

## Searching for the Ratu Hospital: Dreams and Judaism in the Imagining of Mizo Nationalism

By Myer Samra

As much as the emergence of Judaism in northeast India is a by-product of Christian missionary activity in the region,<sup>1</sup> it is also an outgrowth of the ethno-nationalist aspirations of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo people (the "CHIKIM"<sup>2</sup>), whose historical range straddles the states of Manipur and Mizoram in India and Chin State in Burma (Myanmar), with outlying populations in the neighboring Indian states of Assam, Nagaland, and Tripura, the Arakan region of Burma (now the Rakhine State), and the Chittagong Hills of Bangladesh. Such nationalist aspirations arose in the wake of British occupation from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century in each of the territories inhabited by these people and have continued to evolve in the successor states to the British Empire in India.

In this article we shall be examining the experience of one individual, a woman from Mizoram, whom I shall refer to by the pseudonym Mawii (pronounced Moy-ee), in its social and historical context to see the factors that led to her adoption of the Jewish religion. In Mawii's case, the connection between her nationalist feelings and Judaism is mediated by a dream, interpreted by her and her friends as a revelation. For Mawii it is an honor, perhaps a sign of grace, to have been chosen to receive such a message.

In the Western world, we generally regard dreams as private matters, of little consequence except for the psychological well-being of the dreamer. Mawii's case illustrates the relationship between the ambient culture and the individual dreamer as a social being, with the individual and the culture each contributing to the shaping of the other.<sup>3</sup> As isolated as a person may seem while asleep and dreaming, Mawii's experience demonstrates the impact of society on what is dreamt and how it is interpreted.<sup>4</sup> By recounting her experiences to other Mizos who listen and learn from her story, Mawii in turn contributes to the shaping of the broader culture, affirming beliefs she shares with a small but substantial segment of the population. In this way, the dream itself is transformed from being simply a private matter into a social phenomenon, relevant to questions of identity, nationalist aspirations, and spiritual concerns that have confronted the people of Mizoram and their congeners in adjoining territories.

I met Mawii in Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram, a few days before the Jewish festival of Passover in 1992. Mawii had come to consult with Gideon Rei, who at the time styled himself as the "Chief Chazzan" and served as spiritual guide to the "Benei Menashe" congregations in Mizoram. "Benei Menashe" is the term by which the followers of Judaism in the region identify themselves, indicating a belief that they are the descendants of the biblical tribe of Manasseh.<sup>5</sup>

Mawii sought advice from Gideon Rei as to how she should go about celebrating the festival. With Gideon's assistance as interpreter, I asked Mawii about herself and how she came to join the Jewish community. She was happy, indeed keen, and proud to recount her story. Given that Mawii has lived all her life in Mizoram, we shall be focusing on conditions in that state, while also touching upon developments elsewhere in the CHIKIM world, particularly in Manipur, where there has similarly been a significant move toward Judaism.

## Mizoram

Mizoram, which became India's 23rd state in February 1987, is a small territory in northeast India, wedged between Bangladesh to the west, the state of Manipur to the north, and Burma to the east. Located around latitude 24° north and longitude 93° east and covering an area of 21,087 square kilometers, most of its land consists of a range of hills running north to south (average height 900 metres above sea level), with the highest peak, Phawngpui or the Blue Mountain, rising to a height of 2,165 meters.<sup>6</sup> Because of its altitude, Mizoram enjoys a pleasant, mild climate, with temperatures ranging between 11°C and 29°C. Heavy rainfall averaging 208 centimeters per annum gives it a lush, verdant landscape.<sup>7</sup>

It is easy to overlook Mizoram, which was known as the Lushai Hills District until 1952: its population of less than one million constitutes a minute fragment of the one billion citizens of India. As with much of northeast India, Mizoram's inhabitants are racially distinct from the majority of Indians, being of Mongoloid appearance and speaking a language that belongs to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. The people belong to that coterie of tribes which F. K. Lehman designates "the Northern Chin."<sup>8</sup> Altogether there are over two million people, belonging to no less than forty-five identifiable "tribes" of "Chin," speaking related but distinct dialects. Many of these dialects are mutually intelligible, while more distant communities cannot understand one another, even though their languages contain numerous words of common origin.<sup>9</sup>

