A Historical Study of the 'Zo' Struggle

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A post-colonial liberal polity like India does not seem to be at ease in managing the stark reality of identity-related interests today. In spite of disavowal by the Indian state, current international debate on indigenous tribal peoples may serve as a crucial point of departure to historicise the self-definitions of indigenous tribes and also to document little known struggles of non-dominant internal minorities like the Zo people who inhabit India's eastern borderland. There are significant historical anomalies specific to the "hill tribals" of Manipur. Foregrounding such singular conditions may explain, at least in part, why and how Manipur remains in a state of siege, especially since the 1980s. Perhaps a degree of compromise may be required, if not desirable, between liberal regimes that represent dominant interests on the one hand, and indigenous collective claims to some sort of redress for past wrongs – especially when they have the force of justice behind them, on the other hand.

The author is indebted to L Lam Khan Piang, B Lalzarliana, H Kham Khan Suan for sharing valuable information and materials.

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Regardless of the definitional problems associated with the term "indigenous peoples", it is one of self-identification for several hill tribes of north-east India. Therefore, the concept is a useful heuristic tool in documenting little known struggles of the so-called "Zo peoples" – named Chin-Kuki-Lushai in the colonial register. While foregrounding the historical conditions that shaped the current hill tribal unrest along India's eastern border, this essay attempts to provide insights into the complex process of ethnic identity formation. Attentive to the politics of *naming*, it traces the rich genealogy of the hybrid term, "indigenous tribal peoples" in the colonial census, academic discourses and international conventions. In a way, this is related to the indeterminate disputes on naming among the "Zo people". While one faction insists on using the "right" indigenous collective nomenclature, another faction favours continued usage of colonial names like Chin-Kuki-Lushai, at least for official purposes – regardless of their real or imagined derogative overtones. It also takes note of the disputed interpretation in India on how indigenous "populations" transmuted into "peoples". Colonial policies and practices – at times unintentionally – conspired with missionary print culture to shape later indigenous solidarity movements since the 1950s in the borderland spanning north-east India and Upper Burma. However ill-conceived these struggles may be as political projects, they certainly deserve careful study to gain a deeper understanding of the troubles in India's north-east region, especially in modern Manipur.

'Indigenous Tribal Peoples'[1]

Part of the ancestry of the hybrid phrase "indigenous tribal peoples" may arguably be traced back to the 18th century when the terms "tribe" and "caste" were used interchangeably. The 1881 Census of India referred to "forest tribes" as a unit of wider pastoral castes; but then there was no direct reference to "tribes" per se (Xaxa 1999: 1519). For the first time the 1901 Census under Risley and later the 1911 Census under Gait defined "forest tribes" as "animists". This colonial British naming practice echoed E B Taylor's enquiry into the origin of religion in North America where he coined the term "animism" (*anima* means "soul") to identify the "primitive" belief in the existence of soul. Marten merely made the religious tinge explicit when he discarded "animism" in favour of "tribal religion" as a census category in 1921. Given the terms of the colonial discourse, the "primitive" forest/pastoral tribal animist in India was predictably categorised neatly as the other of the "civilised" sedentary caste Hindu peasant society.

At the dawn of India's independence, the idea of cultural difference between tribal animists and caste Hindus continued to inform Verrier Elwin's polemical tract, *The Aboriginals* (1943).

But this debate happened under a totally new historical context where nationalist thought increasingly became dominant. Nationalist reaction to this came immediately from the eminent sociologist, G S Ghurye, in *The Aborigines – So Called – and Their Future* (1943). The idea that animist "tribal religion" was different from Hindu practices was anathema to his unitary concerns for the emerging Indian nation. Ghurye, therefore, called the tribal "aborigines" and rather patronisingly as "backward Hindus" who "are the real swadeshi products of India" (1943: 21 & 32). A whole generation of nationalist ethnographers in post-colonial India committed themselves to the "noble" task of forging linkages between indigenous tribes and the wider Indian society. In a radical departure from earlier ideas of tribal *difference* and *isolation*, the nationally inflected ethnographers began to reformulate tribal indigenous cultures merely as instances of "little traditions" that can be simply subsumed within the great "Indian" (read Hindu) tradition (cf Sinha 1958). The burden of tribal studies was on how tribes or nomads smoothly transmuted into caste peasants. This fairly linear social and historical process is called "peasantisation" (Bhattacharya 1995: 84) or tribe-caste-peasant continua (Sinha 1965). This elegant but monolithic perspective is neither ideologically attractive nor politically empowering for indigenous struggles today since it virtually legitimises dominant interests to speak on behalf of oppressed peoples and excluded citizens within the Indian nation state.

In India, scholarly interest in tribal society was initially confined to anthropologists till the 1980s when historians[2] of the Subaltern Studies Collective turned their attention to "history from below" – including tribal movements and anti-colonial tribal protests. David Arnold (1982) accented the relative isolation, lowlander-highlander dichotomy, "restricted territoriality" and autonomy of "rebellious hillmen"[3] – a category that lumped together both "elite and subaltern hillmen" (p 140) besides indigenous tribes and caste peasants. Unlike Arnold, Sumit Sarkar (1983) was sensitive to the tribe-caste distinction: "The term 'tribe' is used to distinguish people so socially organised from 'caste'" (p 44). But he was careful to add the earlier insistence of nationalist ethnographers that tribal difference "should not convey a sense of complete isolation from the mainstream of Indian life" (Sarkar: 44).

