

Revisiting the *Boi* System of Lushai Hills

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This paper examines the *boi* system of Lushai Hills during the colonial period. It argues that bois are neither 'slaves' nor ordinary 'paupers', they are but bois after all. Despite a polemic debate on the subject it remains lively and vibrant. This paper intend to contribute not only in terms of the on-going debate but also in providing some original materials to substantiate the argument of the *boi* system that one finds in the Lushai Hills before and during the colonial period, which was neither slavery nor a charitable institution but bois. Overall, it argues that *boi* system is certainly one form of servitude, and substantially, it is neither a charitable institution nor slavery but contains the elements of both. The debate continues to centre on the issue of legal slavery which have been initially projected by the Christian missionaries. The colonial state defended the system in the name of preserving tribal 'customs' but deep into the controversy lies the colonial state vested interests in preserving a class of workforce. It divorced the *boi* system with that of slavery merely to protect their own interest although it recognised that the system was inhuman from the perspective of the 'civilised' society they purportedly proclaimed to introduce in the Lushai Hills.

Keywords: *Boi*, Lushai Hills, Lusheis, Chiefs, Slavery, Custom, Colonial State, Missionaries

*I didn't know that I was a slave
until I found out I couldn't do the things I wanted.*
-Frederick Douglass

Introduction

The *Boi* system in Lushai Hills was one of the most controversial issues on the debate on slavery during the colonial period. Different scholars have understood the system in different ways. Due to the combination of two set of human existence, the love and hate, within the *boi* system, between the oppressed slaves and the beloved children, it was often interpreted in different ways. Those who looked from the perspective of love and care eventually found it charitable and altruistic in nature whereas seeing from the perspective of other extremes such as the toils of workload, of lack of mobility, and the

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difficulty in getting liberty, found them to be no better than the slaves. Therefore, the study of *boi* system depends upon the way a particular scholar look at it from his chosen perspective. In this process, no consensus will be possible, and in fact, it is meaningless to seek for such agreement. Therefore, in spite of a number of works on *boi* system, the debate continues unabated. The debate centres around the issue of slavery: were the *bois* slaves or was the *boi* system a system of slavery? However, before we come into this aspect of the debate, it is significant that a brief description of the history of *boi* system be given.

Origin and evolution of *boi* system

The origin of *boi* system may be traced to the tradition of debt bondage. Guite felt that the ‘practice seems to have begun with the custom of debt bondage which gradually includes other groups of bonded labourers like war-captives, destitute, criminals and those who were bought’. He noted that Buchanan was, perhaps, the first colonial observer to notice *boi* system in Lushai Hills in 1798. Buchanan was told by five ‘Lang-ga’ (Maramas term for Kukis) men and two women that ‘they have slaves in the same manner as the Ma-ra-mas’ have. As per the Maramas system, one became ‘slave’ to anyone one was in debt. He remains his slave until the debt was paid off during which he had to provide free labour in the master’s field with some monthly allowance. He could not be sold by his master but he could move to another master if the latter paid his debts. Buchanan also noted that the wife often became slave for her husband’s debts and children for their parents (Guite, 2011; van Schendel, 1992: 89-90). If this was the system that prevailed in Lushai Hills earlier then we can see that a bonded debtor was in bondage with his labour for a fixed period of time, the labour being counted corresponds to the debt. This is the principal which still exists during the later period at least in theory but what one finds in the nineteenth century was certainly different. We can see that now the *bois* have to work and work for the master which is not counted as part of the price to buy his freedom. To buy his freedom the *bois* have to procure from other alternative sources which rarely came. Hence, the *bois* remained as *bois* throughout their life and the children of the *bois* now became *bois*.

For instance, Lewin in 1860s noted that the ‘residence of a powerful Chiefis generally surrounded by the houses of his slaves [*bois*], who marry and cultivate, enjoying undisturbed the fruits of their labour’ (Lewin, 1978: 132). However, it was John Shakespear, the first superintendent of Lushai Hills (1898-1905), who recorded the first detailed account of the *boi* system in Lushai Hills. He remarked that they lived in the chief’s house:

...ever since they were children and had been fed at his expense till they were able to contribute towards the labor of the household, and Saipuia (the chief) had given the man his wife. This form of *parental slavery* is a Lushai custom that I see no reason to interfere with. They are not captives, but merely people who from one cause or another have sought the shelter of the chief’s house; and in return for their keep they work in the chief’s jhooms & c.¹

We can see that what was considered a ‘parental slavery’ in the early 1890s was no more slaves in 1912 at the height of *boi* controversy between colonial state and Christian

missionaries. In his 1912 monograph Shakespear categorically wrote: 'Among the *Thados* and Chins real slavery used to exist, and men and women were sold like cattle. Among the Lushais this has never been the case, but there is a class of *Boi* who have been miscalled slaves by those ignorant of their real condition' (Shakespear, 1912: 45).

