

# From Animism To Structured Beliefs: Socio-Cultural Changes In Lushai Hills With The Advent Of Christianity And British Administration In The Region

Dr Srijani Bhattacharjee

Assistant Professor, Department of History, School of Social Sciences,  
Adamas University, Kolkata

*Abstract: This paper is an attempt to trace the cultural and social transformation within the Lushai society with the emergence and propagation of Christianity in Lushai Hills presently known as Mizoram. The Lushais believed in animism prior to British arrival in the region and animistic beliefs based on nature was ingrained in every aspect of their life incorporating their culture, society, economy and religious beliefs. The people shared a relation of interdependence with their natural surroundings. In return for using nature they preserved it through religious norms and social taboos. With the arrival of the British in the region, significant changes appeared in their societal, cultural and religious sphere along with administration. The transformation brought about changes in the region that affected the Lushai society at large. The implementation of Christianity and western education in Lushai Hills brought far-reaching changes in Lushai religious beliefs essentially based on animistic ideas and were reflected in their society and culture. This paper is an anthropo- historical probe into the human-nature interface, socio-cultural and religious transformation within the Lushai society under the initiatives of Christian missionaries and British administration in the region.*

*Keywords: Nature, forest rights, human-nature relationship, colonial administration, chiefs, Christianity*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Lushais inhabited the district of Lushai Hills of British Assam which is presently known as Mizoram. It is the 23<sup>rd</sup> state of the Indian Union that shares international boundaries with Bangladesh and Burma, and is situated in the north eastern tip of India surrounded by the Indian states of Tripura, Manipur and the Cachar district of Assam. Prior to the British rule, Lushai Hills was a conglomeration of tribal units ruled by chiefs known as 'Lals'. On April 1<sup>st</sup> 1898, the region was annexed to Assam as one of its districts for administrative convenience and on strategic grounds. The region was known as Lushai Hills till the end of August 1954 and was later renamed as Mizo district. In January 1972 it was declared as a Union Territory within the Indian Union. It attained statehood in February 1987 with Aizawl as the state capital.

The people of Mizoram were known as 'Lushai' prior to Indian independence. The name of the region inhabited by them was derived from this term and was known as Lushai Hills. As it did not denote the entire community but referred to a single clan, the term 'Lushai' was soon replaced by 'Mizo' which was found to a better nomenclature as it was an umbrella word that included the various tribal populations within Mizoram. It also denoted highlander and was considered to be the suitable word for general application. The origin of the 'Mizo' is veiled in obscurity and is differently explained by scholars. To Liangkhaia, the Mizo claimed Chhinlung as their ancient home which is located within the Szechwan province of China. The reference of Chhinglung is found in the traditional songs, innumerable poems and legends of the Lushai people (Lalrimawia, 1995). To V.L. Siana, the name 'Lushai' might have originated from 'lisu' a tribe in South East China with whom the Mizos had certain

resemblances. The Mizo are of Mongoloid origin and speak a dialect of Tibeto-Burman group (Das, 2004).

## II. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The paper is an endeavour to enquire into the transformation brought about within the socio-cultural milieu of the Lushais with the implementation of Christianity and British administration in the Lushai region. The propagation of the religion brought significant changes within the Lushai society that was reflected in economy, society, culture, religion revolutionising the Lushai people at large. The study highlights the presence of animistic beliefs based on natural elements within the Lushai society and focuses on the changes in the beliefs that brought about religious translation of the Lushai people to Christianity. The implementation of Christianity was the most important development attached to British administration in the region. The study is broadly divided into seven sub-sections including introduction, objectives and methodology and conclusion. It is based on Gazetteers, scholarly works by British administrators, Census Reports and anthropological researches (Mackenzie, 1884; Shakespear, 1912; Allen, 1906, Singh, 1995). The secondary literature by scholars such as Lalrimawia, Jagdish K. Patnaik, N.N Bhattacharya, Daman Singh, J.M Llyod, Hminga and Joy Pachuau illuminates the subject further (Lalrimawia, 1995; Bhattacharya 1995; Singh, 1996; Llyod, 1991; Hminga, 1987; Patnaik, 2008; Pachuau, 2015).

