

Rev. Dr. Peter Fraser's Mission in Mizoram (1908-1912) : A Historical Perspective

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A great man of God and a well-loved missionary to the Mizo people. Dr. Peter Fraser was born on 31 July 1864 at Caemarfon in Wales. After qualifying as a doctor, he worked at Treorchy in the Rhondda Valley among coalminers. From there he moved to Llangefni and then to Caemarfon where he became well known and was a friend of the British Chancellor of the Exchequer and MP for Caemarfon, the Rt.Hon.D.Lloyd George. In fact, so popular was he that he was apparently asked by the then Viceroy of British India to be his personal doctor while he was working as the Chief Medical Officer at Liverpool Hospital.¹ It is a wonder, therefore, that a man of such abilities and stature, who could have amassed great wealth, chose to give up all to come to a remote place like Mizoram for the cause of the Gospel.

Dr. Fraser was ordained a pastor at Llagollen in North Wales in June 1908 and was soon thereafter appointed to Mission work in Liverpool. By then he had already travelled widely and had visited several European countries. After having made their decision to serve in Mizoram, Dr.Fraser and his wife, Mary Catherine sailed for India on Oct. 14, 1908, reaching their destination on Dec. 9, 1908. Mrs.Fraser, lovingly called "Pi Theli" by the Mizo, was born in Llangefni, Wales. She had a lovely voice, was trained in music and was a member of the British Academy of Music. She was in fact, one of the praise singers in the well-known Gipsy Smith's gospel meetings. She found her own calling in Mizoram and taught music and Tonic Solfa to the Mizo people.² The Frasers served as missionaries in Mizoram for four years, leaving the place on Oct. 12, 1912.

Practice of Medicine : A doctor of medicine by education and a spiritual guide by service was exactly what Mizoram needed at a time when the practice of animist traditions was still rampant. The people still believed that evil spirits caused all physical ailments and the only way to appease them was through expensive sacrifices and rituals. They were completely unaware of hygienic practices and their disregard for prevention and early intervention often led to the simplest injuries resulting in deaths. This was especially true with regard to women and child health. Women

bore many children out of which around 50% died on an average before adulthood. Also many mothers died at childbirth for lack of proper care and superstitious ideas.¹

Dr. and Mrs. Fraser settled in Mission Veng at Aizawl. There was no hospital building and the doctor had to see patients in his own home. Every day many sick people would file into his verandah waiting for their turn to be examined. Understanding the problem, Mr. Dixon, the then Asst. Superintendent in Aizawl, lent him a tent in 1910 where he could examine patients. On an average, he had to examine 50-100 patients daily. Dr. Fraser was a gentle man of great determination. He never tired of explaining to his ignorant patients the cause of their illnesses, prescribing and providing the required medicines. In the year 1909 alone, he treated 23,919 patients at a time when the population in the entire Northern Lushai Hills was only about 90,000.⁴ This number apparently does not include the patients he treated on his many journeys around the hills. This clearly shows how unhealthy the general population was and the magnitude of the task before the doctor.

One incident told of his practice is when he had to operate on a boy who had a problem in his legs. The boy, unable to bear the pain, spat mercilessly on the doctor. This embarrassed his father and he chided the boy to which the doctor is said to have replied, "It's not his fault but yours for not having taught him any better." Word of his skills spread quickly among the people and he was soon able to gain their complete trust. One mentally challenged man is even quoted to have said, "Doctor, I shall be healed completely if you will just open me up and put me back together again." The genuine care he imparted did not go unnoticed by the people he served.