The term "Chin" employed by Lehman is the general designation for these tribes used by the British in Burma. In India, the term "Kuki" was used to refer to members of this set of tribes. Neither term has had widespread support among the people themselves since both have pejorative connotations. In the mid-nineteenth century, John W. Edgar, who served in the administration of Bengal, observed "I have never found any trace of a common name for the tribe among them although they seem to consider different families as belonging to a single group, which is certainly co-extensive with what we call the Kookie tribe."<sup>10</sup> The people of Mizoram were known to the British as "Lushai Kukis" prior to their adoption of the term "Mizo" for themselves in 1946.<sup>11</sup>

The Lushai Hills were annexed by Britain in 1891, to put an end to the raids from the territory into areas already under British control.<sup>12</sup> At the time, the territory comprised numerous ministates, each a single village or a small cluster of villages, ruled by a chief, and owing fealty to no outside authority. Such independence was celebrated in a popular maxim, that "it is better to be the head of a cat than the tail of a tiger."<sup>13</sup>

Within the Lushai Hills, a chief was the ruler of a realm rather than a defined territory. Subjects owed allegiance to a particular chief, regardless of where they might wish to settle. Practicing slash-and-burn agriculture, people moved frequently from place to place.<sup>14</sup> Villages were not permanent settlements, and realms also shifted over time. Warfare between these village states was endemic. Consequently, villages were frequently located on hilltops or the higher slopes to afford maximum protection, while cultivation took place farther down the hillside.<sup>15</sup>

The dominant "Lusei" tribe in Mizoram has only lived in the area since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, thrusting their way westward from Burma and propelling longer-established, kindred tribes northward toward Manipur.<sup>16</sup> Early in the nineteenth century, members of one Lusei lineage, the Sailos, gradually defeated

other chiefly lines and came to dominate the territory, albeit as individual chiefs within their separate realms.<sup>17</sup>

Lehman suggests that the complex social structure centred on chieftainship among the Northern Chin may have arisen during the sixteenth century to facilitate raiding into the territories of sedentary plains-dwelling communities, to procure material goods not otherwise available in their sparse hills districts.<sup>18</sup> The rationale for this raiding, and the attitude of the Chin to the Burmese, is evident from Lehman's observation that "Burman civilisation ... evoked both envy and respect" among the Chin, who "preferred his own hill country, owing to its cool climate, its relative freedom from tropical fevers, and its beauty, but he also was vividly aware of its relative poverty and of the difficulties of his existence there."<sup>19</sup> In 1910, Sir James Scott recounted one of a number of myths that highlighted these equivocal ties with the Burmans and offered a justification for the raiding. The Chins had been subjected to "such long continued and systematic ill-treatment on the part of the Burmese, that traditions accounting for this form a part of the national religion."<sup>20</sup>

Relations with the Bengalis and other plains-dwelling communities in India were equally strained. In Mizoram, these "foreigners" are called *vai*, a term also used in Burma. B. B. Goswami shows how this term, initially used descriptively for the plains-dwellers, has come to take on pejorative connotations, and has gradually come to be restricted in use to designate persons of "Indian" racial appearance, with the implication that such people cannot be trusted.<sup>21</sup> Such an attitude was evident in September 1994 when a Mizo man was stabbed to death in Silchar, a Bengali-dominated town just outside Mizoram. In retribution, Mizos went on a rampage, destroying numerous Bengali owned shops and vehicles throughout Mizoram.<sup>22</sup>

### British Colonial Rule and Christian Missionaries

British conquest had a dramatic impact on life in the Hills, hurtling isolated, self-sufficient, nonliterate communities into contact with the wider world and involving them in a multiplicity of relationships that transcended the boundaries of the microcosm of their face-to-face, village society.<sup>23</sup> In place of the one, traditional lifestyle open to the villager, the presence of soldiers, teachers, traders, government officials, and missionaries provided a staggering array of new possibilities.<sup>24</sup> While agriculture had been previously geared to subsistence, the penetration of the competitive market system undermined "the tribal communitarian life" in favor of a more individualistic ideology.<sup>25</sup> The imposition of taxes on land, guns, and rice, small as they were, forced these hillsmen to enter the monetary economy.<sup>26</sup>