## III. ANIMISTIC BELIEFS AMONG THE LUSHAIS

Prior to the arrival of the British in Lushai Hills, the religious beliefs of the Lushais can be designated as animism as they believed in nature based spirits and other natural living objects. The people believed in a spirit called 'Pathian' who was supposed to be the creator of everything. According to Lewin, the tribes had two gods—Pathian and Khozing (Lewin, reprint 2004). The Lushais also believed in 'Khuavang' who was identical to 'Pathian' but was inferior to him (Hminga, 1987). The people believed in some harmful spirits that lived in trees, mountains, rocks, caves and streams known as 'Huai' or demons to whom every illness and misfortunes were attributed. The 'puithian' or the village priest was thought to know the cure of all evils and misfortunes and the solutions were mostly in the form of sacrifices. The spirits who could be propitiated by sacrifices were guardian spirits of the clan. Sacrifices were considered to cure sickness, barrenness in woman, to increase the fertility of agricultural fields, cutting of plough, and after the hunting expeditions (Bhattacharya, 1995)

Lushai beliefs in animism were reflected in societal norms and cultural practices. The people preserved lands on religious grounds. Certain lands were never cleared for cultivation as they were considered to be the abode of supernatural beings who when offended would take vengeance on those who encroached upon them. By tradition the people never dug out jungle yam or roots indiscriminately and kept them for rare exigencies (Nibedon, 1980). A Lushai peasant believed that

the presence of spring water was always haunted by evil spirits. The concept of nature worship was however not prevalent among them. Rather they believed in the existence of spirits in nature both good and evil responsible for wellbeing and devastation of all forms and could be propitiated by sacrifices and feasts. The people had a faith that these spirits resided in mountains, rocks, trees, caves, streams amongst others (Bhattacharya, 1995).

Animistic beliefs based on nature were associated with Lushai religious, social, cultural life and regular life of the people. Hunting, fishing and shifting cultivation, the essential occupations of the Lushai people were based and performed in forests. The chief mode of agriculture practiced by them was *jhum* or shifting cultivation. Some indigenous ceremonies like *Chapchar Kut*, *Pawl Kut* and *Mim Kut* were associated with the entire process of *jhum* cultivation. The people led a nomadic life and the place of habitation was often based on the site of cultivation (Patnaik, 2008). The Lushais hunted almost all types of animals excluding few the killings of which were considered as taboo by some clans within the society. For instance, the *Minhlong* clan claimed descent from the Great Indian Hornbill and therefore never killed it. The *Hnaihlen* clan did not kill tigers and the *Bonghias* clan did not kill pythons (Singh, 1996). Natural elements were the major characters around which the Lushai folklore revolved. Flowers especially the crimson ones were always associated with the charming beauty of young maidens (Shakespear, 1912).

Natural elements formed the essential component of Lushai trade. Commercial transaction through barter with the neighbouring areas was an important element of the traditional Lushai society. Bepari Bazar in the Sylhet border and Kasalang on the Chittagong region were well known trade marts where the Lushais carried on trade with the neighbouring plains and hills. The important articles of trade were natural products like rubber, elephant hides and skins, ivory, roots and shoots etc (Lalrimawia, 1995).

## IV. INITIATION OF BRITISH ADMINISTRATION IN LUSHAI HILLS

The British-Lushai relationship can be considered as old as the battle of *Plassey* when with colonial occupation of Bengal; the Lushais came into contact with the British as the East Bengal provinces of Sylhet and Chittagong Hills were situated at the Lushai border. Later when under the clauses of the Treaty of *Yandabo* signed in 1826 Assam was annexed to the British Empire, the hill districts adjoining Assam plains also came within the purview of the British authorities. Within a course of few years, the hill areas under indigenous chiefs neighbouring Assam were incorporated within the province as hill units. By 1898 Lushai Hills was annexed to British Assam on strategic and political grounds.

Initially after the British occupation of Bengal and expansion of trade relations between the adjoining hills and the British occupied districts of Cachar, Sylhet and Chittagong Hills, people residing at the border of Lushai Hills entered Lushai Hills for trading and business purposes. This was not to the liking of the Lushai chiefs (*Lals*) who resisted the intrusion of outsiders in the region. The non-Lushai people

who entered the region had to pay a safety tax to the chiefs and accept their supremacy over the region. The first instance of Lushai conflict with the British took place in 1826 when a party of Sylhet woodcutters entered the region and were massacred by the Lushais on the pretext of their failure to pay the safety price to the chief in whose territory they had felled trees. The matter was viewed seriously by the British who imposed a commercial blockade on the markets with which the Lushais carried on their trade (Sangkhima, 1992). The Lushai also retaliated with counter attacks. In January 1871, they killed Winchester, the planter in Alexandrapore tea garden in Cachar and imprisoned his six year old daughter Mary. This followed the Chin Lushai Expedition of 1889-90 after which the area was annexed to British India on administrative grounds (Chatterjee, 1990).

