Book Reviews
Mizo Selves: Alienated or Grounded?

1. Malswamdawngliana and Rohmingwamii (Editors.) *Mizo Narratives: Accounts from Mizoram*, Scientific Book Centre, Guwahati, second reprint, 2014, pp. 305+index, Rs. 295.
2. Joy L.K.Pachuau, *Being Mizo: Identity and Belonging in Northeast India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2014, pp. 265+index, Rs. 895.

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Retailing and detailing the flashpoints of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Mizoram produces a collage of territorially linked up indigenous and ethnic histories, colonial ruptures and inauguration of multiple modern selves and communities in difference-with-itself without a bounded notion of identity. It challenges the linear Mizo narrative of transition from chieftainship to self-determination to a post-insurgency electoral democracy and institutes a kind of self-critique, a re-figuration of the past and a host of other narrative strategies of reconstruction and deconstruction. The collection of essays edited by Malswamdawngliana and Rohmingwamii is a testimony of revisionary local history that produces a richly diverse, disconnected and yet a serializable narrative of milestones of Mizo lived experiences. Joy Pachuau expands this horizon of ethnic self-understanding by investigating many modes of self-making among the Mizos and thereby creating an auto-critique of 'incorrigibility' of any such 'conjecture and imagination'.

Both these works sincerely question what James Clifford, the American anthropologist, termed as 'the liberal privilege of "making space" for marginal narratives'. Indeed, if Pachuau pointed out the fact that being Mizo in a maximalist as well as in a minimalist sense is an act of recreating a locale (as in death or mourning for the dead by symbolically returning to one's place of origin), Malswamdawngliana

and Rohmingwamii's edited volume highlighted how 'the desire for more political autonomy or self-rule' pre-exists in constructing Mizo-self in the interstitial difference between the self and the other, the old and the new. This is how both the volumes seize upon the past as an image that flashes up at an instant of recognizing what the self desires here and now in the existential context.

The existential context for the Mizos, as is well-known, lay in new cultural, political, religious and economic encounters with the Other that transformed everything that the Mizos have - from youth dormitories to jhum cultivation to an unflinching resistance to dominance by the Other. The Other here is the colonial ruler as well as the *vais* (the word for outsiders). In spelling out what the Mizos meant by freedom or self-determination, the post-colonial Indian state often arose as the Lacanian big Other[1] in whom they got immersed in the concreteness of its controversial acts such as grouping of villages, ill-managed famine and any such agonizing crisis of sorts. The Indian state, through its optics of authority and control, attempted to establish hegemonic peace through accords, co-option and ideological manipulations of the Mizo cognitive apparatus. Both the volumes reconstruct the Mizo cognitive and conceptual resources in a positive way to discover depth meanings in them.

Meaning(s) of Identity

Mizos have two distinctive ethnographic-semantic and material sources of meaning construction. Both again have a semiotic and symbolic dimension. In the essay entitled, "Administration of Mizo Chiefs in Pre-Colonial Period", Lalhmingliani Ralte mentioned a narrative categorization of *Tlangau* (village crier, may be *Rudali*), who not only is a messenger, but performed the symbolic role of a mourner who would announce what Pachuau had characterized as *tih tur a lawm*

[1] The Big Other is constituted as a permanent lack, but it is prefigured as an image before oneself such that its substitutes the imagining self and occupies the place of the Other by cancelling out the self. Indian State is prefigured in Mizo native imagination that invisibly influences self-descriptions and fit it into a discursive frame of Othering by the State. Joy Pachuau, pp.192-93 argued about the otherness of suffering of the Mizos by Others (vais) in order to borrow signifiers from such instances of suffering to name and tame the Mizos themselves.