The coming into prominence of the Lushai *boi* system as we see in nineteenth century was contingent upon by certain pertaining economic and political situation in the Hills. Jhum cultivation was the mainstay of the Lushai society and was a labourious economy that requires both men and women. There was no other economic option left to orphan children and widow mothers. In such case they would invariably enter the chief's house or other richer family if there was no male relative of the fathers to look after these destitutes. This type of circumstance becomes prominent in case of crop failure, warfare and so on. Good harvest depended wholly on nature and the clemency of weather. A continuous and long period of monsoon may cause great hardship to people in general. However, an occasional visit of bamboo famines in the hills was perhaps most disastrous to this section of the hill population. The first known *mautam* (bamboo famine) occurred in 1861 and again reappeared in 1880. We found from the reports of colonial accounts that they were such a disastrous event in the hills where thousands of people had to temporarily come down to the plains for work and food. During the 1880s famine, the British government sent up large amount of food to the hills which were to be repaid by the hill people later. The worst situation was when there was no centralised authority like state to provide for any relief measures. It was under such circumstances that we have several accounts of parents selling 'their children and themselves for a meal or a small coin, and thus famine replenished the slave market'.² The only person who can lend support during such disaster was the chief. Therefore, many of the hapless families entered the chief's house to survive the disastrous event on condition that they become his *bois*.

This occasional hardship was compounded by the internecine warfare among the several Lushai chieftains throughout the nineteenth century. We have accounts of inter-tribal warfare, first among different chieftains and tribes such as Pois versus Lushais, then between the so-called 'Eastern' and 'Western' Lushais, then again between the so-called 'Northern' and 'Southern' Lushais which finally came to an end with the coming of 1880s bamboo famines. It was under such continuous warfare among the tribes in Lushai Hills that the number of *bois* shot up arithmetically.³ Attacks begot counter attacks and hence the mortality rate among the adult male members eventually increased rendering large number of hapless widows and orphans seeking help at the house of the chiefs. Women and children were usually the victims of warfare and raids. They were the ones who could not escape the surprised tactic of Lushai warfare, they lost their husbands, sons or fathers in the war, they were the ones who found maximum hardship after their working male members were killed and eventually were the ones who found it most difficult to buy their freedom once they enter *boihood*. Vanchhunga, in his statement before Fraser, noted that the chief's *bois* had 'tried their best to make the orphans and destitute slaves for their master, and once taken, some of them continued for three to four generations'.⁴

The 'hospitality' of the chiefs was not so much due to kindness. It was because of

his greed for making wealth out of the *bois* labour that many destitutes eventually found their home in the chief's house. From the *bois* the chiefs benefited by adding his income from their labour, marriage price of women *bois*, and price for their freedom. More importantly, a good number of male sections of *inpuichhung bois*, including those *inhrangbois* who formed his immediate retinues in war and peace, lived either in his house or set up their houses around his house as the fort. We have already noted that Lewin found the residence of a powerful Chief being always 'surrounded by the houses of his slaves, who marry and cultivate, enjoying undisturbed the fruits of their labour' (Lewin, 1978: 132). Hence, the chief's power and prestige largely depended on the number of *bois* he could afford. The profitability of holding *bois* was equally attractive to many other people as well. Shakespear remarked that the 'chiefs are not the only slaveholders; any man may take a person into his house and feed him in return for his work'.⁵ Besides, captives of war and raids belonged to the captor who might own, sell, kill or marry off as he pleased. McCulloch also noted that people become *bois* from 'sheer laziness' (McCulloch 1859). Thefts and murders naturally found their ultimate protection in *boihood* at the house of the chiefs. Though it seems to be a common practice, *boi* system did not come about easily; it involved a great deal of coercion on the part of *boi*-holders and was the last resort on the part of the people who entered *boi*-hood. A brief description of the *boi* system becomes pertinent here.

