

Jewish Movement in the Hills of Manipur and Mizoram

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The religious movements have been variously designated as messianic movements, millenarian movements etc. It has been observed that in Mizoram and in the hills of Manipur the occasional religious movements, which sprouted here and there, had deep religious moorings. Fuchs (1965) quoting McCall exhaustively cited such an instance and called it messianic movement. Raghavaiah just makes a complete mess of the whole situation. McCall, however, spelled out a number of instances of such reactions of the Mizos as a result of their encounter with foreign religion.

The encounter of the Mizos and the Chin-Kuki tribes of Manipur is a fascinating field of study. Briefly speaking, though the bulk of the Mizos and Chin-Kuki tribes are followers and believers of Christianity, here and there they have reacted to the new religion sharply. In some instances, such movements have given rise to numerous new schools of thought (Pawels).

The European Christian missionaries first came in these areas since 1894. The first difficulty, which the church faced, was from the Mizo themselves. The Mizo religion was animistic and a large number of ceremonies and sacrifices which were celebrated, with drinking rice-bear (*zu*) played a significant role in their life. Christianity emphasised on the ethics of life, which was sometime very difficult for the tribal people to adhere to. For instance, abstainism from taking liquor, sex habit regulations, and monogamy were new conceptions and the people found it difficult to adhere. These schools of thought (Pawels) though have a leaning forwards Christianity, are occasionally tradition oriented. They are the products of either the rebellion of few ardent Christian Mizo followers against the type of Christianity introduced by the Mizo church or an attempt to reinterpret the Mizo customs in the light of new teachings.

For the several centuries Churachandpur is the home and heartland of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes of Manipur. All these tribes share a common belief that they originally emerged out of a cave variously known as *KhaI*, *Khur*, *Khurvi*, *Khurta-bijur*, *Singlung*, *Chinleng* in the analogous myths of the different tribes (Kamkenthang, 1986:5). All of them also acknowledge that the Khur or Singlung from where they had come was located further to the east, perhaps in southwestern China (Das, 1985:17). The whole constellation of related tribes were designated 'Chin' in Burma, Kuki or Mizo in India. At the time of their initial contact with the British in the nineteenth century, the Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes had no knowledge of writing. Indeed one historian describes them as head-hunting savage people following horrible customs in funerals and marriages (Chatterjee, 1990:2) a view which the ethnocentric European Christian Missionaries who worked in Manipur and Mizoram from 1894 also fostered among their Chin-Kuki-Mizo converts, making them shameful about their community's past (Dena, 1988: 110).

If at some earlier period in time their ancestors can be shown to have possessed the skill of writing, this would be a pride of self-respect, showing that they had in fact previously been civilised. A legend that the Chin-Kuki-Mizo had once possessed written records is recounted in a number of their writings (Zaithanchhungi, 1990,10-13). These records, it is said, had been kept on parchment but they were destroyed when a dog devoured parchment. While they

acknowledge kinship between the various Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes and clans, the authors like to stress how different they are from, and how little they have been influenced by their neighbours particularly in the field of religion. In this regard, Zairema (1989) points out that whereas Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists lived in districts bordering Mizoram, none of these great religions and philosophical systems exerted any appreciable influence on the religious and cultural lives of the Mizos. Christianity finally displaced their indigenous cults—something which Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism had not succeeded in doing.

Among the Christianised section of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes, who are now the most literate communities in India (Goswami 1979) intensely familiar with the Bible from which they draw personal inspiration, there is wide spread admiration for the ancient Israelites. In past, this may be due to the influence of the Protestant missionaries who came to Manipur and Mizoram and were inclined to afford more respect to the Old Testament, particularly to the ethical message of the prophets, than is found among other Christian denominations. Additionally, as a tribal people, the Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes readily identified themselves with the Biblical Israelites, who were also constituted as a tribal society, guided by God, whose history was full of triumphs and setbacks, according to whether they submitted to God's will or stay from it.

There is an abundance of Chin-Kuki-Mizo literature and numerous journalistic reports to indicate that many of them subscribe to the view that they are of Israelite origin (Zaithanchhungi 1990; Banerjee, 1986). Although majority of them may not accept the Israelite origin of these communities but a section of them widely held the notion that prior to their adoption of Christianity, they had been observing a vestigial form of Judaism. One article common name 'Manmasi' of the Christian Mizo people. S. Kipgen (90) are 'Chikim' for referring this tribal groups.

