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Mizo women resistance against the British rule: with special reference to Ropuiliani

Dr. Phoibi Lalniropui Tuolor, Asst. Prof., Dept. of History, Handique Girls' College, Guwahati, Assam, India

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Abstract

This paper intends to highlight the Mizo women's contribution in resisting British colonialism in the Lushai Hills. Among Mizo women, Ropuiliani's contributions stand out as particularly impactful and prominent compared to others. Before the annexation of the Lushai Hills by the British, the Mizo society was governed by their chiefs whom they called 'Lal'. The Chief was the supreme authority in his village and as such enjoyed extensive political and military power. The immediate result of the colonial expansion in the Lushai Hills was an increase in widow chiefs. After the death of Chief Vandula, his widow Ropuiliani became the first female Chief in the history of Mizoram. She refused to recognize British colonial rule and thus was imprisoned, detained and died in the prison in January 1894. She emerged as one of the most courageous people in Mizoram who fought British aggression. This article thus tries to examine how women chiefs besides male chiefs played key roles in the political process of governing Lushai Hills and how they show resistance against colonialism. Primary as well as secondary sources based on historical studies will be used in writing the article.

Keywords: Mizo, Chiefs, women, colonialism, resistance.

Introduction

Northeast India witnessed some of the most intense resistance movements against British colonial rule, led primarily by the region's tribal communities. Despite the deeply patriarchal nature of these tribal societies, these uprisings were not exclusively male-led endeavours. Several female chieftains who were either widows of Chiefs or independent took up arms to defend their lands and sovereignty from colonial incursions. This article explores the role of such women leaders among the Lushai (Mizo) tribe with special reference to Ropuiliani, who emerged in the wake of their chieftain husbands, brothers, and sons being killed by British forces. It reconstructs the histories of these female chieftains, rebels, and warriors who not only commanded armies but also engaged in diplomatic negotiations with the colonial state. Their leadership temporarily disrupted the gendered power dynamics of their patriarchal societies. However, this did not bring about any lasting change in the patriarchal structure of their communities. Despite their remarkable resistance, their contributions remained largely unrecognized, absent from regional folklore and historical records, which instead celebrate the achievements of male chiefs.

This pattern is also evident in the historiography of popular struggles across other parts of India, where women's contributions were either overlooked or absorbed under the broader category of men. This not only rendered them invisible but also perpetuated the myth of women's passivity. As a result, it reinforced the belief that only men were capable of militant action, leadership, and influencing historical events—ultimately shaping the narrative that history was made solely by men.¹

Brief background of the Mizo

According to Linguistic Survey of India, the Mizo belong to the Tibeto-Burman group of the main Tibeto-Chinese race.² Mizo was erstwhile known in various names such as Kuki, Lushai and Chin. In recent years, the term 'Mizo' has gained popularity among the people as a way to foster a distinct identity and express their political aspirations. Mizo is not the name of a specific tribe or clan; rather, it is a collective term used to refer to all the tribes grouped under the Mizo identity in Mizoram.³

Prior to the British annexation of Mizoram in the late 19th century, each village functioned as an autonomous administrative unit, governed by a chief known as the "Lal." The Lal held absolute authority and operated in a dictatorial manner. A chief's influence was often gauged by the number of followers he commanded. Serving as the head of the village, the Lal fulfilled multiple roles — he was the leader in times of war, the owner of village lands, and the protector and caretaker of his people. He exercised executive powers and acted as the primary dispenser of justice. The chief's authority extended across all spheres of village life, including warfare, peace negotiations, shifting cultivation (jhuming), religious observances, and festivals. He even possessed the ultimate judicial power, including the ability to impose or revoke capital punishment.⁴

The Mizo society is a patriarchal society where male dominance is prevalent. As compare to recent time, the position and status of women in traditional Mizo society was not as equal to their male counterparts. As an old Mizo saying goes:

“Crab's meat is not counted as meat as women's word is not counted as word; but wife and bad fence can be changed, but unthreatened wife and unthreatened grass of the fields are both unbearable.”⁵

The above rich and layered metaphor saying reflects cultural or patriarchal attitudes towards women. Women were seen inferior and their opinions or voices were undervalued or not taken seriously. Women by customary law had no right to inheritance except *Thuam* (Sridhan/dowry) which she brought at the time of her marriage and even children belonged to the husband. In spite of all the gender inequality, it is interesting to note that how the female Chieftainesses mobilized their people, formed militias, and fiercely resisted British expansion.