The *Boi* System

Shakespear classified the *bois* into three categories: *inpuichhung bois*, *chemsen bois*, and *tukluh bois*. *Inpuichhung boi* (*in*-house, *pui*-big, *chhung*-within) refers to those *bois* who live in the chief's big house. They were also called *lalchhungor chhungte bois*. Certain conditions often force persons to seek shelter in the chief's house. Shakespear noted that this category of *bois* 'consist of all those who have been driven by want of food to take refuge in the chief's house':

Widows, orphans, and others who are unable to support themselves and have no relatives willing to do so, form the bulk of this class of *boi* but it is not unusual, if a young widow remarries, for her second husband to insist on his predecessor's children being put into the chief's house, unless any of their father's relatives will take them. The *inpuichhung* are looked on as part of the chief's household and do all the chief's work in return for their food and shelter (Shakespear, 1912: 46).

He also specifically noted the works performed by this class of *bois*: 'The young men cut and cultivate the chief's jhum and attend to his fish traps. The women fetch up wood and water, clean the daily supply of rice, make cloths and weed the jhum, and look after the chief's children'.

Poverty was therefore one main reason that reduces persons to a state of dependence. The hill tribes were dependent solely on their labour for sustenance. This process was sometimes disturbed by elements such as war, calamities and crop failure that reduced people to a state of servitude. In the course of such hardship, the more poverty-stricken often seek help from the chief where the door of the 'big house' was always open. Illness was another reason that prompts a person to seek aid from people better

situated and there was hardly anyone more suitable to turn to than the chief, who was even considered divine. Thus, the sick and ill also sought out the chief's house in their difficulties. Raids and wars being a common occurrence in the hills, there was no lack of orphans and widows left by fathers and husbands. Many of these seek refuge with relatives, friends and neighbours, but this was not always the case with everyone. Relatives barely able to support their families sometimes refuse to entertain them. In such cases, their hopes were drawn towards the chief's house, who, they knew, would not and was not in a position to refuse anything to his subjects. Further, if a man was too poor to perform his religious obligations he might seek the help of the chief. In doing this however, a ceremony called 'saphun' was performed and the man and his family becomes part of the chief's household (Sangkima, 2004: 79). This *boi* then loses his former clan identity and adopts the chief's clan. Besides, there was a category of *bois* called 'Fatlam', meaning the youngest child of a *boi*. Such *bois* 'could not purchase their freedom' and 'they could not be redeemed' (Lalbiakthanga, 1978: 25; Vanchhunga, 1994: 44).

Shakespear also noted the rights and privileges of the *inpuichhung bois* in a somewhat favourable manner. First, he notes that 'a boi is at liberty to move from one chief's house to another' invariably but not necessarily to the chief's relations. Second, he also noted that the *bois* 'can only purchase freedom by paying one mithun or its equivalent in cash or goods signifying the fact that a *boi* can acquire property. He mentioned that the chief buy the male *boi* a wife and after three years in his house (six years if the wife is also a *boi*) the couple can set up their own house as *inhrang boi* (*in*: house, *hrang*: separate) and 'work for himself, but is still in some respect a boi'. However, this did not imply that he was free from the chief's service. Although he work for himself and his family, he had to pay many obligations such as 'the hind leg of every animal he killed, failure to do which, renders him liable to a fine of one mithun or its equivalent'. They run errands for the Chief, and offer help whenever required. He was to help the Chief with rice if he happens to run short of it. The only difference was his living in a separate house and cooking in separate pots. Regarding the children of the *inhrang bois* he found under some chiefs, excepting the youngest son, other children were entirely set free and in some other case, he found that all the children of *bois* were also *bois*. A female *boi* usually married in which the chief received the marriage price. If her marriage was to a non-*boi*, she (and all her children) got liberty from the chief. She may come back to the chief's house as *boi* or remain in her husband's house, or marry another man, as a free woman after her husband's death. In the latter case, the chief received her marriage price again. Speaking from the point of colonial state, Shakespear therefore concluded that *Innpuichhung bois* 'are by no means badly off, and the custom seems in every way suited to the circumstances of the case' in which many young man had risen to prominence (Shakespear, 1912: 46-47).