The doctor's practice was not confined to Aizawl alone- he went to even the remotest villages when it was required of him. In a village he once visited, the chief requested him to stay longer and take care of the sick in his village. But the doctor declined saying he needed to hurry back to his dispensary, which had to remain closed while he was on such visits. After setting out on his way home, he could not stop thinking of the chiefs request and feeling such compassion for the people, he went back to care for the sick in that village. On another occasion, he was called to Bnghmun, a four days' journey on foot, where the village chief Hrangvunga had taken seriously ill. Going would have meant closing the clinic for at least ten days but the doctor felt his presence at the village was necessary so he immediately set off on foot. By the

time he reached, the chief had already recovered but this trip was not in vain. There were eight people in that village who had been preparing for over a year in their desire to convert to Christianity. He baptized those people, among whom was Rosema, one of the first three Mizo elders. On his way home, he also operated successfully on a girl who suffered from dropsy.⁵ Another noteworthy fact of his doctoral ministry was that he trained many women in midwifery. These women learnt quickly and soon became indispensable to the doctor. They also helped in creating awareness among women on the need for special care during pregnancies and childbirth.

In his practice, he often encountered strong opposition, especially from the 'bawlpu' or priests who performed the appeasement sacrifices. They rebelled against him and encouraged the people to throw away the medicines he prescribed. The doctor once visited a village where there lived one of his most aggressive opposers. At the time, a snake bit this priest's son and he found himself completely helpless. He had no choice but to run to the doctor for help. After his son was healed, it is said this priest became one of the first converts in the village. As his practice grew and more people cured from it, many such priests were gradually converted, and they became strong advocates of medicine.⁶

To understand the constant pressure under which Dr. Fraser worked, one has only to read one of his letters to his friends at home. This letter was printed in the Welsh Presbyterian Church's monthly magazine, '*Y Drysorfa*' (Treasury) which the Rev. J.M.Llyod translated to Mizo. The following is an extract from the same.⁷

We are always so tied up in work. At times I am so tired by the end of the day that I wonder how I will ever find the strength to work again the following day. But as each new day dawns, God gives me strength to face the day with renewed energy. We feel so much compassion for the Mizo people. It is only through the prayers and good wishes of people at Caernarfon's Castle Square that we are able to carry on with our work. Every week, hundreds of patients come to our clinic. Every morning at 7, we conduct prayers before we start our work. From then to sundown, the day is entirely devoted to the examination of patients.

Evangelism : Dr. Fraser placed great importance on the work of evangelisation. Along with the prescriptions he was always careful to

add. "Don't put faith in medicines alone, pray and believe in God for they will work together." He had bought a small press from Assam. One of his practices was to print Scripture verses in this press and fix it on every bottle of medicine he prepared, along with instructions on how to take the medicine. People who came to see the doctor from all over the hills started their own practice of first going to the government dispensary in order to obtain medicine bottles. On their way to the mission clinic, they would pour out the medicines and present the bottle to Dr. Fraser when they came to consult him. This is evidence of the trust they showed the doctor. The practice of fixing Bible verses was thus very effective in spreading the word of God.⁸

He was not a preacher nor did he possess any oratory skills. Once when he came back from Shillong, many people had gathered at Bawngkawn to welcome him. His message on that occasion was just a single sentence, "Put your faith in Jesus today, for he died for you on the cross." Missionaries in those days had to make trips to the Welsh mission headquarters at Shillong at regular intervals. Another incident that is told is that of the time when he was invited to preach at the Mawkhar church. The biggest church in Shillong, it was filled to capacity on the occasion and all the doctor said was, "The hills of your land are beautiful, but the loveliest hill in all the earth is Calvary. This is because it was there that Jesus died to save us. Calvary is beautiful." The congregation may never have heard such a short sermon but at the end of the service, many of them were heard repeating among themselves, "Calvary is beautiful" and it is said that this sermon prompted the composition of many Khasi songs on the theme of the Cross.⁹

Fraser was a firm believer who always tried to live the faith he preached. He held prayer so sacred that he always knelt down when he prayed. He and his wife would hold a small prayer service every morning at dawn in their small verandah with the greatest earnestness. He also firmly held the belief that the coming of the Lord was not far, and therefore urged himself and others to zealously carry out the work of evangelisation. One of his favourite songs was:

We'll work till Jesus comes
And we'll be gathered home."

The sounds of the Frasers singing this song on their piano always greatly attracted the people.

