1 Introduction

In November 2018, a protest engulfed the state of Mizoram, demanding the removal of the state's chief election officer (CEO), S. B. Shashank (Figure 1.1). With just a month away from the state's assembly election, the protest came in the wake of the CEO's attempt to allow Bru refugees to vote in the election. The Mizos perceived the move as being politically motivated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) trying to gain support of the Brus and alienate the Mizos against the non-Christians of the state. Ethnic relations between the Mizos and the Brus have been strained since the 1990s, resulting in conflict and displacement, with many Brus fleeing to the neighbouring state of Tripura (Roluahpuia 2018a). The case of the Mizo–Bru tension is embroiled with the state electoral issue, particularly after the coming of the BJP in power at the centre in 2014. Given the party's ideology, the BJP did not find much appeal among the dominant Mizos, who are predominantly Christian. With this, the party shifted its focus onto the ethnic minorities of the state, the Brus, including the Chakmas—who mostly practise animism and Buddhism—as its support base. The final blow came when the centre agreed to the transfer of the state's principal secretary, Pu Lalnunmawia Chuaungo, a Mizo bureaucrat. This had further intensified the discontentment among the Mizos with major organizations, such as the Central Young Mizo Association (CYMA), the Mizo Zirlai Pawl (Mizo Student Federation) (MZP), and state celebrities, including sportspersons, coming out in the open to extend solidarity. An online campaign on various social media platforms demanding Shashank's removal galvanized like-minded netizens. Mizos from Manipur, Tripura, and different parts of India released a press handout to mark their solidarity.

Figure 1.1 Leaders of various Mizo organizations on the stage of the protest during the Mizo *hnam hnatlang* (voluntary action to save the Mizo nation), 2018
Source: Explore Mizoram, https://www.exploremizoram.com/2018/11/hnam-chhan-hnatlang.html (accessed in November 2022).

In Mizoram's recent past, the protest to oust Shashank is one of the few political mobilizations that the state has witnessed on such a massive or extensive scale. It demonstrates that local politics, both electoral and ethnic, are entangled with the interplay of regional and national political interests. This is particularly true in the case of the Mizo–Bru ethnic tension. The case of the ethnic tension between the Mizos and the Brus has a longer history. Since the eruption of the conflict in 1997, various organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vanvasi Kalyan have operated in the refugee camps of the Brus, mobilizing the community. The Bru community conveniently fits into the right-wing narrative that projects tribal communities as 'backward Hindus'. The success of the RSS and its sister organizations was soon felt as the Brus began to project themselves as 'Hindus' suffering at the hands of the majority Christian community.

Two crucial features mark the protest (Figure 1.2). First, the protest was held under the name Mizo *hnam hnatlang*, a call upon the public to come out together in protest against the CEO of the state to save their *hnam* (clan, tribe, or nation),[1] Mizo. The Mizos' sense of being a community is informed by their idea of *hnam*. The *hnam* consciousness can refer to or relate to a clan, tribe, ethnicity, or nation. The Mizos' sense of nationalism is closely intertwined with their *ram*[2] (territory or land),

Figure 1.2 Mizo *hnam hnatlang* (voluntary action to save the Mizo nation) in Aizawl, Mizoram, 6 November 2018
Source: Reuben Lalmalsawma, Aizawl, Mizoram.

commonly referred to as Zoram (Zoland) or Mizoram (land of the Mizos). Hence, their idea of nationalism has to do more with Mizo nationalism and not necessarily state nationalism, or, in this case, Indian nationalism. The protest brought to the fore, once again, the question of the Mizos' integration into the Indian Union, an issue that remains an undercurrent in Mizo politics.