(what ought to be done). Such an announcement on behalf of the village Chief performed the function of giving and receiving orders from the Chiefs with 'sovereign military-political powers', often in excess, that mixes up the quotidian domains of life with power, be it political or spiritual. In Pachuau's description, burial of the dead in one's *veng thlawmual* (locality graves) arises as an earthly metaphysical sign of belonging or alienation that marks a sense of belonging to the clan, tribe and community that also is an imagined territory of a Chief. Although Pachuau does not tell us how burial in one's locality is connected to the journey of the soul across the 'lake of dead soul' (Lake Rih Dihil in Myanmar), yet the idea to become *Thangchhuah* in the sense of being "Lushais of the Lushais" in pursuing one's faith in Christianity creates a logic of contrast and distinction between the quotidian and the transcendent, the old way and the new. The quotidian dimension of death qualifies itself in being buried in one's own locality in order to die as a Mizo by throwing up distinguishable concepts like *Sakhua* (spirit of the tribe) and its transcendental revival or *harhna* that ultimately marks 'a distinctive relationship with the landscape'. In sharp contrast to Pachuau's exegetical reading of Mizo worldview, Rohmingmawii pointed out that the missionaries had cut the Mizos off from their old religious practices and it resulted in 'alienating themselves from blood family ties'. Rohmingmawii goes on to argue that *Hlimsang* or high revival is a moment of 'being drunk with spirit' called *Zu*, the rice beer that created Khurbing, or 'spiritual attachment' giving rise to its saturation in the mysterious power of *Zawlnei* of such a revived soul. In this altered state of consciousness, the world is reconfigured in an 'alternate Christianity', or 'sub-alternness' of Mizo Christian experience that went to the extent of *Puma Zai*, or 'heathen revival' promoted by non-Christian chiefs in the early twentieth century.

If the sites of culture and religion was dominated by this tension between life and death, death and revival, Christian and heathen, native versus outsider (*vai*), the political economy was showing a transition from the abolition of *Bawi* (bonded labourer under the Chieftain) system to the emergent tenuous relationship between Jhum cultivation and chieftainship throughout colonial times to the claims of independence and self-determination to ultimately a kind of peace with the Indian state-all in a time-frame of a century or little more. This is a rapid fire

round of Mizo history. Significant transitions such as famine due to the flowering of bamboo and increase in rat population to ethnic insurgency led by Pu Laldenga of the Mizo National Front (MNF) are discussed in both the volumes. Interesting debates such as whether the *Bawi* system meant slavery, whether the Mizo Union wanted to join India or remain independent, or go with the Chin province of Myanmar in 1947; criteria for demarcation between Mizo and Chin hills, Barak valley and Lushai hills; whether Mizos could be divided into Pawi, Lai, Lakher and Lushei and others are discussed in the context of shifts in politics, religion and identity. Pachau's formulation of 'ethnic heterogeneity' as stated by one of her respondents in Sawleng village of Aizwal *hnam chitin reng kan veng ab kana wm tawh*, translated as 'all kinds of "tribes/ethnic" communities now live in our village' sounds like a process of ethnic differentiation that affects the very construction of post-insurgency Mizo identity. What Pachuau characterized as *veng identity* (identity based on locality) on the basis of an expanding locality and depicted it in terms of accommodating migrants from Burma and Bangladesh create a livewire tension between authenticity and subjectivity of being Mizo. These migrants are termed with distinctive exo-ethno connotations; one as *Burma-Mi* (people from Burma) , or better, quoting the Mizo historian Sangkima, as *Kawl-mi*, used by Mizos to denote 'people from the eastern settlement' of the Mizo ethnic stock; while the other as *vai* connoting the non-relational outsiders, or the economic migrants from Bangladesh as well as from 'mainland' India. Increase in population of Aizwal during insurgency or *buai* years had been due to peoples' attempt to 'flee army or insurgent atrocities', is indeed a good deep probe into peopling of Aizwal, as per Pachuau's explanation. Extending the argument further, Pachuau looked at inter-ethnic relations in terms of distinct segments: Mizos and *vais*, Mizos and other minorities such as Chakma and Bru, Mizos and other groups of Zo origin such as Paite, Hmar, Biate, Hrangkhwal, Zanniat etc., to name a few from within the large Zo family. Her finding about call for uniting people of Zo origin termed as *Zofate* as well as inclusion of fraternal groups such as Brus or any other within Mizo identity by the ceremony of *saphun* tells us about the complex processes of 'acceptance and belonging' in contemporary Mizo society. Malswamdawngliana and Rohmingmawii marked this complicated process in terms of narratives of plural trends within

