

# **Ideology and Ethnic Politics : A Study of Autonomy Movement in Mizoram**

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Ethnic upsurge in India has become an endemic syndrome that often compels an optimist to doubt the very existence of India as a nation-State. Undoubtedly, ethnic strife has strained our democratic political process, perpetuating a state of siege within. India is a plural society and our bane has been multi-ethnicity-. Societies are very complex eco-systems formed by the encapsulation of distinct ethnic groups within a territory. The induction of conflict at political, social, economic spheres along with the ethnic identity, are instrumental for separatist or autonomy movements. The present paper attempts to analyse some of these factors as ideological configurations in the context of autonomy movements in the North-East India with reference to the Mizo autonomy movement.

## **I**

Autonomy movements in North-East India have their genesis in history that dated back to the British subjugation of the hill tribes of North-East India. From the very beginning, the British rulers, for obvious reasons, kept these

areas either fully or partially excluded, thus maintaining the isolationist character of the hill people. "The hill areas in course of time witnessed an emergence of new elite-structures in the form of political organisations symbolising growing politicisation. These were India Durbar formed in 1900, the Khasi National Durbar in 1923, The Khasi States Federation in 1934, the Naga club in 1918, the Naga Hills District Council in 1915 which changed its name to Naga National Council in 1946, the Mizo Union in 1946 and the United Mizo Freedom Organization in 1947".<sup>1</sup> It was in the year 1946, that the Naga autonomy movement assumed significance under the leadership of Zapu Phizo.

It was Zapu Phizo, the archetypal rebel, baptised in the revolutionary nationalism of Burmese leader Aung Sang, during his stay in Rangoon advocated the clamorous "ethnic philosophy" that was going to engulf the whole of North-East India in a few decades. Conceived in tribal wisdom, Phizo's ethnic philosophy was terse and convincing. He declared : "Nagas are not Indians as Indians are not Nagas".<sup>2</sup> The Nagas insisted on the fundamental issue of ethnic difference from the very beginning. In the memorandum to the Simon Commission, pleading for autonomy, the members of the Naga Club marshalled historical, social, economic and political reasons in justifying their demands. On July 16, 1947, a month prior to India's achievement of freedom, Phizo handed over a letter to no less a person than Mahatma Gandhi justifying the separate identities of the Nagas and thereby claimed independence. This letter was drafted by the famous ideologue, Theyieu Sakhire, who wrote :

Truely we are a 'peculiar' people .....We talk freely, live freely and often fight freely. We have no inhibitions of any kind. Wild? Yes but free !

In these lines, Sakhire had, indeed, simplified Rousseau's ideology of freedom and contradicted Hobbes' dictum that life is "nasty, brutish and short". For Sakhire, life is endurable under any condition provided freedom is absolute. For him in his cherished Nagaland : "There is order in chaos, (where) law

is freedom". The call for freedom was grounded on a carefully planned ethnic ideology that Phizo put forward :

The Naga people belong to the Mongolian stock, and for fifty-two generations of their remembered history, they have lived according to their own proud, simple and utterly independent way of life ..... (Historically, Nagaland has no connection whatever with India, and even the part of Nagaland which for a time came under the British administration was kept separate from India)

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Phizo struck at the very ethnic uniqueness of his people. The ethnic denomination of the Nagas for Phizo was not simply a tribe's name; it embodies in fact, the socio-cultural and ethnic character of the people as different from the so-called Indians. Nirmal Nibedon points out that Phizo's ethnic philosophy was strikingly similar to one that was being embellished near the Thai-Burma border by Bo Mya, the chief of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). He sees the phenomenon of ethnic upsurge in the yellow belt starting from the Brahmaputra valley down to Cambodia as an international phenomenon having complex ramifications. However, the rising ethnic militancy in North-East India was galvanised by the spread of education and Christianity.

The so-called outsiders were called as *Via* in Mizoram, *Mayang* in Manipur, *Tepriemia* in Nagaland and *Dakhars* in Meghalaya. Behind these usage cutting across the boundaries of many ethnic groups, the message was clear that the inner-group viewed the outer-group as unwanted in their territories. Thus, the different autonomy movements in North-East India signaled an ominous beginning. The end of that beginning unfortunately is no where in sight. Within a short span of time, the whole of North-East India turned into a guerilla country.