Second, a lesser recognized and unacknowledged aspect of the protest is the circulation of *hnam hla* (national songs) during the protest. Social media was flooded with verses of patriotic songs, and artists were invited to sing popular *hnam hla* on the day of the protest. In Mizo political history, *hnam hla* were a vital source of mobilization and continues to be sung in important sociocultural and political events. Specific to the protest, it was the songs composed by Rokunga that became one of the most sung and circulated. Rokunga is a known composer whose songs became widely popular at the dawn of India's independence. As India's independence drew near, various *hnam hla* were composed through which the Mizos expressed their political aspirations. Rokunga's songs swept the hills of Mizoram, Manipur, and Tripura. His song 'Ro Min Rel Sak Ang Che' (Be Thou Our Counsellor) remains widely popular today. Largely, the case of *hnam hla* demonstrates the persistence of a strong *hnam* consciousness among the Mizos.

Hnam hla have an important lesson for us in the way we understand nationalism. *Hnam hla* in Mizo history were particularly significant and widely popular during

the Mizo struggle for independence. For this reason, *hnam hla* were closely associated with the Mizo National Front (MNF). For the MNF, *hnam hla* were an important node for transmitting nationalist ideas. *Hnam hla* proliferated particularly after the outbreak of the conflict with composers mostly being MNF members themselves. Both the MNF and non-MNF members composed songs that shaped the idea of Mizo nationalism. The influence of composers aids our understanding of nationalism and their contribution. In fact, in post-colonial Mizo society, modern electoral politics have engendered an offshoot genre of *party hla*[3] (party songs), where political parties use songs to mobilize support and counter their rivals. *Hnam hla* are political narratives that contain a rich source of information about the ideas and ideology of nationalism.

Another aspect of this is the cultural context that underpins why *hla* (songs) have such a strong resonance. The use of *hla* in general and *hnam hla* in particular needs to be understood within the sociocultural milieu of Mizo society. At its heart, Mizo society is an oral society. The practice of orality has a strong cultural context where knowledge and histories are transmitted orally. For a society that primarily relied on oral communication, the practice is deeply interwoven into the social fabric and easily adaptable to the larger community. *Hla* in Mizo society occupy a central place in understanding the history, literature, and culture of the community. Historically, various genres of *hla* emerged in Mizo society, and such genres reflect the specific time, period, and context to understand Mizo society. For instance, historians used *hla* as a means to periodize Mizo history according to the form and style of the *hla*. The Mizo historian Lalthangliana (1993) categorized *hla* in Mizo society according to the time period in which they were composed; accordingly, he noted more than 30 types of *hla*. Likewise, Chhuanvawra (2011) noted more than 50 types of *hla* whose history dates back to way before colonial rule. While not all types of *hla* are sung any longer and nor are their tunes followed, different forms of *hla* continue to survive and remain significant to this day.

Historical studies analyse how *hla* reflect the sociocultural change and transformation in Mizo society. This is particularly evident from the time the Mizos converted to Christianity, beginning in the late nineteenth century. While there was no fundamental break between the pre-Christian and post-Christian eras in terms of the songs, the tune and tenor of the *hla* were influenced by Christian hymns composed by the missionaries as well as local Mizo composers. On the centrality of Christianity, Thirumal, Laldinpuii, and Lalrozami (2019: 15) note that 'the connection between script and scripture was established through the singing of Christian hymns and the introduction of performative culture instead of a textual culture'. During this period, new styles of singing, such as *puma zai* and *kaihlek hla*,[4] began to be popular. Both genres of songs emerged at a time when religious revivals, locally referred to as *harhna sang*,[5] spread across the hills. The Christian Mizos

quickly adapted to the new religion and made Christianity their 'own' religion, and soon, they repudiated other forms of traditional rituals and singing, with *lengzem hla* (love or romantic songs) being one. The songs that were sung were strictly monitored, and the church leaders decreed against any form of singing or songs that were not Christian hymns.