Kut is the traditional word for festival in the tribal dialects of these communities and in Manipur a 'cultural fiesta' to highlight the common features of these tribes is celebrated on 1st November each year since 1979 and *Kut* day is a public holiday in Manipur. There has been a revival of cultural dances and traditional costumes, which had been relegated to the background after conversion to Christianity. In a souvenir booklet published by the organisers of the festival in 1990, there are no less than three occasions where the imputed Israelite connection with the tribe is highlighted.

The identification with the Biblical Israelis has gained currency among the segments of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes living in Manipur, Mizoram and Burma's Chin state. How and why such concept has arisen, and why has it taken hold throughout the geographical range of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes? Two authors (Goswami 1980 and Lalbiaktluanga 1989) have addressed such issues in a scholarly manner. While both of them have written specially about the development in Mizoram, their observations apply equally well to circumstances in Manipur and Chin state.

Discussing the theological trend in Mizoram, Lalbiaktluanga (1989) identifies one group, which he calls 'Mizo-Israel.' He places this group in the context of indigenous theological trends, which in the history of Christianity in Mizoram has been formed in reaction to western theology and practices. In particular, he identifies Mizo Israel' among sectarian groups that have found

difficulty in adjusting with the mainline churches, planted by western missionaries and have, therefore, chosen to break away to form new sects, each of them having its 'Own emphasis and distinct theology and practice.' Some of these groups no longer exist while their teachings still prevail. On Mizo Israel specially he reports:

A revivalist, Saichhunga of Hliman village claimed that Mizos are the lost tribes of Israel. In 1951 the statement of Saichhunga was confirmed as true by Chala of Buallawn Village. Since then a group of people who believed in the idea started contacting Prime Minister of Israel and also counsels in India. They were told by Mr. Tashkere representative of Israel government in Calcutta that Mizos could be accepted as Israelites if they strictly observe and practise the laws of Moses. When these delegates returned to Mizoram they formed a Zionist Association and began appointing priests to observe the Laws of Moses.

Goswami (1980) shows this in the context of what he describes as 'by product of Christianity' in northeast India. New religious cults have sprung up under the impact of Christianity and its 'cultural and ideational confrontation' with the old value system. Among the causes for such developments, apart from deprivations, conflict and frustration, he suggests 'the urge to carve out a social identity different from Christian identity.' Further, he observes, most such groups display a sentimental attachment to the community's pre-Christian social order, retaining ~some of the values of traditional culture.' Like Lalbiakluanga (1989), Goswami regards such groups as ephemeral and urges the need to study them before they disappear (1980). Concerning those who believed the Mizos to be lost tribes of Israel, Goswami notes 'During the early period of the Mizo National Front initiated disturbance, the followers of this sect staunchly supported the Mizo rebels, hoping that Mizo rebels are fighting for the religious cause. Subsequently the followers of the sect were disillusioned.'

Sarma's (1991) findings are substantially in accord with both Lalbiakluanga and Goswami, but for the sake of clarification of Lalbiakluanga's report, he points out firstly that Chala of Buallawn's 'confirmation' of the Mizo's Israelite identity came about through a 'revelation' rather than any scientific assessment of facts. Secondly, there has not at any stage been an Israelite government representative stationed at Calcutta. According to one Mizo informant, after Chala's vision, a Mizo delegation went to Calcutta where they met several members of the local Jewish community. The Mizos asserted Israelite identity and expressed the desire to return and settle in Israel. The Calcutta Jews advised them that they should contact the Israeli Counsel in Bombay about migrating to Israel.

They also expressed the view that the Mizos would only be allowed to settle in Israel if they were practising Judaism. This advice stimulated some of the Mizos who had been proclaiming their Israelite origin to attempt to follow Judaism in some form. As a matter of fact Israeli government authorities have not accepted them as immigrants under the country's Law of Return (The Telegraph 1987, Ghosh 1988), although a small number who have formally converted to Judaism have now settled in Israel.

