



Analyzing Hmar Identity in Mizoram: Political Movement and Organizations

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Abstract

The Hmar are one of the indigenous and major tribes of Mizoram. There are numerous studies of Hmar history and culture as well as political movements for autonomy. However, a study of the Hmar identity specific to Mizoram context is rather limited. Therefore, this paper would attempt to fill up the literature gap studying the process of Hmar identity formation in Mizoram by highlighting the role of civil societies.

Keywords: *Ethnic Identity, Hmar, ICI, EFCI, HSA, Mizoram.*

Introduction: The Hmar Tribe

The Hmar is one of the indigenous and major tribes of Mizoram. The Hmar refer to their original home as Sinlung from which they migrated due to unfavorable circumstances and a hostile environment. The Hmar are mainly concentrated in the northern part of Mizoram and the southwest part of Manipur which is contiguous to each other. They are also spread over the northeastern part Cachar hills of Assam, on the eastern and southern borders of North Cachar Hills of Assam, and the eastern part of Tripura adjacent to Mizoram (Thiek, 2013). In Mizoram, they are mainly concentrated in the northern part consisting of around 50 villages and towns and a significant number of them are found in almost all parts of Mizoram, including the state capital, Aizawl itself (Inboun, 2020).

There are diverse ideas regarding the origin of the term Hmar. Some people presume that the term Hmar is derived from its literal meaning 'North', meaning people living in the northern side as their concentrated area is the northern side of Mizoram. Another claimed that it is derived from a particular word Hmarh which means knotting one's hair in the nape or back of the head. According to the Hmar oral tradition, their progenitor 'Manmasi' has two

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sons- Hrumsawm and Tukbeksawm. The descendants of Hrumsawm like the Lai tribe, used to knot their hair on their forehead while the descendants of Tukbeksawm used to knot their hair on the nape or back of the head; hence the descendants of Tukbeksawm are called as Hmarh. But the problem with this contention is that the Lusei, Paite and Kuki are also included in the Tukbeksawm group regarding their knotting hairstyle. Another theory link Hmar with the Burmese word Hmarh which means prosperous or fruitful. (Thiek, 2013).

There are different views regarding the number of sub-tribes and subdivisions of the Hmar tribe. Hrangchhuana, mentioned 26 Hmar clans (Hrangchhuana, 1987) while Thangluaia (Thangluaia 2012) and Laldotluanga (Laldotluanga 2011) listed 24 clans, Hrilrokhum includes as many as 33 clans which are- Zote, Vangsia, Hmar-Vaipheis. Tlau, Thiek, Sakechep, Sak-um, Rawite, Pautu, Pang, Ngurte, Ngente, Lungiau, Leiri, Lawitlang, Khuolhring, Khiengte, Khelte, Khawbung, Kawm, Hmar-Lusei(Hualngo), Hrangkhawl, Faihriem, Darlong, Darngawn-Pakhuang, Chothe, Chiru, Chawte, Chawngthu, Changsan, Biete, Bawm, Aimol. (Thiek, 2013). A brief look at the clan list of Hmar tribe reveals that many of the clans included as a part of Hmar like Khiangte, Chawngthu, Khawlhing, and others claimed themselves as separate tribe depending on the place of their inhabitation.

Till today, several places or villages in Mizoram like -Biate, Zote, Khawzawl, Khawbung etc. bear the names of the Hmar clans who had inhabited the area in the past. (Zawla, 1993) This signifies that the Hmar migrated to Manipur and other areas through Mizoram in four main batches (Thiek, 2013). The first batch left Mizoram in around the 15th century, the second batch by around the 18th century, the third and the fourth batch just before the British occupation of Mizoram. While the majority of Hmar had migrated to Manipur and other areas, a number of them settled at the present Mizoram mainly under the Sailo chiefs and some of them like Saizahawla earned the Sailo chiefs favor due to their heroic acts (Zawla, 1993).