The second category of *boi* was called *Chemsen bois* (*chem*-dao, *sen*-red). These mainly include criminals, thieves, vagabonds and such people who fled to the chief's house to escape the vengeance of pursuers. Young and frivolous men often landed themselves in critical situations that forced them to flee from those they had wittingly or unwittingly angered. Finding no one else more powerful than a chief to protect them,

they usually run and hold the chief's *sutpui*-(the central post inside the chief's house supporting the roof) and beg for protection in exchange of service by becoming his *boi*. The pursuers could do nothing in this case as they could not fight the chief nor create enmity with him. Shakespear noted:

Murderers closely pursued by the avengers of blood rushed into the chief's presence and saved their lives at the expense of their own or their children's freedom. Debtors unable to pay their creditors sought the chief's protection and released them from their debts on condition that they and their children became *boi*. Thieves and other vagabonds avoided punishment by becoming the chief's *bois* (Shakespear, 1912: 47-48).

Shakepear also noted that '*Chemsen bois* do not live in the chief's house or work for him. Their position is similar to that of the *inhrang boi*, but all their children are considered *boi* to the same extent as their parents. The chiefs generally take the marriage price of the daughters of such a *Boi*' (Shakespear, 1912: 48).

The third category of *bois* was called *Tuklut bois* (*tuk*-promise, *lut*-enter). These *bois* were those who, in times of war, deserted the losing side and joined the winning chief with a promise of becoming his *bois*. Besides themselves entering *boi*hood, this category of *bois* also pledge the service of their descendants if they were to receive protection and shelter (Malsawma, 2002: 38). Shakepear again noted of *tuklut bois*:

These are persons who during war have deserted the losing side and joined the victors by promising that they and their descendants will be *boi*. A *tuklut boi* can purchase his freedom for a *mithan*, and if there are three or four persons in one household one *mithan* will release them all. As a rule the daughters of the *tuklutbois* are not considered *bois*. A *tuklut boi* does not live in the chief's house, and is in most respects in the same position as an *inhrang boi* (Shakespear, 1912: 48).

Of the three types of *bois*, the *Chemsen* and *Tuklutbois* were not recognised by the British administration as there was no legal sanction for such practices and were fast dying out anyway for want of fresh recruits which, with the Colonial administration's prohibition, raids became difficult and the class mentioned decreased in number. It was therefore, over the *Inpuichhung bois* that a controversy arose between the colonial state and the Christian missionaries.

The *Boi* Controversy: State vs. Missionary

There was a heated controversy over the question of *boi* during the colonial period. It centres around the issue of slavery: Whether *boi* system was slavery or not. The point is that if *boi* system is a slavery system, it should be invariably abolished as slavery was banned in British Empire. Two groups of people therefore emerged, both reading the nature of *boi* system from their own perspective and deriving different conclusions. The first view, represented by the Christian missionaries and Anti-Slavery lobbies, felt that *bois* were slaves and *boi* system was but a system of slavery. The second view, represented by the colonial state, felt that it was just a social custom and not slavery in its essence and contents.

The colonial state's standpoint was extended by the Superintendent of Lushai Hills, Maj. H.W.G. Cole. Maj. Cole extended seven points to refute the missionary's argument that *bois* are slaves:

1. He contended that Messrs. Savidge and Lorrain admitted that the use of the word 'slave' against *boi* was 'unfortunate', and 'pauper' might have been a more suitable term.
2. *Bois* are persons who 'agrees to serve a chief for consideration or because he or she is unable to support himself'.
3. Any *boi* can discharge his obligations for a sum of Rs. 40/- or equivalent, for one individual, and this sum covers all the members of the same family.
4. The service rendered by the *bois* are 'practically identical with the ordinary every day work of a Lushai i.e. the *bawis* cultivate *jhums* and perform household duties and the chief in return provides them with necessities of life'.
5. 'There is no restraint' against the *bois*. '*Bawis* have the same freedom as anyone else in the village'.
6. 'They are never confined'; they go to the fields, visit the bazaars and are according to Lushai custom permitted to transfer their obligations to another chief.
7. It is impossible for a Lushai to tell who is a *boi* and who is not except by asking him or her.

With these seven points Cole argued in clear terms that *bois* are not 'slaves' nor was it a 'wrongful restraint' and 'wrongful confinement' under Indian Penal Code. Hence, instead of being an illegal practice, he contended that it was recognized by the Government of India as a lawful and 'a well-established Lushai custom'.⁶ Thus in the name of 'custom' the *boi* system was exonerated from its association with slavery.

