



Bond of Unity amidst Diversity in Mizoram

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Abstract

Unity in diversity is such an issue that has been one of the most discussed and most debated topics in today's issue of national integration. It is an expression of harmony and peace between dissimilar individuals or groups which is generally defined as 'unity without uniformity and diversity without fragmentation.' In modern politics, it was first used by Ernesto Moneta, an Italian Nobel Prize winner in the context of Italian unification. The concept of unity in diversity has been adopted by various religions and politicians as their slogan. Every nation has come to realize the vitality of the notion of unity in diversity of which Mizoram is not an exception. The Chief Minister of Mizoram, Mr Zoramthanga in the inaugural speech of the Independence Day on 15th August, 2019 even mentioned that the state government has allocated Rs 1 crore for the 'Mizo Diaspora' to organize a unity festival for the promotion of brotherhood of all the Zo ethnic group across the globe. Keeping all these in mind, this paper attempts to highlight the strong bond of unity that prevails within Mizoram in spite of some minor tensions that have plagued the region from time to time.

Keywords: *Unity in Diversity, Social Solidarity, National Integration, Social Unity, Religious Unity, Political Unity, Ethnic Unity.*

Introduction

When it comes to the issue of unity in diversity, India is world-renowned for its unity, integrity and diversity in which Mizoram is an ideal example of it. The story of Mizoram's unity is extraordinary where 1,091,014 people (2011 census), with contrasting views on lifestyles, likes and dislikes could peacefully co-exist. The Peace Accord of 30th June 1986, which was regarded as the most successful peace accord of the country ever signed serves as the best explanation of the true existence of peace and unity within the region.

Methodology

The study is mainly based on secondary data which includes books and journals in Mizo language, magazines, press release, pamphlet, government's records etc. Primary data

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includes telephonic interview with religious leaders and politicians which makes the study qualitative in its approach.

Historical Evidence of Social Solidarity among the Mizos

The nature of social unity among the traditional Mizos could be best explained through the context of social solidarity. Sociologist generally defines social solidarity as a well-integrated functioning of society where all members have been socialized into its shared norms and values. Emile Durkheim has identified two types of solidarity that is, 'Mechanical solidarity' and 'Organic solidarity' representing the ancient-archaic society and the modern industrial society respectively. The social solidarity in ancient-archaic society, according to Durkheim was marked by solidarity of 'similarity', 'likeness', 'resemblance of individuals' and by 'sameness of social function' (Jena and Mohapatra, 2002: 54).

The main argument here is that the 'mechanical solidarity', that is, solidarity of likeness, 'we feeling' and mutual co-operation advocated by Durkheim was also very much prevalent in the traditional Mizo society. The historical evidence of the existence of mechanical solidarity would be best explained through the following heads:

- (1) *Traditional Village Community*: Before the annexation and consolidation of the British rule in Mizoram, each village community was well-organized under the rule of the chief called 'Lal'. Peace, unity, solidarity and oneness were the main concern of the 'Lal' in the discourse of his function. He settled all disputes between the villagers, supplied the essential commodities in times of need, provide shelter to the fugitives (Patnaik and Lalthankima, 2008: 4). 'The chief was most instrumental in maintaining law and order. Although theoretically speaking, all powers rested in his hands in practice, however, he would never try a case without consulting his 'Upas' (Parry, 1976:1). The chief hardly misuse his power, because, if he did so, the villagers would have left him and migrated to other villages. He tried his best to see that his subjects were happy and united under his banner. He and his well-organised administrative functionaries like the 'Upa Min' and 'Upa' (village elders), 'zalen' (Freeman), 'Puithiam' (Priest), 'Tlangau' (crier) and 'Thirdeng' (Blacksmith) made sure that they look into the welfare of each and every members of the villages. The Chief was well aware of the fact that his chieftainship lies in the unity of his people. Therefore, every effort was taken up to unite the people.
- (2) *Zawlbuk and the Role of Internalization of Social Values*: Zawlbuk is one of the unique features of the traditional village community. It was remarked as the 'hub of the Mizo village' which played a very important role in the smooth functioning of the society. It was a place where the village's young men took a night halt. The prime motive of the construction of Zawlbuk was for security measures. In times of emergency, all the men from the village could collectively gather at once. In case of wild animal's sudden attack, forest fire, attack from the other hostile villagers, the men who were in Zawlbuk took up the challenge and unitedly faced