As the Hmar live near the headquarters of the British administration and the Christian mission, many of them are the early beneficiaries of the modernization. As many of the Hmar received modern education, they were among the first group of Mizo modern elite in Mizoram. One of the first two native Christians, Khuma belongs to a Hmar tribe. One of the first businessmen in Mizoram Dohnuna, the first elected president of Mizo Union Pachhunga, H.K Bawihchhuaka first councilors of Mizo Union all belongs to the Hmar tribe. As the early elite among the Hmar tribes mostly adopted the Lusei language, they do not show interest in the development of their particular tribe, rather they assert a Mizo identity as a common nomenclature for different Zo-ethnic tribes, including their tribe. Hence, many persons belonging to the Hmar tribe plays a prominent role in the emergence and propagation of the Mizo identity. (Thiek, 2013).

Hmar Tribe-based Civil Societies

The arrival of Christianity and formal education in a Hmar-speaking area was a significant event that transformed the Hmar society. Upon the invitation of Senvon chief, Watkin R. Roberts visited Senvon of the present Manipur from Aizawl in 1910 which

eventually led to the formation of Thado-Kuki Pioneer Mission. As the Mission began to encompass different tribes, the name of the mission was changed to The North East India General Mission (NEIGM) in 1924. As the Lusei language was commonly used in imparting Christianity and education, the early Hmar Christians used the Lusei language for conducting church service. (Dena, 2008).

When the mission in Manipur was put under the American Baptist Church, Watkin R. Roberts, who belonged to Welsh Presbyterian Church, had to abandon the NEIG Mission. In protest to the dismissal of Roberts, the Hmar tribe moved out of NEIGM and formed the Independent Church of India (ICI) in 1930 which happened to be the main Hmar tribe-based church until the Evangelical Free Church of India was established in 1972. (<http://efci.org.in/about/historical-background/>) The two foremost Churches among the Hmar – ICI, and EFCI played a significant role in the dynamics of the Hmar identity movement for popularizing the Hmar language by using Hmar language in services and activities of the Church (Sungte, 2017). The ICI has its headquarters at Churachandpur of Manipur while the EFCI headquarters is located at Shillong, the state capital of Meghalaya. Even though the leaders of the two churches claimed that they are not specifically Hmar tribe church, non-Hmar usually refer to them as Hmar tribe-based churches for their use of Hmar language for church service and the fact that their members dominantly belong to the Hmar tribe. Rev. V Ramchualo Varte, Presbytery Secretary, ICI Aizawl Presbytery (Personal communication) claimed that ICI has 14 Presbyteries, out of which the three presbyteries – Aizawl, Sakawrdai, and Tuivai are in Mizoram. The EFCI has five administrative districts in Mizoram- Lunglei, Aizawl, Kolasib, Khawlien and Sakawrdai districts respectively (Rev. Lalmunsang F Tusing, Personal communication). According to Darrosanga, (Personal Communication) in the context of Mizoram, the Mizoram Presbyterian Church seem to have the largest number of members among the Hmar tribe in Mizoram as a whole and the Hmar speakers of Mizoram too.

The advent of Christianity in and around Senvon of the present Manipur was followed by the establishment of Christian missionary runs schools. The introduction of modern education paved the way for the emergence of a modern educated elite among the Hmar tribes. The newly emergent educated elite formed several associations to integrate the Hmar tribe and preserve its culture among whom the Hmar Youth Association and Hmar Students' Association are prominent among the Hmar in Manipur.

Interestingly, the Hmar Youth Association, which is considered the most influential Hmar organization in Manipur, does not function in Mizoram as the Hmar in Mizoram prefer to join Young Mizo Association rather than HYA which has its headquarters in Manipur. Except for one incidence when the HPC (D) issued an order on 17th April 2012, for the dissolution of YMA branches within their demand area in retaliation of the Central YMA president's speech regarding not favouring the upgradation of Sinlung Hills Development Council to an autonomous District Council (<https://www.virthli.in/2012/04/hpc-d-in-yma-branch-dissolve.html>) there was no serious confrontation between HPC or HPC (D) and YMA during the Hmar movement for autonomy. That HPC (D) order was also followed by

only 17 branches of Tuisualral Group YMA and the YMA branches are formed again after the standoff was over (Sungte, 2017).