Unlike the term "tribal" which has a long genealogy in India, the word "indigenous" gained currency only after it was used for the first time by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 1957. ILO's engagement with "indigenous and tribal populations" was predated by its concern for "native workers" as early as 1920. To prevent States from disqualifying certain indigenous groups, the ILO intentionally avoided any precise definition of indigeneity beyond providing criteria like early settlement, non-dominance, statelessness, cultural difference and self-ascription. But these cultural markers of indigeneity ironically tend to promote primitive, primordial and essentialist representations of indigenous peoples in ways that do not exactly relate to their modern aspirations.

The ILO Convention 107 of 1957 was ratified by 18 countries including three south Asian states – Bangladesh, India and Pakistan (ILO 2009: 173). It was unfortunate that the convention reflected the 19th century view that a "tribe represented not only a particular *type of society* but also a particular *stage of evolution*" (Beteille 1998: 187). It was naively assumed that entire indigenous and tribal populations would eventually be assimilated into dominant societies. National governments assumed that indigenous tribal populations would eventually wither away as distinct communities before the advancing gods of "modernity" and "progress". A number of repressive policies were adopted to hasten this process of assimilation by undermining indigenous practices and institutions. But the internationalisation of indigenous issues and the failure of oppressive policies gradually persuaded a number of western nation states that

> indigenous peoples will exist into the infinite future as distinct societies within the larger country, and that they must have land claims, cultural rights (including recognition of customary laws) and self-government rights … (Kymlicka 2005: 24).

Under such changing international standards, George Manuel and Michael Posluns in 1974 formulate an alternative to "indigenous people" by coining the term, "fourth world nations" to throw into relief the structural inequalities inbuilt within the relationship between indigenous minority enclaves and the dominant society, especially in the Canadian context.

Meanwhile, the evolutionary and Eurocentric bias of the original ILO Convention No 107 was remedied in part by the ILO Convention No 169 of 1989 by recognising the enduring qualities of indigenous tribal culture (cf Burman 1995: 44). Nepal is the only country from south Asia that became an exemplar by ratifying the new ILO Convention of 1989 (ILO 2009: 174). The Nepalese Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) played a constructive role in making this possible.

Eleven years after the preparation of its draft, the UN finally declared the Year of the Indigenous Peoples in 1993. Indigenous people are broadly defined as "non-state people…associated with non-industrial mode of production" (Eriksen 1992: 321). Indigenous identities are often victims of the nationalist desire to equate nation state with the dominant culture. The dilemma of indigenous tribal struggle to retain their community identity and their basic humanity is aptly captured by Thomas H Eriksen (1992) in these words: "In a world of nation states, linguistic minorities are trapped between the native reserve and cultural genocide" (p 330).

Official Anthropology

Reflecting the official mind in India, renowned anthropologist K S Singh (1995) of the Anthropological Survey of India (GOI) prefers the local term adivasi (i e, early but not original settlers) to "indigenous peoples" in global circulation. He suggests that the idea of indigeneity in the sense of "original" settlers is irrelevant in the "strange alchemy" (Singh 1995: 30) of India's historical melting pot, and claims that nobody is indigenous. Dissenting from this view, Walter Fernandes (1995) of the Indian Social Institute (New Delhi) explained India's refusal to sign the ILO Convention No 169 of 1989 as a misinterpretation of the implicit reference to self-determination in the use of the term "indigenous peoples" in the revised Convention as distinct from the use of "indigenous populations" in the earlier Convention. This was somehow seen as an incitement to secession by the Indian state despite the qualification provided by the revised Convention in Article 1(3) that "peoples…shall not be construed as having any

implications as regards the rights which may attach to the term under international law" (ILO 2009: 187).

Moreover, indigenous demands for more autonomy or special safeguards from blanket applications of national laws do not necessarily amount to secessionism. For instance, the demand of the Mizo Union in April 1947 for "full self-determination within the province of Assam"[4] did not then obviously refer to sovereign independence. As to India's preference for "adivasi" over "indigenous peoples", Fernandes registered the definitional power of dominant classes in the act of naming adivasis in bureaucratic parlance, and "vanavasis" in the rightist discourse. Regardless of the alien origin of the term, "indigenous peoples", he apparently saw it politically useful as a potent tool for resisting relations of domination for "peoples" subsumed within modern nation states.