any danger. One noteworthy point here is the undeniable unity among the villagers in such situations due to compulsion by circumstances for their collective efforts. Thus, the youths were simply ready to die for the safety of their village. Apart from this, Zawlbuk played an important role of socialization by internalizing the social values and norms among the youths. The eldest member of the Zawlbuk, called 'Val Upa' distributed the work according to the age-group such as collecting fire-woods, selected one among them to rise up early in the morning and so on. Sometimes, the youths who misbehaved or not conforming to the social norms were given punishment in Zawlbuk. Thus, social training is one of the most important roles of Zawlbuk wherein social values such as unity, oneness and brotherhood were not only taught but also practised by the Mizo youths through the institution of Zawlbuk.

- (3) *Social Solidarity of We-feeling*: The social life of the village community of the Mizos was fabricated by strong community sentiments and love for neighbours. They exhibited a strong sense of 'we-feeling' and a sense of belongingness to one's own community. The social relationship was marked by 'Primary relationship' or in other words, face to face relationship. Since the population of the traditional villages was small in number, the nature of social control was informal and direct. The primary groups such as the family and neighborhood acted as powerful agencies of social control. The common phrases given below were some of the guiding moral code of conduct that were strongly conformed by the people and strictly put into practice till date:

“Dam lehtlangkhat ah, thihlehuamkhat ah”

(Come rain or come shine, we will stick together through thick and thin in the face of adversity)

“Semsem dam dam, eibilthithi”

(Sharing magnifies blessing, the only riches that last are the ones that are given away)

“Thenawm do aiin, Khawsarih do a thlanawmzawk”

(Be at war with your vices ,at peace with your neighbours)

“Tlawmngaihna”

(Self-sacrifice, helping hand or self denial for the good of others)

Since differentiation is the law of nature, it may be wrong to assume that Mizo society is an egalitarian society. Human society is not homogeneous but heterogeneous where diversity and inequality are inherent in society. The pre-British Mizo society was neither free from this stratification and inequality. For instance, the Mizo Chieftainship was an ascribed status and along with the emergence of the institution of chieftainship, there arose a certain group of people who enjoyed some privileges by virtue of their position such as closed blood

relationship with the chief, physical strength, courage, bravery and so on. The most prominent form of social stratification in the traditional Mizo social hierarchy were the Chief (Lal) at the top followed by Khawnbawl Upa (Elders), Puithiam (Priest), Thirideng (Blacksmith), Val Upa (Youth commander), Pasaltha (Hunter), Tlangau (Crier), Hnamchawm (Commoner), Bawi (Mild form of bonded slaves) and Sal (War captives). No doubt, the bond of unity was strongly felt by each and every member of the society, however, the aforesaid forms of social hierarchy suggests that diversity and differentiation did prevail in the Mizo.

Religious Unity

Of all the forces that have been influencing the life of the Mizos, religion and in particular, Christianity plays the most influential role. The total social life of the Mizos is circled around religion. In fact, it exerts the most powerful form of social control. The 2011 census records 87.16% of Christians in Mizoram, 1.35% of Muslim, 2.75% of Hindus, 0.5% of Sikhs, 8.51% of Buddhist and Jain as 0.03%. The fact that Christianity takes the absolute majority in all the eleven districts shows that unity in its highest form is seen in the religious sphere which is further divided into several denominations such as the Presbyterian Church of India (1894), Baptist Church of Mizoram (1894), United Pentecostal Church (1969), The Salvation Army (1917), United Pentecostal Church, Mizoram (1995), Seventh Day Adventist (1946), Evangelical Church of Maraland (1907), Roman Catholic (1926), Isua Krista Kohhran (1970), Lairam Isua Krista Baptist Kohhran (1970).

Among the major Christian denominational churches in Mizoram, the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram, the Baptist Church of Mizoram and the Evangelical Church of Maraland were founded by the pioneer missionaries. Presbyterian Church of Mizoram was founded by D. E. Jones of Welsh Presbyterian Church and it forms the largest denomination in Mizoram. The Baptist Church of Mizoram that constituted the second largest denomination was founded by Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) Missionaries namely, Rev. J. H. Lorrain and F. W. Savidge in 1894. The Evangelical Church of Maraland forms the largest denomination among the Mara people and was founded by Rev. and Mrs. Reginald Arthur Lorraine.