In 1910, Watkin Roberts (Sap Tlangvala) his aide, sent the Gospel of John to Kamkholun, the chief of Senvon village in Manipur who wrote back requesting them to send someone who could explain the text to him.

From among the students he was sponsoring, Fraser sent Vanzika, Savawma and Taitea and they stayed at the village for an extended period of time. After they came back, Upa R.Dala was sent to live there in 1913 to spread the Gospel. He may, thus be considered the first missionary among the Mizo people.¹⁰

In 1910, Fraser joined D.E. Jones in arranging the first Presbytery in Mission Veng, Aizawl where Rosema, R.Dala and Darchhinga, the 1st Mizo elders were ordained. Although it was the Rev Jones who performed the ordination, it is said that Dr. Fraser made the choice of the three men.¹¹

Other Noteworthy Undertakings : Like other altruistic missionaries such as David Livingstone and Albert Schweitzer, Dr. Fraser clearly saw the need for the Gospel among less privileged people- he worked tirelessly among the marginalized, the sick and the poor. He was living proof of Luke 4:18-19 in the Bible.¹² Under him, five buildings were run to house the poor, and the mission hospital was also entirely under his care. The five buildings housed around 70 people- the poor, old people who had no one to care for them, the physically challenged, etc. This number was raised to more than a 100 in 1911 at the time of the *Mautam* famine. The poor and needy from all over the hills would simply arrive at the doorstep and they were all admitted.¹³ Once admitted, the doctor would take the opportunity to preach the Gospel to them. They were also trained to take up any tasks that needed attention.

Setting up of a Children's Boarding : Dr. Fraser would gather children from different villages during his travels and bring them to Aizawl for education. These children were housed in a boarding facility and he sometimes personally sponsored the children's education. Orphans and other needy children in the boarding were taught the Word of God along with their conventional schooling. Out of these, the better students would be sent out in the evenings to preach in different areas of Aizawl. Some of them were also sent to villages during their vacations to teach those who did not have opportunities to get their education in Aizawl. One of such children, Sena remembers, " As soon as we had our holidays, we would be sent out to preach and teach in different villages. Once our supplies wore out, we would find work and continue to preach over the length of our vacations." A single child's sponsorship cost Rs.3/- per month at the time, the equivalent of the first *Tirkkoh's* (native workers sent forth by the Mission) monthly wages.¹⁴ This boarding was the precursor of the present Ramthar Boarding School run by the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram.

Printing Press : Dr. Fraser was gifted a small hand press from England in 1911. Mrs. Fraser and some boys took up the task of putting the press together and setting up the 'Aijal Christian Press'. They initiated the work of running the press by printing small booklets, the first of which was 'Kros Thu' (The Gospel of the Cross). In 1911 alone, 6000 copies of this booklet were distributed in his dispensary. '*Krista Tlangau*' (*Herald of Christ*), a monthly Christian organ was started in October 1911. The name of this journal was later changed to '*Kristian Tlangau*' (*Christian Herald*), which continues to be issued today by the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram. It now has the distinction of being the oldest monthly journal in Mizoram. In the beginning the responsibility of bringing this journal out was in the hands of Saptlangvala (Watkin Roberts) and his Mizo helpers Tebawnga, Kapnghina and Sena. Such humble beginnings paved the way for the Loch Printing Press when Manding Putara (Col. G.E.Loch, the local Commandant of the Army) made a gift of an upgraded and bigger machine.¹⁵ In subsequent years, this machine was again upgraded and the Synod Printing Press came into being. The Loch Press is now kept on display at the Synod Press in Aizawl.

