

**A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF WOMEN AND SOCIETY IN MIZORAM**

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**CERTIFICATE**

Certified that the dissertation entitled, "A Sociological Study of Women and Society in Mizoram" submitted by Mercie Gangte, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of degree of **Master of Philosophy**, is her original work and has not been previously submitted for any other Degree of this or any other University.

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*dedicated to*

*Chiengkongpang Pupu...*

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*Where do I even start...*

*To Professor Tiplut Nongbri,*

*Whose patience never wore thin.*

*To my Father,*

*For simply being my father.*

*To my sisters, Naro and Rody,*

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## Contents

*Certificate*

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Introduction	1
Chapter One: Status of Women in Mizoram	11
• About Mizoram	11
• Who are the Mizos	11
• Language	15
• Social Structure of the Mizo Society	16
• Mizos and Their Associated Cultural Practices	23
• Christianity and Social Change	25
• Status of Mizo Women	28
• Norms and Duties Related to Women	29
• Courtship and Marriage	31
• Women and Social Change	32
Chapter Two: Social Construction of Gender	37
• Gender and Ideology: Glimpses of different Communities	40
• Women and religion	45
• Mizo Religion and Women	48
• Women and Customary Laws	54
• Gender and Education	56

Chapter Three: Customary Laws and Women	59
• Marriage Customs Among The Mizos	61
• Customary Law on Divorce	70
• Divorce and The Mizo Women	73
• Inheritance	75
• Women and Inheritance	78
• Customary laws and Social change	81
• Challenges for the Mizo women.	84
Conclusion	86
Glossary	
Bibliography	

## Introduction

Nestled amidst the hills of North-East India, there lies Mizoram which constitutes one of the seven states namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura and they are also known as the Seven Sisters. Recently the state of Sikkim has also been added as the eighth sister of the existing seven states. A striking and unique feature of the northeastern part of India is the fact that this area is mostly inhabited by different tribes. These tribes although originating from the mongoloid racial stock are distinctly different in a myriad number of ways, of which cultural and linguistic diversity emerge beautifully in perfect synchronicity, a reminder of the symbiotic relation one has with one's neighbor. The northeast region was earlier not a part of mainland India. The colonial incorporation of the northeastern part of India occurred much later than the rest of Indian Sub-continent. The British acquired control of Assam in 1826, Garo Hills in 1873, Naga Hills in 1879, Khasi Hills in 1765, Jaintia Hills in 1835 and the Lushai Hills between 1881 to 1890. With the perpetuation of colonial authority and beginning of territorial annexation by the British, 1826 onwards, the cultural identity of the native tribes came under the threat of alien influence. Many of the tribes resented the political domination inflicted by the outsiders and expressed their discontent and protested time and again. The colonial rulers separated the hills from the plains for direct administration and control of the tribes. The resistance of different tribes to British colonial incursions into the hills of northeastern India in the early nineteenth century provoked many types of reaction and outcomes. Under these provocative conditions special policies were enacted to allow customary system in forest management and respect for the traditional system of governance. Henceforth their customary laws play an important role in determining how various aspects of their life should function. The policies of the British led to the isolation of the northeast region from the rest of India. The Inner Line Regulation Act of 1873 established a virtual boundary running along the foothills and stressed that any British subject or persons who pass beyond the stipulated line were liable to be fined. The Acts like that of the Inner Line Regulation has been responsible for restriction and the segregation of the Northeast of India in terms of trade and commerce. Under the Government of India Act 1935, the hill areas of Assam were divided into two categories namely Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas. Excluded Areas covered exclusively tribal inhabited areas while Partially Excluded Areas had mixed population of tribal and non-tribal

people. Under the Excluded Areas were the Lushai Hills (Mizoram), the Naga Hills and the North Cachar Hills, over which the provincial ministry had no jurisdiction, and under the Partially Excluded Areas were the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the Garo Hills and the Mikir Hills. These districts have five representatives in the Assam Legislative Assembly but in Garo Hills and Mikir Hills the franchise was limited to the traditional village headmen. These areas were administered by the state government subject to the special powers of the governor. After Independence of India, the Government of India in line with Government of India Act 1935, provided an Autonomous District Council to each hill district under the Sixth Schedule.