The above three mentioned denominations, that is, the Presbyterian Church, the Baptist Church of Mizoram and the Evangelical Church of Maraland in their earlier stage, were strongly united and the idea of denominationalism was never a problem. In fact, the early Missionaries encouraged the Christians to stand united for one cause no matter what. J. H. Lorraine (Pu Buanga) eventually said that -

“We are not here to make them Eastern duplicates of Western Baptists, but bring them to Christ and to so guide them that they shall develop along their own national lines into a strong Lushai Church of God which shall be a living witness of the Power of the Gospel to change savages into saints and head-hunters into soul-hunters” (BMS Report, 1913).

Unfortunately, things began to change with the birth of various denominations and sectarian groups like the Salvation Army (1917), the Roman Catholic (1926), the Seventh

Day Adventist Church (1946), and United Pentecostal Church (1950) and so on. 'Every Church claimed their superiority and righteousness in terms of their doctrines against the other Churches. They started to publicly condemn each other and a seed of competitive spirit was planted in the minds of the followers of other's Church in order to win members to join their congregation' (Interview with Rev. Lallungmuana, 2020). However, due to tireless efforts of various religious leaders, the Mizoram Kohhran Hruaitute Committee (MKHC), North East India Christian Council (NEICC), Mizo Theological Association (MTA) and Bible Society of India (BSI) were formed. It is a significant joint co-ordination committee wherein all the Christian denomination across Mizoram is working unitedly and strongly towards maintenance of peace and unity within Mizoram at present.

The celebration of Christmas on the 25th December of every year is the true reflection of unity among the Mizos. It is festival of joy, peace and brotherhood. Christmas is celebrated with the same enthusiasm even by the non-Christians residing in Mizoram. Community feast during Christmas signifies the purest form of oneness where the Christians belonging to diversified ethnic, economic or else religious backgrounds gather together for the feast. Therefore, community feast is not about food only, it is the spirit of Christmas that attracts everyone. The Christians believe that Christmas is a time for exchanging gifts, outreach programme by various NGO's and government departments to the orphanages, jails, corrective homes and hospitals. In this way, religion has been acting as a driving force of unity in Mizoram.

Unity among the Various Ethnic Groups

Mizoram is a land of diverse ethnicity. The total geographical area of 21,081 sq.km may be broadly divided into two ethnic zones. 'The first group consists of the Lusei, the Ralte, the Hmar, the Paite, the Thadou, the Pangkhua and the like with their various sub-tribes, clan and sub-clan. They inhabit the northern and the middle parts of the state. The second group is formed by the Pawi (Lai) and the Lakher (Mara) with their different clans and sub-clans who occupied the south and south eastern parts of Mizoram. Besides these two groups, huge concentration of the Chakmas and the Brus are also found who live in the south-west and western belts (Lalsiamhnuna, 2011: 4). Each ethnic group and their sub-clans maintain their own distinctive culture and traditions without undermining other's culture. Interestingly, the three famous 'Kut' (festivals) like the 'Chapchar Kut', 'Mim Kut' and 'Pawl Kut' are celebrated every year with the same zeal all across Mizoram irrespective of neither clan nor tribe. Eventually, Mizo delegates from Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura and foreign countries like Burma, and U.S.A. etc. came every year to witness these special occasions.

Despite being politically divided by state and international boundaries. The Zo Ethnic groups, commonly known as Chin-Kuki, Mizo groups are bound together by historical and cultural affinity (Khangte and Lalhminglina, 2018: 11). They are the indigenous inhabitants of different states of North-East India, Burma (Myanmar) and Bangladesh. However, lack of accepted common nomenclature is the main reason as to why the common brothers were identified in different names. For instance, in Myanmar, they are known as Chin, Kuki in

Manipur and Lusei or Lushai by the British administrators. Even though some section of the group accepts and develops an identity on the basis of these imposed names, the people never refer themselves by these imposed names in the pre-colonial time. The people themselves would rather use terms like Zo, Zopa, Zomi or Mizo whenever they make reference of themselves as a group. (Khangte and Lalhminglana, 2018: 12). Therefore, the Zo ethnic tribes were somehow known by different names depending on their area of inhabitation.

