



N E PARRY AND MIZO HISTORY

Mrs. Lalrameng K Gangte

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Pachhunga University College, Mizoram,

e-mail : gangterameng@gmail.com

Abstract:The process of annexation of the Mizo or Lushai hills in 1890 by the British brought many officials to the present state of Mizoram who gave accounts of their military operations and in the process described about the culture and society of the Mizos who lived therein. The accounts written continued after the annexation and administration of the hills. These accounts of the British officials throw ample information about the Mizos hitherto unknown before. With special reference to a particular official, N.E.Parry, one of the Superintendents of the Lushai hills, an attempt is made to look at his works in the light of the ideology of colonial historiography prevalent at the time. It is observed here that against the colonial ideology in historiography of criticism of Indian culture and society and legitimising British rule, Parry sought to preserve the culture and traditions of the Mizos to the extent of criticising the missionaries for their western influences. This ideology of Parry was reflected in the two books written by him on the Mizos which made his accounts a reliable and valuable source of Mizo history and Mizo history writing.

Keywords: Mizo, Customs, colonial historiography, missionaries

The Mizos are Tibeto-Burman people who in course of time arrived in the Chin-hills of Burma from Southern China along with other ethnic tribes as a result of population movement. They lived there for centuries and formed themselves into a homogeneous group of varying clans, thus settling down at various places until they inhabit the present Mizoram. The word 'Mizo' is a generic term and as such the different tribes or clans who inhabit the entire perimeter of the present Mizoram and whose culture, traditions, dialects etc. are similar are commonly designated by the term "Mizo". In the pre-colonial Mizo society, each village was independent and ruled by its own chief who was the supreme arbiter in all cases. A very important social institution of the Mizos was the Zawlbuk or 'bachelor's house' where the young boys and men of the village lived and slept there. It served as the educational, cultural and communal centre for the village. It was the epicentre of Mizo society and it trained and moulded the youths into responsible adult members of the society. One of the most valued objectives of the Mizos was the possession of *tlawmngaihna*. Chatterji stated, "*tlawmngaihna* to a Mizo stands for that compelling moral-force which finds expression in self-sacrifice for the service of others"¹. A *tlawmngai* person is ready whatever the occasion demands whether it is collecting firewood in the forest, carrying a sick villager to the hospital or taking less share of food in a hunting expedition etc. In a nutshell, he is altruistic and chivalrous who thinks for the welfare of others before himself. No wonder the reward for the most *tlawmngai* that is drinking *zu* or rice beer in a *tlawmngai* cup was considered as the 'highest' award

in pre-colonial Mizo society. Suffice here to say that the Mizo society was one that was based on chieftainship and a close knit society until the arrival of the British. The year 1890 forms a significant landmark in the history of the Mizos for in that year the British annexed the Mizo land then called the Lushai Hills and established their political domination until independence. Since the annexation various political officers of the British designated as ‘Superintendents’ ruled the Lushai hills. My attempt in this paper is to look at the contributions of the British to Mizo history with special reference to a particular British official, N E Parry.

Though the post-colonial period saw a number of works written by the Mizos and other non-Mizo scholars, the earliest works about the Mizo were written solely by foreigners. The works were written not by historians but by officers who were from both military and administration related with Mizoram regarding the annexation and administration of the area by the British government. The earliest works on the Mizo was written by Tom Herbert Lewin. He wrote three books published at different periods of time. They were ‘*The Hill Tracts of Chittagong and the Dwellers Therein*’ (1869), ‘*Wild Races of South-Eastern India*’ (1870) and ‘*A fly on the Wheel or How I Helped to Govern India*’(1912). Another work on the Mizo written by C.A.Soppitt was ‘*A short Account of the Kuki-Lushai tribes on the North-eastern frontier with an Outline Grammer of the Rangkhoh-Lushai language and A Comparison of Lushai with other Dialects*’(1893).These earliest works gave ample information about the Mizo which were hitherto unknown to the outsiders. Another type of writing comes from “military officers who gave detailed accounts of military operations in what were referred to as the Chin-Lushai Hills”². These include R.G.Woodthorpe’s ‘*The Lushai Expedition, 1871-72*’ (1872), A.S.Reid’s ‘*Chin-Lushai Land: Including a Description of the Various Expeditions into the Chin- Lushai Hills and the Final Annexation of the Country, with Maps and Illustrations*’(1893), and L.W.Shakespear’s ‘*History of the Assam Rifles*’(1929). The British made concerted efforts to bring the Chin Hills of Burma and the North and South Lushai hill districts into one single unit administratively and two books were published in this regard. These two books were Bertram S.Carey and H.N.Tuck’s ‘*The Chin Hills: A History of the people, Our Dealings with Them, Their Customs and Manners, and a Gazetteer of their Country*’, Vol.1 (1896, reprinted 1976) and John Shakespear’s ‘*The Lushei Kuki Clans*’ Parts I and II (1912). William Shaw’s ‘*Notes on the Thadou Kukis*’ (1919) and G.A.Grierson’s historic work ‘*Linguistic Survey of India*’,III, 3 (1904) were rather anthropological works depicting the nature of Mizo society and culture when the Lushai Hills was beginning to come under the British administration³.