The implementation of British administration in Lushai Hills brought significant changes in administration. The colonial administrators utilised the indigenous chiefs in the works of administration. Under the conditions of the Assam Frontier Tract Regulation 1880, the Lushai chiefs subject to good conduct and efficiency were given the hereditary charge of forestlands as custodians although not as owners (Jha, 1997). The British administration in the region was further strengthened with the spread of Christianity in the territory. Christianity gradually replaced the animistic beliefs of the Lushais by bringing a revolutionary change in the pre-colonial Lushai social structure (Lewin, 1839).

#### V. IMPLEMENTATION OF CHRISTIANITY IN LUSHAI HILLS

By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, animist beliefs among the Lushais began to show changes with spread of Christianity in the region. The first missionary who visited Lushai Hills was William Williams, a young Presbyterian proselytizer who had undertaken evangelical works in Khasi and Jaintia Hills prior to his coming to Lushai Hills. He arrived in the region in the later decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and associated himself with the tribal communities of Aizawl and soon gained popularity among them. Aizawl being a trading centre during the period was a hub of various tribal communities like Khasi, Jaintia, Naga, Mikir and Kuki. William Williams preached Christian teachings among them and soon became popular among the local dwellers (Lalchuanliana, 2007). By around 1893 another duo of missionaries named James Herbert Lorrain and Frederick William Savidge of the Arthington Aborigine Mission arrived at Aizawl and remained there till 1897 to spread Christian ideas among the locals. They learnt Lushai language, translated hymns and teachings of the New Testament and Bible in Lushai and thus were successful in transmitting Christian ideas among the indigenous populace. They developed a Lushai script using the Roman script that later laid the foundation of education among the people. The Lushai chiefs like Lalsuaka and Thangphunga actively supported the missionaries in these works that resulted in increase of educated Lushais. With this increase, there was simultaneous increase in the number of Christian Lushais (Lorrain, reprint 1982).

After the departure of Lorrain and Savidge, the Welsh Mission under Rev. David. Evan. Jones took up the charge of preaching Christianity in Lushai country and under his initiative by the end of 1904; a Church was formed that had a total membership of 57. Two schools were already in operation that spread education among the people. Soon Rev David. Evan was joined by Rev. Edwin Rowland who mutually balanced each other and by their combined efforts Christianity spread in corners of Lushai Hills (J. M Lloyd, 1991). By 1908, Dr. Peter Fraser, the first medical missionary and his wife Mary Catherine arrived in Lushai Hills. Through his combination of medical service and evangelical works, he provided immense service to the Lushai community although later came into conflict with the Lushais on the issue of the abolition of 'Bawi system or servitude' in the Lushai society finally leading to his expulsion from the region. However the British Parliament supported his stance and the government of Assam passed laws prohibiting the 'Bawi' system in the region (Hminga, p 68). The Bawis or slaves who got emancipation due to anti-Bawi campaign launched by Frazer in course of time became the greatest supporters of Christianity. They formed a group among themselves known as the 'Soldiers of the Cross'. Frazer started a printing press at Aizawl that was the first of its kind in the region that published works on Christian literature (J. M Lloyd, 1991: 126-127).

By the turn of the twentieth century, Christian missions spread in various parts of Lushai Hills that speeded up the proselytization purpose. With the enlargement of the missions, churches were established in North and South Lushai Hills. The British Baptist Missionary Society was the initial amongst them. During Indian independence, the Baptist missionaries extended their evangelical activities in northern and southern part of Lushai Hills encompassing missionary activities among the Chakmas and Riangs in South Lushai Hills. In the later years, many other missions like the London Baptist Mission at Lunglei Sub-Division, the Lakher Pioneer Mission in the Lakher areas, the Roman Catholic Mission, the United Pentecostal Church the Salvation Army, and the Seventh Day Adventist Mission carried on the propagation of Christianity in Lushai Hills (Hminga, 1987).