The idea of Zo-unification from different parts of the states and nations such as Mizoram, Bangladesh and Myanmar had been felt very strongly by various associations such as the Mizo Union, the MNF, the YMA, MZP and so on. Amongst all the attempts to unite the Mizo people, the ZORO movement (Zo Reunification Organisation) is worth mentioning. On 5th March 1988, The Zomi National Congress (ZNC of Manipur and People's Conference (PC) of Mizoram in their meeting at Lamka (Churachandpur) resolved to convene an international convention of the Zo ethnic tribes and accordingly, the first World Zomi Convention was convened at Champhai from 18-19, May 1988 where thousands of delegates from different states of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar gathered in the convention. A significant outcome of the convention was seen in the agenda (ZORO Pamphlet, 2010):

- (1) The nomenclature of the Zo ethnic group of people who traced common origin from Chhinlung should be 'Zo'.
- (2) Steps should be taken up to integrate the Zo ethnic tribes who are already scattered in territories of these sovereign countries.
- (3) Appeals should be made so that accommodative approach should be adopted by various groups and tribes for better unification and integration.
- (4) Political forum should be established so as to initiate necessary steps for speedy pursuance of unification campaign.

The ZORO now has seven zones and it functions actively in the Zo inhabited areas of India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Further, it has branches in Washington and Florida. Fortunately, it has been recognized as International NGO in 1999 and has been affiliated in the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFI) in May 2004 at Geneva. However it must be noted that the issues of redefining tribe identities among the Zo is still an ongoing process and the search for a common identity label among the Zo remains inconclusive. Moreover, a model of unity in diversity among the Zo whereby loyalties to locational dialectical identities proceeds that of loyalty to an over arching national identity. Therefore, there is an urgent need to rethink the whole edifice of tribe recognition to factor in these emerging socio-political and cultural contexts. H. Kham Khan Suan has rightly remarked the issues of the Zo-unity in diversity as "It must be remembered that the more fractured these identities are, the more conflict-prone and fractured our democratic experience will be as these identities will continue to demand and compete for scarce state resources" (Kham Khan Suan, 2011: 183).

Chapchar Kut, perhaps, is the most popular festival and it serves as a living example of unity and peace among the Mizos residing even outside Mizoram. For instance, in Manipur, a similar kut known as 'Chavang Kut' which falls on every 1st November is

enthusiastically celebrated as in Mizoram. It is also observed as a state holiday in Manipur and a restricted holiday in Assam (Interview with Lalgin Chongloi, 2020). The recent 2019 'Chapchar Kut' was celebrated with a theme 'unity of the Zo people' in the hope that this festival would express to the world outside that the Mizos all over the world remain as so. S. N. Singh has also commented the Kut as 'The festival has promoted community feelings and has helped in influencing the attitude of the Mizo people. Festival is accompanied with dance and music, which are the symbol of love and fellow-feeling. The community feasts and festivals have widened the boundary of community life' (Singh, 1994: 60-61).

Political Unity and Stability

Mizoram may be said to be politically stable since the signing of the Peace Accord in 1986. In fact, the Peace Accord has been famous for its long –lasting attainment of peace till date and was regarded as the most successful peace accord ever signed. Moreover, there has been no record of serious violence or riots in the political behaviour. Besides, Mizoram is highly appreciated even by other states in her conduct of free and fair election. So far, Mizoram has been experiencing a peaceful conduct of electoral process since 1948. Electoral malpractices such as booth capturing, threats and intimidations, poll violence in any form have never occurred in the political history of Mizoram except for some incidents of violence during MNF disturbances (Haokip, 2019: 157). However, since the fifth Mizoram Assembly Election of 2003, incidences like numerous allegations of the use of insurgent groups, use of money power and muscle were reported during these elections (Haokip, 2019: 157). As a response towards all these issues, the Mizoram People Forum (MPF) was formally established on June 21, 2006. The main aims and objective put forward by the MPF are:

- (a) To work towards establishing democratic government through free and fair elections as per the Indian Constitution, Election Rules and Code of Conduct.
- (b) To reform the electoral process and do away with the corruption and malpractices in the electoral system of the state.
- (c) To put in place a transparent, accountable and responsible government.
- (d) To educate the people on the governance issue and make them to be responsible citizens.
- (e) To guide and advice the government on developmental issues.
- (f) To conduct social audits for social reforms.
- (g) To counter any form of violence, use of arms and terrorism (Mizoram People Forum, 2018: 3).