While post-colonial nation states in south Asia willingly support abstract indigenous rights in principle, they often oppose substantive democratic changes in practice. Post-colonial nation states increasingly realise that they cannot afford hot wars between states, but they are engaged in cold wars with indigenous peoples and minority nationalities that are fielding resistance forces. India, Bangladesh and Pakistan (in that order) are among the 10 most populous states in the world. But the natural recourses required for the "development" of these post-colonial states happen to be concentrated in the indigenous tribal areas. The policies of Bangladesh and Pakistan towards their national minorities and indigenous peoples came in for serious criticisms. Bangladesh denied any distinct constitutional recognition to indigenous peoples except under the patronising and blanket label of "Backward Sections of Citizens" (ILO 2009: 17). The systematic violations of human rights by an expanding Bangladeshi state in the Chittagong Hill Tracts are well-documented (Dewan 1985 and Chakma 1989). In this context, Bernard Q Nietschmann of the University of California Berkeley rightly observes, "The outward movement of lowland Bengali people has long been a demographic reality and a threat to the adjacent nations of hill peoples such as the Assamese (India) and the Chakmas (Chittagong Hill Tracts)" (1999: 5). With rare intellectual honesty, Nietchmann also depicts a radical truth about the unequal struggles of indigenous tribal peoples ("Fourth World nations") against the so-called "Third World States" today:

> Third World colonialism has replaced European colonialism as the principal global force that tries to subjugate indigenous peoples … Invasion and occupation of indigenous nations once done by foreign white expansionist are now done by foreign brown expansionist power … Most Fourth World indigenous nations have maintained the quality of lands, waters and resources while Third World States have not. Systems that do work are being destroyed to prolong systems that don't work. Over one-half of the world's conflicts are being fought over Fourth World geography, not East-West politics, or North-South economics. The development and modernisation of Third World States is heavily dependent upon the invasion and annexation of Fourth World nations (Nietschmann 1999: 1-2).

In spite of all its shortcomings,[5] the democratic and legal safeguards of India, especially in the form of the Sixth Schedule, absorb a great deal of tension between the indigenous peoples and the expanding State. At times, the Indian state could be insensitive in handling indigenous tribal concerns – for instance, the militarisation of the Naga problem under Nehru. But India can also be imaginative and respectful towards tribal communities as shown in the case of North-Eastern Frontier Agency (renamed Arunachal Pradesh since 1972). Shaped by Verrier Elwin's *Philosophy for Nefa* (1957), the Indian policy of restrain in Arunachal Pradesh enabled indigenous loyalty to India which stood the test of Chinese invasion in 1962. Here the indigenous hill peoples had been administered through the Indian Frontier Administrative Service whose officers inculcated a philosophy that

> tribal culture was not a primitive anachronism to be summarily swept away…that respect was a two-way traffic and the tribals would respect us and our institutions to the extent that we respected them and theirs (Rustomji 1983: 103-04).

Colonial Rule and Record

Unlike those areas of India's north-east where indigenous peoples are in a dominant position, the hill tribes of two princely states (Manipur and Tripura) occupy an anomalous status within the Indian constitutional arrangement. Political and demographic factors like the Partition and immigration from a densely populated neighbour (Bangladesh) reduced the indigenous "Borok" people in Tripura to a minority status. Similar demographic pressures in the valley of Manipur[6] vitiate the normally good relationship between the locally dominant community and the indigenous hill tribes of Manipur today. To put current social problems into perspective, it will be helpful to explore the historical context of British colonial rule and record.

After British control of Assam in 1826 and of Upper Burma in 1886, vast areas of hill tracts between India and Burma still remained beyond imperial surveys and colonial conquest. Of indigenous populations sandwiched between imperial Calcutta and Rangoon, the so-called Chin-Kuki-Lushai tribes were one of the last resistant forces to succumb to British rule. Due to linguistic affinities and geographical contiguity, their land was often described simply as "Chin-Lushai country" (Elly 1893) and the people were variously called "Chin-Kuki" (Grierson 1904) or "Lushei Kuki clans" (Shakespear 1912). Till the Lushai Expedition of 1871, the inhabitants of Lushai Hills were rather loosely termed "Kukis" or "Kookies" in colonial records. To create the deepest impressions of British power on the local societies, major military expeditions to the contiguous hill tracts between the Chin Hills, Lushai Hills and the southern hills of Manipur were always coordinated. These military strikes culminated in the Chin-Lushai Expedition of 1889-1890 that permanently brought the Lushai Hills under colonial rule.

Following on the heels of the Chin-Lushai Expedition, the Chin-Lushai Conference took place at Fort William (Calcutta) on 29 January 1892. Significantly it was a military officer, R G Woodthorpe, who apparently initiated the idea of the conference almost four months earlier in his "Note on our Dealing with Savage Tribes and the Necessity for having them under One Rule".[7] From a logistic and military point of view, the administrative division of the "Chin Lushai country" impeded the operational manoeuvrability of the British frontier forces "working under different orders".[8] That explains why Woodthorpe lamented, "The Chin Lushai files abound in instances of difficulties having been

caused by the three governments of Bengal, Assam and Burma having jurisdiction in these hills".[9] In the face of stiff opposition from civilian interests, some military officers at the conference advocated the administrative unification of the Chin Lushai hill tracts. A recent research in the *Indian Historical Review* describes this colonial tussle as "administrative rivalries on a frontier" (Pau 2007: 187). Since the unified administration was proposed to be "subordinate"[10] to Assam, the chief commissioner of Burma and other non-Assam cadres in this turf war expectedly opposed the move. The Chin Lushai Conference eventually reached a compromise. While it was "very desirable" to unify "the whole tract of country known as the Chin-Lushai Hills",[11] it was implied that this new step would be delayed. On a positive note, it was unanimously "agreed" – not merely desirable – that north Lushai in Assam and south Lushai in Bengal would be unified "under Assam at once".[12]

The delimitation of colonial boundaries at the Calcutta conference had indirect but long-term political imprint on later indigenous struggles and political possibilities. The administrative unification of north and south Lushai due to strategic concerns of military officers ironically rendered indigenous Mizo "peoples" locally dominant within a well-demarcated territorial unit in British Assam. Though unintended by the then colonial authorities, the concerns of the 1892 Conference retrospectively acquired new resonance with Zo indigenous leadership who met almost a century later at their first mammoth "world conference"[13] in 1988 – this time at Champhai town, on the border of Mizoram and Myanmar. Usable pasts (including unhappy colonial pasts) can be rescued from oblivion to inform present social possibilities and future political imaginations.