Christianity and development of rift between chief and the colonizers and later within the Mizo Union. Khuhly Robin argued that removal of *Zawlbuk* as an institution among the Mizos acted as a 'blow' that cannot be recovered by any other measure such as modern education and hence 'conformity' to the new path of development initiated by the colonial rule gave way to what he cautiously termed as the 'desire to accumulate'. Indeed Rohmingmawii furthered this line of argument by bringing in 'new sense of brotherhood and identity consciousness' that replaced earlier religious rites such as *Kwangpui siam and Fano dawi* by annual gatherings and worship in the churches. One could surmise that Mizo worldview now is changed to the extent that it makes a distinction between self and other not in terms of only what is ethnically a shared origin but also by way of the trans-ethnic Zo identity and its Other outlying everywhere in the historical Kuki-Chin territory. The new Other of modernity is much more nuanced than the old *vai*, as they are in proximate distance, not exactly a part of the non-Lusei worldview, yet their status is of an ambiguous multiplicity. One may add that the modern desire to accumulate resulted into a self-splitting process of intra and inter-ethnic differentiation that mobilized both common origin as well as trans-ethnic identities as modes and means of othering. Resurgence of Zo nationalism is trans-ethnic, while maintenance of Mizo ethnic identity against ethnically other, both internal and external assumes distinctive intellectual and political economy forms. Rise of distinctive scholarly voices like Pachau and Malswamdawngliana and Rohmingwamii and many others in social science literature and political economy forms such as new land use policy could be considered as new forces that constitute belonging to what Pachuau called 'being Mizo'.

Recasting the Ethnic Self-identity of Mizos

The prevailing logic of some of the scholars articulates a sense of public disenchantment. Starting with the age old practice of jhum cultivation, replacement of chieftainship and regrouping of the villages as an outcome of Mizo insurgency and, later, the issue of defining a distinctive Mizo way of life have become major areas of a contested and plural narrative of self-constitution. Whether all these multiple social causes can produce a singular effect of being Mizo remains open thick/thin interpretation. The idea of defending institutions of *Zawlbuk*

(youth dormitory) and jhum land by reviving the land surveyor called *Ramhual* remained a political agenda for cultivating the Mizo sentiments and Mizo identity, but it transformed into new shades or formations along the lines of powerful and not so powerful clans within Mizos. Such a process of internal reordering of the given social identity of Mizos led to exclusivism of sort such as making of a sect like *Thira Pawl*, while it revived the idea of common ancestry and origin as reflected in re-historicization of *Chhinlung Chhuak* (the myth of Chhinlung) among the entire Kuki-Chin-Lusai group.

This quest for origin reinforced internal fault lines and ambiguities carried from the pre-colonial and colonial past in terms of contesting narratives of territory and identity and brought back the colonial plan of enumeration and map-making that created a new problematique of/for post-colonial Mizo self. Entry of market relations as 'frontier relations' created a sense of space over the sense of place that also materially juxtaposed the episodes of colonial administration upon the contemporary Mizo experience of ethnic fault lines to protect 'land and identity'. Pachuau argued that a combination between memories of torment and current ethnic fault lines aggravate the crisis of Mizo self realization that Mizo as a 'particular' does not exist in the national imagination of India. The argument is sharpened in Rohmingwamii by terming it as 'denationalization' of the Mizo self as a consequence of alienation from being Mizo as well as a contrary process of re-identification with Chin-Kuki-Lusei continuum. Pachuau described it as ethno-genesis that brings in notions of *lainat aum* (one to whom empathy must be shown) and also a recalling of the *thlarau* (shadow-spirit) that redraws affiliations to community and land. She cited the idea of downward movement in the oral histories of Mizo group of tribes as *Thlang tlak*, "… the words that are used to describe the movement from Burma to the present-day location, are now almost always understood as a 'westward move; however, *thlang* also means 'lower down."

This concept of *thlang* goes into *thlanmual* (graveyard) of the locality, a semantic-semiotic transition that lies in symmetry with contemporary Mizo history of settlement in a landscape 'in relation to the other', which is simultaneously a site of kinship as well as a place for identification between territory and self.

Pachuau also drew a modernist distinction between visual and print representations of such identity in terms of a distinction between visual representations and writing such that disciplinary knowledge about Mizos could be characterized as representational, while writing about them constructs an auto-ethnography of a past and a present that contingently shifts their discourse of identity from locality to macro-geographical space as a cultural and historical 'particular': from Lushai hills to Mizo hills, from being Mizo to Zo in terms of *Zofate* or *Zo hnahthlak* (branches of Zo tree). This construction is 'interlocutory' specific, as is beautifully stated by Pachuau in the context of Mizo identity: 'identity is (…) continuously constituted and re-constituted through a dynamic relationship with history'. Alternatively, while re-narrating Mizo conversion to Christianity, Pachuau quoted scholars like Robert Hefner to tell us that conversion may not always be 'a deeply systematic reorganization of personal meanings, but a new locus of self-identification. ' This dynamic relationship with a new locus is once again is produced through interlocution on/about the Chhinlung origin myth, as Lallianzuali Chhangte narrated it:

> The Chhinlung myth (in the form as is popularly known today)(…)seems to have evolved (…) various sub-tribes sharing more or less identical norms of social relationships had evolved a distinct identity and sought to validate that identity by subscribing to the myth. (…) The Mara version clearly reveals the Lusei were more numerous in numbers than them.(…) The Ralte, who are depicted as loud and talkative people in the myth, had already lost their prominence to the Lusei.(…) Therefore, this *Chhinulung* myth probably took shape only in the early part of eighteenth century (…). By this time, most of the Lusei clans had already reached the present Mizoram.

This is how the dynamics of identity construction leads to ways of seeing each other, some of which are difficult and not in tune with others; while some are proximate or distant, or in 'relational proximity'; as the social worlds constructed through such religious, ritualistic and cultural terms remain a subject of interpretation and reinterpretation.

Other(ing) as the Means and Ends of Selves

Seemingly, historicization of experiential narratives provides an understanding of oneself in their relationship with the Other. Both the volumes attempt to establish a dialogue with the Mizo past in terms of an idea of 'past' that is largely formulated by colonial and post-colonial Other. How this narrative from the other about oneself gets transmitted in a different way to the Mizos and how they themselves speak *differently* from others about themselves become a core issue in auto-ethnographic writings on Mizos by Mizos themselves. Occasionally the voice of the Other becomes the main-text so much so that when Pachuau allegorically called colonial rule as a sub-text, it belongs to the cross-fertilization between Christianity and modernity. Pachuau put it this way: 'Mizos reflected on their own pasts, telling stories of their 'ethno-genesis' in frameworks provided by colonial and missionary epistemology in order to make the Mizo claim to be a nation, a distinct possibility.' Indeed the political weight of the claim to be a nation beckons a discourse of inclusion and exclusion-for example, being Mizo gets included with being Zo or Zomi in the sense being the predecessor, while *Inti Chhungkhat* (behaving as if one is belonging to the same family) as opposed to *Inti Hmar/Paite* marks an exclusion within. Further Mizos being Indians, or being a part of 'greater Mizo identity' constructed in the Zo reunification movement (ZORO) still remain open-ended. How such shifts within very construction of identity through inclusion-exclusion mode are negotiated assume significant place in everyday politics. For example, many Southern Mizo ethnic groups attempt to express their distinct identity claims (e.g., Mara, Pawi, Chakma, Bru, Hmar, Bawms), while some of them collaborate with Mizo identity by taking part in a common ancestry and geography (such as Pangs). One would like to argue that this difference and negotiation emerged through inter-clan memories of migration that happened through Chin hills, west of Chindwin river to Kabaw valley of current Burma and Manipur to Lushi hills. Indeed the term "Mizo" was not in use in the inter-clan sharing of ideas and values, while they called themselves in their clan names such as Lusei, Laizo, Thlantlang, Ralte, Paite, Zaliau,Vanzang, Fanai, Zotung, Zophei, Zo, Molsom etc. Pachuau is of the opinion that while Lais share their commonality with Pawis, they do not call them as Mizos, while Pawis do call themselves as Mizos.

Interestingly Pangs are considered to be 'off-shoots' of Lais, who call themselves as Mizos. Such interspersed and overlapping connotations of identity and ethno-names mark an ongoing process of filiation and affiliation in cross-cutting origins that only create interstitial identities in search of their roots and affiliations.