The Mizo autonomy movement, which started after two decades of the Naga movement, was ideologically identical. The MNF exploited the frustration and disillusionment of the Mizo people against the Government of Assam. On the eve of

India's independence, the Mizo leaders were divided whether to go with Burma or to remain with India. Finally, they stayed with India. Economic backwardness coupled with the apathy of the Assam Government to the problems of the Mizos prepared the ground for the MNF's autonomy movement. Phizo's ethnic philosophy came handy and the failure of the Assam Government to manage the infamous Mautam or famine of 1959, added fuel to fire and gave birth to the Mizo National Front; a voluntary organization, under the leadership of Laldenga. The MNF's declaration of freedom echoed the ethnic philosophy already authored by Sakhire and Phizo.

In the course of human history it becomes inevitably necessary for mankind to assume their social, economic, political status to which the land of the Nature and Nature's God entitles them. .... The Mizo created and moulded into a nation and nurtured as such, by Nature's God have been intolerably dominated by the people of India, in contravention of the law of Nature.<sup>5</sup>

The allusion to "the Mizo" created and moulded into a nation underlines the ethnic identity of the Mizos in terms of race, language, culture and religions. Motivated by the political and ethnic aspirations, Mizo National Front resorted to armed struggle against Government of India in 1966.

## II

(Violent ethnic upsurges like the Naga or Mizo autonomy movements pose greatest challenge to the unity and integrity of the Indian nation.) India as a multi-ethnic conglomerate faces the problem of control over these separatist tendencies. It is obvious that in a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural India, smaller groups resent the domination of stronger communities or groups. The accusation of the M.N.F. that the Mizo people are being "intolerably dominated by the people of India" justified the claim. (However, the so-called ethnic identity groups under the Mizo or Naga generic identities is self-contradictory. Because the Mizo or Naga

generic classifications constitute many major and minor tribal groups having significant linguistic, cultural and social differences. Had these autonomy movements borne fruit, nobody knows what would have been the future of the Mizo or Naga country. Because the resentment of smaller groups against the dominant groups under the same generic tribal classification is natural, once the war is fought on ethnic lines. In this context the so-called Hmar people's resentment against the dominant Lushai clan in Mizoram is a point in reference. The multi-faceted character of the ethnic strife in North-East India, from a comparative perspective, substantiates the point against the uni-faceted identity of the early fraternity within Assam on the language issue. The Mizos had strongly resented the imposition of Assamese language before the ethnic struggle could take shape.

Sociologists view ethnic struggle in our country as inter-elite conflict. The fundamental problem of maintaining the unity of a plural society consists in reaching a *modus vivendi* among the ruling elites at the national, State and ethnic levels. In fact, the failure of adjustment and understanding between the ruling elites at the State level and the ethnic elites at the group level contributes to the ethnic upsurge in most cases. On most occasions, frustration at group level elite to wrestle power and status lead to mass mobilisation. This happened clearly in the case of the Mizos as they were disillusioned and frustrated to fulfil their aspirations at different levels under the Assamese leadership. Short-sightedness of the State level elites allowed the frustration of the local elites to percolate down to the grassroot level. This accounted for the fragmentation of the North-East political process leading to autonomous movements resulting in district size States.

Apart from the inter-elite conflict, observers of the ethnic strife in North-East India feel that lack of assimilation of the isolated tribal groups in this region with the mainstream population of India is the prime cause for ethnic strife. The very ideology of 'assimilation' is subject to debate.

'Assimilation' as opposed to 'conflict' as theoretical constructs merit discussion here. The so-called 'assimilation' approach, insists on the initiative of the majority community to give up their rigid attitude towards the minority groups and to conciliate with them on the basis of equality and mutual dignity. As this approach necessitates voluntary giving away of one's privileges and domination over other groups, the concept, therefore, lacks radicalism. On the other hand, the conflict approach emphasises assertion of smaller groups of their rights when the change to benefit them is either hindered or does not come smoothly in normal course. Interestingly, Mahatma Gandhi and Vir Sarvakar with their strong ideological differences in politics advocated the 'assimilation' approach. The 'conflict' approach on the other hand, was supported by Jati Rao Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Taking into account the complexities of the Indian society and the traditional antagonistic attitude between majority and minority communities, the 'conflict' approach is preferable. Without entering into any debate here whether one of the two approaches is good or not so good, it is a fact that the 'conflict' approach has benefitted the tribals of North-East India in safeguarding their interest and identities. The 'conflict' approach has its limitations too because it subscribes to violence and hatred as a result the wounds created as such takes longer time to heal.