Though the second half of the resolutions of the conference was immediately implemented, the first half was destined to be aborted by new administrative developments in the shape of the Government of India Act 1935. Under this important act, the administration of British Burma was once and for all severed from that of British India. By demarcating an international boundary between India and Burma, colonial cartography mapped by the 1935 Act inadvertently partitioned an open Asian borderland – "Chin Lushai country" – inhabited by various Zo indigenous tribes referred to derogatorily as "savages newly brought under British control"[14] in the minutes of the Chin Lushai Conference. A shared ancestral territory (to borrow Sunil Khilnani's phrase) got "severed by the hasty scrawl of an imperial pen between India and Burma" (2004: 31).

For a student of indigenous struggles, an important feature of the 1935 Act relates to the introduction of certain safeguards in the form of Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas.[15] This ensured full autonomy in the internal administration of certain indigenous tribal polities by insulating them from the control of ministerial India. But there was an anomaly in colonial north-east India: the hill areas of two princely states (Manipur and Tripura) did not figure in the colonial map of internally autonomous Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas (in quaint colonial parlance) in the 1935 Act. Since the Constituent Assembly's "debt to the 1935 Act in particular is very great" (Austin 2008: 328), indigenous hill peoples of Manipur and Tripura predictably did not figure in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution in independent India.

The Sixth Schedule was created by the Bardoloi Sub-Committee in which three men – Bardoloi, Nichols-Roy and B N Rau – played crucial roles. Formed on 27 February 1947, the Bardoloi Sub-Committee of the Constituent Assembly of India tried to work out within a period of five months a compromise formula between the bureaucratic dreams of a British Crown protectorate on the one hand, and the Indian nationalist haste to abolish the special safeguards enjoyed by the hill tribes under the raj, on the other. Anyway, it later transpired that the Bardoloi Sub-Committee made a curious omission of two hill areas of the north-east. This rendered the indigenous tribes of the Tripura predictably vulnerable to a serious demographic crisis in the wake of the Partition, and the hill areas of modern Manipur soon turned into hotbeds of political unrest that has spilled over into the Indo-Naga problem. S K Chaube of CSSS (Kolkota) attempts to explain why the hill tribes of Manipur and Tripura have remained outside the purview of the Bardoloi Sub-Committee – and hence, the Sixth Schedule:

> The problem of the princely states, because of its all-India dimension, missed the special attention needed in the north-eastern region. Tripura and Manipur were partly 'tribal states' … No special arrangement was made for the hill areas of Tripura and Manipur. Perhaps the Constituent Assembly felt that, as the integrated Indian states would be constituted as part B and part C states under the rigorous control of the Centre, no special scheme for their minorities would be necessary (Chaube 1999: 97).

It was only as an afterthought that the hill areas of Tripura received in 1985 protection of indigenous rights under the Sixth Schedule.[16] But unfortunately by then, the demographic deluge had happened. A similar demand for Sixth Schedule by the indigenous hill tribes of Manipur was snubbed by locally dominant interests. Indigenous tribal elites in the hills of Manipur were sensitive to their relatively vulnerable status vis-à-vis the special status of other hill tribes of the north-east. They also readily perceive real or imagined threats – especially linguistic chauvinism – of the dominant Hindu Meitei community that tends to forget the cultural diversity of Manipur. Further, the "postcolonial miseries" of the Zo people and the articulation of their contested indigenous identities were inflected by colonial contingencies and expedients played out in the ironies of historical trajectories.

An Imagined 'Zo' Community in Print

A focus on highly visible colonial policies and practices on indigenous struggles should allow for less visible but far deeper imprint of missionary print on the "political *imaginaire*" (Kaviraj 1997: 13) of the educated elites of the local society. The first printing press arrived in British Assam in 1836, but it took a whole century to reach the various Zo tribes in the hills of Manipur and the Lushai hills. In its early days, print technology was the monopoly of Christian missions. Yet, print culture was conducive to the emergence of standard languages championed by educated tribal elites with a new sense of community identity. The technologies of writing and printing underpinned the formation of tribal indigenous solidarities under the raj. By the 1930s, evangelical print culture and missionary networks had already

ushered in a Bible-based literacy in Lushai hills. That, in turn, led to a kind of primitive public sphere – a tribal *ecumene*.

