

Hill Cultures



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Lalmuanpuii

*Sivasish Biswas**

It was just before Christmas. We had a very welcome two months holidays. And I was going home to Durgapur in West Bengal. The flight was delayed at Lengpui Airport. It is common in Aizawl to expect delays in winter due to intense fog. And in February-April, there would be huge forest fires caused by 'jhum' cultivation, and very often the flights would just go back instead of risking landing through the inferno. Delay being almost expected, I made for the coffee stall, and was admiring the very pretty '*nula*' or young Mizo girl as she smilingly and untiringly served the customers! There was a big, burly Sardarji before me in the Q...and I casually remarked 'Sat Sree Akal Sardarji!' He turned towards me with surprise writ large on his kind face on being addressed in Punjabi and responded 'Sat Sree Akal Beta!' and put his huge arm on my shoulder. He ordered two cups of coffee...no, 'two coffees', Indian style, and walked me to the seats like an old acquaintance.

And we talked. He was going to his own village in Ludhiana.

'Did you come to Aizawl on duty?'

'No Beta! I am retired from the army.'

'Any business in Aizawl?'

'Yes...(long gap)...yes.....business....'. Silence. Then looking out of the window, in a faraway voice, he said : 'I come to Aizawl every year before Christmas beta. I am old now...previously I used to come more often...!'

His addressing me as 'beta' or 'my son' touched me! I felt instantly close to him, as if we were acquainted or related for ages! The faraway lost look on his eyes as they gazed at the bluish green hills made me curious. Who is he? And why does he come to Aizawl? His dignity was attracting me...and there was mystery in his eyes. He seemed to be unhappy. Suddenly he turned his broad face with a gray beard and fixed his eyes on me : 'I come to give gifts Beta! I have my own here in Aizawl. Christmas is so special, Beta! It is the time to remember and show love...You see that hill, Beta? Behind that is Chanmari...long time ago it was full of trees...and just a few houses...!' His voice faltered, and he lost himself gazing at Chanmari. I saw two pearl drops at the corner of his eyes.

I put my hand on his arm. He started!..as if from a dream! I asked : 'Major Baldev Singh?' He was speechless! He caught me in the iron grip of an army officer, searched me inside-out through his eyes, and whispered : 'You know them Beta?'

It was by chance that I had come to know Dr. Lalmuanpuui. She took me to her place one day for dinner. Having the bad habit of making friends, I became a regular visitor at her place. The very natural and warm reception attracted me. And I met her daughter Kimkimi – an oh so beautiful Mizo nula! She was tall and slender, with curly hair, and.....there was something in her appearance. Very beautiful. But?...I don't know. Something different. Something familiar I had seen elsewhere.

I often had dinner with them. The kind hospitality and lack of pretences was so warm and enchanting! And as a guest I gave them no trouble with any food restrictions. They were surprised. But I would feel uneasy that their house had no male presence. No jacket thrown over the chair carelessly. Not even an ash-tray. It was strange; I never asked Pi Muanpuui. She might be a widow, or a divorcee. She might not like my curiosity. But one day she told me about a famine in the 1960s. She told me of the legendary Mizo leader Pu Laldenga and his politics of separatism, the deprivation and marginalisation of the Mizos by the Assam Government when Mizoram was not Mizoram but just Lushai Hills District in Assam. She told me how he formed the Mizo National Front, their armed uprisal following the terrible famine and declaration of independent Mizoram in 1966.

Many non-Mizo Government officers were killed. Many more were beaten up and there was a frantic exodus from Aizawl. The blue flag of the MNF fluttered on top of the Radio Station, the Post Office, the Treasury, the DC Bungalow...The army moved in. They bombed Aizawl. They used helicopter gunships. They killed even helpless women and children. The Army Officers

occupied civilian houses. The men fled into the jungles. Only women and children remained. The women had to wash and cook for the army officers. Atrocities..undue advantages took place – more often than not.