#### VI. IMPACT ON THE LUSHAI SOCIETY, CULTURE AND PEOPLE AT LARGE

The implementation of Christianity in Lushai Hills brought far reaching changes in the Lushai society. The first notable change was the abolition of chieftainship in 1954. With the implementation of the new administrative structure, chieftainship began to lose its importance. Moreover the new Christian converts did not accept the primitive ways and systems of administration under the Lushai chiefs due to which conflicts between them and the chiefs became frequent. Thus it was ultimately abolished in 1954 (Thangtungnung, 2012). The radical changes brought about by the implementation of Christianity in Lushai Hills were reflected in the transformation of the Lushai social structure. Zawlbuk, the most important social institution in the pre-colonial Lushai society began to lose its relevance. The schools established by the Christian missionaries preached gospels of peace among

all creations of God that soon attracted the people towards it. Education began to penetrate within the Lushai society. Within a span of few years education came to be equated with Christianity. 'Bawi' or the system of servitude also lost its significance with the propagation of Christianity. Under the initiatives of Reverend Frazer, the *Bawis* or slaves were emancipated and by 1936 and the practice of this system was abolished by the colonial government (J. M Lloyd, 1991). Transformations were noticed in marriage rituals, social norms, and head hunting practices with the conversion of Lushais to the new religion. Christian preaching that God has created the world and the humans should not destroy His creations reduced sacrificial rites and superstitious beliefs among the people. Soon there was a radical change in the Lushai culture that was reflected through alterations in Lushai dress and costume, music and dances, food and living habits (Thangtungnung, 2012). Improvement in the social status of women was also noticed (Verghese and Thanzawna, 1997). The impact of European and western culture was more prominent over the society that echoed in all the aspects as mentioned above. This further strengthened the hold of colonial administration in Lushai Hills.

Christianity brought changes in the animistic beliefs of the people. Beliefs in natural spirits were replaced by faith in the Almighty. Sacrifices as solutions to natural calamities and to propitiate evil spirits as existed earlier also began to obliterate with the propagation of love for living beings as creations of God under Christian principles. Thus there was a fundamental religious change among the people. The establishment of churches and schools in villages brought changes in the nomadic habits of the people. The settlement of people in a particular area led to the growth of settled villages. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the establishment of some areas as seats of colonial administration, those areas gained prominence that soon developed as urban centres. Lushai raids to neighbouring plains that formed an essential threat to the colonial officials also began to diminish with the propagation of the peaceful message of Christianity (Hminga, 1987).

Changes can also be noticed in the agricultural practices of the people who began to give up *jhum* or shifting cultivation. Christianity gave the people access to modern education and thus to government jobs. The educated people began to take up government jobs and thus occupational shifts among the Lushais become conspicuous during the first half of the twentieth century (Nag, 1998). The colonial government under various policies of forest conservation declared prohibition of *jhum* cultivation in parts of Lushai hills that added impetus to the situation. Under colonial initiatives, permanent cultivation was introduced in the valley areas of Lushai Hills where no rice cultivation under shifting cultivating method was permitted without a valid pass signed by the District Officer (McCall, 1980). Part of the Champai province was brought under wet rice cultivation under the initiatives of Colonel J Shakespear, the first Superintendent of Lushai Hills that soon replaced the *jhum* slopes with horticulture and plantation crops (Lianzela, 1994). The change in agricultural pattern brought significant alterations in Lushai economic structure (Nag, 1993).

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Thus Christianity had played a revolutionary role in transforming the Lushai society. It elevated the Lushai society from animism to an organisation. After the arrival of Christianity boosted by the British administration, radical changes came up in the Lushai society within a span of hundred and fifty years. The changes were noticeable in all aspects of the society. Animistic beliefs based on natural spirits, animal sacrifices and superstitions associated with natural beings were replaced by the Christian message of peace that preached kindness towards living beings. The head hunting culture that was prevalent under Lushai chiefs gradually began to eradicate with the abolition of Chieftainship in 1954. Changes were reflected in the entire structure of Lushai society. Under the permanent social organization of Christianity, people shed their previous nomadic habits and began to settle permanently. Social institutions like Zawlbuk, Bawi system and lower position of women hitherto prominent in Lushai society were replaced by schools that propagated English education, printing press that printed books imparting knowledge along with Lushai translation of Christian texts and allowed Lushai women to come out their social restrictions to receive education and participate in the Church. The use of roman script for the expression of Lushai language further accelerated the spread of education and Christianity among the Lushai people and thus within a century the Lushais were converted into one of the most literate communities of India.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Allen, B.C. (1906). The Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the Garo Hills and the Lushai Hills, Assam District Gazetteers, Vol. X, Allahabad: Pioneer Press.
- [2] Bhattacharya, N.N. (1995). Religious Cultures of North East India, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers.
- [3] Chatterjee, Subhas. (1990). Mizoram Encyclopaedia Vol II, Bombay: Jaico Publishing House.
- [4] Chatterjee, Subhas. (1995). Mizo Chiefs and the Chieftaindom. New Delhi: M.D. Publication Pvt Ltd.
- [5] Gait, E. A. (1913). Census of India, 1911, Vol. 1, Part II-Table XIV, Calcutta: Superintendent Govt. Printing.
- [6] Goswami, B. (1979). The Mizo Unrest, Jaipur: Aalekh Publishers.
- [7] Hminga, Rev Dr C.L (1987). The Life and the Witness of the Churches in Mizoram. Mizoram: Baptist Church of Mizoram.
- [8] James Herbert Lorrain- Introduction in 'Dictionary of the Lushai Language' Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1940, Reprint, 1982.
- [9] Jha, L.K edited (1997). Nature Resource Management Vol I, New Delhi: A.P.H Publishing Corporation.
- [10] Lalchungnunga. (1994). Mizoram Politics of Regionalism and National Integration, New Delhi: Reliance Publishing House
- [11] Rev. Lalchhuanliana- Mizoram Presbyterian Kohhran Chanchin (History of the Mizoram Presbyterian Church), Synod Literature and Publication Board, Aizawl, 2007, p. 19.