A patriarchal social order exists among the majority of the tribes of northeast India, with the exception to the Khasis and Garos in Meghalaya and the Lalungs (now known as Tiwa) of Assam, who follow the matrilineal principle of descent. The issues which continually cast their shadows on the northeastern women have received very little attention, especially from the scholars and policy makers. This is starkly evident in the very limited availability of literature that address the plight of the women. There is a general belief that a tribal society is egalitarian in nature and thus, it is almost always assumed that the status of tribal women in the northeast is significantly egalitarian. Due to conditional circumstances like this, there exists a presupposed notion that women of this region enjoy a fairly high status but the fact of the matter is quite different from this. Though their status is relatively high, as compared to women in other parts of India, women in Northeast India face various kinds of discrimination too and it is unfortunate that many are oblivious about the prejudices faced by them on the basis that they happen to be women. Women in northeast India enjoy greater mobility and visibility in comparison with women in other parts of India. The issues of dowry death, bride burning, female infanticide etc. are alien for many of the tribal women hailing from this part of the region. But it would be erroneous to assume that they do not face gender biases. Studies that focus on gender relations among the different tribes of northeast India most often do not delve far enough into issues related to inequality, as the notion of an egalitarian society still prevails among the mindset of many.



## **Statement of problems/ Research questions**

A woman's status depends mainly on their rights and privileges and the roles assigned to them, most often on the basis of gender. This evokes some important queries and observations within the confines of one's own understanding of the situation associated with the status of women, a few of which I have raised below:

- Are customary laws practiced in certain societies responsible for, consciously or unconsciously, differentiation between genders thereby encouraging gender bias? It can be further extenuated into examining its capability of moulding the social order and the extent of its influence on the role and status of women
- "Social structure perpetuates gender inequality." Are we right in assuming so? If yes, how is it so, subsequently followed by providing an evaluation of the condition.
- How does socialization processes affect gender differentiation?
- Elucidate upon the perception of the right owned by women in Mizo society with accordance to issues concerning landholdings and inheritance of property.
- Women are perpetually embroiled and caught up in multiple problematic situations in the field of education, economic independence and political significance. Invisibility and a mute presence are echoes of this precarious condition they are destined to inherit. Answers to why and what can still elude the individual.
- Digress on how the practices of the social structure of the society, the role of culture, beliefs, customary laws of the society; and how these practices stunts women development.

## **Gender and Sociology**

According to the Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, it was Ann Oakley who first introduced the word 'Gender' to Sociology. "Sex" refers to the biological division into male or female; "Gender" on the other hand refers to the socially unequal division into femininity and masculinity. Gender draws attention therefore, to the socially constructed aspects of differences between women and men. But the term gender has since become extended to

refer not only to individual identity and personality but also, at the symbolic level, to cultural ideals and stereotypes of masculinity and femininity and, at the structural level, to the sexual division of labor in institutions and organizations (Marshall, 2005). In sociology, gender, race, ethnicity and social class are the most commonly used categories. They represent the major social statuses that determine the life chances of individuals in heterogeneous societies, and together they form a hierarchy of access to property, power and prestige (Encyclopedia of Sociology: Borgatta and Montgomery, 2000). Various studies on stratification in the past have sidelined the significance of women in the stratification system and the positions of women were more or less assumed. It was therefore suggested that feminist reconceptualization of stratification studies would lead to a better understanding of social structure. Sociology was argued to be a 'Male-stream' discipline primarily concerned with research on men and theories for men, on the basis of which generalization of the whole population are made. Areas concerned with women were seen as personal and outside the purview of the academic. There was little coverage on sociology both theoretically and empirically and this made feminist sociologists opine that sociology was somewhat 'sexist' (Rege, 2003:4).