To Shakespear, the first Superintendent of Lushai Hills and who lived in the Hills for fifteen years, and who had earlier called the system as 'parental slavery', the missionaries argument that *bois* were slaves was now considered by him as 'nonsense' and 'rubbish', and the abolition of *boi* system would be a 'height of folly' and 'unwise from every point of view'. He extended this observation during the height of the controversy, and later in his monograph. After briefly describing the *boi* system in detail, he comes to conclude that:

To call this system slavery is simply nonsense. It is a most sensible way of providing for the destitute of the community, orphans, widows, and those who are in great want are provided with shelter, food and clothing and initiated into work as if they were the chief's children and in return they give their labour, doing no more than if they were living in their parent's house and at any time they can terminate the engagement by a not-exorbitant payment. When further you consider that it is open to any *bawi* who quarrels with his chief to remove himself to any other chief's house, you see at once that the ill treatment of a *bawi* is extremely likely to occur and that the bargain is not at all unfavourable to the *bawi*.⁷

To substantiate his argument he boasted that he was perhaps the oldest European inhab-

itant in Lushai Hills then and hence his knowledge about the *boi* was most authoritative:

I spent 15 years among the Lushais, I began my acquaintance with them as independent tribes in Lungleh. I ended it when they had become the most peaceful hill tribe in the whole province. In Aijal I have lived in their houses and spent many hours in familiar conversation with Lushais of all grades of society and since I left Lushai hills I have seen most of the hill people of Manipur and some of those in Naga Hills, so that I think without being accused of being boasting, I may lay claim to knowing what I am talking about and I unhesitatingly say that it is simple rubbish to speak of the [*boi*] system as slavery.⁸

He ridiculed the idea of interfering in the working of the system and questioned that 'if this system is interfered with, how are destitutes to be supported?' He had 'seen many old and decrepit women living on for years in a chief's house, doing absolutely no work' and warned that such sterile population would become 'a burden on the State' if the system is interfered with. Besides, he also noted that he 'met many bawis who have risen to be the most important persons in the village after the chief and I have no hesitation in saying that the system is well adapted to the people'.

On the question of abolition of the *boi* system, he remarked in authoritative way, and noted, that:

It would be most unwise to abolish it—unwise from every point of view, unwise for the people especially, and unwise for the Government. Every act which lowers the prestige of the chiefs is harmful. We must govern through the chiefs, and in order that the Lushais may live happily, strong chiefs looked up to by their people are all important. The superintendent and his assistants can supervise the chiefs and control them and prevent them from oppressing their people, but cannot govern the hills without the chiefs. In this connection you must remember that every Lushai can move from an unpopular chief to that of some more benign ruler, so that an unwise ruler soon has no subjects. If you meddle with the system on which Lushai society has been built up and bring the chief into disrepute and reduce them to mere headmen, you lay up for yourselves and for the Lushais a terrible amount of trouble.⁹

On the other side, the anti-*boi* system lobby viewpoints are extended by a radical missionary Dr. Fraser who worked among the Lushais as the mission's doctor for the promotion of Christian ministry among the 'heathens' and 'demon' worshippers. His main argument against the *boi* system was later clearly stated in his book *Slavery on British Territory* (Fraser, 1913: 5).

That this custom is really a system of slavery is evident from the following features: the slaves are bound to serve the chiefs for life unless ransomed by the payment of ransom money, generally forty rupees per family (£2 13s.4d). Children of slaves are bound to serve for life, also their descendants, generation after generation.

When a slave moves from one village to another they are still slaves for life to the new chief on whose land they settle. By a new rule recently laid down by Colonel Cole then

superintendent of Lushai Hills, the new chief is at once liable to the old chief for the ransom money. This is more clearly buying and selling of slaves than the old Lushai custom, under which the new chief was not liable to the old chief, but the slave changed his master without money being due from the new chief.

The bawi system is a system under which British subjects in Lushai are deprived of their right to liberty and justice is evident from a perusal of the following statements of slaves, evangelists, chiefs, missionaries and others.