One of the most noticeable Hmar organizations operating in Mizoram is the Hmar Students' Association. The HSA was formed twenty-nine years after the advent of Christianity in the Hmar areas of Manipur at Imphal in 1939 to serve the welfare of the Hmar students and to bring an integrative feeling among the Hmar community in general. The association has a motto "Work, Share, Assist, Lead and Serve the Nation". The General headquarters is located at Churachandpur, Manipur and there are Joint Headquarters in Churachandpur, Hmarram (Tipaimuk), Imphal, Vangai and Jiribam in Manipur; Aizawl, Kolasib, and Sinlung Hills in Mizoram; Barak Valley, NC Hills and Karbi Anglong, Guwahati in Assam, Shillong in Meghalaya and Delhi (<https://hmarstudents.org>). The constitution of HSA does not specifically impose being a Hmar tribe as any of the qualifications to become a member of HSA. There are some non-Hmar, who enroll themselves as member of the HSA and even become leaders of the Association.

In 1935, the Hmar of Manipur formed the Hmar Association to preserve the Hmar customs, tradition, language, culture, and identity. But when the Mizo Union was formed in Mizoram, the Hmar Association collaborated with the Mizo Union and the Mizo Union set up branches among the Hmar tribe. The Hmar people enthusiastically joined the Mizo Union movement mainly on the ground of their expectation to merge the Hmar-inhabited areas of Manipur and some parts of Cachar district of Assam to form the Mizo Hills District. They boycotted the Manipur Government and rejected the proposal for the formation of the Hmar Regional Council. But, when the Mizo Union leaders accepted the Lushai Hills District excluding the Hmar areas of Assam and Manipur, the Hmar people felt let down and started to propagate Hmar identity.

Soon after the Mizo Union accepted Lushai Hills District excluding the Hmar of Manipur and Assam, Rochunga Pudaite formed the Hmar National Congress in 1954 to maintain the unity and identity of the Hmar people. But as many Hmar still affiliated themselves with Mizo Union, the existence of two political parties among the same tribe created a certain problem. So, the Hmar Assembly was convened at Senvon in 1959 and the Assembly resolved to form the Hmar National Union (Thiek, Hrilrokhum, 192-197). In 1968 the HNU submitted memorandum to the Prime Minister demanding the constitution of Hmar Autonomous Hill District comprising the Hmar-inhabited areas of Assam, Manipur, and Mizo Hills. The Hmar movement for identity assertion and political demands in Manipur has a direct influence on Mizoram.

Before the emergence of HNU, the first Hmar political party in Mizoram called 'Hmar Fenngo Federation' was formed in 1954 by some prominent citizens of Aizawl belonging to the Hmar tribe. But the party was put to an end as per the request of the Mizo Union. The HNU had taken up their movement for the constitution of Hmar District composing Hmar dominated areas of Manipur, Assam, Mizoram, and Tripura. Branches of HNU were formed in Hmar-dominated villages like Sakawrdai, Vaitin, Khawpuar, Palsang, Tinghmun and

Mauchar in the early 1960s Just after the establishment of HNU blocks and branches in Mizoram, Young Hmar Association (YHA) was also formed at Sakawrdai. Within a short period, many branches of YHA have been established in the Hmar-dominated villages. However, as the MNF appealed to the Hmar leaders not to fight for a separate tribe-based movement while MNF are fighting for territorial integration of all Mizo inhabited areas into one administrative unit, the HNU and YHA ceased to function following the appellation of the MNF (Sungte, 2017).