While both Lalbiakluanga and Goswami describe the notion of Mizos' Israelite origin as the creed of a particular sect but now it is observed that several different groups accept this proposition, while drawing markedly different theological implications from it; consequently this

view is no longer confined to just one particular sect, it is a part of the accepted lore of wide range of Chin-Kuki-Mizo groups. Such a development accords with Goswami's view that the 'by products' of Christianisation may be short-lived and Lalbiakluanga's observation that teachings may outlive the sects with which they were originally associated.

Zaithanchhungi's (1990) position represents one extreme' of the continuum of those who adopt the proposition that the Chin-Kuki-Mizos were origin ally Israelites. While this proposition may be a source of pride and a boost to moral, it does not alter the fact that she, like the majority of her community, is now a practising Christian and has no intention of converting to Judaism. Nor does she draw 'the implication that with their Israelite origins, the Mizos should attempt to settle in Israel.

Whereas Zaithanchhungi remains a conventional Christian, other supporters of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo Israelite thesis have felt a need to observe at least some of the laws and customs, which the Israelites were commanded to follow in the Old Testament. The earliest group began to observe the Sabbath on Saturday, the Seventh day, as prescribed in the Bible, rather than on Sunday as is customary among most Christians. Their manner of observing this day was much like that of the Christian Sabbath, but subsequently, through great familiarity with Jewish tradition, some have chosen a more Judaic approach.

The early Sabbath observers regarded themselves as 'Jews' even before they have come into contact with recognised Jewish communities and even though they had not adopted any other Jewish practices.

Parfitt (1987) reports that one tribal boy in Bombay had told him that his parents had realised about twenty years back that Christianity was riot the "right way" when they heard the preaching of a local prophet called Tantums of Manipur, who told them that the *S hinglung* could be destroyed if they did not revert to their ancient Jewish faith. He had told them that they were all destined to go to the land of Israel'. Dr. H. Thangruma, M.Th., D.D as he styles himself, organised one of the first such congregations in Aizawl. Dr. Thangruma's -Judaism, then and now, comprises the assertion of Israelite (Manasseh tribe) origin of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes, observance of Saturday as the Sabbath, and a conviction that the Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes should return to live in Zion.

Dr. Thangruma has remarked with regret that some of his followers left his group around 1976, whereas initially people had relied upon their own interpretations cancelling how they should live as Jews, by mid-1970s contact had been made with external guides who influenced their religious practices. From a purely Jewish direction, ORT India, a Jewish Institute for technical education located in Bombay, had accepted representation to allow Chin-Kuki Mizo youths to train in the institute (which is open to all communities) and to reside as boarders in its hostels and to participate in its Jewish religious programmes. The placement of a number of youths at ORT means that on their return home to Mizoram and Manipur they brought back with them first hand experience of Jewish practices.

A source of different 'Jewish' orientation came about through -contacts developed with 'Messianic' Jewish factors in America, who advocate adherence to the laws of the Old Testament

while professing a belief in Jesus as messiah. Such groups generally repudiate the name 'Jesus' as a corruption advocating the use of the term 'Yahshua' as supposedly more authentic. Two such groups, Bet Hashem from New Haven, Indiana and Assembly of Yahweh from Holt, Michigan have exercised an influence through their respective magazines and supplementary literature. A small donation from Bet Hashem saw the erection of a 'synagogue' for its followers in Churachandpur. A Bet Hashem world conference planned for Manipur in 1980 was aborted by the fact that this area is generally restricted to foreigners.

Several attempts to unite the various segments of the 'Sons of Manasseh' have failed. In part, this may be due to personal differences between the leaders of these groups, one group looking to 'Messianic Jewish' groups in America for support and inspiration, the other seeking guidance from Israel, in particular from 'Amishav' a Jewish group searching for lost tribes. It is not worthy that both the messianic and normative Jewish tendencies in Manipur claim the same person, a Vaiphei known as Vaniah Benjamin as their 'founder', bringing their particular faith across from Mizoram. It would seem that whereas the Late Vaniah Benjamin himself retained a 'messianic faith', his son Levy Benjamin who succeeded him has been advocating adherence to normative Judaism.

The relationship between religious tendencies becomes clearer if we examine the personal spiritual odysseys of a number of informants. One informant, a member of the Zou tribe, lamented that we have no identity, we have forgotten our ancestry, on account of the influences of Christian missionaries.' His spiritual evolution had an unusual beginning while working at the post office. Already an admirer of Israel, his interest was aroused by a number of magazines published from Israel and USA. Through 'The Faith', he came in contact with a congregation called Kanesyab' (Hebrew for church or assembly) and was baptised.