Evidently, the socio-cultural conflict assuming political overtones in the form of autonomy movement is understandable. Under normal circumstances, these movements develop segregationist attitudes, as a bargaining tactic and then use the bargaining tactic as a political goal.

### III

The 'conflict' approach is good so far as it does not affect the political status of a country. In a democratic set-up, the socio-political and economic aspirations or small or big groups have to be safeguarded. Functional autonomy under a single national identity favours progressive assimilation of

dissimilar groups without sacrificing their identifies. Politically, in North-East India, the British policy of total and partial exclusion augmented the isolationist character of the ethnic groups. Further, the British policy of 'indirect rule' also contributed in isolating the masses from the administration. 'Indirect rule' essentially consists of utilising the conquered ruling classes as agents of colonial administration. The British for example, did not interfere in the prevalent caste system in India, as much as they did not interfere in the social life of the tribes of North-East India, but they effectively could rule over the people through a system of native rajas, nawabs, zamindars and chieftains. The so-called ruling class had double advantage both as protectors of their own interests as well as being spokesmen for their people. Before the MNF movement took roots, the Mizo Union had already demanded the abolition of the system of chieftainship. At the level of the masses, the resentment against the local chiefs and local administration manifested itself as an accumulated grievance against the national Government. The MNF's popularity originated in adopting the popular disenchantment against the Mizo Union administered district council, then capitalising on the same against the Government of Assam, culminating in secessionist struggle against the Government of India.

(Apart from the political factor, economic backwardness is the single most important factor that has contributed to the shaping of autonomy movements in North-East India, particularly the Mizo autonomy movement.) The whole of North-East India has been a late starter so far as processes of economic development and modernisation are concerned. The Britishers by keeping Mizoram as an excluded area, did not favour any real economic development of the area. The points regarding the fear of the local people of facing tougher and unequal competition because of the outsiders' entry and slow pace of development have been well made. The newly emerging educated young people were not willing to serve outside their own areas and the district level administration

could not generate enough jobs to fulfil their needs. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar cautioned members of the Constituent Assembly, on the question of economic inequality. He said :

In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else, those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this Assembly has so labouriously built up.<sup>6</sup>

Had the leaders of free India taken note of Dr. Ambedkar's warning, separatist movements in case of many ethnic groups might have been avoided. The MNF movement is a clear case of economic frustration. Traditionally, a self-reliant agricultural community rendered helpless at the face of the famine without stirring enough sympathy at the level of the state government. The situation was almost parallel to the famine of 1942 in Bengal and prior to that, the famine of Orissa, when the British Government did not bother to come forward to help the masses. In a democratic country, each ethnic group big or small, wants an accessible and understanding government to rise to the occasion. For the economic problems and for various other reasons, the State-level leadership and national leadership fail to win the trust of the tribal people of North-East India. On the face of the autonomy movement, mutual mistrust and suspicion complicated the whole issue.

#### IV

The phenomenon of separatist movements raises a vital question : is India as a nation-state going to wither away? Because Indian nationalism was never before so much under pressure as it is today. B.K.Roy Burman views nationality (meaning at ethnic level) as a crystallisation of the symbols of identity, historical prerogative in respect of resources, but not inherent tendency or willingness to antagonise State power. Therefore, according to him, a nation-society may manifest the features of ethnicity as a stepping-stone towards

universal humanity.<sup>7</sup> There is no contradiction between the broader Indian national identity and the sub-national identities. Without striving for independent power, the proto-national entities are also likely to represent a fusion of clan and status group in a nation State perspective, where the nation State is a part of a world system based on profit maximisation and featured by perpetuation and accentuation of disparities.<sup>8</sup>

The Indian Constitution is a novel document and within its framework, all groups small or big can look forward to fulfilling the socio-political and economic aspirations. The Sixth Schedule is a well planned incorporation in the Constitution. Further, 'secularism' as the basis of our Constitution provides for religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence. Rajiv Gandhi's pronouncement on the inauguration of the State of Mizoram in 1986 vindicates our faith in the Indian Constitution:

We are able now to look ahead to economic development because peace has come, insurgency has ended. It has not come by accident, it has come with the very Constitution that we have been working with. It shows the strength of our Constitution and the strength of our democratic system. It allows every community, human rights, civic rights and political rights. It guarantees the developments of each culture, of each language, of each religion, of every way of life. It is with this great use of our Constitution that we are able to solve such serious problems to re-establish the political process in Mizoram.