Many persons from the Hmar tribe, inside and outside Mizoram joined the MNF movement with the hope of integration of all the 'Mizo' as the Hmar living outside Mizoram are also in favour of political integration. At the same time, Mizo-speaking Hmar in Mizoram are relatively not much interested in Hmar tribe-based politics as compared to the Hmar-speaking groups in Manipur and Assam. There are instances when there was a gap between the Hmar speaking group in and outside Mizoram and the Mizo speaking group of Hmar in Mizoram. The majority of the Mizo-speaking Hmar in Mizoram were very much influenced by the Mizo nationalism that they did not care much about Hmar as a separate identity. Most of them identify themselves as one of the tribes under the nomenclature of Mizo and they called themselves Hmar-Mizo. On the other hand, the Hmar outside Mizoram usually considers Hmar as a distinct identity separate from Mizo. There seem to exist mixed feelings regarding the designation of Hmar within the Hmar of Mizoram. There is a tendency for some people to call themselves Hmar while others identify themselves as Mizo. (Sungte, 2017).

Movement for Autonomy

The MNF signed Mizo Accord in 1986, which ended their movement for territorial unification of Mizo inhabited areas by accepting the same boundary of the erstwhile Union Territory of Mizoram excluding all the Mizo inhabited areas of Manipur, Assam and Tripura. The Hmar have been disappointed once again as the Mizo Peace Accord of 1986 failed to address the integration of Hmar-inhabited areas in other parts of Northeast states. They feel neglected of their contribution and opine that the signing of the Mizo Peace Accord brought nothing for the socio-political benefit of their tribe. They started to openly denounce the policy of Greater Mizoram and started the Hmar tribe movement in the late 1980s in Mizoram (Sungte, 2017).

Soon after the signing of Mizo Accord, some persons of the Hmar tribe held a meeting at Aizawl and formed Mizoram Hmar Association on 3rd July 1986. The Association organized Conference at Vaitin village regarding "Hmar Political Future". The delegates of the conference opine the need to change the name of the association as it would not be suitable for the association to engage itself in the political problems of the Hmar in Mizoram. Hence, the Hmar conference held at Sakawrdai on 22nd December 1986 decided to convert Mizoram Hmar Association to a political party called the Hmar People's Convention (HPC). The objectives of the HPC included – striving for a separate political setup to safeguard Hmar culture and communal identity, adopting peaceful means in its political movement, applying a

socialistic pattern of administration, and maintaining justice in the pursuit of moral and human rights. (Thiek,2013).

The HPC took up the earlier demand of the Hmar National Congress and Hmar National Union by demanding the setting up of an Autonomous District Council for the Hmar-dominated areas of North East India under the Sixth Schedule to the constitution of India. However, the party executive body held on 23rd May 1987, resolved to confine their demand to the creation of the Hmar Autonomous District Council in the Hmar-dominated area in the northern part of Mizoram. (Sungte,2017) The HPC contested Mizoram State Assembly elections in 1987 by putting up three candidates to contest in three constituencies within their demand area, but none of them become elected. (Sungte, 2017).

In pursuance of their demand for the constitution of the Autonomous District Council for the Hmar in Mizoram, the HPC submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister of India on 17th March 1987. The reply to their memorandum came from the Home Ministry, Government of India in 1988 in the form of a letter that request the Government of Mizoram to provide facilities for imparting education to the Hmar children up to the primary level in the mother tongue, without paying attention to the main demand for the creation of an Autonomous District. The HPC leaders submitted a memorandum and discussed their demand with Laldenga, Chief Minister of Mizoram on 20th June 1988, but the MNF ministry collapsed before the matter could be taken up. When HPC leaders met Lalthanhawla, Chief Minister of Mizoram in 1989, the Chief Minister promised them that their demands would be discussed and a formal talk would be conducted. Upon learning that their demand was not discussed in the two successive cabinet meetings, the HPC organized a 24-hours Bandh on 28th March 1989 at Sailutar along the line of Aizawl-Tipaimukh Road. What was expected to be a peaceful bandh turns violent after Mizoram police attempted to disperse the HPC volunteers. With the eruption of violence, the HPC resorted to arms in pursuit of their demand. (Pulamte, 2018).