Besides bondage for life other evil features are seen:

- 1) The inhumane separation of mother from her child.
- 2) The separation of husband and wife.
- 3) The separation of relatives.
- 4) Intimidation, bodily hurt.
- 5) Temptation to immorality and sin.
- 6) Opposition to slaves becoming Christians.
- 7) The selling and buying of people.

Therefore, he insisted that the *boi* system should be abolished once and for all. For this he appealed to the district administration of Lushai Hills, then to Assam Government under which Lushai Hills came, to Government of India, to other missionaries in Northeast, its mother organization in England, to Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society, to His Majesty of England, and so on. For his radical stance against the *boi* system and against administration for not abolishing it, Dr. Fraser earned the contempt of the administration for going beyond his 'calling'. In the name of public 'peace' and 'tranquility' Dr. Fraser was forced to confine his mission's works within the radius of Aizawl and its surroundings west of Sonai river and compelled to serve the people *only* on those activities he was called for, to treat the sick and diseased for God's ministry. He was strictly warned not to interfere in any subject related to administration, including the custom and traditions of the local people such as *boi* system. Despite several representations made against his confinement, no relief came forth so that he had to finally leave the Lushai Hills, dejected as he was, but only to launch another battle that later compelled the government to change its mind.¹⁰ *Boi* system was finally abolished in 1927.

The straight question to be dealt with here is why the colonial state had to take a sort of u-turn on the question of *boi* at this point of time. We know that most of the earlier British officers, including Lewin, Edgar, McCabe, Shakespear and so on took the view that there was slavery system in Lushai Hills in which they accepted that *bois* were one of them. They were described in different ways such as 'slave', 'paternal slavery', 'serf' and so on. When Messrs. Savidge and Lorrain translated the word *boi* as 'slave or retainer', no one complained noting the fact that the system was accepted as slavery. Perhaps Dr. Fraser's appearance on the scene was an odd moment when the colonial state was fast busying over different projects in the hills such as the construction of roads, bridges and other government establishments. Large labour force was required for all these projects. For instance, from 1898-1906 the total labour forces employed for the construction of

various government projects were given as 6.5 lakh (6,55,564 labour).¹¹ Since *bois* were the major chunk of these labour forces who were most willing to work for the government for the petty wages, it became obvious that the administration wanted to continue the practices. Besides, we have already seen that most district officers shared the view of Major John Shakespear who had served in the Hills for the longest period of time in which the reputation of the chiefs - power and wealth lies in the number of *bois* he possessed. The abolition of *boi* system would be detrimental to the chief's power and authority which would be in turn harmful to the colonial state's administration. He openly warned that any act that lowers the prestige of the chiefs would be 'harmful' and since they ruled 'through the chiefs' their reputation should be always kept alive. 'If you meddle with the system on which Lushai society has been built up and bring the chief into disrepute and reduce them to mere headmen', he warned, 'you lay up for yourselves and for the Lushais a terrible amount of trouble'.¹² This was the zest on which the colonial state defended the *boi* system, which they eventually abolished when the pressure was insurmountable.

Postcolonial Debate on *Boi* System

It was within the context of the colonial *boi* controversy that the trends of writing in postcolonial period has been continued and the debate on the subject went on without any tangible solution. The legacy of the two dominant views prevail even today without having any other option to add. The first group, taking the view of the missionary dispositions, see the *boi* system not as slavery system but something akin to 'domestic servants', 'personal attendant', 'dependent' and so on. They felt that to the Lushais the term 'boi' or 'bawi' means 'pauper' or destitutes which connotes the altruistic nature of *boi* system. They found that the chief's house was instead of being the hall of bondage the 'house of charity' where all the poor, destitute and hapless seek refuge. It was under the 'paternal care' of the chiefs that this class of *bois* received all they wanted for in life as a regular and common member of the society. They work on the same lines as any other people within their physical capacity, shared various perquisites common to most chiefs' establishment, and got married as others.¹³ This is the view shared by British colonial state and its successive officers in the region during the colonial period causing major controversy across the colonial world. However, there are some problems in the argument given by this group of writers. *First*, while looking into the charitable side of the *boi* institution the other side of the system was either deliberately ignored or considered insignificant. *Second*, most of these scholars see the system taking the reference point in the classical practice of slavery of the western world, hence *boi* system would obviously not fit into the system.