Protestant missionaries, who established themselves in the Hills in 1894, played a major role in this transformation. With approval from the colonial authorities, the Christian missions also dispensed medicine and created a Latin-scriptured, written form of the local language based upon the dialect of the dominant elite of the Lusei tribe. This emerged as the common language of the territory. People who previously spoke other dialects gradually dropped them in favor of the Duliën-Lushai (now known as Mizo) language.<sup>27</sup> In 1912, the government assigned sole responsibility for running schools to the missions. Thus, the church had become the main source of contact between the tribesmen and the outside world: "the central agent of acculturation in a situation of acculturation where traditional societies were giving way to the process of modernisation."<sup>28</sup>

Not surprisingly, the missionaries came to be seen as agents of the Crown. The Haka in Burma's Chin State adopted the term *siang inn*, "government building" to designate a school, and *siang bawi pa*, "the lord representing the official culture" for a Christian missionary, where the word *siang* meaning "king," referred to "the King of England."<sup>29</sup> In this environment Christianity spread dramatically. By 1971 it had become the religion of over 85 percent of the population of Mizoram.<sup>30</sup>

Colonial support for the missionary churches went to the extent of allowing them exclusive rights in particular districts: the British Baptist Missionary Society in the South Lushai Hills, the Welsh Calvinistic Foreign Mission Society in the North Lushai Hills, and the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society among the tribal population in neighboring Manipur.<sup>31</sup> The Salvation Army, the Catholic Church, and charismatic denominations that attempted to enter the region found their efforts thwarted.<sup>32</sup> The Catholic Church was finally able to establish a mission in the Lushai Hills in 1940, while other denominations had to wait until 1947 when India achieved its independence. Since then, charismatic churches have grown rapidly. The United Pentecostal Church (UPC) has become the third largest denomination in Mizoram, after the Presbyterians (the church of the Welsh missionaries) and the Baptists.<sup>33</sup> Several attempts since Indian independence to form a United Church of Mizoram taking in the Presbyterian and Baptist denominations have failed on each occasion, resulting in increased denominational conflict.<sup>34</sup>

Charismatic practices entered the territory through "Revivalism" in the Welsh missions in 1906. While this innovation was enthusiastically taken up by many Mizos leading to a dramatic rise in the number of converts<sup>35</sup> and the development of a creative new form of music in worship, both the churches and the colonial authorities came to be concerned with the "excesses" of Revival. Major Anthony McCall, Colonial Superintendent of the District, recounts a number of incidents where individuals "claiming to be filled with the Holy Ghost," used this as a cover for assault and robbery. McCall quotes the Chief of Sainen that "some of these revivalists people are having sexual intercourse with others' wives freely."<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, "not having outlawed from the outset an unindigenous and clearly unhealthy manifestation of wild Lushai within a Christian framework," the missionaries were faced with the disturbing situation whereby their own Lushai Church leaders and colleagues challenged their European preceptors' right to give a final ruling on what the Bible did or did not sanction.<sup>37</sup> To rectify the situation, in 1935 the Welsh Presbyterian Church prohibited all manifestations of Revivalism, such as "listening to voices, prophecy [and] speaking unknown tongues."<sup>38</sup>

The churches continued to grow as a source of power and influence independent of the chiefs. Consequently, the baptized, educated elite came to resist the chiefs' customary claims and religious role. Traditionally chiefs could exact labor from their subjects and claimed the choicest portions of any animal slaughtered.<sup>39</sup> After independence, the new elites campaigned for the abolition of chieftainship, achieving this goal in Mizoram in 1954.<sup>40</sup>

### Problems of Identity among the CHIKIM

With the conquest of the CHIKIM, their territories came to be divided among the Assam, Bengal, and Burmese administrations. The cultural similarity of the various CHIKIM groups was not lost upon the British colonial authorities. As early as February 1892, the colonial heads were considering the desirability of bringing these

territories under one administration.<sup>41</sup> Although the South Lushai Hills came to be transferred from the jurisdiction of Bengal to Assam and joined to the North Lushai Hills, the CHIKIM territories otherwise remained separated from one another.

