

Ropuiliani : Her Role in the Freedom Struggle in Mizoram

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There were a number of Chiefs and Chieftainesses famous for their active participation in the struggle against the advent of the British in Mizoram. Pi Ropuiliani was one such personality. Like many chiefs she sacrificed her own life for the good cause of the Mizos in general and of her own men whom she served and governed them in particular. By bravery and gallantry she outwitted many chiefs in the resistance against the British. Provoked and hardened by the ruthless killing of her own sons and relatives the occasions which she witnessed herself Ropuiliani stood on the way to the British by forming a formidable opposition. She did not lack qualities which man had. She was not an ordinary woman by wit and tactic. She tried to preserve with all cause the sanctity of her position which she inherited from her husband, Vandula. She asserted her patriotism by relentlessly formenting all her efforts and abilities in dislodging the English in their attempts to suppress the chiefs and their subjects.

Ropuiliani

Pi Ropuiliani, born in 1806, was a daughter of the great chief Lalsavunga, ruler of Aizawl. Her brothers -Vanhnuailiana, Lal-phunga and Thawmvunga were all chiefs with several tributories of their descendants. Her husband, Vandula, son of Thutpawrha, was the grandson of Rolura Sailo, the famous Haulawng chief who one time was ruler of the whole southern Mizoram. All five brothers including him were chiefs among whom, Vandula was the most powerful ruler.¹

Pi Ropuiliani inherited a feeling of hatred for the British from her husband Vandula and her father Lalsavunga. Both the father and the husband were the old enemies of the British.² Before he died, Vandula, the husband, had opposed the British in their attempts to suppress the Mizos. Vanhnuailiana, brother of Ropuiliani, too, was one of the chiefs against whom the Cachar column of the Lushai Expedition of 1871-72 was directed.³ It is, therefore, strongly believed that Ropuiliani should have stored enough grounds to have an anti-British feeling.

Before he died, Vandula was the head of all the Haulawng chiefs. Not only that he was a recognised leader among the Haulawng chiefs, he also extended his influences upon the Shendus or Lakhers. Before applying a strong armed policy against Vandula the British had tried hard to induce him, but in vain. They could not persuade him to come to their side even through his own brother Seipua

who was an ally of the British. Failing to convince him the British considered Vandula an enemy. When Ropulliani assumed the sovereign authority she was deeply influenced by the legacy left by her late husband towards the British. The attitude of the British towards her and her allies also remained unchanged. In the same manner, Ropulliani also adopted the most stringent and bitter policy towards the British.

Pi Ropulliani succeeded her husband at the latter's death in 1889 at Denlung. When she assumed power she became a danger to the British for their future plans. She had an absolute command over all the descendants of her late husband. This was imperative for the fact that after Vandula the Haulawng chiefs were without any able ruler. They needed leader badly in their resistance against the advent of the British. It was their first duty to accord recognition to her leadership without any hindrance. Therefore, the future relations between her leadership and the British solely depended upon her. She had to choose between the two. In the first place, she should follow the policy adopted by her late husband, and in the second place, she had to follow a policy of reconciliation deviating from the legacy of her husband. In the end, she chose the former one which she adhered to it till her death. Now, confrontation with the British became her sole aim in life. An attempt has been made in this paper to assess the role of Ropulliani who offered a stiff and intense resistance to the British whose supremacy was recognised over the whole of Mizoram at last.

Her Role

To assess the role played by Ropulliani in her conflict with the British we must examine the various circumstances in which she became involved with the British. As a confrontationist and anti-imperialist, Ropulliani did not give in herself to the British as a friend and as collaborator with any slightest tinge. There was not a single event or incident in which Ropulliani was directly involved but she was involved in all the incidents for which successive operations were sent for she controlled the situation.

The first incident for which a military expedition of 1889 was despatched took place near Rangamati in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. This event took place on 3rd Feb 1889 in which Lt. J. F. Steward and his party were killed. It was Hausata who killed them. The other two chiefs Dokola and Vantura were also directly involved. The incident provoked the English and an expedition was sent in 1889. The despatch was inevitable for the fact that it was the duty of the British to protect the men living within their declared boundary, and not to avenge the murderers would be a breach of faith.⁴ Murray, who was one of the team members, declared the British policy in the strongest term and says: "Every white man is held to be a Chief. . . ."⁵ The Government of Bengal was determined to take actions against the chiefs whom they considered were responsible for the murder.