Muanpuii was a young girl then. Her eyes were full of fear and wonder. Her father and brother had fled into the jungles, leaving Muanpuii and her mother behind. The army men tried to collect information from the women and conduct combing operations in the forests. Her brother died fighting the army. When the news reached Aizawl, her mother turned to stone. Muanpuii wept and wept! Yet, she had to carry the tray of food to the hated outsider or ‘Vai’ – the army officer in the front room. Her eyes were swollen and red. He had given her chocolates before. But today she refused – and burst out : ‘Leave us! Go away! You murderers!’ But Baldev Singh loved her all the more. He was young and handsome and smart in the uniform she had washed and ironed for him. He would praise their food and take ‘*vawksa*’ or pork, but he would never touch ‘*bongsa*’ or beef. He was kind, and she cried and cried on his shoulder, and he smelled of sweat and tobacco.

Aizawl again flew the Indian flag. The insurgency was crushed. The Army was being pulled out in phases. Now, again, Lalmuanpuii wept. Baldev Singh’s tears mingled with hers. He had told her stories of Mainland India, Punjab, Delhi, Lucknow, Madras. She had listened with awe! Now he was to leave.....and he, too, remembered how, in faraway Aizawl, he had found a home and a woman who loved intensely, passionately!! When the army killed her brother, she hated him and yet loved him too.

Baldev Singh could not bear to leave. He decided to resign from the army and stay back in Aizawl. The bliss he had found in that cottage up on Chanmari Hill meant more to him than his career or family in Ludhiana. He just could not leave his dear Muanpuii.

She leapt up from his clasp and screamed : ‘Go away! Go away!’ ‘But why? You love me...?’ ‘Go away I say! For my sake! For the sake of the baby in my womb....Go away!’ and she broke down crying...

It was my turn to ask Dr. Lalmuanpuii : ‘But why? You loved him?’ She answered : ‘Do you think once the army left, our men would have allowed him to stay back? His head would have been chopped off and stuck on a pole in revenge! For me, his being alive was more important.....’ She had a faraway look on her face, and her eyes were trickling pearls! ...‘and...(she was lost in her youth in the 60s)...even if I wanted, I could not go with him...He was married when very young. He had a child, too. I would have committed suicide, but Kimkimi didn’t let me die. And when she came into this world, I had to remain alive to look after her. None in my

family would accept her. She was the child of a *vai*. I could do nothing to console her as she wept bitterly. Then she said : ‘Nobody knows what I told you. Not even Kimi. It is better to remain unknown while I’m alive. He was a fine man...a loyal, loving man! What wouldn’t I have done for him? But I wanted him alive. And I also wanted his family to have him. They had come before me. For me, his memory is precious. And I have his Kimi. My Kimi.’

When I saw Major Baldev Singh looking at Chanmari with the same lost look, I saw the young *nula* Muanpuii in his eyes. Instantly I knew, how I don’t know, – that this is Major Baldev Singh!

The metallic voice of the Kingfisher Airlines announcer urged one Baldev Singh to go through security and board the flight immediately. After he left in a hurry, I realised that I had not taken his phone number.

(ps: Dr. Lalmuanpuii is no more...)

Mapuii

It was a six hour drive from Aizawl to Silchar. Sitting next to me was a pretty Mizo girl. She looked very young, and had the typical jeans and T-shirt attire that Mizo girls prefer. I thought she was a ‘*nula*’ or an unmarried young girl. There was a child sitting next to her. ‘*Dam o boyii!*’ I said, trying to be pleasant. Mizos, or Mizo girls to be specific, are very talkative, and if they find a ‘*vai*’ or non-Mizo talking in Mizo ‘*tawng*’(language), the flood gates open!