Prior to colonization, the commoners' horizons were limited to kinship relations, the local village, and the realm of its chief. Given the frequency of raiding even between villages from closely related groups, relations beyond the realm were hostile and fraught with danger. Cultural affinity could not unite people who spoke the same dialect, let alone all the CHIKIM groups. This situation changed with the imposition of the Pax Britannica and conversion to Christianity. Participants in church synods met and came to know individuals from farther afield with whom they could identify ethnic connections.<sup>42</sup>

A national consciousness was developing, seeing the CHIKIM groups as one people. Clearly they had a common ancestry, and they were close to one another culturally and linguistically.<sup>43</sup> The Atlantic Charter of 1942, which was to become the cornerstone of the United Nations, affirmed "the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live": the right of nations to self-determination. This declaration had a decisive impact on members of the educated elite, who were encouraged to see in it support for the formation of a CHIKIM nation.<sup>44</sup> For them, the sentiment of a common identity among members of the various tribes, was emerging as an "imagined community" in Benedict Anderson's terminology,<sup>45</sup> as a nationality borne of common origins and a belief in a shared destiny—an overarching CHIKIM identity, extending beyond the confines of one's tribe or clan, and the territorial borders imposed by the British.

As we have noted, in the Lushai Hills (Mizoram), the domination by one clan led to its dialect becoming the *lingua franca* of the territory. The missionaries further enhanced its status when they used this dialect as the basis for a written language and the medium of instruction in their schools. These developments have assisted in the process of state formation and have encouraged an ideology that they were all the same, that they were all "Mizo." People have come to downplay their tribal differences in asserting that there was no difference between one Mizo and another, whatever their particular clan or tribal background.<sup>46</sup>

The division of their territorial range into different political domains has been another major problem hampering the achievement of unity among the CHIKIM people. The historical experience of groups living in the Lushai Hills/Mizoram, where the chiefs had been like independent princes, is significantly different from that of their colleagues in Manipur or Tripura, where they had the status of vassals to the king or maharaja.<sup>47</sup>

Notwithstanding the sense of a shared identity, outside Mizoram unity among the CHIKIM groups has been an elusive, if not exasperating, vision. Whereas the disparate so-called "Naga" tribes, who have very little in common with one another culturally or linguistically have forged a common "Naga" identity upon their embrace of Christianity, the absence of a single, widely accepted common name for the CHIKIM has impeded such unity among them.<sup>48</sup>

Names for the various CHIKIM groups have not been stable over any length of time. Tribes, clans, and subclans have sometimes been called after their eponymous founders, at other times they have been referred to by some distinguishing feature. One tribe is nowadays known as Hmar, meaning "north," in regard to their location in Mizoram.<sup>49</sup> Previously they were known as Kholhang, meaning "southern village," apparently a reference to their location relative to the

Singson clan.<sup>50</sup> The tribe known as Suantak in Burma have come to be called Vaiphei in Manipur, after Khovaiphei, the first village they established in that State. The Gangte tribe (Rangte in Mizoram) identify themselves as emanating from a land called Gang-gam.<sup>51</sup> While some members of this tribe might now use Gangte as a surname, close patrilineal relatives might be known by the name of a clan (Khaimang) and others by a subclan name (Thangjom).

Although the CHIKIM groups outside Mizoram acknowledge their common heritage, they have not been able to achieve unity among themselves. Members of different tribes, and even clans within the one tribe, are likely to clash with one another. A strong emphasis on genealogical knowledge, coupled with a patrilineal clan structure, with traditional marriage alliances and a classificatory kinship system, create loyalties that radiate out from one's closest kin to more distant members of the ethnic group. Tribes distinguish themselves with distinctive designs in their *puon* or garments, particularly on ceremonial occasions and burials, much as their particular tartans identify Scottish clans. One can be a Phaltual, Baite, or Khaute at one level, while recognizing members of the other divisions as fellow Vaiphei who must be addressed according to classificatory kinship categories. In Manipur particularly, children are generally brought up speaking the dialect of their father's line, and clan or tribal gatherings are organized from time to time.

Tribal loyalties have influenced voting patterns in Manipur, where around 200,000 CHIKIM account for approximately 10 percent of the state's population, and from time to time conflict has flared up between closely related groups. In the 1950s, warfare erupted between two of the largest groups in the Churachandpur District of Manipur, the Hmar<sup>52</sup> and the Thadou speakers.<sup>53</sup> Many fled to Assam to escape the fighting. The translation of the Bible into the Thadou language in 1960, the first full translation in any CHIKIM dialect of Manipur by the Bible Society, upset the other tribal groups since it was called the "Kuki" Bible. These other groups demanded their own separate translations, even though the differences between their dialects are but slight.<sup>54</sup>

In Assam, fighting has arisen among speakers of the Thadou dialect, between those who were happy to be identified as "Thadou," and those who preferred to be called "Kukis." Thadou is the name of a reputed ancestor of a *segment* of the speakers of this tongue. Others who speak the same dialect who are not descendants of Thadou objected to having their language named for someone junior to them in lineage terms. Radio programs in the dialect in Assam and official references are now careful always to refer to the language as "Thadou-Kuki" in an attempt to placate both camps.

