

Nationalism in the Vernacular

Nationalism in the Vernacular illuminates the relationship between orality and nationalist politics. In doing so, it provides a new angle to the understanding of nationalism by looking at the popular support and participation of ordinary people in the construction of Mizo nationalism—in short, the vernacularization of nationalism. The book examines this process of vernacularization at two levels: first, the process of creating a vernacular language to express nationalist ideas and, second, the irrepressibility of the oral against the Indian state's violent response to the nationalist movement. Drawing from multiple sources, the book—through the rich oral narratives and archival material, including government and media reports—shows how Mizos have remained active agents in asserting and claiming their rights to define ideas of nationalism in their own terms by making them distinctively Mizo.

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Map of northeast India
Source: Map prepared by Benjamin V. Jamkhanpau.
Note: Map not to scale and does not represent authentic international boundaries.

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State, Tribes, and the Politics of Peace
in Northeast India

Roluahpuia



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To my mother, for her love and sacrifice

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Preface

This book focuses on Mizo nationalism in northeast India. In 1966, the Mizos, through the Mizo National Front (MNF), declared independence from the Indian Union through an armed struggle that lasted for two decades. As a study of a national movement, the book addresses key questions and theories concerning identity, nationhood, violence, peace, and post-conflict transformation. To explore this, it examines the significance of oral culture and how it is imbricated in nationalist politics. The book traces this at two levels: first, the creation of vernacular language and idioms, which reframes and reconstructs Mizo nationalist ideas and the politics of peace; second, the irrepressibility of oral vernacular idioms and practices against the state's violent response to the Mizo nationalist movement. It brings into analytical focus the multiple oral forms of expression such as *party hla* (party songs), *hnam hla* (national songs), and *rambuai hla* (songs of troubled times). It argues that this was vernacularization at work, where political ideas and imaginations, idioms and practices, and loss and suffering were articulated in the local idiom that reflected the agency of the Mizos.

The period of the MNF movement (1966–1986) is pivotal in Mizo political history, and most often it is with the MNF that Mizo nationalism is associated. The rise and emergence of the MNF are linked to the famine that hit the Mizo Hills in 1959, causing mass anger and disenchantment directed at the Assam government. Hence, one explanation looks at the greed or grievance factor to explain the rise of Mizo nationalism. The other common explanation is the colonial isolation policy of the hill areas, particularly regions inhabited by tribal communities. The prevailing understanding is that colonial policy prevented the penetration of the Indian national consciousness by keeping the tribes in isolation. This was further aided by

the Christian missionary interventions that fuelled the secessionist mindset among the tribals. The book goes beyond such arguments by taking a more *longue-durée* perspective in analysing the emergence of Mizo nationalism. It argues that the Mizo nationalist impulse was foregrounded by the vernacular consciousness, idioms, and language of *ram leh hnam* (territory and nation), the groundwork for which was laid much prior to the emergence of the MNF.

In 1946, the first political party in the form of the Mizo Union (MU) was established. The party championed the cause of the majority commoners against the despotic rule of the chiefs, who were backed by the British. The chiefs, who earlier were the primary source of authority and the protector of the people's interests, were reduced to mere administrators by the colonial state. This changing role resulted in antagonism between the chiefs and the majority of commoners who demanded the immediate end of the chiefs' rule. Led by the MU, the movement to overthrow the chiefs, or the anti-chieftainship movement, saw the support of the vast majority of the commoners, who questioned and challenged the colonial state. Unlike conventional understanding, the case of the Lushai Hills demonstrates how tribes kept in administrative isolation were politically active in articulating their aspirations. With the support of the commoners, the MU took charge of articulating the political aspirations of the Mizos in independent India. Political consciousness, in as much as it was aided by colonial intervention, was home-grown, where the Mizos, both elites and commoners, articulated and asserted themselves politically. It is the evolution of this consciousness, and how it shaped the political culture up to the launching of the independence movement, that I trace in the book.

The political mobilization under the leadership of the MU has had a lasting influence on Mizo society and politics. It altered political configuration by displacing the old political authority and instituting a decentralized form of politics, whose success was only enabled due to the participation of the masses. More significant for our purpose here is how the grammar of Mizo politics was laid down, grounded within the oral world of Mizo society. The MU volunteers used songs to protest and challenge their rival political parties. Even as the leadership of the MU was largely drawn from the elites, the tone and tenor of Mizo politics were set by the songs whose composers and singers were from diverse backgrounds. This continued up to the rise and emergence of the MNF, which began to employ what is now known as *hnam hla* to spread the ideas and ideologies of Mizo nationalism. During the period of counter-insurgency, another genre known as *rambuai hla* emerged as a genre of songs that captured the Mizos' lived experiences under terror and violence. Drawing upon the multiple genres, we acknowledge the role of non-MNF members and non-elites in the articulation and imagination of Mizo nationalism. From song composers to rebels, one finds that orality facilitated the extensive dissemination of ideas of nationalism beyond borders and across regions.