- [12] Lalrimawia (1995). Mizoram History and Cultural Identity, Guwahati and Delhi: Spectrum Publications
- [13] Lewin, T.H (1839) (reprint 2004). The Lushai Tracts of Chittagong and Dwellers Therein, Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute, p 134.
- [14] Lianzela, (1994). Economic Development of Mizoram, Guwahati and Delhi: Spectrum Publications.
- [15] Llyod. J.M Rev (1991). History of Church in Mizoram, Aizawl: Synod Publication.
- [16] Mackenzie, Alexander (1884) (reprint 1979). The North Eastern Frontier of India, New Delhi: Mittal Publications.
- [17] Maithani, B.P (2005). Shifting cultivation in North East India: Policy Issues and Options, New Delhi: Mittal Publications, p
- [18] McCall, A.C. 1980 (reprint 2008). The Lushai Hills District Cover, Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute, Department of Art and Culture.
- [19] Nag, Chitta Ranjan, (1998) Mizo Polity and Political Modernisation, New Delhi.
- [20] Nag, Chitta Ranjan (1993), The Mizo Society in Transition, New Delhi: Vikash Publishing House.
- [21] Nibedon, Nirmal (1980). Mizoram: The Dagger Brigade, New Delhi: Lancers Publishers.
- [22] Pachau, Joy & Schendel, W. Van (2015). The Camera as Witness: A Social History of Mizoram North East India, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.
- [23] Patnaik, Jagdish K. edited (2008). Mizoram: Dimensions and Perspectives, New Delhi: Concept Publishing House, pp 93-94
- [24] Rosanga, O. (July 2001). Economic factors leading to the Annexation of Mizoram by the British' in Historical Journal Mizoram, Vol II, Issue II. Aizawl: Mizo History Association.
- [25] Sadangi, Himangsu Chandra (2008). Emergent North East India A Way Forward, Delhi: Isha Books.
- [26] Sangkhima (1992). Mizos: Society and Social Change, Guwahati and Delhi: Spectrum Publications.
- [27] Shakespear, Col .J. (1912) (reprint 1983). The Lushai Kuki Clans. Delhi: Cultural Publishing House.
- [28] Shangpliang, Rekha M. (2010). Forests in the Life of the Khasis, New Delhi: Concept Publishing House
- [29] Singh, Daman (1996). The Last Frontier: People and Forests in Mizoram. New Delhi: Tata Energy Research Institute, pp 8,12
- [30] Singh, K.S. (ed) (1995). People of India, Mizoram, Vol. XXXIII, Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India
- [31] Thangtungnung, H. (2012). 'Social Organisations of Paite Society in Manipur', in Madhu Rajput (ed), Social and Cultural Stratification in North East India, New Delhi: Manak publications.
- [32] Thangtungnung, H. (2012). Social and Cultural Transformation in the Lushai Hill under the British Rule, a paper presented at the 33rd Annual Conference of NEIHA, Rajiv Gandhi University, Arunachal Pradesh.
- [33] Thirumal.P and Lalrozami (2010). 'On the discursive and material context of the first handwritten Lushai newspaper 'Mizo Chanchin Laishuih' in The Economic and Social History Review, Vol 47, Issue 3. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- [34] Verghese, C.G and Thanzawna, R.L (1997) A History of the Mizos, Vol I, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.