The Liberator of Slaves : There was practiced in the Lushai hills a form of slavery called the '*Bawi* system'. Under this system, people- usually criminals and paupers- took refuge in the chiefs house and surrendered themselves as slaves to the chief. The most pertinent evil of the system lay in the fact that the children and grandchildren of such slaves were born as slaves to the chief even after their ancestors died. They were not free to get education or even change their religious affiliations without the consent of their master, the chief. The only way to free such slaves was to pay the ransom money of Rs.40/- to the master. Since Fraser strongly felt that these slaves ought to have equal rights in exercising their will, he freed 40 of them at his own instance. Such liberated slaves who had nowhere else to go were put up in a house near the present Mission Veng Church in Aizawl.¹⁶

Fraser took up a campaign with the local officials in Mizoram saying it was unlawful to practice slavery in any form under British administration. He also contended that the system was in direct contradiction with the teachings of Christianity. However, he found no supporters in his cause even from among his own missionary colleagues. This was mainly because the government officials and the chiefs insisted that the *bawis*

were simply paupers or criminals who took refuge in a chiefs house and lived as members, not slaves, of the chiefs family.

The issue assumed controversial proportions when Fraser began to take up the cause of abolishing the *Bawi* system, a system which was still maintained even after twenty years of British administration in the hills¹⁷. Fraser found few supporters, the chief of them being his aide Saptlangvāla, Khawvelthanga, the chief of Maubuang village and R.Dala, an elder. On the other side were the Superintendent H.W.G. Cole, other government officials, and the chiefs themselves. Fraser and the Superintendent being good friends often took to discussing the issue between themselves. Once the Superintendent called a chiefs elder from one of the villages and asked him to elaborate on the *bawVs* position. This elder confidently said, "Why, they are just below the chief in status and considered members of the chiefs family." At this, Supt. Cole asked Fraser to join them and the elder repeated what he had said, in the doctor's presence. Cole was quick to taunt Fraser saying, "There you are, the *bawis* aren't real slaves at all". Fraser apparently replied, "Well, my dear Cole, allow me to ask the elder just one question. If the *bawis*' position is so secure and of such stature, why don't we register you right now as a *bawi* to your chief?" The elder was aghast at such a suggestion and strongly expressed his unwillingness to do so. To this, the Superintendent did not have a reply.

Fraser's campaign assumes great historical importance when taking into account its socio-economic base and effects. The progress of this campaign is hereby followed up in greater detail.¹⁸

1. **Before the Chief Commissioner** - This was more like an inquiry Commission rather than a court of law summoned to pass judgment. The case was opened between Fraser and the Superintendent in 1910. The Superintendent took with him Pu Zataia, the chief of Khawhai and a few other chiefs. Fraser and Watkin Roberts were also summoned to appear before the Chief Commissioner in Shillong. After their hearings, they awaited the final decision at Silchar. The Commissioner took the side of the Superintendent on this issue and decided that the *bawis* were not actually slaves, but rather members of the chiefs family. Fraser and Cole were also asked to leave Mizoram immediately.
2. **Maubuang Chief Khawvelthanga** - Khawvelthanga was the first convert among the Mizo chiefs. Right from his conversion, he

strongly felt that the system of keeping *bawis* was in contradiction with his Christian beliefs. He had started liberating his *bawis* even before Fraser came as a missionary to Mizoram. He freed the 5 families he had inherited from his forefathers in the following years: a) Dengruma and family-1903; b) Rokawia-1904; c) Vawmthanga-1907; d) Vungkawnga-1909 and e) Kawkhama-1909. The other chiefs and the Superintendent could not tolerate Khawvelthanga's actions and he was summoned by Supt. Cole to clarify his position. However, the Superintendent could find no fault when he appeared before him along with Pu Hmara and Tualhawma.

When King Edward VII died in 1910, all the chiefs were ordered to light fires on the highest hill in their respective villages as a sign of respect and mourning. Khawvelthanga, for reasons unknown, did not light a fire and a complaint was made against him on this charge. Taking this opportunity, the Superintendent confiscated his best arms and he was also imprisoned. The general population, however, strongly believed that such drastic measures were taken only because he sided with Fraser on the *Bawi* issue. Awithangpa, a well-known Mizo composer, even composed a song on the occasion in favour of their chief Khawvelthanga.