Third, despite emphasizing on the charitable side of the institution they also invariably recognize the fact that the position of *bois* in the society was different from other people in a big way. For instance, Varghese and Thanzawna talks about a mithun for the price of freedom or changing master chief, that the bride price of their daughters is the perquisite of the chiefs, and that children born from them invariably become *boi* on the principle of what they called 'physical surrender without choice' (Vergheese & Thanzawna, 1997: 39-41). A part from bringing out this fact in clear terms they refuse to talk about

the *difficulties* the *bois* had found in getting their liberty, say, payment of one mithun for a *boi*. When the fruits of all his labour was reaped by the chiefs, from what extra source of income would the *boi* buy his freedom? Hence, the *bois* continue to be *bois* and worst their children continue to remain as *bois* till they were emancipated during the colonial period. In fact, they recognized that the advent of British colonialism heralded the emancipation of generation of *bois*'bondage, causing great hardship to the chiefs. In fact, logic applies that if the chiefs lost much of their prestige with the abolition of *boi* system, as all of them clearly recognized, it makes sense that these chiefs would do anything not to liberate the *bois* once they entered the chief's house. In this context, the wide doors of the chiefs were but the gateway to the hell of bondage and servitude.

It was from the critical argument given against the notion of altruism in *boihood* that some scholars went to the extent of calling the *boi* system as 'slavery' system. They felt that the *bois* were but 'slaves' and the *boi* institution as institution of slavery. No doubt, the *bois* were treated well by the chiefs as part of his extended family but they argued what the beauty of *boihood* was when one lost his freedom of movement and of choices as common man, lost his family, kinship and society, of customs, rituals and ceremony as a member of his community, lost the freedom to reap the fruits of his hard labour, and lost the opportunity to earn for their liberty.¹⁴ The *boi* system certainly substantially shows that the *bois* were bound to the soil just as we see the European serfs of the High Middle Ages. They lost their family and kinship, and community; they were bound to the chiefs and were invariably absorbed within that chief's family as part of his extended family. A part from what he needs for his subsistence survival all his earnings belong to the so-called 'paternal' chiefs whose wealth and prestige much depend on the labour and support of these *bois*. Under such situation there was no chance for the *bois* to buy their freedom. We have evidences to show that even if the *bois* got sufficient amount to purchase their freedom during the early colonial period (which was fixed at one mithun or forty rupees) it was the chiefs who engineered several means to refuse them any freedom.

Besides, *bois* made up the lowest strata of society from the social and spiritual perspectives. They had no homes or property of their own, no identity, as they were often considered as part of the chief's family although they did not truly form a part of the latter's family. Society looks at them simply as dependents even if they become influential as the chief's aide. They remained *bois* unless they were officially liberated. They could neither take part in important social functions as ordinary persons nor play significant roles in religious ceremonies. They had to do things when others were home and so on. All these reduced the *bois* to the lowest strata of society.¹⁵ S/he got married, no doubt. S/he lived in separate house with his family, again no argument. He may work independently, still no controversy. But the fact is that he continues to remain a *boi* unless he could buy the freedom of his family. He might be, after hard work, able to buy his own freedom but all his family members would remain *bois* unless he pay for each of them, a herculean task of impossibility in the situation the *bois* found themselves under bondage. For all these reason, it was felt that *boi* system was but a slavery system, as if it was the only alternative explanation for the *bois*.

Indrani Chaterjee, for instance, felt that *boi* system was 'a relationship of master

and slave' (Chatterjee 2006). She looks at issues such as the feeding techniques of chiefs that transformed *bois* into slaves who later became useful 'in the conjunction of savours that later resulted in a peculiar circulation of bodies and cash between local chiefs, Christian missions and colonial public works'. To her, *bois* were real slaves who had no identity, who lose their clans by adopting the chief's clan and religion and in doing so, lose even their own beings. Regarding the meaning of the word *boi* and government's decision of changing its meaning, she viewed it as a simple denial of the existence of slavery in the hills or a policy of 'not calling a slave a slave'. She dismissed it as an 'unsettlement' of language which was, and had remained, an important historical factor in the politics of dispossession and power. But the original analytic remains not language per se, but the politics that simultaneously weighted languages down and vaporized them. To her, refusal of 'slavery' is another way of repeating the acts of dispossession all over again. Lawmsanga also felt that 'bawis are slaves'. He argues that J. H. Lorrain's inability to reduce the meaning of *boi* to mean 'pauper' or 'retainer' but concluded to the term 'slave' in his first Lushai Dictionary suggest that *bois* are but slaves (Lawmsanga, 2010: 111). There are a few more scholars who felt that *boi* system is a 'mild form of slavery' or having a 'tinge of slavery' but not slavery in itself (Kipgen, 1997: 73). But can there be other explanations?