Language politics, for instance, shaped the Assamese identity vis-à-vis the Bengali identity. In the Khasi-Jaintia hills, the Welsh mission promoted the Sohra dialect spoken around their mission headquarters at Cherrapunji. The missionaries prevailed against the colonial administration's candidate – the Shella dialect. In colonial Lushai hills, Duhlian was the obvious choice for creating a literary language. It was not only widely spoken around the mission centre at Aizawl, it had also been the preferred medium of Lushai chiefs. Language is at the very core of modern Mizo identity. The emergence of Duhlian dialect as a standard language prefigured the formation of Mizo ethnic identity.

The history of Mizo literature began with the advent of Christian missions who reduced various dialects into writing since the 1890s. Once they created basic linguistic toolkits like dictionaries and primers, the missionary focused on the translation of Bible portions. These activities were typically followed by the translation of the New Testament, Bible commentaries and much later, the entire Bible. In the evangelical scheme of things, the "missionary literature" was aimed at producing edifying "convert statistics". This was, of course, required by the sponsoring Mission Societies who held the purse strings back home in the UK and the US. The British administration also saw no "threat" to their imperial stability and order. After all, the Bible-based literacy and its pious devotional readings had nothing to do with nationalism, or proto-nationalism. Even the craziest coloniser would not imagine such a possibility in his wildest dream.

What, then, is the linkage between missionary literature and the "Zo peoples"? Christian missionaries were legally required to be non-political and they were intent on converting souls, not inventing new nationalities. But evangelical print arguably left indelible imprint – even if unintended – on later imagined communities. This is because the Bible – unlike the Koran, for instance – has a long tradition of "translatability" into local vernaculars. Readers generally assumed that the dialectal translations were as authentic and "inspired" as the originals texts. This makes the Bible truly an "open book", especially so within the non-conformist protestant communities of north-east India and the Chin hills. The British historian, Christopher Hill aptly remarked: "There are few ideas in whose support a Biblical text cannot be found. Much could be read into and between the lines" (1993: 5).

The vernacular Bible easily lent itself to various interpretive strategies and metaphorical meanings. Partly due to the Protestant disdain for tradition, the Zo converts were free to compose commentaries without any sense of history. Thus they began to write commentaries on their vernacular New Testaments published in Lushai (1916), Tedim (1932) and Hmar (1946). Naturally, the Zo commentators read in their Book allegorical stories about the salvation of their *hman or minam* (nation) by a deity no less than *Pathian* (Yahweh). Interestingly, Pathian was the self-same tribal creator-deity of the Zo pagan *Sakhua* religion.

Moreover, missionary magazines also popularised the concept of hnam or minam in the mind of their neo-literate readers, whose mental horizons previously did not transcend the family, kinsmen, the chief and their co-villagers. In fact, the magazines of the Welsh Calvinists and the American Baptists catered to fairly large market of vernacular readers. The mission magazines were not meant for any particular tribe or village; its target readership was the entire hnam or minam variously called "Zo", "Zofate" or "Mizo". The church magazines were replete with such reference on almost every page. These terms had been employed by traditional poets: examples include Lallula's usage of "Ka Zokhua" in *c*1860 and Saikuti's (1891-1921) use of "Mizo" (Lalthangliana 2004: 106). However, Lalthangliana asserted that the old meaning of "Zo" then was admittedly more restrictive than its current meaning today. Missionary magazines did not coin the abstract idea Zo minam or hnam; but they normalised this concept powerfully in the mind of their devout readers. While the *Tedim Thu Kizakna* (The Chin Hills News) was founded by the Reverend J H Cope in the Chin Hills, the Reverend D E Jones was instrumental in the publication of *Kristian Tlangau* (Christian Herald) in the Lushai Hills since 1911.

In early colonial Lushai Hills, the Welsh missionary Edwin Rowlands (Zosapthara) pioneered the creation of an indigenous Mizo national literature. He had a good command of Mizo language, and composed poems to instil self-respect in Mizo selfhood. His inspirational verse, "Mizo fuihna hla" (1909) is possibly one of the finest celebrations of the "hnam" (nation) in Mizo missionary literature:

Mizo kan ni lawm ilang-in
Kan hnam that-na thu zawng zel-in,
Thil tha-in kan ram ti-mawi-in,
Mizo lawn teh u! (Zosapthara 1909).

Free translation

We'll rejoice for being Mizo
Seek what is good for the *hnam* (nation),
Adorn our land with things of beauty
Let Mizo rejoice!

In the post-missionary period, the translation of the Old Testament (OT) further strengthened the earlier habits of reading the Zo as the "chosen nation". Bible readers were actively encouraged to interpret OT reference to the Jewish nation as the Zo nation. Later figurative exegesis gave way to literal reading of the Bible which led to the "dual conversion" of some Zo Christian into Judaism (Weil 2003). Today there is even a book entitled, *Israel-Mizo Identity* (Zaithanchhungi 1990). It is significant that such scriptural interpretation came only after – not before – the publication of the Mizo OT in 1959. No wonder C L Hminga (1963) claimed that the Shinlung theory was "inspired by a fanciful interpretation of the Bible". The dual converts passionately attest in the historicity of their belief. In fact, they appealed to certain Zo folklores and practices to support the theory of "Lost Tribes". Nevertheless, it has to be said that it still remains a faith issue rather than a demonstration of reliable scientific evidence.

