

Roluahpuia, *Nationalism in the Vernacular: State, Tribes, and the Politics of Peace in Northeast India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023

Reviewed by George Chakma

Isaiah Berlin, one of the finest historians of ideas, on nationalism once wrote: “There was one movement which dominated much of the nineteenth century in Europe and was so pervasive, so familiar, that it is only by a conscious effort of the imagination that one can conceive a world in which it played no part: It had its partisans and its enemies, its democratic, its, aristocratic, and monarchist wings, it inspired men of action and artists, intellectual elites and the masses...” (Berlin, 1968, p. 337). Of course, Berlin was specifically talking about the European condition, but nationalism as a socio-cultural-political phenomenon has taken shape in almost every nook and corner of the world. Berlin’s comments succinctly describe the nature of nationalism and the role it plays in shaping modern polities and identities. The northeastern region of India has been no exception. The winds of modernity have caused (sub?) nationalist groups here as well to ideate their respective poetics and sensibilities of national identity and nationalist politics. The case of Mizo nationalism presents to us as one of the textbook examples of modern invention of a national identity and the playing out of nationalist politics, yet it has not grabbed the attention of many scholars. Roluahpuia’s book “Nationalism in the vernacular: state, tribes, and the politics of peace in northeast India” is a timely intervention that has the potential to become a seminal work.

Roluahpuia sets off with a quintessential chapter on the ‘tribal question’ in India vis-a-vis the concern of nation building following the departure of the British colonisers from the Indian subcontinent. His focus while broadly is the tribals of all of India, more specific concern is the tribals of the northeast and the Mizos. He provides a historical context to the opposing propositions put forth by the integrationists and the isolationists (also known as the Ghurye-Elwin Debate). The debate between the two groups dominated the discourse during the early years of independent India with regards to the appropriate approach the Indian state ought to take towards the tribals of the country. The issue was hotly debated by the Constituent

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assembly. A useful primer on the quest of the Indian state to integrate the northeastern region and the diverse tribes, the chapter is concluded with the argument that integrationist agenda that is dominantly in line with the state's own terms has instead caused more alienation to the tribal groups in the northeast. The subsequent chapter gives a detailed historical account of the formative years of Mizo nationalism. He traces the formation of the Mizo Union (MU), the very first political party of the Mizos to the realization of Mizo political consciousness and the consolidation of a distinct Mizo identity. The emergence of an educated class among the Mizos, that challenged the rule of the traditional chiefs who were in cahoots with the firstly the British colonisers then subsequently the Deputy commissioner (read Assam and Indian state). The momentous role of party *hla* (songs) in this regard is inexplicably significant. In the following chapter he further substantiates the inseparable role of the *hlas* by providing examples of how the songs inspired commoners to actively participate in political movements, while developing romantic ideations on Mizo nationhood or *hnam*. He beautifully captures the poetics of national imagination and the playing out of it on the street. This chapter titled 'the Mizo National Front and the vernacularisation of Nationalism', is arguably the most important chapter of the book. From the invention of the Mizo nation from the diverse sub-tribes, the standardization of Mizo language is discussed. In the process the earlier more commonly spoken language called Duhlian is pushed to the sideline. The subsequent sections study the emergence of the Mizo National Front as the torch bearer of Mizo nationalism as a consequence of state's step motherly treatment towards the Mizos during *mautam* (famine) and the imposition of alien Assamese language. The penultimate and the final chapter offer intimate account of the politics that transgressed during the years of the armed insurgency: from the romanticized resistance to the bloodbaths, the fratricides, to the bombings by the Indian Air Force. He further details the challenges to the conceptualization and practice of Mizo nationalism that emerged not only from external forces but also from tribals groups within Mizoram - groups that were either excluded or secluded themselves from the umbrella identity of Mizo like the Hmars, Chakmas, Brus, Lais and others. Overt violence ended with the signing of an accord in 1986, that eventually came to be known as the Mizo accord. The Mizo hills finally relished on the peace it desperately deserved.

