the Bru (Reang).

Paul R. Brass' (1991) observation that 'Ethnic identity formation can be seen... as a process created in the dynamics of elite competition within the boundaries determined by political and economic realities' stands true in the context of Mizoram. Zomi Politics reflects the determining role played by Zo/Mizo middle classes in the politics of inclusion and exclusion.

Today the middle class in Mizoram seems to realise the impossibility of the Zo territorial reunification; especially under the provisions of the Peace Accord, the middle class seems to be more content or satisfied with the everyday life and the conditions created by peace. However, a strong support for the same comes strongly from sub-tribes in the

93 An important factor that contributed to the shrinking of the imagined national space was the prospects that peace generated in the state of Mizoram. The initiatives of the various stakeholders geared towards development and the creation of 'an Ideal Zo Christian State' proved highly attractive for many of the diaspora tribes/groups to make a return to Mizoram in the changed times.
peripheral areas. The conflicting territorial claims in the region and dilemmas of having to accept the state territory are best bargained by calling to rechristen the territorial space in tune with the 'Imagined National territory' (Zopui/Zoram). Changing the name of the territory has thus become a special or compulsory programme to satisfy the national ego of the 'Diaspora citizens'.

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