Another informant who has been a member of no less than four different congregations. While she was young, she joined Seventh Day Adventists. At the age of 26, when she was married and had given birth to her second son, he joined a revivalist group. Recalling here life in the revivalist groups, she said:

After I was rebaptised, my husband, his family did not like it. They did not like... but still I kept on, because of devotion to God. Revival is not like normal Christianity; you devote life completely to God, not to earthly life. In revival, there are mostly visions, (lancing, vision and faith. They practise full concentration. Also sonic are having a kind of prophecy. Most of the visions are coming from woman.

In 1975, one of her friends became an Israelite. Initially she was critical, she wondered how could they dare to say they were Israelite and she was curious as to what they believed. When I inquired about these things I was convinced by F. Hangshing, who was a Government Commissioner and had been to Israel. Then in 1976, I was baptised in the Israel faith. She explained that Bible belonged to Israel Judaism that is why I believe in the way. The Israelite community which she joined, however, did not satisfy her fully as their style is still Christianity' She learnt another congregation following Judaism without Christianity and was attracted to it and joined this group in 1986.

She believes she has found the true religion but following it has been hard. Her ambition now is to 'move that side' i.e. Israel, so that she can practise her religion fully.

From these two case histories we can find the fluidity of religious groups in Manipur. There are conventional Christians, revivalist ones, a group calling itself 'Israel' which combines Jewish and Christian features, another group which tries to follow Judaism directly.

What, however, is the basis for asserting an Israelite origin for the Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes? Zaithanchhungi (1990) finds a host of similarities in the pre-Christian beliefs and practices of the Mizos with Israelites in the Bible. Similarities cited include beliefs in a Supreme, creator God and Lesser evil, spirits, a tradition of animal sacrifice, burial practices, and values such as kindness to strangers. Of course, the link between 'Manasia' forefather of the Mizos and the Manasseh of the Bible is also made.

According to Sarma (1991) such characteristics are found among myriad different groups in different parts of the world, are not by any means distinctive or 'racial' features of the Jews. The response of another informant is also worth recording. When the author *ached* him why he was observing 'Judaism' he gave him the explanation of the descent of his people from the tribe Manasseh. When he asked the informant 'if you were to discover that there is no basis to this notions how could it affect your religious position?' His informant responded that it would have no effect; for he had come so 'at home' in his adopted religion that he would keep it up, even if his people were not original Israelites.

The implications to be drawn from such responses are interesting indeed. For whatever reasons, Christianised Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes have come to stay from the theology to which they had been introduced over the past century by Christian missionaries who came from Britain and United States, who undermined the respect of their converts for the traditions of their ancestors. These Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes have by no means altogether rejected the lessons of their missionary tutors, for their religious experiment all begin with the premise that the word of God is to be found in the Bible.

And yet, from the opinions expressed by the informants, the new theology as a product of Bible interpretation coupled with local genius, might possibly have strength enough to survive without the myths that have initially supported it. These developments represent a significant reorientation towards social change among the Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes who have been subject to extremely radical changes in the past one hundred years, brought about by the influence of the missionaries. This influence led to the destruction of the old social order and undermining of the respect to the elders who were now to be regarded as savage. One sees in the current religious movements an aspect of a new desire to create Chin-Kuki-Mizo identity, which can be a source of pride. According to Sarma (1991) this trend has two faces, as we have noted previously, one expressed as a need for a common name embracing all the Chin-Kuki-Mizo peoples, others which seeks to rehabilitate the past by interpreting it as a form of Judaism.

We are at the stage of new development which are worthy of systematic study, as pointed out by (Goswami (1980), since here none finds a confrontation between the identity forged through Christianity and a desire to create a new one based on Christian (Biblical) elements and

respect for the old traditions. The causes of these trends, and the course of their evolution whether indeed they help to create a better future for the people concerned or whether they collapse on their face, whether the new theological trends will survive as one or more sects become completely diffused among all Chin-Kuki-Mizo elements or simply disappear after a relatively brief life—are matters of considerable anthropological interest.

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