In 1999, conflict again arose in the Churachandpur District, when Paite were accused of treachery for not having supported a "Kuki" candidate for the Manipur Hills electorate in the Indian parliamentary elections, thereby allowing a Naga to take the seat. Bloody confrontation erupted, pitting the "Kukis" (i.e., Thadous) on one side against the Paite on the other.<sup>55</sup> The Vaiphei found themselves reluctantly drawn into the conflict on the side of the Paite. During a visit to Mizoram the following year, I met a number of Paite who had fled there to escape the conflict and appeared to have settled in relatively easily and happily.

Beyond such clan and tribal loyalties, in Mizoram the ideology that "we are all one" has led to an intolerance of the use of dialects other than the officially sanctioned Mizo one, and the conflicts between the groups in Manipur is seen as a dangerous manifestation of "communalism."<sup>56</sup> This view is exemplified by the

response of a prominent Mizo of Ralte background when I asked her about the dialect of her tribe, and she told me she knew nothing of her ancestral speech. On one occasion, she recalled, she had asked some old Ralte women to talk in Ralte, but she quickly became annoyed and irritated by the jarring sound of the language, which she found difficult to follow. She therefore asked them to stop. My friend affirmed a lack of interest in her Ralte background, stressing the importance for her of the common Mizo identity and form of speech.

### The Search for a Common Name

The lack of a single name with which they could identify has proven to be a problem for the CHIKIM people. As we have noted, neither of the terms frequently used by outsiders to refer to them—"Kuki" and "Chin"—has attracted widespread enthusiasm among the CHIKIM themselves. Consequently, many different terms have been proposed to designate the total community. Thus, they have been called the "Tukbemsom Tribe," a reference to the topknot in which the hair was previously worn by the menfolk in many of the tribes.<sup>57</sup> The term "Lusei," the former name for the dominant tribe in the Lushai Hills, has been translated by some writers as "long-headed" and may be a reference to the same custom.<sup>58</sup> Students in Shillong established an "Eimi (Our People) Union," and an "Eimi Fellowship" was founded in Ukhrul, while an "Unao (Brothers and Sisters<sup>59</sup>) Fellowship" was instituted in Jorhat,<sup>60</sup> each expressing the same idea—namely, that the various CHIKIM groups are "one."

The neologism "CHIKIM" created by combining letters from the words Chin, Kuki and Mizo, was also for a while used in some official publications in Manipur and in the names of ethnically organized churches. This term has the felicitous meaning "all the tribes," but as we have already noted, it has not caught on widely as an accepted name for the tribes and clans that had erstwhile been known as Chins and Kukis.<sup>61</sup>

In the 1950s, the name "Khulmi," cave people, was used in Manipur, alluding to the common myth of these tribes that they had emerged from a cave or a pit.<sup>62</sup> This shared origin is seen as a defining element of the identity of tribes belonging to the Kuki-Chin family, although the various groups use different words to refer to the primordial cave from which they had emerged.<sup>63</sup>

Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail, who was largely responsible for drawing attention to the Judaizers in Manipur and Mizoram and for organising the settlement of over 800 of them in Israel, wrote of the "Shinlung Tribe (Menashe)," using Shinlung as a term to include the whole coterie of CHIKIM tribes, assuming that this was a common name accepted by all of them.<sup>64</sup> Following Rabbi Avichail, Shalva Weil has used the term in the same way, asserting, "In India they were known...collectively as the Shinlung."<sup>65</sup> Tudor Parfitt also uses the term "Shinlung," but uses it to mean specifically the Judaizing members of these groups.<sup>66</sup> Neither of these usages is strictly correct. From my understanding, very few CHIKIM dialects other than that of the Asho, plains dwelling Chin of the Arakan district, possess a phoneme equivalent in sound to English "sh." Many communities that I have encountered in Manipur are not familiar with the word, although close variants are to be found in Mizoram, from where presumably Avichail adopted the term.