The MPF is strongly against the use of loudspeaker, organizing public feast or picnics, excessive use of posters and flags, house-to-house campaign, distribution of manifesto, public meeting by different political parties in separate places and instead, it organize a common platform for all parties under the Chairmanship of MPF leaders in which equal chances are given to all the party candidates. In this way, the MPF has been playing the most significant role towards the maintenance of peace and unity in the political arena. Mr. Debashish Sen, the Special Observer of the Election Commission for Mizoram in 2008 election was so impressed that he remarked the 2008 election as:

“Other states should try to emulate the Mizoram experience to rid Indian elections of malpractice and wasteful expenditure” (Presbyterian Review, 2008: 55).

The issues of national integration and unity among the diverse population of Mizoram have occupied a central place in the policy-making process of all the politicians. Historically speaking, the present ruling political party, that is, the MNF ultimately took the phase of insurgency for over twenty years wherein its prime motive had always been the Zo-unification throughout the nation. The two major political parties in Mizoram, that is, the Mizo National Front (MNF) and the Indian National congress (INC) may appear to be in direct conflict, but, in times of emergency, they always stood together for the common good of the people. For instance, the success of Peace Accord may be credited to Mr. Lalthanhawla, the president of INC who did not hesitate to step aside and handed over his post of Chief Ministership to the MNF President, Mr. Laldenga.

The most striking example of unity in diversity in the composition of the Assembly House which comprises of forty MLA's at present from different political parties hailing from different ethnic groups merge together co-operatively to work for the common good of the state. At present, out of forty MLA's, two MLA's are from Mara community, namely, Dr. K. Beichhua and K. T. Rokhaw, another two MLAs, namely, C. Ngunlianchunga and H. Biakzauva from the Lai community and B. D. Chakma and Nihar Kanti Chakma from the Chakmas community.

Linguistically United

The Mizo (Duhlian) language belongs to the Kuki-Chin branch of the Tibeto-Burman family. The Lushai dialect also known as 'Duhlian Tawng' is the most common language and is the official language of Mizoram along with English. There are 850,000 native speakers according to 2011 census. Besides Duhlian Tawng, the numerous tribes and sub-tribes of the Mizo have their respective dialects.

It is a positive development to state that Duhlian tawng emerges as the most popular languages among the languages and dialects of the Zo ethnic group and it also promotes unity among various tribes of the Zo ethnic group because Duhlian emerges as the lingua-franca of the Zo ethnic group. In an annual report given by Rev. D. E. Jones, a Welsh Missionary to Mizoram had described the Lushai language as:

“...although were about half a dozen dialects spoken in the country. Lushai is supreme and others tribes soon learn it although they may retain their mother tongue on the heart. The literacy work done by our predecessors had given the language a written form which will probably be permanent” (Jones, 1899).

Thus, the Lusei (Lushai) language is one of the driving force of unity among the Zo ethnic group inside and outside Mizoram. Surprisingly, almost all the tribes, the sub-tribes and even the non-tribals were able to speak the language in no time. Being able to

communicate fluently in one common language creates an atmosphere of closeness among all the people in Mizoram. J. H. Lorrain in his letter dated the 25th April 1899 had also narrated the story of the beginning of their close relationship with the Mizo people as follows: “From the time when we began to speak fluently, the people looked upon us as a member of their own community and we became fast friends.....they began to call us ‘Mizo Sap, the ‘Lushai Sahib’ or perhaps more often ‘Our Sahibs’ (Lewin, 1912: 316).

Conclusions

The discussions in the above sections throws light that the Mizo people have been habituated to the idea of unity in diversity since time immemorial wherein reflections of unity is witnessed in every spheres of life. Mizoram’s rich cultural heritage may also be attributed as the by-product of a healthy social relationship among the various tribes. No doubt, it has attracted world’s attention and serves as a ‘model of peace’ (Patnaik and Lalthankima, 2008: 19) for the neighbouring states. It may be added that Mizoram’s experience of unity in diversity may be attributed to the stronghold of powerful and influential Non-Governmental Organisations like the Church, the YMA, MZP and the like. Further, Christianity, alone has been one of the most important steering wheels for social change and unity among the diverse population of Mizoram. Mizoram’s unity, however rest on mutual understanding, co-operation and responsibility among these different identities.

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