3. **The Debate in the British Parliament** : At this juncture, Fraser decided to personally pursue the matter and raised the issue in the British Parliament through his friend John Gardine, Member of Parliament. The subject of "Semi-Slavery in Assam-India" was thus debated in the House of Commons during the period between July 11 and August 3, 1914. Watkin Roberts' father, a Member of Parliament from Caernarfon and his brother, a lawyer in the King's Council of Law were greatly instrumental in directing the course of these debates. Another major role player was Fraser's good friend, Rt. Hon. D.Llyod George, Chancellor of the Exchequer. Fraser collected photographs of the *bawis* and other relevant materials as evidence and also took to Britain R.Dala, one of his staunch supporters on the issue. The issue of the *Bawi* system had already reached the British Privy Council in 1910. Moreover, the British Government had banned slave trade in 1807 and the "Emancipation of Slave Act" had also been passed in 1833. When it was presented in Parliament that the slave system was still practiced rampantly in Mizoram, there was complete silence in the House. When the photographs of the chiefs, their *bawis* and the names of the forty Fraser had already liberated were shown, there was loud applause.

On the pronouncement of emancipation of slaves in Mizoram, as it already was in the rest of the British Empire, there was loud applause and a general shout of appreciation that rocked the House.

Effects of the Liberation of Slaves

1. Rejoicing in the Church- The news of the slave liberation was greeted with much rejoicing by the general population, and more so by the Church in Mizoram. The slaves rejoiced over the fact that they no longer needed their masters' consent and could now freely convert to Christianity on their own accord. Mizo students studying in Shillong were overwhelmed and inspired by the good news of the liberation of the slaves. One senior student, Pu Thangthura (1883-1957) was greatly touched and through the spontaneous inspiration of the Holy Spirit, composed a truly great hymn at Down Hostel where he was staying. This hymn continues to have a deep meaning for the Mizo Christians. It was with tears in his eyes that he wrote the following lines.¹⁹

*We praise thee our Lord in the highest,
Thou all-powerful and Living God,
Friend to the helpless, slaves and sinners.
Lord of orphans, the downtrodden and poor,
Thou O Lord answer all our prayers,
Thou provides/ the needs of Thy people,
And listen to their cries of woe,
And reward seekers of the truth and doers of good deeds.*

2. **Expulsion of Fraser and Cole** - Following their appearance before the Chief Commissioner in 1910, it was thought best that both Fraser and the Superintendent, H.W.G.Cole leave Mizoram. Cole was transferred to Manipur as a Political Agent. Fraser returned to India as a missionary to the tea gardens of Lakhimpur in North Assam. However, he took seriously ill soon after and had to be taken back to Britain. He died in Blaenau Ffestiniog on December 29, 1919. Mrs. Fraser retired to Shillong and found bits of work to support herself. Many Mizo boys visited her there and called her 'Mother'. Rev. Dr. Zairema was among those who would visit her.

Government's Actions following the Order to free Slaves : Even after the order to free slaves was announced, the actual liberation took a much longer time to be successfully implemented. There were many

among the chiefs who actively complied with the order but there were still others who refused to comply immediately. Moreover, there were also a few among the slaves who refused to leave the service of their masters. The Superintendent had to continue issuing instructions and orders to this effect till 1914. Almost every month in 1914, the *Mizo jeh Vai Chanchinbu* (a monthly journal issued by the Government) carried further instructions on the issue. A sample of such a notification is hereby produced :