As the HPC went underground to press their demand, the first gunshot of a series of encounters that had followed was fired on 16th May 1989 at Moniarkhal. As per the official record, a total of 46 persons were killed and 66 injured in the various encounters between HPC and Mizoram police. (Pulamte, 2018) The negotiation process started on 31st July 1990 and on 27th July 1994 Memorandum of Settlement was signed between HPC and the Government of Mizoram. Following the Memorandum of Settlement, the HPC surrendered its arms and Sinlung Hills Development Council was formed.

Some volunteers of HPC who did not surrender their arms due to dissatisfaction with the implementation of the Memorandum of Settlement formed Hmar People Convention Democratic (HPC D) under the leadership of Lalhmingthanga Sanate in 1995. The HPC (D) demands the creation of an Autonomous District Council consisting of Hmar-inhabited areas in Mizoram, Manipur, and Assam and also demands the involvement of the Government of India towards the implementation of Memorandum of Settlement signed by HPC and the Government of Mizoram. On 2nd April 2018, the Government of Mizoram and HPC (D) of

H Zosangbera faction signed a Memorandum of Settlement. In pursuance of the Memorandum, a statutory body named Sinlung Hills Council was constituted through an Act of the State Legislature comprising of 14 members headed by Chief Executive Member and Sakawrdai as the headquarters of the Council. (The Mizoram Gazette, The Sinlung Hills Council Act, 2018) The Council has administrative autonomy to carry out development works in 31 villages spreading across three Assembly constituencies namely- Chalfilh, Tuivawl and Serlui. In the 1st General Election to Sinlung Hills Council, held on 5th November 2019, the MNF and HPC alliance bagged 10 seats in the 12-member Council, both HPC and MNF won 5 seats each while the remaining 2 seats are won by the joint candidate of ZPM and Congress, and an independent candidate (www.eastmojo.com).

Conclusion

The Hmar identity movement encounters several problems. The territorial division by state boundary has very deep consequences for Hmar identity. As Manipur is where the majority of Hmar tribe lives, many of the Hmar political and social movements originated from Manipur, and the headquarters of most of the significant civil societies like the Independent Church of India, Hmar Students Association, and Hmar Youth Associations are also located in Manipur. Hmar of Manipur exerts great influence upon the Hmar of Mizoram, particularly among the Hmar-speaking group. However, certain practical problems caused the Hmar in Mizoram to fully join the Hmar of Manipur as there are situational and agenda differences between Hmar of Manipur and Mizoram.

The Hmar in Mizoram are divided based on the language used, which mainly correlates with the area of inhabitation. The Hmar, particularly those living outside the Sinlung Hills District Council speak the Mizo language and identify first and foremost as Mizo. In actuality, the Hmar in and around Aizawl were deeply responsible for the emergence of the modern Mizo nationality. Those who propagate for Hmar identity mainly come from Hmar-speaking group. The difference in perception towards Mizo identity is also witnessed between the members of 'The hmar-based Church like EFCI and ICI, which conduct their service in Hmar language, and those churches which are pan Mizoram churches like PCI, UPC, etc.

The HPC movement is the lone armed movement for autonomy among the Zo ethnic groups of Mizoram. The confrontation between the HPC and Mizoram police which resulted in the loss of lives on both sides does not bring many societal problems along tribe lines. The main reason seems to be that there is a close relationship between Hmar tribe and other tribes. In fact, there are many Hmar who are pivotal in the Mizo nationality formation process and its propagation. Hence the Mizo leaders and people largely saw HPC movement as a movement of the disgruntled groups among the Hmar tribe rather than the Hmar as a whole. The existence of a significant number of Hmar who identify as Mizo first and foremost and the establishment of YMA rather than Hmar Youth Association in the Hmar-speaking dominated area greatly diffuse the situation.

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