My attempt in this paper is to look at the subsequent writer during the period who contributed a great deal to Mizo history (writing). N.E.Parry was an I.C.S who worked as the Superintendent of the Lushai Hills from 1924 to 1928. Though he didn’t stay long in the Lushai Hills, he left an indelible mark with the publication of his two important books ‘*A monograph on Lushai Customs and Ceremonies*’ (1928) and ‘*The Lakhers*’(1932). Earlier he had also written ‘*Mizo Dan*’ which was a mizo version of ‘*Monograph*’ in 1927⁴. ‘*Monograph*’ was written as ‘an attempt to record

the customs by which Lushais were governed in their daily lives and according to which cases are decided by the chiefs and courts'⁵. As the Superintendent of the then Lushai Hills, Parry found it difficult in 'trying cases to ascertain the correct custom'⁶. In consultation with 56 chiefs of that time, the publication of this important book was made thereby the first written record of the Mizo customs emerged. It is reliable in that it was written after consultation with many Chiefs who were the arbiter of Mizo laws and customs of the time. It also significantly changed the perception of the Mizo to the outside world. The other publication of his book '*The Lakhers*' was about a detailed study of the history and culture of the Maras. The Maras were included among the many clans of Mizo but they were called 'Lakher' by the Lushais. The Lakhers or Maras inhabited the south eastern part of Mizoram. It was Parry's period of Superintendency that the Lakher area was included in Mizoram⁷. Parry gives deep anthropological insights into the life and culture of the Maras. This work is important in that it was the first work which gives detail accounts of the Maras. It also includes a glossary of vernacular terms and folklore stories pertaining to the Lakhers.

Parry's work being written during the colonial period, it would be pertinent to look at the colonial ideology in historiography in India and see Parry's work in this light. When we talk of the term 'Colonial Historiography' it refers to both "the history of the colonial countries" and at the same time it also refers to the "works which were influenced by colonial ideology of domination"⁸. Most historians write about the colonial historiography in the latter sense. The ideology embedded in Colonial historiography was influenced to a great extent through the writings of British historians like James Mills, Mountstuart Elphinstone, Vincent Smith etc. These works were written at a time when Britain gained ascendancy as a paramount power dominating many countries whom they considered as backward including India. This British attitude of domination was reflected in their writings. At the same time, Indian society and culture was considered as backward and stagnant and needed British rule to lead the way of progress to a higher level. The dominant ideology, therefore, was a critical 'orientalist' representation of India and at the same time advocating the idea that the modern western civilization was superior. Thus we find that "Colonial historiography was part of an ideological effort to appropriate history as a means of establishing cultural hegemony and legitimising British rule over India"⁹. In the writings of the Mizo society, this trend is also visible especially by those who worked on the impact of Christianity upon the society. With missionary expansion as their motive, the Mizos were looked upon as 'objects of missionary work'¹⁰. They described the moral and religious life of the people in such a way that they could gain support in bringing about what they thought would be a better change in their culture and society.

Against the ideology mentioned above, if one looks at the writings of Parry, he rather tried to preserve the Mizo culture in its original condition without any changes affected by western influences. Just as he was deeply interested in Mizo culture, he was equally interested in preserving it. A look at his writings on some aspects of Mizo society will bear testimony to this.

Zawlbuk: Zawlbuk (bachelor's dormitory), the most important social institution among the different clans of the Mizo, except for the Mara clan, was the epicentre of the Mizo society which moulded the youths into responsible adult members of the society¹¹. Parry considered Zawlbuk to be a most useful institution and stressed its importance in the Mizo society when he made a comparison between the Lusei clan and Mara clan. He found a strong contrast between the "much indisciplined" character and lack of control in the Mara villages with the situation among the Luseis. "A young Mara when ordered to do something by an elder," wrote Parry, will argue, where a Lusei will obey at once."¹². He ascribes this difference to the existence of Zawlbuk among the Lusei and the absence of any such institution among the Mara. With the progress of education in the Lushai Hills, the importance of Zawlbuk gradually diminished. In 1924, when Parry came to Mizoram, Zawlbuk was almost abandoned by the Mizos. Convinced of the important role it played in the Mizo society, he issued an order to maintain it. In Aizawl, Thakthing locality was asked to rebuild Zawlbuk¹³. But the importance of the institution further declined and was ultimately abolished by legislation during the period of A.C.Mccall. Parry thus failed to revive the institution.

Tlawmngaihna: The spirit of Tlawmngaihna was another aspect which Parry found admirable in Mizo culture. He states, "Tlawmngaihna therefore deserves every encouragement, as if it were allowed to fall into desuetude it would be most detrimental to the whole of the tribe"¹⁴. In "Monograph", he cites several examples in explaining the meaning of Tlawmngaihna. Though Zawlbuk disappeared, Tlawmngaihna survived. The survival of Tlawmngaihna however does not mean that it was unaffected. While Zawlbuk way of life was declining, there was also a perceptible decline in discipline and morality among the youth which provoked Parry to make a rather harsh comment : " No one can pretend that it is a good thing that Tlawmngaihna, while still practised by heathen Lusheis, should often be conspicuous by its absence among Christian Lushei Communitites; the reverse should be the case, and the fact is that it is not so is due to the failure in the past to study and make use of Lushei Custom"¹⁵. Parry placed the blame squarely upon the missionaries whose work in "ignorance of the Mizo custom caused as much harm as the good they had done"¹⁶. Though his opinion in this matter is not entirely true, it certainly shows that he was keen to preserve the Mizo culture several of which he found it admirable.