Self-reflexivity, Intellectuals and Solidarity

Awareness of a shared identity ironically comes through the ability to look oneself through the eyes of others. No doubt, the missionary literature familiarised the idea of Zo hnam or minam. Nevertheless, it was the exposure of the Zo youth as labour corps during first world war and second world war that rendered

them self-reflexive about their political identity. In colonial Manipur, forced recruitment for labour corps during first world war had sparked an abortive anti-colonial protest. It was called the Kuki Rising (1917-19), or "Zou Gal" in local parlance. Sarah M Bekker (1989) rightly remarked,

> The period of first world war included recruitment of Zo youth; about 4,000 young Zo went to Europe. With new awareness of the outside world, the Zo felt the first stirrings of nationalism … Zo resistance to the Japanese during world war II, with homemade gunpowder and bullets, brought an increased feeling of nationalistic pride (pp 689-90).

Indeed, the Zo youths during first world war and second world war learnt to see themselves through the outsider's eyes. Likewise, a handful of educated Zo elite since the 1970s received access to higher education to "discover" their nationality in "colonial records and reports" about their recent past. In fact, this first generation of Zo scholars benefited from post-colonial India's initiatives in higher education. They managed to enter the country's premier universities, including the research-driven Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) at New Delhi.

Higher education exposed inquisitive Zo researchers to the colonial archives and a massive English language "academic literature". This includes the imperial census and gazetteers, ethnographic records, bureaucratic reports, and imperial files mostly in the foreign department of the National Archives of India. Those confidential files were originally meant to be read only by colonial officials who ran the empire. But a lot of information got "de-classified" after the transfer of power from the raj to Indian hands. The British may not have created the longest-lived empire in history, but it was certainly one of the most data-intensive.

An important indigenous tribal intellectual of the Zo solidarity movement was a self-made man from Manipur, Pu T Gougin. At a time when tribal leaders were vying for State recognition of their dialectal communities as "Scheduled Tribes", Gougin began to conceive the idea of *Zomi*, i e, "Zo people" in 1955 while serving as a clerk of the Tribal Development Office, Imphal. This prompted him to resign from his clerical job in 1958, and then pursue BA (honours) at St Edmund's College, Shillong. As a final year student, he founded the United Zomi Organisation (UZO) at Singtom village (Manipur) in 1961 to unite "all ethnic Zomi groups" (Gougin 1988: 3). When UZO was reduced to mere vote bank politics to the complete neglect of wider Zo solidarity, T Gougin launched on 28 January 1972 a new organisation, Zomi National Congress (ZNC) at Daizang village (Manipur). He owned a printing press which helped him to propagate his nationalist vision through pamphlets, booklets and ephemeral literature. *The Discovery of Zoland* (1980) is perhaps Gougin's most enduring political writing.

Meanwhile, a more sophisticated articulation of Zo nationality had appeared by the late 1970s at the JNU, New Delhi. S Thangkhangin Ngaihte submitted a fairly original MPhil dissertation on aspects of the pre-colonial *History of the Zomi* (1979) to the Centre for Historical Studies at JNU. Similarly, L S Gangte submitted his MPhil dissertation on *Zomi Polity in Transition* (1979) to the Centre for Political Studies at JNU. Gougin met Thangkhangin during his Delhi trip in 1982 to exchange views with the Mizo rebel leader, Laldenga,[17] who was under house arrest. Thangkhangin was present when Gougin and Laldenga met on 5 May 1982 to deliberate on the contentious issue of finding an acceptable generic ethnic name for all "Zo peoples". While Gougin of Manipur advocated the name *Zomi* ("Zo people"), Laldenga of Mizoram insisted that *Mizo* ("people of Zo") is a better choice. Recalling about his Delhi visit, Gougin writes:

> I also hinted at the proposed nomenclature of the government…that it must be called 'the Government of Zoram' (Zo land), *not* 'the Government of Mizoram' since the word Mizoram sounds communal … It appears that they [MNF leaders] do not think in terms of one common nomenclature, but based their decision on simple issue of language only…During our discussion with Mr Laldenga, my friend Mr S Thangkhangin quietly listened to what we debated upon… Mr S Thangkhangin was very young and robust and energetic. He was doing his research at Jawaharlal Nehru University on *Zomi* issue. I remember, he could not perceive the correctness of Zomi until he became a Master Degree holder (Gougin 1988: 12-14).

Commenting on this Mizo-Zomi semantic squabble, F K Lehman (1999) of the University of Illinois (USA) said, "… between Zomi and Mizo, I cannot think what to say. Their meanings are identical, clearly." He suggests a possible explanation why the term "Mizo" had little resonance outside Mizoram: perhaps this is because "it carried unavoidable overtones of Mizo dominance" – linked, in turn, to the past prestige of Sailo chiefs.