The Mizo and British encounter

From the time they first settled in Mizoram, the Mizo people lived freely, without external rulers. Their chiefs held absolute authority over their subjects. When the British sought to claim their lands and impose control, the Mizo fiercely resisted. However, lacking advanced weaponry and strategic wisdom, they were ultimately unable to overcome their adversaries. Even after the British stationed an officer in Aizawl to govern the region, some chiefs continued to rise in defence of their freedom, though their efforts were suppressed.

Despite these challenges, the Mizo chiefs remained steadfast in their commitment to protecting their land and people, a testament to their admirable courage and leadership.⁶

The British undertook multiple military campaigns before ultimately subduing the Mizo territory. According to foreign writers, these expeditions were a response to frequent raids and incursions by the Mizos against neighbouring communities in the plains. However, many of these so-called raids were actually border disputes. Mizo oral traditions and some historians suggest that the primary motivation behind these raids on the Cachar Tea Gardens and Chittagong was the protection of their hunting grounds and forest resources. Hunting played a crucial role in Mizo society, both as a means of religious fulfilment and social advancement. Achieving the status of *Thangchhuah*, the highest social distinction, required hunting and collecting the heads of wild animals, this also held religious significance.⁷

As a result, defending their ancestral lands and hunting grounds was a matter of necessity. When the British began expanding tea plantations into their territories, particularly in the Cachar border regions, the Mizos could not stand by and allow their lands to be taken. Additionally, Mizo traditions sometimes required the burial of an enemy's head alongside a deceased chief, and pillaging enemies was a key way of acquiring essential tools and implements.⁸

When the British India government decided to establish a permanent presence in the Lushai Hills, their immediate priorities were pacifying the local population and developing transport and communication infrastructure. As was customary with British colonial rule, annexation was soon followed by the imposition of revenue collection. Consequently, after the successful expedition of 1889-90, the British introduced taxes and forced labour upon the Mizo people, sparking widespread resentment. These colonial policies of revenue extraction and coerced labour became the primary sources of unrest in the years that followed, leading to a series of uprisings led by Mizo chiefs.⁹

Lalnu Ropuiliani

Mizo women played an active role in resisting colonial rule in the Lushai Hills, with figures such as Pi Buki, Lalhlupuii, Rothangpuii, Vanhnuaithangi, Laltheri, Darbilhi, Neihpuithangi, Pawibawia Nu, Dari, Thangpuii, Pakuma Rani, Zawlchuaii, and many others making significant contributions. However, Ropuiliani has consistently been highlighted as the most celebrated figure in Mizo history. Her prominence is often linked to her lineage, as she came from a ruling chief's family, granting her a status above that of commoners. Her resistance to colonial rule is frequently attributed to the influence of both her father and her husband. This narrative, however, reflects colonial biases that wrongly portrayed Mizo women as passive and subordinate. Her individual agency and consciousness as a woman have often been overlooked. Ultimately, these collected narratives depict Ropuiliani through the lens of colonial patriarchy – an interpretation that has been reinforced by post-colonial ethnic patriarchy under the guise of 'Mizo patriotism.' While debates persist regarding the nature and impact of colonialism, a careful reassessment of colonial records alongside other sources can offer deeper insights into the gender dynamics of colonial Lushai Hills.¹⁰

According to Sangkima,

“There was not a single event or incident in which Ropuiliani was directly involved but she was involved in all the incidents for which successive operations were sent, for she controlled the situation.”¹¹

The investigation revealed that Lalthuama was in some way complicit in the murder of Lt. Stewart, which led the Government to question the loyalty of both Lalthuama and his mother, Ropuiliani, for a considerable period. It was believed that Lalthuama was heavily influenced by Ropuiliani, who exercised significant control over him, effectively acting as a remote authority guiding his actions.¹²

Captain John Shakespear, the first Superintendent of the British Lushai Hills advanced into Haulawng region in order to secure the neutrality of the villages. However, while he was on his tour to the Northern Haulawng chiefs, Ropuiliani, the Chieftainess of Denlung, was directly hostile to the British. Shakespear had written about her as follows:

