

The Myanmar Exile In Mizoram: A Brief Exploration Of The Complexities Of Culture And Nationalism

Dr. Kristina Z.Zama

Abstract:

The Myanmar exiled in Mizoram are in a precarious position. Having been hailed as brethren and family by Mizos in Mizoram State of India, the exile has found a place that is safe and protected from violence and war. Yet, this position of 'safety' is often seen as devoid of inclusivity. The exile has to manoeuvre the many complicated landscape of society, and other complications due to political and legal implications. The Myanmar people speak languages which are very different from the local mizo language, and hence a communication gap is obvious. This has given rise to many complex situations with regards to the cultural similarities claimed by many, yet an inability to really build a relationship.

Keywords: Myanmar exile Culture Chin NGO Mizo.

Introduction

Mizoram, situated in the Northeast region of India shares a 510km long international border with Myanmar, who are still referred to as Burma mi or Burmese by local Mizos. Although separated by this international border, the 'Chin country' shares a common history, a common ancestry, similar beliefs, rituals, customs and traditions. The Chin has over fifty sub-tribes of which Mizos represent one branch. These large territories have been split and carved separately, scattering its Chin ethnic people, a good chunk of which is represented as the Chin State in northwest of Myanmar. The Chin sub-tribes are found in parts of Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram. Apart from India, a sizeable Chin community can also be found in the north-eastern regions of Bangladesh.

Modern scholars agree that the name 'Chin' comes from Chinlung which literally means 'stone cover' or 'hole covered with a rock'. Depending on the dialect of a chin sub-tribe, the word Chinlung is written and pronounced in many ways like- Chhinlung (which is how my people, Mizos who speak the Duhlian dialect pronounce it) Sinlung, Shinlung, Ciinlung, Jinlung and so on. Considering there are over fifty sub-clans and tribes that come under the umbrella 'Chin', it is not surprising then that even the tales surrounding Chinlung is similar. The way the Mizos in Mizoram tell the story is as follows- Our forefathers who were fleeing from oppressive masters and from oppression and instability, escaped through a hole in the ground (which some historians claim could be a hole/a crack/ an opening in the Great Wall of China as it is often believed that Chin ancestors helped build the wall). When one of the clans, (the Ralte clan often stereotyped as being very loud and talkative) made such a lot of noise that the escaping people closed this passage with a large rock for fear of being discovered and caught by their pursuers. And so this common folktale is told in most of the Chin sub-tribes with slight variations.

Hence, when Myanmar spiralled into chaos and civil war, it was only natural for the Chin Myanmar to exile themselves in Mizoram; to run towards their brethren to the west of them. The Mizos welcomed their Chin unau or 'Chin brethren' because they are all chhul khat

chhuak or have ‘come out of the same womb’. Mizos themselves experienced what is known as Rambuailai or Troubled Times from 1966 to 1986 when Mizos rebel groups wanted to secede from the Indian nation and conflict broke out in Mizoram that lasted for twenty years. During this period too, many thousands of Mizos fled into the Chin State of Myanmar seeking refuge into the household of Chin unau or ‘Chin brethren’ because they were all chhul khat chhuak.