The Hmar, located in southern Manipur and northern Mizoram, knew the word "Sinlung," which Rochunga Pudaite refers to as "the ancient home of the Hmar

people," describing it as a city (Khaw Sinlung).<sup>67</sup> He does not, however, identify it as the name of any individual or tribal grouping. Colonel J. Shakespear records a Lushai legend, wherein "Chhinglung" is the name of the cave from which the CHIKIM had emerged,<sup>68</sup> while James Lorrain's Lushai dictionary has an entry "Chhin-lung, *n.* the name of the mythical rock from beneath which the progenitors of most of the present human race are said to have emerged after the thimzing darkness."<sup>69</sup> Again, these terms are given not as the name of a group but of a place. We do, however, find in Mizoram an organisation, headed by Lalchhanhima Sailo, called the "Chhinlung Israel People's Convention," a Christian organization that seeks to harness the putative Israelite origins of the CHIKIM for political purposes. Sailo we see uses the concept of the "Chhinlung People" as a generic term to encompass all the peoples who had emerged from the cave, namely all the CHIKIM, but in a context where he is also seeking to connect them with the biblical Israelites.

This bewildering range of epithets underscores the difficulties in trying to formulate an acceptable, common name for a set of tribes who recognize a common peoplehood. For the Rev. Dr. Hawingam Haokip, however, it is "encouraging" that so many people have tried: "These names may or may not be acceptable to all as a nomenclature. But they reveal a clear evidence [*sic*] that there has been a strong desire for unity and unification among the educated circle of the Kuki-Chin people."<sup>70</sup>

The ever-shifting names with which the CHIKIM have sought to identify themselves has led Weil to suggest that the CHIKIM tribes exhibit a contextual fluidity of "ethnic" categories similar to that demonstrated by Edmund Leach among the Kachin in northern Burma, who are transformed into Shan as they shift into a different ecological niche and adopt a more highly stratified political structure.<sup>71</sup> In particular, Weil points to the fact that Lian Tual, a Judaizer and "Secretary of the Community of Judaism" in Tiddim in Burma's Chin State wrote to her to say that his name was in Jinghpaw, the main Kachin language. Weil quotes his comment that "If this is Jinghpaw or Kachin tribe, we must be ancestry to the [biblical] tribe of Menasseh."<sup>72</sup>

In referring to the Kachin in this way, I assume that Lian Tual was aware of the fact that the Karen, a tribal group located to the east of the Kachin, had been identified already as descendants of Israelites by Christian missionaries as far back as the 1830s.<sup>73</sup> By association with the Kachin—and in turn on account of the Kachin's affinities with the Karen—Lian Tual was attempting to bolster the Israelite claims of his own community.

I do not consider Lian Tual's assertion to mean that the same process that operates among the Kachin are present among the CHIKIM. For the CHIKIM, self-identification essentially followed a segmentary, patrilineal pattern, similar to that described by E. E. Evans-Pritchard for the Nuer.<sup>74</sup> Alongside obligations to the chief, loyalty and moral responsibility was strongest to people closest to oneself in patrilineal kinship terms, receding as one looked to more distant kin, to members of one's dialect or tribal group, and then to the broader CHIKIM category, and kinship groups themselves were stratified according to the birth order of their founders. Concerning the Thadou, the largest CHIKIM tribe or language group in Manipur,<sup>75</sup> R. K. Das has observed, "Authority is based on status within a unilineal descent system. The elder brother and his descendants occupy a higher status than the younger brother and his descendants."<sup>76</sup> In such a system, one has identities that fan out as one moves away from one's core kinship group, as we have seen above with the Gangte and Vaiphei tribes.

### Emergence of the Term "Mizo"

"Mizo" is one name that has achieved a greater level of acceptance than all the others mentioned thus far. In 1946, members of the "Lushai Association" adopted a resolution calling for self-determination. Taking "Mizo" as the name of their nationality, they formed the Mizo Union as the vehicle for their political aspirations.<sup>77</sup> By 1952, the term had replaced "Lushai" in the name of the territory formerly known as the Lushai Hills District of Assam,<sup>78</sup> and the local language came to be known as "Mizo."