“Her influence is directly hostile to us, as is only natural when it is considered that she is the daughter of one great chief who always opposed us, and the widow of another. Since her husband’s death she has seen his brothers becoming more and more friendly with us, and increasing their prestige by virtue of this alliance. So much so that I overlooked her entirely and attributed Lalthuama’s frequent faults to his own youthful folly. All the villages belonging to this group have been more or less troublesome, not actively hostile but passively obstructive. It has always been difficult to get tribute or labour from them”¹³

After the passing of Chief Vandula, his wife, Ropuiliani, assumed leadership and governed her people from the village of Ralvawng. Determined to defend Mizoram, she and her young son, Lalthuama, resisted British rule until the very end. While they were in Ralvawng, the British demanded coolies, chickens, and other supplies from her. Shakspear’s interpreter, Satinkhara of the Tuikuk sub-tribe, greatly frustrated Ropuiliani and eventually he was killed at the village of Dokhama, the grandson of Ropuiliani. This was the first indication of such resistance against the colonial rule and Shakspear was prepared for the combat. Shakespeare was well aware that Lalthuama’s stubborn nature and irritable demeanor stemmed from his mother’s influence. It was Ropuliani who orchestrated the concealment of Hnawncheuva, the one responsible for the murder of the interpreter, Satinkhara. In his report, Shakespear mentions:

“RopuiLieni could have arrested all the murderers, as is clearly shown by the fact that the moment she was captured she sent out orders to have Lancheyva caught, and he was brought in at once.”¹⁴

Ropuiliani remained unwavering in her refusal to pay any taxes imposed by the British throughout her life. In July 1892, Shakespear received reports that Ropuiliani, along with her son Lalthuama, Dokhara, and other allied chiefs, were planning an attack against him.¹⁵ In 1893, Captain Shakespear led a force of over 80 men to suppress and bring the villages of Ropuiliani and Lalthuama under British control. They sent a message demanding 30 guns, one gayal, 10 pigs, 10 goats, 20 chickens, and 100 mounds of rice, instructing them to deliver these supplies to the British camp by the Mat River. Mother and son were resolute in their refusal to comply with the demands. Instead of surrendering

what was asked, they chose to fight and swiftly prepared for battle. They even called upon the northern chiefs to join them in resistance.¹⁶

In March 1894, upon discovering their preparations, Capt. Shakespear launched a swift and unexpected attack on the villages of Lalthuama and Ropuiliani before the northern chiefs could arrive. They were captured, and all their weapons were seized. With the approval of W.J. Cunningham, Secretary to the Government of India, Ropuiliani and Lalthuama were imprisoned in Chittagong jail, where they were treated in accordance with their status as chiefs. They were even appointed as peons, receiving a monthly salary and benefits. Ropuiliani's life came to an end on January 3, 1895, at the age of 86. Her body was transported back to Mizoram; with her son Lalthuama granted freedom to accompany her remains.¹⁷ The capture of Ropuiliani and her son marked the end of resistance against the British, leading to the subjugation of most South Lushai Hills chiefs.¹⁸ Thus, the valiant Mizo chieftainess Ropuiliani, who had fiercely defended Mizoram with unwavering patriotism and resisted British rule until her last breath, was laid to rest in her own village of Ralvawng. Following the surrender of the Mizo chiefs, the British began implementing their colonization efforts. By 1895, they had fully taken control of the Chin Hills.

Conclusion:

Thus, both male and female chiefs played significant roles in governing the Lushai Hills. The many stories of women's struggles, negotiations, resistance, pain, sacrifices, and, most importantly, their contributions, often remain overlooked and relegated to the margins of history. According to Subhas Chatterjee in his book *Mizo Chiefs and Chieftaindom*, out of 104 recorded chiefs, many were female—either as widows of former chiefs or as independent leaders in Mizoram.¹⁹ While some writers attribute this to 'tribal patriarchy,' suggesting that women became rulers or chieftainesses by circumstance rather than by right, their influence in the political sphere remains undeniable. However, among Mizo women, Ropuiliani's contributions stand out as particularly impactful and prominent compared to others. Thus, though women from all classes resisted the colonial rule but Ropuiliani because of her revolutionary movement she emerged as one of the most courageous people in Mizoram who fought British aggression.

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