Concluding Remarks: Can there be *Boi* for the *Bois*?

Cannot there be a *boi* in the *boi* system? In other words, can there be a *boi* system without the term *boi*? This is the road less trudging. A *boi* is a *boi* after all; no other foreign term can satisfy the system in totality. The *boi* system should be seen from its own setting and the context in which it was founded. This road is not necessarily the middle path to the two extremes. It is a system which has its own tempo, its own rhythm, and its own history. Certainly, it is one form of servitude and this state of bondage is called *boi* or *boi* system. There is no good reason to rationalize it as either charitable institution or slavery. Substantially, it has the elements of both but it can never be purely anyone of them; it is neither a charitable institution nor a form of slavery. It is something else; it is a *boi* system that does not need any translation or transliteration. For translation of this type of practice into some existing system, in a completely different context, would be to do great injustice to the system that flourished at one point of time. This is because the definition of *boi* system with some existing system elsewhere or translation of its meaning into foreign tongue would involve good amounts of commission and omission. Such exercise should be as far as possible avoided. To meet the needs of *boi* system one must, therefore, necessarily go for the local, the real, the authentic, instead of adopting other terms. To understand the *boi* system from its own setting it is significant that *boi* should be called *boi*, nothing more, nothing less. It is one form of bondage in which both the elements of philanthropy and slavery blended together in a peculiarly Lushai's way.

Notes

1. Mizoram State Archive, Aizawl (hereafter ASA), 'Official Tour Diary of John Shakespear': Diary for the week ending 20 June 1891, in Memo of Offg. Commr.

Chittagong, 29 June 1891.

2. Assam State Archives, Dispur, (hereafter ASA), Political Department, Political (A), April 1914: Letter No. 2138, 'The Anti- Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society to India Office', 8 July 1913.

3. See for details of these warfare in Lushai Hills in Mackenzie, *North- East Frontier*, pp. 419-420; Shakespear, *Lushei Kuki Clans*, pp. 7-8; *Official Handbook on the Lushais*, pp. 18-29.

4. As cited in Chatterjee and Eaton (2006: 302).

5. West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata, Political Proceedings, August 1893, Nos. 4-6, File No. L/49 (1-3): *Administration Report of South-Lushai Hills*, 1892-93, p. 18.

6. ASA, Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, (hereafter GEBA), Political Department, Confidential (A), March 1911, Nos. 1-21, pp. 2-3: 'Note' by HWG Cole, Superintendent of Lushai Hills, 31 Jan. 1910.

7. ASA, GEBA, Political Department, Confidential (A), March 1911, Nos. 1-21, pp. 36-37: 'Note on the Lushai Custom regarding *Bawi*', by John Shakespear, 12 Dec. 1910.

8. ASA, GEBA, Political, Confidential (A), March 1911, Nos. 1-21, p. 37: 'Note on the Lushai Custom regarding *Bawi*', by John Shakespear, 12 Dec. 1910.

9. ASA, GEBA, Political, Confidential (A), March 1911, Nos. 1-21, p. 37: 'Note on the Lushai Custom regarding *Bawi*', by John Shakespear, 12 Dec. 1910.

10. For details of what actually conspired between Dr. Fraser and the Government, see ASA, GEBA, Political, Confidential (A), Proceedings of March 1911, Nos. 1-21; Sept. 1911, Nos. 34-37; and June 1912, Nos. 3-18.

11. MSA, Aizawl: Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Judicial Department, Pol-A, July 1907, Carton Box (CB)- 27, General Department, No. 335, 1907.

12. ASA, GEBA, Political, Confidential (A), March 1911, Nos. 1-21, p. 37: 'Note on the Lushai Custom regarding *Bawi*', by John Shakespear, 12 Dec. 1910.

13. See for instance, Verghese & Thanzawna, (1997: 39-41); Sangkima, (2004: 18).

14. See for instance, Chatterjee, 'Slaves, Souls and Subjects'; Lawmsanga, 2010.

15. On this aspect, see for instance, Vanlaldika, 2003.

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