What made this history significant to understand is that it directly influences the tune and tenor of *party hla* and *hnam hla*. The tone of much of the *party hla* composed by the Mizo Union (MU) supporters were sung using the tune of the gospel hymns. This was the case with *hnam hla* as well. In fact, in the case of *hnam hla*, what has become quite pronounced is the Christian symbolism, showing the profound influence Christianity has had on the Mizos' sociocultural and political world. In all this history, it was in *hla*—in other words, the 'oral'—that Mizos expressed their experience of change. The place of the 'oral' has increasingly gained significance in scholarly studies on the Mizos. More recent studies have examined not the 'oral' per se but the forms and narratives of Mizo oral culture. Often, they are categorized as *thawnthu* and *chanchin*. The former encompasses a wide array of oral practices such as folktales, lore, and myths, while the latter is mostly used to refer to stories, literal and historical (Thirumal, Laldinpuii, and Lalrozami 2019: 21). Others take orality as a way of tracing the history and myths of origin (Zama 2005). *Hla*, in particular, remain imperative in these narratives of history as a specific genre of songs was composed to define an event or emerged as a specific response to historical events (Lalthangliana 1998). Of this, *hla* provide a vital resource to trace and locate the historical agency of the Mizos. In other words, *hla*, in the form of *zai* (singing), were the predominant means of expression (Thirumal, Laldinpuii, and Lalrozami 2019: 18).

In the broader context, songs and nationalism are widely studied fields. If nationalism shapes the sound of music, songs themselves also shape the way nationalism is defined. Such literatures have focused more on the relationship between music and nationalism and their significant role in shaping ideas about national identity and culture (Bohlman 2004, 2010; Gooptu 2018; Subramanian 2020). From national anthems to anti-colonial resistance, songs have been effectively used to mobilize the masses. In important national events and commemorations, songs are sung with much valour and pride. Such is the centrality of songs in the national life of the country that even in sporting events, national anthems are played, and today, there is no nation-state without anthems. Anti-colonial movements were infused with songs, and in many cases, it was songs that inspired such movements. In India, too, it was song composers that stirred the movement for independence. Writing on Tagore, Chakrabarty (1999: 31) notes that his poetry offered a mode of expressing and experiencing intense feelings for the nation, a feeling that transports the body beyond the remits of historical time. The imagination of free India was expressed in songs that were later on used by nationalist leaders to mobilize the public.

Within nationalism studies, the study of national songs occupies a central place. The historiography examines the connection between national songs and state nationalism (Bohlman 2004; Riley and Smith 2016). This is true of both European and formerly colonized countries. As formerly colonized societies gained independence, anti-colonial songs were elevated to national songs. They became essential ways by which states infused nationalism through their institutions, extending from schools to government-run institutions. The production and performative aspects of such songs demonstrate how elites used them as a mechanism to govern their citizens. Such songs often carry the imaginaries about the state, usually defined by grandeur, with the intention to stir sentiments. Citizens emotionally connect with them, and this is what makes such songs powerful and relevant in nationalist politics.

National and popular leaders have effectively used songs to mobilize and garner political support. Subramanian (2020) has demonstrated how M. K. Gandhi retorted to public prayers and music as a way to communicate and mobilize the public. In such cases, Gandhi was able to weave his idea about the India he imagined, a multi-faith country. The songs and music he chose were drawn from different regions and religions, displaying the diverse communities that inhabit the country. In this, song composers played a critical role in arousing anti-colonial sentiments and used them to counter colonial policies. Patriotic songs are influenced by the cultural context in which they are composed. The tune and lyrics are rooted in the sociocultural and religious contexts. However, the case has been mostly that such studies tend to focus on the musical work and familiar composers (Curtis 2008; Riley and Smith 2016). It is also the case in India, where composers and poets considered 'national' are mostly familiar composers. This is often at the behest of marginalizing regional composers.