It is imperatively important to note that an incomplete and one-sided understanding is a distorted understanding, a prejudiced falsification of what is real. Sidelining women as actors who contribute to continuity and change in society would weaken the study and distort our understanding of the society as a whole. Anthropological studies are supposed to be based on firsthand observation of life of people but more often than not, rely on information collected through male informants with minimal contribution from women. Studies that focus on the women populace are exclusively distinguished, by the approach taken, highlighted by critical evaluation and fresh analytical framework so as to arrive at a proper understanding of women, grasping their problems and situation and lives. Ardener states that, in line graphs presenting information about women and men, the solid lines represents men and the dotted lines women, in such representation viewers perceive the dotted lines as deviation and the solid line as the norms. "The need for placing the invisibility in wider complex of communication and language had been suggested for helpful approach to the study of women, but this would solve only part of problem of invisibility but visibility of women alone does not necessarily give woman a voice" (Ardener, 1986:3). Ardener explains the invisibility of women with the help of the concept 'muting' which emphasizes the suppression or repression of speech especially related to women. Ardener substantiates her point on muting in Kirsten Hastrup's paper

entitled 'The Semantics of Biology', which depicts, how in many societies as well as in social anthropology, that there is an implicit assumption that men represent both the sexes, the 'male' is 'generalized' while the 'female' is 'specified'.

The sociology of gender emerged as a specific field only in the 1970s. The study of gender in sociology first appeared in the research on sex roles. In so far as sociology of gender in India is concerned, Rege asserts that the agenda of the liberal reformist and revivalists of the nineteenth century shaped the study of 'woman in sociology'. A.R.Wadia's work 'Ethics of Feminism in 1923' was considered the first attempt in sociology with an inclination towards the study of women where feminist thoughts on marriage, motherhood, home life, education and professions were explored. In a compilation of papers on the sociology of gender, Rege broadly classified the feminist critique of discipline into: 'inclusion', separatism and reconceptualization (Rege, 2003:5). She suggests an opportunity to pursue a cause for integration of women into the cognitive structures of the discipline, and argues for sociology of women from a woman's point of view in relation to their status in patriarchal society. She also suggests notions for integration of feminist challenges to discipline and reconceptualization of the sociological categories, thereby challenging the taken for granted dichotomies amongst women. She opines that for the study of women, it is essential to analyze them in terms of their history and the culture to which they belong. Concomitant with this perspective, it is essential to comprehend it with women's perception of themselves and their actions relating to this perception. The study of women in India is not simply about challenging the position of men but also about women's consciousness in terms of social exploitation and oppression in all walks of life be it in politics, family, marriage etc.

There is an ongoing debate that 'sex' is something which is biologically determined and 'gender' is a social construct. The theories on gender are contextual and relational as the notion of body is seen as something which is altered in social practice. The ideology of feminism that turn towards essentialism is based upon belief that it is the body which makes a woman a woman and it is the body which is understood to be the basis on which the ideas about femininity and masculinity are imposed (Holmes, 2007:88). Oakley cited by Holmes, distinguishes sex on the basis of biological differences by emphasizing the presence of visible genitalia of male and female and their related difference in procreation, whereas 'gender' is related to culture. She argues that ideas of masculinity and femininity are social classification, a social construct and not a biological construct. Gender as a concept therefore

initially focused on how social factors, not bodies, determined people's mind (Holmes, 2007:90). In the Marxist perspective gender cannot be understood as an isolated piece of reality, rather it should be perceived in relation to the society in its totality. The notion of male and female cannot be seen as abstract categories but as tangible aspects of a social and economic system. The male and female roles and functions reflect, express as well as influence social and economic realities: of economic power, social dominance and cultural authority (Geeta, 2002:52). An argument of Marxism is that the mode of reproduction is both physiological and cultural and it involves individuals and not groups, women give birth (produce) to children who go on and occupy their assigned role in the production process. In mode of production women play a major role in sustaining relationship, maintenance of the house and children and socializing children to fit into the roles given to them. Marxism is about division of human society into two: those who own resources and power and those who do not own resources and power but contribute to the society in the form of skill and labour. In Marxist ideology, the real distinction is none but that of power. V.Geeta explained the point where relation of production and reproduction with an example of caste society where landlord by virtue of his position has control of a marriage relationship of a poor dalit, he can demand sexual access to the dalit's wife, portraying the lower caste women status and her powerlessness over her own sexuality.