In fact, the Government identified the responsible chiefs but Laltkuama, the youngest son of Ropulliani, ruler of Vaitin village,

was also accused as having hands behind the murder by harbouring one of the killers.⁶ Later through investigation, it was found out that Lalthuama had certain complicity with the murder of Lt. Steward. Actually, the Government had suspected the loyalty of Lalthuama and Ropuliani for quite some time. In another incident, in which the buglar was murdered, Lalthuama, encouraged by his mother, was again suspected as giving guides to the Shendus who killed a buglar.⁷ This was made known to the British by Seipua, brother of Vandula. He, however, said that the men supplied by Lalthuama were taken by force.⁸

The military operation was reinforced by despatching another detachment popularly known as the Chin-Lushai expedition of 1889-90. This time it was done in a bigger scale. The operation was destined to accomplish the tasks assigned to the previous one and to take control of the whole situation caused by the incidents that were taking place during the intervening period. In short, the expedition achieved its objects by bringing the trio who killed Steward and his party to book.⁹ In spite of its achievements, the operations of 1889-90 were extended with a view to completing the punishment of the faiding villages, subduing the chiefs who still put up resistance under the leadership of Ropuliani or the Haulawngs, confirming the authority of the British Government over the tribes to the east who were still unsubdued, and opening up of communication across the hills to the Burma side. As a part of operations permanent posts were established at Fort Tregear (South Vaalaphai) and at Lungleh (Lunglei) and a Political Officer was appointed at Lunglei. During the winter of 1890-91 an additional post was built at Lalthuama's village.¹⁰ with a view to subduing him and his mother Ropuliani along with other chiefs who were also making troubles to the British through the influence of Ropuliani. The operations thus intimidated them and the situation became calm for a while.

As a result, the year 1890 was quiet. No untoward incident took place. However, the lull which followed was short lived. The years of 1891 and of 1892 were marked by fresh outbreaks across the Hills. The 1891-1892 rising was partly political, the trouble in the South arose as a result of injudicious action on the part of Murray who paid a visit to Zahapa's village. Murray and his party did not anticipate that any opposition would be offered to them. The party was attacked and they had to run for their lives.¹¹ A punitive expedition was hurriedly organised but failed to capture the chief. But the operations were on to bring all the chiefs to a submission who had refused to do so and earlier collaborators who had an open hostility with the British.¹² Captain Hutchinson's military detachment made a considerable headway in dealing with the rebel chiefs. Besides the Haulawng chiefs, Dokila who had hands in the murder of L. Steward was captured and he was sentenced to transportation for life in the Andaman Island and died there.¹³ Again, this abated the situation for a while.

The economic grievances of the people in general and the chiefs in particular were responsible for the outbreaks in 1892. The

establishment of new posts at Lunglei and at Fort Tregar and an additional temporary post at Lalthuama's village was giving the chiefs an extra burden for they had to supply labour at the expense of their subjects. This was an act of interference on the part of the British to the internal affairs of the chiefs. Whether the chief was loyal or disloyal to the British he had to render labour and to give tribute. Labourers should go from villages 8 or 9 days' Journey in return for a reasonable rate of pay. This system was not acceptable to the people as a whole and it was not consonant with their custom also. W. B. Oldham, the Commissioner of the Chittagong Hill Tracts was of the view that the system enforced in 1892 in the south was the sole cause of the troubles in the last four years. According to him it was a worthless kind with which the Government was interfered with.¹⁴ The system in 1892 cost Bengal Government alone over 3 lakhs and over 2 lakhs in 1893. Oldham insisted that the continuation of the system would retard the objects the British Government had in view including pacification and the creation of labour supply system.