This book situates *hnam hla* and the rise of *hnam* consciousness among the Mizos of northeast India. It argues that the idea of *ram leh hnam* (territory and nation) and *hnam* consciousness is pivotal to understanding Mizo nationalism. The idea of *hnam* encompasses the Mizo sense of 'self'—being 'Mizo' and the distinct way in which 'Mizoness' is articulated in everyday language. It is common to encounter terms and sayings such as 'Ava Zo[6] em' (It is very Zo), Zopa (Zo man), and Zonu (Zo woman) that all point towards a distinct sense of Mizo identity. They are expressions that define Mizoness. It can be ways of talking, appearance, and dressing. This distinctiveness permeates national thinking, which is best encapsulated when one explores how the vernacular language shaped the Mizos' political life-worlds.

The book locates the rise and emergence of Mizo national consciousness by examining various literary sources, with *hla* being one of the most prominent. The lyrical content of *hnam hla* and their tones fit into what are mostly known as patriotic songs. In the book, *hnam hla* are examined within the context of the Mizo oral culture. It further extends into how the Mizos conceive their idea of nation and nationalism, and *hnam hla* represent the 'long term process of vernacularization' (Michelutti 2008: 18). National movements are often associated with tall leaders and

the organizations involved in leading such movements. A reading of *hnam hla* shows how the composers of such songs included both MNF and non-MNF members, elite and non-elite. Not all Mizos are members of the MNF, and non-MNF members equally have a strong *hnam* consciousness and consider themselves nationalists. The vernacularization of nationalist ideas and ideals expands our understanding of nationalism in general and Mizo nationalism in particular.

The MNF has used vernacular expressions such as *ram leh hnam* and *zalenna* (freedom) through which it localizes the nationalist expressions in a language understandable to all. This vernacularization of nationalist ideas further shows how the Mizos reshape modern notions of nation and nationalism in the local. The language of the movement and the ideology that underpins it are framed as *zalenna* and the struggle as *ram leh hnam tan* (for our land and nation). *Zalenna* becomes the core ideological base and the political motive of the movement. The use of *zalenna* contrasts the existing and predominant analytical frames by which the MNF movement is studied, such as insurgency, regionalism, and ethnic movements. Adopting and examining the vernacularization process enables us to appreciate and acknowledge the agency of the so-called rebels. The projection of their struggle as *zalenna* is pivotal in the writings of MNF leaders such as Laldenga and Zoramthanga. *Zalenna* also found its usage in songs, and that formed the core ideology of the movement.

More than the study of the songs per se, the book interrogates the relationship between orality and nationalist politics and shows how the oral and print cultures were mutually constitutive. It examines this through the vernacularization of politics and nationalist ideas by exploring the divergent ways in which Mizos localize expressions by using terms such as *zalenna*, *ram leh hnam tan*, and different genres of *hla* to express and articulate their aspirations, dissent, and disenchantment. Specific to politics, *hla* were one of the first mediums through which political ideas were transmitted. The political visions of individuals and political parties expressed their political desire and articulated their aspirations through *hla*. In this way, the book locates the rise of *hnam* consciousness preceding the emergence of the MNF.

While the MNF did lead the movement for independence, the case of *hnam hla* has a deeper legacy rooted in the political culture of the Mizos. The MU used songs as a weapon of protest against the British political superintendent and the continuing rule of the chiefs. Under democratic India, the party advocated the abolishment of chieftainship and used *party hla* for electoral mobilization against their rival, the United Mizo Freedom Organization (UMFO). Furthermore, the significance of orality becomes evident in how the Mizos resort to *hla* to express their grief and suffering during the period of counter-insurgency. Now known as *rambuai hla* (songs of troubled times), local communities fell back to oral culture, and there was a proliferation of songs about suffering and sacrifice, pain and loss. With media censorship and high surveillance, *rambuai hla* emerged as a form of oral expression

through which experience and encounters of violence are moved to the oral domain. This makes the oral vital to understanding Mizo politics. Hence, the emergence of various genres of *hla*—namely, *party hla*, *hnam hla*, and *rambuai hla*—are means through which the Mizos record and express political ideas, imagination, and discontent. *Hnam hla* and *rambuai hla*, in particular, soon caught the attention of the state and were then subsequently banned from being sung in public. Most of *hnam hla* as such were disallowed on the radio. Today only a few recordings of both the *hnam hla* and *rambuai hla* are done. Likewise, any print materials related to the MNF or politics were also burned, if not banned, during the period of the MNF movement.