Although there are many periods in Myanmar history that we can refer to in relation to conflict and civil war, the reference here is specific to the most recent conflict that began with a coup on 1st February 2021. The civil war in Myanmar has created some 20 rebel groups who have mostly demanded autonomy. Suddenly having to flee conflict and war, the Myanmar refugee crisis witnessed Chin people have had to exile themselves out of their homeland and into foreign territories in order to survive. Thus, from March of 2021, in the midst of a global pandemic, and the onslaught of a deadly second wave of covid infection and travel restrictions from India, the Myanmar Chin exiled themselves into many villages scattered across the eastern Mizoram-Myanmar border. Travelling for many days on foot, sleeping under open skies with no belongings, facing monsoon rains for many months, a flood of Chin people seeking refuge came through the porous borders, crossing the Tiau River. Although the Indian Government is not a signatory of the Refugee Convention, Mizoram specifically, opened up their doors to help those fleeing war. To illustrate upon the experience of the Chin who were exiled in these villages, I travelled to two villages, that of Khawbung and of Farkawn in January of 2023 to witness the crisis. The YMA (YMA is Young Mizo Association which is the largest NGO in Mizoram) in both these villages took immediate action to welcome Chin unau. In my interview with the Chin refugees and with the YMA, it became very clear that the YMA handled the situation as best as they could. There was and there still is no proper policy and guideline to be followed for a standardized response to such a crisis. And so it continues to this day, that the YMA of villages bordering Myanmar have been taking in the refugees according to what they deem best for their village and the refugees. In Khawbung, the YMA did not necessary want to build a refugee camp. Instead they opted to house the exiles in rented homes, in houses which were shared between two or more families depending on the size of the accommodation. In this way, the Khawbung YMA felt they could help the Chin exiles to blend into the village life and assimilate into the local Khawbung culture and into the functions of the village. For example, when a death occurs in the village, the Chin brethren would be welcomed to partake in rituals (which is not any different from the way they do things because of a shared culture) like sitting in a wake, singing and praying for the dead. Some of the young Chin men and older boys are invited to involve themselves in activities like grave digging which is an activity taken up by the young Mizo men. The exiled are welcomed into cultural practices and rituals so as to make them feel a sense of belonging in the village. The YMA of the village of Farkawn, on the other hand, have built a camp for the refugees. It is one of the biggest camps currently in Mizoram. The YMA in this village have said they prefer to receive the refugees in a camp so that resources pooled and donated can be better distributed and that the needs of the Chin brethren can be better met. Health checks are easier to conduct and children are better protected in this manner.

The complexities of being a Chin exile in Mizoram are many-fold. From the many conversations with refugees in these villages, certain aspects notable for study was revealed. An exile leaves behind the ‘home’ which is not just a structural building or house but a place injected with meaning, heavily coded with tradition, ritual, of memory and identity. Keeping this concept of a ‘home’ in mind, I would like to refer here to Homi Bhabha’s concept of ‘unhomed’ in his Introduction to the Location of Culture in which Bhabha says that the question is about being ‘outside’ of the ‘home’ and not so much about being ‘homeless’. I use this concept to inform us better about the Myanmar exile and their experience of being ‘unhomed’ in Mizoram, being forced to renegotiate their place in the world. Of course, the Myanmar exile in Mizoram is homeless because of exiling oneself,

fleeing from war and conflict. So what does it mean to be 'unhomed'? The exile is dislocated in many aspects; social, cultural, economic and education unhoming is the first and most common experience of all the Myanmar refugees I interviewed. From young children to young adults, the major concern was schooling and education, the disruption of their educational progress which was in shambles. Although the villages of Khawbung and Farkawn I mentioned before, have helped to admit children into schools, curriculum is dissimilar, medium of instruction is different and individual progress of a student cannot be accounted for with different teachers and a different environment. The sense of having to uproot from everything familiar has resulted in the Myanmar exile feeling unmoored from their identity as citizens of Myanmar. This questioning of their identity has also further complicated their Chin identity especially in relation with their Chin brethren in Mizoram. Most of the Myanmar exiled in Mizoram are grateful for having been given shelter, being able to provide some semblance of normalcy to the children, but many have confessed that they are in a complete state of limbo. The sense of 'unhoming' is pronounced across all sub-clans exiled in refugee camps, scattered across numerous villages. The local YMA who placed them in different villages to accommodate and provide relief as best as possible have considered the impact on local villages themselves, whether they will be able to handle the heavy influx of refugees, if they can provide food, shelter and health care. These are the main concerns of the YMA and the Mizoram government when relocating the Myanmar. The philosophy of *tlawmngaihna* is implemented everyday as it is considered to be the most important Mizo ethos of being selfless and putting the needs of others as primary concern. The exile in a way has contributed to refining what it also means to be a good neighbour, a good Christian Samaritan.