Critique of Christian Missions: As against the colonial ideology of criticism of Indian society and culture and glorification of western culture and values, Parry was concerned that the impact of the western culture was felt in the Mizo society through the activities of the Christian missionaries who made a 'full scale assault' on the customs of the people in trying to convert them to Christianity. Parry regarded the British Government to be rather the protector and preserver of the customs of the people. By attacking the customs of the people, Parry believed the missionaries were 'denationalizing the people'¹⁷. He felt the need for "missionaries to receive some training, atleast in anthropology" when sent out to work among the tribals¹⁸. He maintained that mission work when first started among the Mizo, it was "carried on

largely by the light of nature, without training or knowledge of the customs of the people”¹⁹. Mission influence, he stated, “therefore has been largely destructive, good customs having been destroyed and not replaced”²⁰. Thus, he said, “No use was made of the Zawlbuk or bachelor’s house, nor of the custom of tlawmngaihna”²¹. He was equally sceptical of the prohibition of drinking Zu on the early Christians. He found it wrong to assert abstinence from drink as an essential tenet of Christianity. He encouraged temperance rather than insist on prohibition²². Needless to say, this attitude of Parry finds relevance even in today’s context.

Critique of Parry’s work: Parry’s work can be classified as Colonial Ethnography. Colonial Ethnography treated tribals as mere objects of analysis. In spite of his deep interest in the Mizo customs and cultures, Parry’s writings remained within the colonial discursive paradigm. At the same time, Parry’s both anthropological works were geared largely to the need of colonial administration. He was bound by his officialdom to make a study of the people under his charge. He himself admitted that “Monograph” was compiled because he “found it extremely difficult in trying cases to ascertain the correct custom”²³. So it was meant to gain knowledge about the Mizo, so as to enable colonial governance. In this sense, anthropology is said to have developed as part of the colonial administrative system. In order to implement imperialist and colonial policies in the countries they conquered and brought under their rule, the compilation of knowledge about these people was necessary. So certain anthropologists turned out to be apologists of the colonial regimes. N.E. Parry is also no different from this typology. Such a study often lacked the understanding and interpretation in historical perspective, but only provided data for administrative purposes.

Conclusion: In spite of the limitations of his work stated, Parry rendered yeoman’s service to Mizo history (writing) as one who gave the first written record of Mizo customs. ‘The Lakhers’ provides us a deep anthropological insight into the life and culture of the Maras. Though Parry’s writings are not free from bias, his contribution is valuable insofar as they provide the scholar with a basis for understanding subsequent changes. His works were written with the intention of preserving the undiluted Mizo culture and traditions in mind. Against the ideology of the Colonial historiography of the time, he sought to preserve the ‘pristine’ nature of Mizo culture and this was largely reflected in his writings and consequently makes his works a valuable source of Mizo history and Mizo history writing.

Notes and References:

1. N. Chatterji, Zawlbuk as a Social Institution in the Mizo Society, Aizawl : Tribal Research Institute, 1975 p.513
2. Mangkhosat Kipgen, Christianity and Mizo culture, Mizo Theological Conference, Assam, 1996, p.7
3. Ibid.p.8
4. B.Lalthangliana, Zoram Encyclopedia (Zoram Tinreng Bu), Aizawl, 2003,p.475
5. N.E.Parry, A monograph on Lushai Customs and Ceremonies, Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl,Reprint, 1988 p.intro.Hereafter the work is cited as N.E.Parry; Monograph
6. Ibid.
7. R.Vanlawma, Ka Ram leh Kei (My Country and I), Zalen Printing House, Aizawl,p.46
8. Access to Colonial Historiography on 31 july 2018 from <http://egyankosh.ac.in/handle/123456789/44468>
9. ibid.
10. Mangkhosat Kipgen, Christianity and Mizo culture, Mizo Theological Conference, Assam, 1996, p.10
11. Sangkima, Mizos: Society and Social Change, Spectrum Publications, Assam,1992, p.38
12. N.E.Parry, The Lakhers, Tribal research Institute, Mizoram,1932, p.28
13. R.Vanlawma, op.cit., p.46
14. N.E.Parry, Monograph, op.cit., p.21
15. N.E.Parry, The Lakhers, op.cit.,p.23
16. N.E.Parry, ibid.
17. N.E.Parry, ibid., p.20
18. N.E.Parry, ibid.,pp.22-23
19. N.E.Parry, ibid., p.22
20. N.E.Parry, ibid.
21. N.E.Parry, ibid.
22. N.E.Parry, ibid., pp.21-22
23. N.E.Parry, Monograph, op.cit., p.intro