The case of the Mizos also raises important questions about how nationalism emerged in backward regions with limited literacy. There was no 'high culture', to use Ernest Gellner's expression, when Mizo nationalism emerged. Moreover, the northeastern part of India, except for Assam, did not experience any form of industrialization, even during the colonial period. The areas inhabited by the Mizos, the 'savagery tribes' in the colonial lexicon, were left out of the colonial economy and excluded from any meaningful political participation. This, however, is not to undermine the presence of print culture and the influence of modern education. Moreover, Mizo society was largely agrarian with a subsistence economy, and during the 1950s and the 1960s, there were no communication links and industrialization. A modernist explanation is inadequate to explain the rise of Mizo nationalism.

Furthermore, various common theoretical approaches have been used to explain Mizo nationalism. However, such works, more than writing about Mizo nationalism, have to do with analysing the MNF movement, its rise, and its fall. In this context, secessionism is one of the common ways through which the MNF movement is studied. In fact, secessionism is a prominent issue in northeast India. Its geographical location and isolation have made it a periphery, both in the ideas and imagination of the national leadership and the powers at the centre. This follows the explanation of the emergence of nationalism in peripheral regions and among minority groups. Prominent examples of this are the Basque Country in Spain, Quebec in Canada, Papua in Indonesia, Karen, Kachin, and other ethnic minorities in Myanmar, and similarly among ethnic and religious minorities in various regions of India such as Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, and Tamil Nadu, among others. Such cases are often referred to as 'peripheral nationalism', where secessionist tendencies have emerged due to the exploitative tendencies of the core region, leading to an uneven and unequal pattern of development (Hechter 1975; Nairn 1977). Peripheral regions and minority groups feel alienated, and this becomes more pronounced when they have a strong sense of cultural identity. Hence, the desire for independence from the core emerges and often translates into nationalist movements aspiring for independence.

Another trend of studies examines nationalist conflict within the broad framework of the conflict between official nationalism of the state and regional nationalism. In India, this has been widely approached as a tension between

pan-Indian nationalism and regionalism (A. Guha 1982; U. Phadnis 1989; Baruah 1999). From this perspective, it is common to see cultural explanations of nationalism. Hutchinson (1987) examines the significance of how the Gaelic revival stimulates a thinking that promotes an identity consciousness with the potential to recur even after the establishment of nation-states. The argument is that nationalism is not only a political movement alone, as it has a strong cultural aspect. This explanation has a strong influence within the field of nationalism studies (Hroch 1985; Smith 1986, 2008; Hutchinson 1987; 1994; P. Chatterjee 1993). They stress the role of myths, symbols, art, tradition, the *ethnie*, according to Smith (1986), and how they are appropriated by cultural nationalists that get regenerated from time to time. With nationalism thought to wane and fade away with modernity and become irrelevant under the forces of globalization, its persistence is explained by the strong presence of cultural nationalism.

Hardly has there been any real effort to approach the Mizo case within the studies of nationalism. In the context of South Asia, and India in particular, such movements are commonly approached as insurgency or ethnic movements. While most nation-states claim the national question as resolved or the issue of national integration as settled, communities such as the Mizos continue to have a strong sense of being a distinct nation. This distinct sense is emblematic of how they govern, organize, and perceive themselves apart from their Indian counterparts. In other words, the *hnam* consciousness fosters an idea of belonging that is not only imbued with a strong sense of difference vis-à-vis 'Indians' but also involves the assertion of a pan-Mizo identity. A pan-Mizo social network in the form of institutions such as the Young Mizo Association (YMA) fosters an ethnic belonging that transcends national borders, both inter and intra. However, the prevailing view is that *hnam* consciousness is considered a mere identity consciousness, and ethnic mobilizations in the form of protests are relegated as sporadic outbursts and reactionary.