FOR THE INFORMATION OF ALL THE MIZO PEOPLE

1. From now on, everyone is discouraged from practicing the 'bawi' system.
2. 'Bawi-man'(the ransom for liberation) will (1) hereby be considered not as a price for liberation of the bawis but as compensation for the keep of such bawis.
3. The said 'Bawi-man' (2) is to be strictly considered as the above and is to be paid only in the case of proven expenditure over the persons concerned. If no expenditure has been so incurred, the said 'Bawi-man' is not to be claimed.
4. The above clauses- (1) and (2) shall in no way change the amount to be paid as compensation to former masters. Notwithstanding the number of bawis, if such persons belong to a family, the amount to be paid will remain as Rs.40/-(forty) and not more.
5. No chief can, from now on, reclaim any slave previously subservient to him. He can, however, claim compensation on reporting the case to the authorities. Any Bawi who no longer wants to reside in the chief 's household can leave on his own accord and no chief will be allowed to retain such bawis,. He is, however, allowed to claim compensation. A bawi may also report himself to the authorities and express his desire to be liberated from their master's control whereby an order to that effect will be given to him.
6. Any other matters relating to bawis shall also be considered in accordance with the customary laws without any discrimination across the social divisions.

Aijal
The 18" March 1914

J.Hezlett
Bawrhsap, Superintendent,
Lushai Hills.

Conclusion

Prompted by a total confidence in the power of the Gospel, Dr. Fraser worked with complete devotion towards the liberation of *bawis* and his efforts in steering the Mizo social life towards progress will forever be remembered. He clearly went beyond the call of duty in his efforts to realize his dream of setting the Mizo people free. So zealous was he, in fact, that he even clashed with the Mission's parent organization in Wales and was consequently expelled from Mizoram. This did not, however, dampen his fervor for preaching the Gospel and he returned as a missionary to Assam soon after his expulsion. Through his work and his personal life, he showed how the Gospel always sought to uplift the poor and the marginalized. The Mizo people understood Dr. Fraser's great love for them and to show their appreciation, they erected an inscription in brass, which was for a long time mounted on the pulpit at Mission Veng Church. This brass plate was specially ordered from London and the inscription reads :

IN LOVING MEMORY OF
THE REVD PETER FRASER, M.D.
("The Beloved Physician")

Who served the Lushais with untiring
Zeal and Devotion to their Physical,
Social and Spiritual Welfare
From 1908-1912

THIS TABLET IS ERECTED TO THE GLORY OF
GOD
BY LUSHAI CHRISTIANS AND FRIENDS.

A special service was conducted at Mission Veng Church to place the tablet in the church's pulpit. Many people gathered to pay their respects and Pu Zosaphluia, (Rev. D.E. Jones) senior missionary, solemnly mounted it on to its place with a prayer on March 4, 1926.

Notes and References

1. J.M. Llyod: *History of the Church in Mizoram*. Synod Publication Board, Aizawl, 1991, p. 125
2. *Ibid.*
3. J.M. Llyod : *On Every High Hill*. Synod Publication Board. 1984, p.38

4. K.Thanzauva: *Reports of the Foreign Mission of the Presbyterian church of Wales on Mizoram 1894-1957*. Synod Literature and Publication Board, Aizawl, 1997 p.41 (in Short Reports)
5. J.M.Llyod: *op. cit.* p.125.
6. J.V. Hluna: *Welsh Missionary le Chanchin*. Synod Literature & Publication Board, Aizawl, 1993, p.82
7. J.M.Lyod : *op. cit.* p. 126
8. J.V. Hluna: *op. cit.* p.83
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid* p. 84
11. *Ibid.*
12. The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (Luke 4: 18-19, NIV)
13. K.Thanzauva: *Reports* p. 52
14. C.Vanlallawma: *Mizo Hnam Puipate*. 1994, p. 42
15. J. M. Llyod: *op cit.* p.138
16. J.V.Hluna: *op. cit.* p.86 (collected from 'Kristian Tlangau', a monthly organ of the Welsh Calvinistic Mission, Aizawl, Mizoram).
17. Laldena: *Christian Missions And Colonialism*. Vendrame Institute, Shillong 1998, p.45
18. J.V.Hluna: *op. cit.*, pp. 86-89 (collected from various issues of *Mizo leh Vai Chanchin*', a monthly magazine published in Mizo by the Superintendent of Lushai Hills between 1903-1940).
19. *Kristian Hla Bu* (Mizo Christian Hymnal), Synod Literature & Publication Board, Aizawl, Mizoram. 18th Edition 2004, No. 434.