It appears that the rising of 1892 was the creation of the British themselves. Though outwardly situations seemed quiet but the Government was not hopeful of any rapid and peaceful settlement with Lalthuama and his mother because, besides the economic restraints as a result of impressed labour and tribute, as pointed out earlier, their clans were ruthlessly victimised during the rising itself. Hardened at heart by her experiences, Ropuiliani inflicted a stiff resistance to the British inspite of her alleged age. Again, when all the other chiefs of his clan surrendered and agreed the British terms Lalthuama was the only chief left to continue his father's policy towards the British. But he was under complete control of his mother Ropuiliani. She asserted her influence upon him and acted as a remote control. She directed Lalthuama in his attempts to offend the British. In the eyes of the British therefore, Ropuiliani and her son, Lalthuama, must equally share the responsibility for all the untoward incidents to the British. They charge both Ropuiliani and Lalthuama as problem chiefs for their clandestine rôle in inciting the other chiefs of their own clan to ignite tension between them and the chiefs. To make the situation worse, the British Government realised later that in all the activities of Lalthuama against the British, the involvement of his mother, Ropuiliani was unearthed. To their great dismay, Lalthuama was married to a daughter of Lianphunga, Ropuiliani's uncle who was the enemy of the British.¹⁵ The British highly considered the marriage as a plot to distabilise the whole situation.

Ever since the defeat of southern chiefs in their Civil War with the northern chiefs in 1849-1856 (Chhim leh Hmar Indo) the attitude of the southern chiefs towards the northern chiefs was not good. Ropuiliani, being a daughter of a northern chief, was disliked by many southern chiefs and wanted the British to capture and imprison her.¹⁶ The British interpreter, Satinkhara, a Tuikuk by tribe, the former slave of the Mizos freed by the British force was hated by Ropuiliani. To her, such slaves have nothing to

say to her. And at her instance, a hardy man Khawncheuva, took him away and killed him ¹⁷ This incident estranged her relations with the British all the more. On hearing so, Captain Shakespear with Messrs Pugh and Hutchinson led a punitive expedition team of 80 rifles against Lalthuama and his mother in August 1893 at the height of the rainy season. While countering the hostility Sheakespear was besieged at Chhipphir of Vansaaga's village. But he was able to hold out only through the help of Lallvuva Sailo, a Bualpui chief and one interpreter, Dara Ralte ¹⁸ whom his own people called to be traitors. Shakespear demanded fines consisting of 30 guns, one gyal, 10 pigs, 10 goats, 20 fowls and 100 mounds of rice which was to be produced to Mat river Camp. ¹⁹ Lalthuama and his mother Ropuilliani strongly objected to comply with the British demands. Some of the northern chiefs came into their support at their request and prepared for war against the British to drive them out from the land. They were the last to be subdued. The incident took place when some coolies and an interpreter were attacked. The authorities took immediate action with a view to containing the revolt within the south.

To suppress the rising, an expedition was despatched under Capt. Shakespear. Before the movement was mobilised C. Davis, the Political Officer, North Lushai Hills was also consulted. The despatch consisted of more than 550 troops and more than 400 military police. It was done jointly with the Northern Column. The mission was intensely directed against Lalthuama and his mother Ropuilliani under whose leadership clandestine atrocities were actively organised. The Government this time was determined to crush the powers of the chiefs who were still unsubdued.

The forces approached Ropuilliani's village under the darkness of the night to surprise her and her son after crossing the Mat river and at dawn the next day the village was reached while it was still dark. Without any resistance the party captured Ropuilliani and her son Lalthuama. Their subjects were rapidly disarmed. Their weapons were confiscated. ²⁰ With the capture of Ropuilliani and her right-hand man, Lalthuama, the Haulawng chiefs, of Vandula's descendants lost their leaders and they were now without a leader.