Back in Manipur, Gougin convened on 9 July 1983 a special assembly of the Zomi National Congress at Zogal Hall, Churachandpur. It was attended by a number of young scholars from different Zo tribes. L S Gangte MPhil (JNU), Thangkhangin Ngaihte MPhil (JNU), Otkhothong Haokip MA (Delhi) and L S Thangjom were important indigenous intellectuals who attended this meeting to lend their support to the solidarity movement initiated by Gougin under the banner of ZNC. Though ZNC achieved no concrete political result, this organisation stirred the public imagination at least momentarily. Taking a leaf out of chairman Mao's book, Gougin launched on 8 January 1987 a 12-day long march from Sipuikawn to Churachandpur town (265 km). But this was merely a prelude to the "first world Zomi convention" where an estimated 20,000 volunteers from Mizoram and Manipur converged at Champhai in Mizoram from 19-21 May 1988. The slogan of volunteers on their way to Champhai was coined by Gougin (1988), "If ZNC lives, who dies? If ZNC dies who lives?"

Initial excitements about the ZNC died down in India as people realised that translating the dream of "Zo unification" into political reality is no *tamasha* (streetside entertainment). Moreover, the mantle of the Zo solidarity movement fell on the Zomi Reunification Organisation founded in 1993 at Phapian (Kachin State) of Burma. Its founder president Pu K Guite hailed from Karbi Anglong in the Mikir Hills of Assam. Meanwhile, the ZNC had a new lease of life as its Burma chapter commenced in 1988. There it became a regional political party where it had successfully contested elections for a short-lived Parliament. A celebrated song in an audio-album called *Lengtong No 1* (1988) captures popular sentiments of Zo solidarity:

Sakmi khangmi kikhen lo in
Mimbang pianna Chiimtui vangkhua
I heina pianin dang zong leng
Sinlai pai tembang kua chiat ve ni

Zin in khen maw, Sian in khen maw
Sinlai ah na sang e
Gibang khen zong lung ah kingil kei ni
Tun sung khat pan piang hi ngeingei hang e.

Free translation

With shared origin in Chiimtui,
Kinsfolk from north and south shall not part.
Though we dwell in divided worlds,
Let's stick together like sheathed knives.
Whether God's will or Satan's wiles,
Partition hurts all the same.
While separated, forget not that
For sure the same mother had borne us.

Recorded at Lynn Studio in Rangoon, this patriotic song used a new medium to evoke an old origin myth in a hallowed locale, Chiimtui, with its charisma of homeland. Its composers – Lengtong Pauno, Sua Mang and T S Khai who is a graduate of Rangoon University – appealed to existing communities of shared speech and sentiments in Burma and India (Nang 2009: 12).

The term *Zomi* propagated by the ZNC had powerful resonances in the Chin Hills of Upper Burma with the adoption of the name "Zomi Baptist Convention" (ZBC) during a general assembly attended by 3,000 members at Haka (Burma) from 5-7 March 1953. Due to the restrictions imposed by nationalist Burma on foreign missionaries, the native Christian leadership was eager to reflect their indigenous credentials in the name of their church organisation. In the words of Reverend Sukte T Hau Go, the proposed Convention "should be a purely national organisation, bearing national name, and run by national personnel. No foreign missionary should hold any official position …"[18] Though the etymology and precise meaning of "Zo" or "Zomi" still prove illusive within academic debate, that it is an indigenous or a "national" ethnic name has been well accepted. It is quite a different matter that some local scholars question the inevitability of adopting an indigenous term ("Zo") than colonial names like Chin and Kuki.

As a pioneering indigenous scholar, Vum Ko Hau endorsed the existing trend to use "national names" for both church and political organisations. He lamented that alien names like Chin and Kuki were not the "right word" for naming various tribes and clans of the Zo "race" (Hau 1974: 297). Son of a Baptist pastor, Hau started his career as a colonial clerk during second world war, but worked hard to become a Burmese ambassador in 1955. As a serving ambassador at Prague, he enrolled for a PhD degree at Charles University, where he eventually completed his thesis, "A Profile of the Burma Frontier Man" (1974). The generic name "Zo" gained wider currency in the academic circle with the publication of *Zo History* (1987) by Vumson, an academic who worked both in Germany and the US. The book was favourably reviewed in reputed journals, including *The Journal of Asian Studies* (Bekker 1989). Outside the academia, research findings on Zo issues were disseminated by an enthusiast like Tualchin Neihsial through a series of booklets published by *Zogam Research Publications* since 1984 at Churachandpur, Manipur. Subsequently, T Neihsial earned a PhD in 1993 from Manipur University (Imphal) on the history and culture of the Zo people.

Among others, indigenous Zo secular intellectuals across the globe including Gougin (Manipur), JNU scholars like Ngaihte and L S Gangte (New Delhi), Vum Ko Hau (Prague), Vumson (Germany) and Tualchin Neihsial (Manipur University) laid a respectable intellectual foundation for subsequent scholarship in Zo indigenous studies. Edited by H Kamkhenthang, *In Search of Identity* (1986) was a collection that reflects the outcome of consultations on Zo issues under the auspices of Kuki-Chin Baptist Union from 1981-83. They were all labours of love on the part of the research performers. Admittedly an academic field like indigenous studies do have contemporary political implications. No wonder academic debates on ethnic names reverberated around various Zo organisations; and aspects of it became standard ideological diet for Zomi "nationalist" activists and cultural organisations in India, Myanmar and beyond.