### **Status of Women in India**

Women's status depends mainly on their rights and privileges and the roles assigned to them, most often on the basis of gender. The study of social status of women forms the significant indices of the state of the society and it also indicates the nature and direction of social change. Two important questions that need to be raised in the study of women are:

1. What constitute status of women?
2. How does customary law shape the status of women?

Sociological studies often imply status in relation to the position one acquires in a social system. Mitchell defines social status as a position occupied by a person, family, or kinship group in a social system relative to other. This determines rights, duties and other behaviors, including the nature and extent of the relationships with persons of other statuses (A New Dictionary of Sociology: 1979, Mitchell). According to Linton, 'a status is a collection of rights and duties'. When a status is ascribed to a person, like that of 'gender' status, there are

concomitant roles and duties duly assigned with it. Some statuses are predetermined, like that of gender which have been decided from birth and thus status like that of gender is an ascribed one. And in all societies, the status of a person is defined by associations with various socially approved norms which in turn dictates the acts of the person belonging to that particular section of society. When a person puts the rights and duties which constitute the status into effect he/she is performing a role, one that represents the dynamic aspect of a status. The division and ascription of statuses with relation to sex seems to be basic in all social system. All societies prescribe different attitudes to men and women. A status represents a person's position with relation to the total society (Linton, 1964:116). For Weber, status may not rest on class position of a distinct or an ambiguous kind. However, it is not solely determined by it; money and an entrepreneurial position are not in themselves status qualification, although they may lead to them; and the lack of property is not in itself a status disqualification, although this may be a reason for it (Weber, 1978:306). Therefore status is a situation where individuals are evaluated by others in terms of his social positioning. Evaluation of status is not always in terms of economic class but rather how individuals are perceived by others, and with that perception individuals are attributed certain forms of social prestige or esteem in accordance with their social position. Status therefore cannot be determined by socio-economic indicators such as income, property, education and skills alone e.g. an educated and employed woman may have economic security but in her home as a wife she still has to conform to certain norms like caring for children and husband, cooking etc. her status is lower in relation to her husband at home. While explaining the inequality of status between men and women, Davidson (1979:111) stresses that even when women enter new fields, they may not be treated as equals within those fields. Therefore it should be noted that education of women or provision of employment does not necessarily ensure equal treatment of both men and women as the notion of differences in terms of sex, ethnicity, race etc. are imbibed in the ideology of people. There is no doubt about the importance and vitality of a study conducted on the status of women in a society. It becomes the measure which encompasses the advent or progress of a State and a Nation as a whole, and this study of status is a perplexing case because it cannot be concluded or determined by merely studying one or two parameters. Thus even in the field of sociology, it is difficult to measure status of women as there are no fixed criteria for measuring how high or low the status of women occupies in the social scenario.

Determining status of women in India is a challenging one. Since time immemorial, Sacred Hindu literature portrayed the role of women as that of a being who is destined never to enjoy a free and independent status. These texts were interpreted in such a manner that their freedom and rights in the society be considerably restricted, strictly in adherence to the edicts of the divine knowledge. Women have often been referred to as *devis* or goddesses but in many ways they are being discriminated. A universal picture of the role of woman as one that is the epitomised personification of a self-sacrificing being in a patriarchal world has been etched into the very fabric of societal consciousness. If one were to gaze through the scrolls of history, the period of deterioration of the position of women in man's world can be glimpsed in its tragic onset as early as in 200 A.D. The *Smriti* writers of that period imposed many restrictions upon the body, soul, and the very existence of women. *Manu*, for example, maintained that women should never be allowed to exist in a free and independent status. In her childhood, she should remain under the control of her father, in her youth under the control of her husband and in old age, she should remain under the control of her sons. Ceremony like *Kanyadan* in marriages implies just this; where the power of control over the woman is transferred from the father to the husband. *Manu* also believes that a wife who serves her husband faithfully and devotedly can attain heaven or *swarge*. Discrimination of women can be observed in hideous practices like *Sati*, where wives were burned along with their deceased husbands.