In the case of the Mizo problem, the Constitution of India has shown the way. Solving the Mizo problem through constitutional means, the Government of India has proved that India as a nation-State can survive and would possibly provide solutions to all other ethnic problems. Rajiv Gandhi's words have echoed the very sentiments expressed by Nehru a few decades ago that all the tribal groups of the country will be allowed to develop according to their own genius without any imposition whatsoever from the State.

Even after the historic Mizo Accord, solutions to other ethnic problems in our country elude us. If there is a possibility, as the Mizo Accord has proved why there can be no end to the strife generating "little nationalism" in which the ethnic groups and Government of India are ranged in opposite sides. It needs courage and conviction as demonstrated by the MNF and its leader, the late Laldenga, to see the point. Unfortunately, most of the leaders of the ethnic movements are prisoners of their own making and only see the inverted pyramid without having the will to solve the problem.

The need of the hour is trust and understanding of each others position. Gandhi is still relevant today who was considered by Phizo as our Jesus. In response to Phizo's letter, Gandhi said : "No one can attack their freedom. If, I come there, I will teach you the act of spinning and weaving you grow cotton and yet you import cloth. Learn all the handicrafts. That is the way to peaceful independence. If you use rifles and guns and tanks it is a foolish thing".<sup>10</sup> It was Gandhi's dream that within the Indian nation-State, all groups of various ethnic denominations should prosper on the philosophy of economic self-reliance. Most of the leaders of autonomy movements had failed to see the point. They do not advocate a self-sustaining economic philosophy to their people. Instead they propagates the culture of bloodshed and bullets. It is not always true that the so-called tribal genius does not see the other side of the spectrum in the context of sub-nationalism vis-a-vis Indian nationalism. Rev. Zairema's words sound prophetic in this context. In a letter to Laldenga for putting an end to the strife, the peace warrior wrote:

We admire the courage of your conviction. However, we would like to remind you that India has herself never been one nation. The Telegus are as different from the Punjabis as the Bengalis from the Mizos. Yet, we together, are determined to build one mighty nation. In this process, each of us has a right as well as a responsibility.

Rev. Zairema's words, I believe, carry the conviction of our faith in Indian nation state. Those who do not subscribe to a one nation theory may see a silver lining in this conviction and come forward to build a strong India. We can only secure peace, prosperity and happiness for all, if we choose to follow the words of Rev. Zairema, accepting diverse versions of freedom and rationality. For this, we have to regenerate our understanding, consciousness, releasing in the process new agenda, generating a new language of both self-understanding and social understanding for putting the lid on all our problems through Constitutional means.

### Notes

1. Mohan Lal Sharma, "Ethnicity and Regionalism in North-East India - Problems of Multiple Identities and Inter-Elite Conflicts " in A.D. Pant and Shiva K.Gupta edited *Multi Ethnicity and National Integration*, (Allahabad : Vohra publishers, 1985)p. 162
2. Quoted from Nirmal Nibedon's *North-East India : The Ethnic Explosion*. (New Delhi : Lancer, 1981)
3. *Ibid*, p. 19.
4. *Ibid*, p. 22.
5. Quoted from John Vanlal Hluna's *Church and Political Upheaval in Mizoram*, (Aizawl : Synod Press, 1985) p. 183.
6. The quotation is part of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's speech on the occasion of moving the final reading of the Constitution in the Constituent Assembly of India, in November 29, 1949.
7. B.K.Roy Burman, "Ethnic Group, Ethnicity, Nationality, Infra and Proto-National Movements", in *Multi-Ethnicity and National Integration* pp. 131-133.
8. *Ibid*.
9. *Mizoram State*, published by DIPR & T. Govt. of Mizoram, Aizawl, 1986, p.11.
10. *North-East India : The Ethnic Explosion* p. 24.
11. *Ibid* p.22.