Research on the Zo people was a tiny trickle in the 1970s and 1980s, but it grew into a steady stream of writings in the 1990s. L Keivon set the tone for the new decade with his series of *Zoram Khovel* (1991). Keivon speaks Hmar as first language, yet he chose Mizo as his literary vehicle. Keivom is a prolific travel writer who otherwise was an officer in the Indian Foreign Services. Apart from Keivon's contribution to popular Mizo literature, the English language literature on the Zo had a satisfactory harvest from academic theologians like Sing Khaw Khai (1995) who enquired into "Zo culture" at Myanmar Institute of Theology (Insein), Khup Za Go (1996) who completed his MTh thesis on the "Zo people" at UTC Bangalore, and Mangkhosat Kipgen (1997) who is the Principal of Eastern Theological College (Jorhat, Assam). Before the 1990s, Zo research done at secular institutions reflected a bias towards historical concerns. After the 1990s, however, research on the Zo at theological seminaries reflected sociological concerns. Here institutional sites of research played a role by informing aspects of Zo research; they clearly leave their stamp of influence on the final product of scholarly literature.

Conclusions

Given the atmosphere of distrust among nation states sharing strategic Asian borderlands, it may be premature to think of international agreements concerned with the plight of partitioned indigenous tribal peoples across national borders. Yet India's Look East policy offers new opportunities of reopening old regional contacts between India and Myanmar. The indigenous solidarity and demographic character of tribal peoples like the Zo who inhabited contiguous areas of the Chin Hills,

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Lushai Hills and the southern hills of Manipur were disproportionately affected by the severance of British Burma from British India by the Government of India Act 1935, and a subsequent hardening of boundaries by newly created nation states. A complex set of unintended historical, demographic and political factors relatively favoured the Zo peoples with recognised rights in the Chin Hills and the Lushai Hills. But as non-dominant internal minorities, the Zo people in Manipur got subsumed within the dominant State structure which fails to meet their aspirations. Liberal regimes are generally more comfortable with the language of liberal-individual rights than collective indigenous rights or identity-related claims. But a degree of flexibility and sincere engagement with the concerns of marginalised indigenous peoples are arguably the cornerstones of political stability and enduring peace in the eastern borderlands of India.

NOTES

1 As a variant of the phrase "Indigenous and Tribal Populations" in ILO Convention No 107 of 1957, the term "indigenous tribal peoples" was employed in the Penang Charter or "Charter of Indigenous-Tribal Peoples of Tropical Forests", Bangkok: Asian Indigenous Peoples' Pact (February 1992) and also in V Thomas (ed.), *Traditional Occupation of Indigenous Tribal Peoples: Emerging Trends,* Project to Promote ILO Policy on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, 2000.

2 Among others, these include historians like Arnold 1982; Sarkar 1983; and Dasgupta 1985.

3 Since 1959, the Thai state used a comparable label "Hill Tribes" who are described as "Subjects of the Nation without Citizenship" (Toyota 2005: 110).

4 "Memorandum Submitted to His Majesty's Government, Government of India, and Its Constituent Assembly through the Advisory Sub-Committee by the Mizo Union, dated 26 April 1947" in Go (2008), pp 137-42.

5 For instance, the Pataskar Commission (1966) on the Hill Areas of Assam critically observed how the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution created ill-defined sets of local authorities that pitted traditional rulers against District Councils, and District Councils against Regional Councils.

6 According to 2001 Census, the hill tribes of Manipur inhabit as much as 89% of the state's territory, but constitute only 41% of its population.

7 NAI, New Delhi, Foreign Department External A, Proceeding September 1892, Nos 9-62, Colonel R G Woodthorpe, "Note on Our Dealing with Savage Tribes and the Necessity for Having Them Under One Rule", dated 1 October 1891.

8 NAI, New Delhi, Foreign Department External A, Proceeding September 1892, quoted by R G Woodthorpe's *Note.*

9 NAI, New Delhi, Foreign Department External A, Proceeding September 1892, ibid.

10 NAI, New Delhi, Foreign Department External A, 29 September 1892, No 32, pp 1-2. Resolutions of the Chin-Lushai Conference, dated Fort William 29 January 1892.

11 NAI, New Delhi, Foreign Department External A, 29 September 1892, No 32, ibid.

12 NAI, New Delhi, Foreign Department External A, 29 September 1892, No 32, ibid.

13 "First World Zomi Conference, Declaration, dated Aizawl 30 October 1988, Champhai, Mizoram" in *The Indigenous Zomi,* Churachandpur (Manipur): Zomi Re-Unification Organisation (2005), pp 172-76.

14 NAI, New Delhi, Foreign Department External A, 29 September 1892, No 32, *Resolutions of the Chin Lushai Conference.*

15 Excluded Areas included the Naga hills, Lushai hills, North Cachar hills and Northeast Frontier Tract (modern Arunachal Pradesh). Partially Excluded Areas were the Khasi-Jaintia hills, Garo hills, and Mikir hills.

16 Tripura Tribal Areas District instituted by the Constitution (49th Amendment) Act 1984 (wef 1 April 1985).

17 Laldenga was the leader of the Mizo National Front (MNF) and the first Chief Minister of Mizoram on its attainment of full-fledged statehood.

18 Sukte T Hau Go (1988), "Adoption of the Name Zomi Baptist Convention" Rangoon, cited in Sing Khaw Khai (1995), p 69.

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