The first official report on women in India was published in the form of report *Towards Equality: Report on the Committee on status of women in India* in 1974, which estimated the status of women in relation to development, constitutional provisions and laws relating to women. Several approaches such as assessment of the impact of constitutional and administrative provision on status of women in terms of education, employment etc., status change in social pattern and its remedial measures for betterment of this status were the important and major dimensions. Women's attainment of status in reference to her gender most evidently begins from the social framework, social structure, cultural norms and value systems of the society of which she is a part, therefore status of women is relational as it varies from one society to another. Every society has certain social expectations which are most generally determined on the basis of sexes, the behavior of the two sexes at an individual level and in relation to each other. Here social tradition is an important factor in influencing and forming behavior patterns of human society. Thus in study of the status of women it is essential to look into the society in its totality. Study of women status can be termed as

dynamic, as society is ever changing and what has been considered a taboo some hundred of years may not be today. But in all its dynamic nature and certain social change in a society, one fact that remains stagnant is the secondary status of women in relation to that of man. Even today the position of women has not shown any significant improvements. Many continue to be victims of malnutrition, illiteracy, and unemployment, and they are by virtue of their gender and social mores disadvantaged in regard to basic needs. Even in modern India gender bias has not stopped to perpetuate. Social problems like dowry death and female infanticide can be still observed in modern India. Indian women are seen perennially and transcendently as wife, mother and home maker even in modern India. Even as large number of women today are opting for education and career they are expected to balance their dreams and aspiration with household management. In fact, the image of perfect women is one who efficiently juggles home and work.

In India gender bias can be manifested in the overall status of women like, social, economic, health and nutrition. Status of women can be determined by the sex ratio of the country, Sex Ratio is the number of females per thousand males, the sex ratio of a region reflects the socio-economic development, it also reflects the level of women's empowerment of the region. In case of India the Sex Ratio is 933:1000 (census 2001). Studies have shown that, female child gets neglected in access to food, better clothing, and education. Child mortality in the age group 1-4 is 43 per cent higher for female children than for male children in India (Haq, 2007:130). But a glance at Mizo society shows a more favorable picture. In so far as the sex ratio is concerned, the sex ratio of Mizoram is 938:1000 (census 2001) slightly better off than the national sex ratio.

The general attitude amongst Indians is that women are the caretakers of the household. It is usually the men, who eat first and who eat best, and women get what is left after the men and boys have eaten. Studies of women in India highlight the much lower caloric and protein intake levels of women relative to their needs, their higher levels of morbidity and malnutrition and their grater neglect during illness. Study of women in the Mizo society however shows no such discriminatory practice towards women among the Mizo society. Birth of female child in family is hailed with the same joy as that of a male one and not treated in anyway different from male child in her upbringing (Mahapatra, 2008:380). One interesting fact about women of Mizoram is that today they have the second highest female literacy rate in India which is 86.13 %, second only to Kerala which is 87.86%. The Sex

Ratio of 0-6 years in Census 2001 shows that Mizoram Sex Ratio stands at 964:1000, which is fairly high in comparison with States like Punjab, Haryana and Gujarat which stands at 798:1000, 819:1000 and 883:1000 respectively (census 2001). The Reproductive Health Studies in India shows that there are various complications like pregnancy, childbirth, and unsafe abortions related to maternal issues are mainly due to mere negligence, and these negligence often contribute to poor health among millions of women in India. In studying the status of women in particular society it is essential to look closely into the matter of women's overall status in the wider society, as comparison will give an idea about their positioning. Though the study is focused on women among the Mizo tribe it is important to analyze her position in comparison to women of India as a whole. Status of women can be determined by looking at parameters of development like access to land, healthcare and decision in marriage and household. India is often called the land of 'Unity in Diversity', but in all its diversity one common feature in almost all societies is the secondary status of women. Therefore it is essential to compare and contrast different aspects of gender across India. Irrespective of rules of descent adopted by the society, be it patrilineal or matrilineal, gender boundaries have been vividly drawn by the societies. Women's social position can be understood in terms of rights ascribed by society which generally privilege men over women. Women in India are denied rights in ownership and control of land, even where women have access on land they lack controlling power. Status of women in India is dependent on the customary laws, inheritance pattern etc. The inheritance patterns vary within India in itself by region, caste, community and ethnicity. India maybe a country of heterogeneous society, but a homogenous element in this heterogeneous society is the inequalities of women which is inherent in traditional social structure, religion and other societal practice. Though today emphasis is being placed on equality, women continue to suffer from various disadvantages.