Those who share a common filial lineage do not often share a common affiliation, but such differences do not reproduce themselves on the ground as very neatly cut out territorially distinct tribes or ethnic groups. Another very stimulating way of distinguishing oneself is in terms of a moral framework that designates a 'domain of sense', or *sensus communitas*. Pachuau brought out such a domain of sense or commonsense when she conceptualized the idea of death and dying in one's locality and being buried in the locality grave (*veng thlanmual*) is in practice determines what is it to be a Mizo. This is supported by a moral norm of participation in mourning, termed variously as *laint awm* (empathy for the other), or I *ral thawem?*, or (have you expressed sympathy?) for one who dies within *veng thlanmual* (locality grave). The argument draws a closure by distinguishing between *veng thlanmual* from *riangvaite thlanmual* (graveyard for people whose origins are unknown) and by distinguishing between *thih ropui* (grand death, presence of a large number of mourners) and *An phum tawp* (they simply buried him). The description of such a practice along with its conceptual apparatus brings out a critical commonsense of affiliation in which death is lived in language of mourning that takes a specific moral turn in terms of empathy/sympathy for the Other, who is an inside Other to be distinguished from an outside Other. One sees here a break between a filial other from an affiliating Other, a discursive break that gets enforced through objectification in language and social practice. Another streak of the same argument runs through Pachuau's characterization of 'denial of coevalness' between Mizo identity and Indian national identity that leads to denial of Mizo as a 'particular' with all its territorialized specificities within Indian national imagination that throws up the larger argument about the fluidity and transactionalist nature of Mizo identity in 'public discourse'. Pachuau critiques nationalist representation of tribal/ethnic identities as 'exoticized' cultures and formulates it as a project of creation of an 'Other' within. One can contend that othering remains as

the means and end of locating and binding the Mizo self-identity in many creative ways to ultimately emerge as a singular identity.

Framing the Other in an Alternative Mizo Way

Looking at the Other from an alienating frame of reference needs to be corrected not just by the so called incorrigible view from within, but by looking at how Mizos distinguish themselves from internal/external Other. This can be done in a variety of genres of academic works that is being discussed here. The argument gets either trivialized or transfixed by the intervention of the State, or the way the State reads them or sees them. In this context, the idea of Mizo state to be carved out as separate state within Indian union and consequent relationship of violence and conflict between organized political identities is justified in terms of 'desire for more political autonomy or self-govern/rule'. The dichotomy between cultural self and political self of Mizos expressed respectively in 'being Mizo' and 'being Mizo nation' can be understood in the larger context of the dichotomy between 'social formation' and 'state formation'. There is also a dialogue and exchange of standpoints between the two sides of culture/politics, society/state in terms of difference and accommodation that usually is an institutional predicament shaped by peoples' desires and acts. Here again, Mizos as a society always-already has their due role to play. Both the volumes expand this self-understanding of Mizos by going deep into inner recesses of their cultural self only to transpose it to the larger field of political imagination of/for a national, trans-ethnic and global community to which they can belong. This at the same time is a constitution of a historical and cultural field of struggle in which Mizos as an Other constitute themselves as a distinct social identity and follow a particular path of development. This path of development leaves the remainder to act as a successor to the present state of Mizo's being, or, being Mizo by being caught in the cross-roads of political and cultural games of staging oneself in the world amidst Others.

Uses of the past is limited, as Mizo ethnographers, historians and social scientists narrate their own lived experience only after a phase that is passed off, one even does not intend to return there again, but forms an opinionated and yet there is a corrective intentionality that works through both the texts in a contemplative vein. Re-textualization of the past in its

speculative and spectral fit with the present is certainly an act of renarrativization and resignification giving rise to a process of finding new reasons to either accept something or to screen it out from the intellectual discourse. Despite this, the two volumes bring out comprehensively the core values of Mizo identity. A critical issue is, like any other identity, Mizo does not remain a homogeneous community or identity. It has a manifold of discernible voices and some silent interior too that call for continuous and dynamic negotiation with the lived present. The question remains, can one posit many more alternative histories of the lived present of the Mizos and in how many different ways? Let Mizo imagination flourish with such new questions and new resources of understanding and ways of thinking about oneself that the two volumes initiate as major leaps towards speaking to the world in a distinctively touching Mizo voice.

Both the volumes carry out a central project of imagining new forms of Mizo identity that wields an overarching framework of understanding Mizo history. Pachuau introduces a substantive philosophy of history by projecting an inalienable moment of lived experience, while Malswamdawngliana and Rohmingwamii offer a moving account of triumph of the wicked and suffering of the good, which is an emplotment of a rear window view on the present from the past. This produces a different frame of reference: a descriptive reordering of the historical narrative to answer some of the concerns of the present. Pachuau goes a step ahead by capturing tropes of the present and deriving from these tropes a pragmatic and moral framework that delimits a few liminal practices as markers of authentic Mizo identity. Both the volumes succeed immensely in their intellectual pursuit and any reader is going to experience freshness of mind and idea in reading the critical essays that makes up these two almost simultaneous and qualitatively similar volumes coming from different intellectual locations.

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