Even today, Mizo nationalism is associated with the MNF movement, and the end of the armed struggle is considered the end of Mizo nationalism. In pursuing my study on Mizo nationalism, I commonly encounter the question 'What is there left to study given that the movement is already over?' In seminars and academic gatherings, this question continues to linger. The point here is not so much about the naivety of the question but how it reflects the way we look at contemporary Mizo society, politics, and nationalism, generally. Following this, a question that began to bother me was 'Does the MNF only signify the emergence or end of Mizo nationalism?' The MNF today, as a political party, has proclaimed itself as the guardian of Mizo nationalism. One may also ask: What did Mizo nationalism mean to the non-MNF members before, and what does it mean today? How do ordinary people perceive and construct their sense of Mizo nationalism?

In writing about nationalism, Billig (1995) argues that what we understand as nationalism is inherently limited and biased. In his critique of the existing theories

of nationalism, he writes: 'Nationalism is equated with the outlook of nationalist movement and when there are no such movements; nationalism is not seen as an issue' (Billig 1995: 16). In *Banal Nationalism* (1995), Billig demonstrates that even in established liberal democracies where nationalism is so routinized and familiar, it goes unrecognized as expressions of nationalism, such as the 'un-waved flags'. He argues that the banality of various acts and events are ways by which the state reminds its citizens of their national place. Succeeding studies on nationalism have attended to the more mundane and quotidian aspect of nationalism, dealing with 'everyday nationhood'. Two significant contributions of these studies are that they have introduced what is now commonly referred to as 'bottom-up' studies of nationalism and put the masses at the heart of nationalism studies.

This book is not necessarily concerned with the everyday practices of nationhood in the Mizo context. However, what is relevant is that the way we think and perceive of nationalism, including that of the Mizos, is underpinned by the fact that it is seen only in the form of an extremist movement—in this case, armed struggle. From this viewpoint, Mizo nationalism is irrelevant and non-existent in contemporary times. There are certain caveats inherent in this explanation. To begin with, it is restrictive because it equates Mizo nationalism with the MNF, thereby denying the contribution and participation of the non-MNF members and ordinary Mizos in shaping the idea of Mizo nationalism. Furthermore, this view is unhelpful in explaining the contemporary tensions about national identity and nationhood in India. As already noted, the Mizos continue to have a strong sense of being a distinct *hnam* in the Indian Union. Most importantly, the nationalist impulse was foregrounded through the consciousness that was expressed in the vernacular notion of *ram leh hnam*, the groundwork for which was laid prior to the emergence of the MNF. Needless to say, the Mizos' sense of being a distinct *hnam* is strongly attached to the notion of *ram*, which, in turn, is deeply connected to the emergent political consciousness that began to take shape during the colonial period.

Today, the Mizos are collectively recognized as Scheduled Tribes (STs) under the Constitution of India. In northeast India, they inhabit a compact geographical area, although they are divided by state and national boundaries. Within northeast India, the predominant population is concentrated in Mizoram, with a much smaller number in Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya, and Assam. Contemporary Mizo consciousness and the conception of Mizo identity are rooted in the long history of their encounters and negotiations with the colonial and post-colonial states. They are a 'product of the specific long-term historical and cultural process', as J. Pachuau (2014: 7) puts it. For instance, there is an intricate connection between the consolidation of Mizo identity and the aspirations for the territorial unity of all the Mizo-inhabited areas under one administrative unit. Furthermore, the choice to rename the place from Lushai[7] Hills to Mizo Hills and subsequently