In the words of the author, the book started off as a PhD project then subsequently published as a book. The effort of his extensive fieldwork and immersion into the subject owing to his identity are apparent and gives the book a delightful personal touch. The book can be read as a contribution to firstly knowledge on the northeast, more specifically on Mizoram, and secondly as theoretical expansion to the corpus of knowledge on nationalism studies. Roluahpuia took inspiration from Lucia Michelutti conceptualization of the 'vernacularisation of democracy' in understanding 'the long-term process of vernacularisation' of Mizo nationalism (p. 6) and nomenclating the book itself. While books and other works on sub-nationalisms within the northeast like Assamese nationalism, Naga nationalism etc. are available, well researched works, written in English on Mizoram or Mizo nationalism are few and far between. This work stands out and hence can prove to be a seminal work in this

regard. Other significant works on the subject include Joy Pachuia's works on Mizo identity. However, with his specific focus on the subject of Mizo nationalism, Roluahpuia's work is arguably the first of its kind. His study on the role of vernacular languages, and other endemic processes like the role of party *hla* helps us understand how phenomenon like nationalism which is widely considered a derivative ideology took roots in a tribal society like amongst the Mizos. The sense of collectivity among the members of the Mizo society can be compared with that of any nation in the west that are often exemplified as textbook cases of 'imagined communities.' So much so that he makes a case against the rather reductionist popular trend of equating the MNF with Mizo nationalism itself. He argues that Mizo nationalism is more cultural than ideological and is much more than an elite conspiracy. Not just mass participation but influence of mass culture characterized this particular nationalist movement (p. 49). In this sense, Mizo nationalism is both, similar and dissimilar to nationalisms elsewhere in the world. As to what part of Mizo nationalism is exactly vernacular, Roluahpuia argues that the relationship between orality and nationalist politics, and the participation of ordinary people characterize the said vernacularity. Oral (in the form of vernacular language and politico-cultural tropes like party *hla*) he says is irrepressible by the state, an understanding he draws from James Scott (p. 134).

Roluahpuia is right to lament that there has been hardly 'any real effort to approach the Mizo case within the studies of nationalism' (p. 9). His insights into the case offer valuable learning points to all who are either distantly interested in either Mizo society or nationalism studies or both. However, there are some areas where one can contest him. The Mizo case is far from being an exception. The case of orality through the party *hla*s rather than being a theoretical disjuncture is consistent with existing theoretical explanations. Nationalism wherever it arrives takes distinctive forms, while at the same time adhering to the elemental theoretical aspects. In the same vein, Mizo society went through the elemental historical changes before its becoming of a 'nation'. The advent of an educated class that challenged traditional rule, the invention of a pan identity, culture, and history (for instance through party *hla*s), and the identification of a national goal. An inevitable ramification of the unleashing of certain forces in the process is the need for an eternal enemy (or more) who is most times an 'outsider'. It could be the British colonisers, or the Indian state. Post the end of overt confrontation between the Mizo nationalist and the Indian state, minority tribal groups within Mizoram like the Brus and the Chakmas have been identified as some sort of enemies of the Mizo nation and defined as 'outsiders' if not in its philosophical conceptions, in the discursive reality. This has prompted, many policy initiatives by the state government that are glaringly against the interest of these minorities. The Mizo civil society organizations like the Young Mizo Association (YMA), Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP) and others have been far ahead of and more radical than the government in creating discourses on insider/outsider. Roluahpuia's book contains some of the historical explanations to some of these contemporary realities. Today Mizo nationalism is all pervasive and can be best understood as the Mizo rendition of what Perry Anderson termed 'the Indian ideology': 'the Mizo ideology.' The book is an honest attempt at offering an analysis of the otherwise less discussed phenomenon of Mizo nationalism.

Reference

Berlin, I. (1968). *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*. New York: The Viking Press.