As Lalthangliana observes, "In the first census ever collected among the people of Mizoram (1901), there was no-one who called himself Mizo. But in the 1961 census, there were over 200,000 Mizo." In 1961, no one chose to identify by the former name of the dominant "Lusei" tribe, and the names of two other prominent groups, the Ralte and the Paihte had also disappeared, while the Hmar and Pawih had declined sharply. Clearly the overwhelming majority in each category had registered as Mizos.<sup>79</sup> Many people outside Mizoram, in the Churachandpur District of Manipur, in Tripura, and in the Chin Hills of Burma were also attracted to this new designation.<sup>80</sup>

The success of the name "Mizo" reflects the fact that historically *Zo* was a name most CHIKIM groups applied to themselves,<sup>81</sup> while *mi* is a common word for "man" or person.<sup>82</sup> Grammatically, the expected term would have been *Zomi*,<sup>83</sup> "Mizo" being a poetic inversion. L. S. Gangte reproduces a line from a traditional ballad in which a proud hunter describes himself as a *mizo*.<sup>84</sup> Goswami points out that already in 1912, Lt. Colonel J. Shakespear, first Superintendent of the Lushai Hills District, had written that "the general population of the hills is spoken of as Mizo," indicating that the word was not unknown in previous generations and that it was not restricted to any particular tribe or clan in the region.<sup>85</sup>

Unfortunately for the elite among the CHIKIM peoples, just as they were beginning to imagine themselves as one people, in 1947 their territories were parcelled out among the new postcolonial states of India, Burma, and East Pakistan (later Bangladesh), which had little thought for the CHIKIM people, located on the fringes of their respective nation-states, and on the fringes of public consciousness in the new nations.

Under British rule, ostensibly to protect the hill-tribesmen from exploitation by the more sophisticated plains-dwelling Indians and Burmese, the Lushai Hills District was administered as an "excluded area," into which the plainsmen could only venture if they obtained a special "Inner Line" permit, to enter the territory for a limited period of time.<sup>86</sup> This helped preserve the territory from the fate of Tripura and Sikkim, where the indigenous populations have become a minority in their own lands. However, it also meant that the CHIKIM were largely isolated from the movements and the struggles that went to forge the Indian, Burmese, and Pakistani national identities.

Although the "Inner Line" system protected the CHIKIM from exploitation by the plainsmen, it did not insulate them from the Western cultural influences of the administration, through the adoption of Christianity and the Latin script—developments that increased their alienation from the neighboring civilizations.<sup>87</sup> With the approach of independence for the Empire in South Asia, certain British officers sought to continue to protect the hill-tribesmen by detaching their territories

from both Indian and Burmese rule and merging them into a "Crown Colony," which would remain under British administration.<sup>88</sup> This scheme had the support of Sir Robert Reid, governor of Assam, who observed that these people were "not Indians in any sense of the word, not in appearance, not in habit, nor in outlook, and it is a historical accident that they have been tacked on an Indian Province."<sup>89</sup>

Although Prime Minister Winston Churchill sympathized with this proposal, it was eventually dismissed as being geographically and economically unworkable.<sup>90</sup> The inhabitants of the Lushai Hills District therefore had to choose whether to affiliate with India, Pakistan, or Burma. While segments of the leadership favored Burma, the majority resolved to join India, on condition that they would be entitled "to opt out of the Indian Union after ten years if they wish to do so."<sup>91</sup> However, none of the three countries proved sensitive to the special needs of the tribal populations or understood their concerns and suspicions.

Chatterjee observes that, "The military dictatorship in Myanmar (Burma) and theocracy in Bangladesh added miseries to the Mizos living there," so that those living under Indian rule are now grateful for their citizenship.<sup>92</sup> However, while India has remained a parliamentary democracy, during the immediate postindependence period it failed to win the loyalty of the Mizo people. The region was incorporated as a tribal district in Assam, and the government made a concerted effort to assimilate the tribal peoples into mainstream Indian culture. The Christianity that the Mizos now professed was viewed as "a hand maiden of colonialism" and was consequently considered potentially subversive.<sup>93</sup> The use of the Assamese language was promoted, along with Assamese culture.<sup>94</sup> Having learned contempt for "heathen" Hinduism, the Christianized tribals resisted these initiatives.