So I get to know that her name is Mapuii, she stays at Vaivakawn, helps out in a shop during the day-time, and of course all shops down shutters by evening in Mizoram. And as she speaks to the child next, I get to hear the child address her as ‘*kanu*’ or Mom. Then she is no *nula*. Or may be *nula*...lot of girls have children before marriage. ‘*Kapi*’ most probably. *Kapi* is the blissfully married stage. But it is advisable not to ask, and I talk of the weather, the road, the coming Chapcharkut festival...

The roads are very steep and winding. At the window seat beyond the child there was a non-Mizo labourer from the plains, very typical, easily identifiable. This fellow very irritatingly kept on smoking *bidis* which made me nauseous. And now and then he would turn towards us and silently listen to our talk.

When the vehicle reached the plains, it stopped at Bhaga Bazar for lunch. I never eat at these way-side eateries. I prefer the fastest fast-food on earth : bananas! I bought some extra for the child Venii. Mother and daughter had gone for food. I waited near the Sumo for the other passengers to return. Then I had a shock! I found Venii walking back with a Muslim lady – clad from top to bottom in a black *burqha*!! The tell-tale jeans were still sticking out below...I became very, very curious...When they resumed their seats I couldn't help asking Mapuii why this change of dress? She started squealing with laughter! and said that she was going to the place of her in-laws! – Hailakandi. Now in a flash I understood – once again – how stupid I am! Of course that Muslim labourer sitting next to the child by the window must be her husband! Yes! It was instantly verified. His name? Abdul. No doubt all along, he was rightfully interested in his wife chatting with an unknown person...but he never opened his mouth.

These labourers flood Mizoram, mostly as masons or '*mistiries*'. They are commonly suspected to be Bangladeshis who cross over the porous border in Karimganj and find shelter in Hailakandi. It is almost impossible to detect, and really, where is the identifier which denotes an Indian and a Bangladeshi? Same colour, same language, same dress...Getting an Inner Line Permit or Work Permit is extremely easy, given the reluctance of Mizos to do menial labour. Once inside Mizoram, their situation is rather ambivalent – they are necessary, so their contractors or masters give them shelter. But they are the easy targets of social abuse by local hooligans who take advantage of their poverty and non-Mizo status. They face

abuse, extortion, brow-beating, and physical assault at the slightest pretext. Often, or very often, they are forced to get converted.

And often, very often, what do these labourers do? They promptly manage to fall in love with a Mizo girl...!! and when caught by the society, or local organisations, they won't and don't dare to deny. And pretty willingly, they get married. Marriage means most importantly the security of being a Mizo woman's husband, as also having a cook for free! Now nobody can touch Joseph! for indeed, Abdul is no more. It is the new avatar, Joseph, husband of Mapuii, father of Venii.

But at Bhaga Bazar, I found Mapuii in a new avatar. She giggled : 'Oooh I'm Ameena now hihihhi!' I asked her : 'How long are you going to stay at Hailakandi?' – 'One month. *Oii...*its *lum lutuk* (very hot) in Hailakandi! And see this dress...it is so hot!' 'And what will you eat? *Bongsa* (beef)?'-'Yes!' '*Vawksa*(pork)?'-'No no!!' she giggled, '*Vawksa* is dirty in Hailakandi.' *Arsa* (chicken)? –'Yes!' 'And what about *Uisa*(dog-meat)?' – 'Oh no no not in Hailakandi. But we'll bring back three or four *uis*(dogs)...its free you know! – you just have to catch them and put them in gunny bags when we return back to Aizawl. The driver will hang them from the top of the Sumo....I'll sell some, and keep one or two for ourselves. But *vawksa* is my favourite! Once we return to Aizawl, I'll have lots of *vawksa* everyday!' I asked 'and what about Joseph? Does he take *vawksa* too?'- Again she giggled and said in a low tone '*Oii...*of course! Joseph likes it when I cook it in Aizawl.....but in Hailakandi, Abdul does not take *vawksa*.'

*Professor Sivasish Biswas was formerly Reader & Head, in the Dept. of English, Mizoram University. He is now the Pro-VC of Assam University, Diphu Campus.