Acknowledgements

This book began as a doctoral project at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Guwahati in the year 2013. Evidently, it has been a long journey, and I have incurred many debts over the years. However much has changed in terms of contents and materials, the core idea remains the same. I am grateful for the support I received from faculty and friends at the TISS, who shaped my intellectual thinking. I owe a great debt to my doctoral supervisor, Professor Virginius Xaxa, particularly for his patience and understanding towards my project. My post-PhD stopover in multiple places gave me the opportunity to rework and refine the work—first at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), New Delhi, followed by fellowships at Harvard University, at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Guwahati, and at IIT Roorkee (IITR), my current institutional affiliation, which provided me the space to complete the work. At the CSDS, I got the opportunity to work and focus exclusively on my work. I greatly benefitted from the resources within Delhi, such as the National Archives of India (NAI), the Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis (IDAS), the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), and the library at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU).

Outside academic spaces, I am fortunate to have received support and company from friends while conducting fieldwork. My thanks go to those who gave me so much of their time, accompanying me in my interviews and helping me locate and find documents: to Lalnunpuia, for guiding and driving me around in Aizawl and to Pu J. D. Mawia and his family for hosting me in the Jampui Hills, Tripura. Yet all of this is possible only because of my research participants, and I thank each one of them for sharing their experiences and stories with me. The names of my research participants have been changed to maintain confidentiality. At the time of writing this, the project has just entered its eighth year, including my time as a doctoral

student. For all these years, the more I learned, read, and researched Mizo politics, the less I felt I knew, with my confidence dipping every time I sat to think and write. Hence, the work was always in progress, and by the time I finished the book it had expanded quite significantly. This was only possible because of the continued support from friends who helped me collect and ship materials that I needed, ranging from books to photographs, and to my research participants who made themselves available online and on phone calls on occasions when I was unable to travel and visit the field. I feel extremely privileged to have gotten all the support that I have needed, always on time.

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I returned to Guwahati in 2019, which was re-enlivening and, at the same time, challenging. Within a month of my joining IIT Guwahati, my mother was diagnosed with cancer, which had greatly affected all of our family. We are fortunate to have received love and support from friends, although my work had to take a back seat. However, I am glad that the book is finally seeing the light of day. Dixita Deka, Pavei, Sangay Tamang, Savio, Jitu Kumar, and faculty at IIT Guwahati, Dr Ngamjahao Kipgen and Professor Sambit Mallick—their friendships and presence were invaluable; they helped me through one of the most challenging times of my life.

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Abbreviations

AFCO	Anti-Famine Campaign Organization
AFSPA	Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act
AIR	All India Radio
AMPO	Assam Maintenance of Public Order
APCC	Assam Pradesh Congress Committee
APHLC	All Party Hill Leaders Conference
AR	Assam Rifles
ASC	Advisory Subcommittee
ATC	Aizawl Theological College
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
CA	Constituent Assembly
CADC	Chakma Autonomous District Council
CEO	chief election officer
CHTs	Chittagong Hill Tracts
CI	circle interpreter
CIJW	Counter-Insurgency Jungle Warfare
CNF	Chin National Front
CYMA	Central Young Mizo Association
DoI	Defence of India
ELAs	Extended Loop Areas
HNU	Hmar National Union

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HPC	Hmar People’s Convention
HPC-D	Hmar People’s Convention (Democratic)
HRC	Human Rights Committee
INC	Indian National Congress
JP	Janata Party
KNA	Kuki National Assembly
MCS	Mizo Cultural Society
MKHC	Mizoram Kohhran Hruaitute Committee
MLA	member of legislative assembly
MNF	Mizo National Front
MNFF	Mizo National Famine Front
MNVs	Mizo National Volunteers
MNA	Mizo National Army
MSA	Mizoram State Archives
MSU	Mizo Students Union
MU	Mizo Union
MZP	Mizo Zirlai Pawl
NAI	National Archives of India
NC	National Council
NGCs	New Grouping Centres
NNC	Naga National Council
NNL	Naga National League
PAMRA	Peace Accord MNF Returnees Association
PC	People’s Conference
PLRC	Pawi-Lakher Regional Council
PLTU	Pawi-Lakher Tribal Union
PPVs	Protected and Progressive Villages
RC	Regional Council
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
SF	Special Force
STs	Scheduled Tribes
UMFO	United Mizo Freedom Organization
UT	union territory
VCP	village council president
VGCs	Voluntary Grouping Centres
YMA	Young Mizo Association

Notes on Transliteration and Translation

I have not followed any standard guidelines or conventions of translating Mizo into English in the book. The songs, in particular, have been taken from a mix of published and unpublished sources, both online and print. As such, diacritical marks and other writing conventions in the Mizo language are not strictly followed and, in most cases, omitted. In many instances, I have observed differences in the lyrics of the songs, and in such cases I have tried to retain the essence of the original by cross-checking them against two or more sources. The translation work has been undertaken collectively, and I appreciate the support of friends and colleagues who have assisted me.