Meanwhile, trade routes and communication channels that ran from Mizoram through East Bengal were severed since this was now Pakistan, a separate and hostile nation. Similarly, contacts with fellow tribesmen now living in Burma or Pakistan had become more difficult, for they were beyond volatile international borders, and the tribesmen were obliged to demonstrate their allegiance to the countries within whose borders they happened to reside.<sup>95</sup>

### The Mizo Revolt

The dream of a larger, united territory embracing all the "Mizo" and allied tribes finally led to insurrection on February 28, 1966, after inept government handling of an extended period of famine. The Mizo National Front (MNF) stressed the differences between the tribal peoples and the Indians, the *vai*, expressing contempt for the latter who were regarded as heathens, while the Mizos were proud of their Christian beliefs and the level of literacy and civilization that they had achieved, courtesy of the missionaries and the colonial administration.<sup>96</sup>

It is instructive to see how both Indian nationalism and Mizo nationalism took inspiration from the west, though the two are fundamentally at odds with one another. India has sought to create a national identity embracing people of different racial, linguistic, and religious backgrounds, based on principles of a democratic, secular state, a nationalism based on notions of a shared fate arising from living in a particular territory, and the struggle for independence led by Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru.<sup>97</sup> While it is tinged with Hindu cultural forms, those of the majority population, it also has room for the operation of principles of equity, through various schedules to the Constitution of India, which provide special assistance to those

disadvantaged in society, through such measures as the reservation of positions for members of disadvantaged castes and tribes in the civil service and in higher education, exemption from income tax, and grants for schemes intended to promote their welfare and development.<sup>98</sup>

On the other side, the nationalism of the insurgents was based on claims of common ancestry—an extended kinship network—and bound up with the religion of the Mizos: the Christian religion that had been learned from the Western missionaries, together with the revivalist accretions that had come through the operation of the Holy Spirit in the Hills. This was a nationalism based on common origins rather than simply on common residence, claiming the right to self-determination for the related tribals, in an expanded Mizo nation.<sup>99</sup>

Laldenga, the leader of the revolt, was a fine orator and attracted sympathizers among all sections of the population in Mizoram, from former chiefs to the common people. Leaders of CHIKIM groups in Churachandpur met with Laldenga in January 1965 and gave support to the vision of a greater, independent Mizoram.<sup>100</sup> The various Kuki groups in the Jampui Tong district of Tripura, who had accepted a "Mizo" identity, also participated in the revolt.<sup>101</sup> Laldenga inspired members of allied communities in other territories, persuading them of the validity of his claims. Many saw his cause as divinely inspired, and indeed Christian rituals played a significant role in the activities of the insurgents. Clearly Laldenga had enthused the masses, for B. B. Goswami records that "many rural people saw him in their dreams."<sup>102</sup>

Mizoram quickly fell to the Mizo National Front rebels, who proclaimed their independence.<sup>103</sup> However, military reinforcements marched on the territory and recaptured it, although the revolt continued to fester for many years. With popular backing from the common people, support and armaments from India's rivals Pakistan and China, the rebels could retreat across the border to East Pakistan after any skirmish, or seek shelter among sympathetic villagers and be ready to strike again whenever the opportunity arose. However, this situation changed dramatically in the aftermath of the Pakistan civil war which, with support from India, led to Eastern Pakistan's rebirth as Bangladesh. Because of Bangladesh's debt to India for its independence, the Mizo rebels lost their sanctuary in that territory and became more vulnerable to the Indian troops. A Mizo government in exile was established in Peking. The insurgency lingered on, even though it had lost any real chance of achieving its goal.<sup>104</sup>

In their determination to suppress the rebellion, the Indian army sought to control the population of Mizoram by clustering villages together, making them easier to keep under surveillance. Along the Silchar-Aizawl-Lunglei road, 106 villages with 50,000 inhabitants were regrouped into 18 "Grouping Centres."<sup>105</sup> Harsh punishment was meted out upon the rebels and anyone suspected of providing them with food and shelter. Villages and even churches were burnt down, men were tortured, women and young girls raped by members of the armed forces.<sup>106</sup> Hluna reports that should a villager complain against such actions, he was likely to be arrested and charged with being "a suspected MNF sympathiser."<sup>107</sup>

Villages in the Churachandpur District of Manipur, where the rebellion had popular support, also faced this treatment. On August 8, 1967, a band of insurgents had come to Chongmun, a Gangte village, spending the night there. As the 9th Bihar Regiment were pursuing them, they fled, leaving behind a Bengali bearer who was too sick to travel. When the troops came, they apprehended the bearer and