A part from these aspects, the exiled Myanmar communities that are being built in different areas are redefining what it also means to be Chin in Mizoram/India, a reconnection and rediscovery of Mizo nationalism. Is Chin identity therefore necessary to Mizo identity? Do the exiled refugees experience a hybrid identity or a hybrid culture? Although they are *chhul khat chhuak* or coming from the same womb, does the exile feel the pressures to perform the role of the exile within Mizoram? What are the wider political and cultural complexities then, that the Myanmar exiled in Mizoram has experienced?

There is a rising fatigue that has set in with providing relief while the huge exiled population has grown to over 30,000. Although the non-government organizations, Church organizations and civil society have continued to support and feed the exiled refugees, the Mizoram government has expressed depleting finances. This, added to resources being stretched, a new stereotyping of the Myanmar exile has increased. In between these rising tensions and with the added stress of the most recent elections in Mizoram in November of 2023, the exile experience seems to have shifted. In the beginning, it was defined by a sense of relief, a new found sense of security, gratitude for being welcomed into a relative's home with warm and fond memories of a shared past, but this experience has shifted into a new worry. The mix of exile and local population specifically in the capital city of Aizawl and other district capitals has given rise to new tensions. For example, the border town of Champhai which is a district capital bordering Myanmar, has taken in thousands of refugees so much so that the Mizos themselves believe they are outnumbered by the Chin. In the past, Myanmar migrants worked in Mizoram as house maids, in the handloom industry and as helpers in various jobs. They have now come to be viewed with a mix of emotions, seen as a source for rising social ills. At a certain point when demand for drugs grew because of total prohibition of alcohol in Mizoram, the Myanmar migrant came to be generalized as drug peddling peoples, illegally smuggling drugs across the border. Because of the frequency of such crimes and the high rate of arrests of criminals who were Burmese, and because some of the crimes committed were heinous, this too contributed to the stereotyping of the migrant as dangerous and having no respect for local Mizo culture and society. This memory seems to have been triggered again in recent months. Rising rental rates for private apartments and rise of housing rates, specifically in the capital city Aizawl

have been observed to have occurred because of the Myanmar exile with plenty of resources, money and funding from abroad. These illustrations I have mentioned are examples of real time issues in Mizoram. So how does the Myanmar exile, having been 'unhomed' deal with such a complicated situation? The exiles I interviewed have felt discriminated against, felt it unfair to stereotype them because of crimes of a few. Some have experienced discrimination where they could not find proper houses to rent because the landlord did not want 'trouble'. All political parties have made the 'Myanmar refugee' into an issue in the recent elections. All parties wanting to play the 'Chin' identity card, combining it with the Mizo nationalism have approached the Myanmar exile and situation as one to exploit for political gain. The cracks in relations have definitely started appearing.

Many of the exiles have their respective leaders created from their church groups, or youth leaders and even political leaders. The general message they give to their fellow Myanmar refugees whether in the larger cities or in villages is to adhere to social norms as far as possible. The Chin has had to adjust to a catalogue of cultural norms, having to comply to certain local practices. On the other hand, there is also a growing anxiety on the part of the Mizo. The sudden growth of population especially in Aizawl city and larger towns in other districts have begun to weigh heavily on those controlling law and order like the policing system and the non-government organizations like the Young Mizo Association which aids the government in many areas of social control. Rise of crime like burglary, auto theft, scamming and defrauding, bank fraud and land disputes have been reported to be on the rise.

The experience of both Mizos and the Chin exile in Mizoram has exposed the complexities that arise out of a humanitarian response. Considering the political turmoil in Myanmar and its rising severity, both Chin and Mizos wonder how their relations will progress in months and probably years to come.

Works Cited

- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge: London. 1994.
- Carey, Bertram S. *The Chin Hills*. Vol 1. Tribal Research Institute: Aizawl. 2008.
- Reid, A.S. *Chin-Lushai Land*. Tribal Research Institute: Aizawl. 2008.
- Robin, K. *History, Culture & Identity*. Dominant Publishers and Distributors: New Delhi. 2009.