The party returned to Lunglei with their seized weapons. Ropuilliani and her son Lalthuama were also taken along with them. They were imprisoned there. But the English did not feel safe to keep them at Lunglei and feared that their presence there might escalate tension in South Lushai Hills. Shakespear, therefore, proposed to keep them outside Mizoram. This was informed to higher authority. ²¹ Accordingly, the Government of Bengal directed the local authority to deport the prisoners to Rangamati, the headquarters of Chittagong Hill Tracts. Thus, the prisoners were deported to Rangamati from Lunglei on 8th April 1894. But Ropuilliani could not survive the shock of the prison life and died on 3rd January 1895 ²² at the age of 86. She was very weak when admitted on 18th April 1894 and her health was deteriorating when she was attacked by dysentery for a few days. This perhaps has-

tened to her end. When she died her dead body was embalmed and brought home and Lalthuama was also released and came home along with the body of his mother and thereby allowing him to settle at his own village. Ropuiliani was buried at Denlung, 2 k.m. from the present Hnalthial town. In the prison, Jail authority treated them as state prisoners and they were guarded with warders, not by Police constables.

Results of the capture

With the capture of Ropuiliani it became easier for the English to subdue the chiefs of lesser importance. The subjects of Ropuiliani and Lalthuama were rapidly disarmed. Messages were despatched to neighbouring villages informing them to surrender their arms. The response was rapid for fear of further intimidation. From Ropuiliani's village alone they extracted 100 guns within a week. In all they collected more than 500 guns including from villages other than Ropuiliani.²³

The general condition of the country was quiet. The people also abandoned the idea of resistance although isolated outbreaks occurred here and there. But to contain such separate sporadic outbreaks a small number of Police was sufficient.

Another significant achievement of the expedition was the capture of Lalhcheuva, son of Rothangpuia, wanted for murder. Another capture which had a significant effect in pacifying the country was that of Vansanga who kept up the spirit of hostility among the Mizos for a long time.

Notes & References

1. Khup Za Thang, Capt. K. A., *Zo Suanh Khan Simna Lai Bu : Genealogy of the Zo (Chin) Race of Burma*, Prague, 1973. The Sailo chiefs of North Lushai Hills were the descendants of Rohnaa and they were known after him or his great son Lallula. Lalsavunga, father of Ropuiliani was one of the great grandsons of Lallula.
Also, Saibuanga, Maj., *Rolura Thlahte Chhuina*, Aizawl, 1985, p. 6. Vandula, husband of Ropuiliani, was a grandson of Rolura after whom the Sailos of South Lushai Hills were descended and known. Sometimes the British writers referred them as Howlong (Haulawng) due to the fact that Rolura ruled at Haulawng when the British came into contact with him first.
2. Suhas Chatterjee, *Mizoram Under the British Rule*, Mittal Publications, Delh, 1895, p. 121.
3. Sir Robert Reid, *The Lushai Hills*, Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl, Reprint 1978, p. 49.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Reid, A. S., *Chin-Lushai Land*, Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl, Reprint 1976, p. 172.
7. Suhas Chatterjee, *op. cit.* p. 122.
8. Reid, A. S., *op. cit.* p. 192.

9. J. Shakespear, "Note on the Lushai Hills, Its inhabitants and Administration since 1888." Dated Manipur, 22nd March 1905. Hereafter referred to as Note on the Lushai Hills.
10. H. J. S. Cotton, "Historical Note on the question of the Jurisdiction of the British Government in the Chittagong and South Lushai Hill Tracts", Darjeeling, the 12th May, 1893.
11. McCall, A. G., *Lushai Chrysalis*, Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl, Reprint, 1977, p. 60.
12. Reid, A. S., *op. cit.* p. 101.
13. J. Shakespear, *Note on the Lushai Hills*.
14. W. B. Oldham, Commissioner of the Chittagong Hill Tracts to H. J. S. Cotton, Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Chittagong, the 24th July, 1895.
15. Reid, A. S., *op. cit.* p. 195.
16. Interview with Pu Chawngkunga, a Mizo Historian.
17. Letter from Lalzidinga Sailo, Ropuiliani's great grandson.
18. McCall, A. G., *op. cit.* p. 61.
19. Reid, A. S., *op. cit.* pp. 173 & 195.
20. Shakespear, L. W., *History of the Assam Rifles*, Firma KLM PVT LTD., Calcutta, Reprint 1977, p. 104.
21. Subhas Chatterjee. *op. cit.*
22. From R. W. Murray, the Superintendent of the Chittagong Jail to the Magistrate of Chittagong, No. 23, Dated Chittagong, the 6th January, 1895.
23. J. Shakespear. *Note on the Lushai Hills*.