## Chapter One

### Status of Women in Mizoram

#### About Mizoram

Geographically Mizoram is located in the Northeast region of India, sandwiched between Myanmar in the east and south and Bangladesh in the west. The state occupies an area of great strategic importance to India due to its geo-political location in the northeastern corner of India. Mizoram is situated between 21.58° to 24.35° North Latitude and 92.15° to 93.29° East Longitude. It shares international boundary with Myanmar and Bangladesh and in India it shares its border with Tripura, Assam and Manipur. Mizoram is a mountainous region, three-fourth of the area of the state is under mountains enveloped with natural vegetation, as a result, availability of flat cultivable land is very meager in the state. Like most other states in the North-east of India the land is characterized by a great scenic beauty and a landscape that is rich in flora and fauna. Mizoram covers an overall area of 21,087 sq.km with a total population of 891, 058 persons as per the Census 2001. As the name itself implies the dominant and major tribe of Mizoram are the Mizos and the popular language spoken is Mizo and as such the word Mizoram in itself implies the land of the Mizo, wherein Mizo implies the Mizo people and *Ram* in Mizo connotes 'Land'. According to Census of India 2001, the total Scheduled Tribe population of Mizoram is 94.5 % which is higher than other northeastern state of India like Nagaland (89.1%), Meghalaya (85.9%), Arunachal Pradesh (64.2%), Manipur (34.2%), and Tripura (31.1%) respectively. The principal language of the state is Mizo and English.

#### Who are the Mizo?

The origin of the word 'Mizo' *per se* is unclear. It is a generic term and in common parlance it is used to mean Hillmen or Highlanders. The Mizos consist of several social groups such as Lushai, Hmar, Paite, Ralte and Pawi. Some of the groups comprise of several clans such as Sailo, Hauhnar, Pacchau, Chhachhuak etc. and like wise the Hmars, Paites and Pawis have their own clans. In so far as population distribution is concerned, various tribes of Mizoram like the Pawis and Lakhers (also known as Mara), are settled in the in the south and east. The Hmars are distributed on the east and north, and the Lushai, Ralte, Hmar, Paite and others

settled mostly in north and central part of the state. Apart from these groups, the Riang tribe of Tripura and the Chakmas (rehabilitated mainly from Bangladesh) also has been rehabilitated in Mizoram and are well distributed. Besides these two groups who speak Bangladeshi, all the others tribe group speak in the common language which is Mizo.

The explanation of the origin of the word Mizo is highly complex and even the most common explanation is conjectural, they are believed to have originated from a single ethnic entity known as Zo who later were dispersed and scattered in Myanmar, India and Bangladesh (Keivom, 2006:141). Keivom elucidates their origin in the myths and legends of the Zo. There is no authentic evidence to prove the exact origin of the Mizo due to absence of literature. According to popular belief the earliest known settlement of the Zo was a large cave which was covered by a big stone called *Sinlung* or *Khul* believed to be somewhere in China<sup>1</sup>. Keivom (2006:142-143) explains the dispersion of the tribe as follows;

The Zo ancestors headed towards Chindwin river and Kabaw valley then already under the suzerainty of the Shan princes some of whose disparate groups later established the Ahom Kingdom in Assam. From there some headed Southwest and spread over the present Arakan (Rakhine) State in Myanmar and Chittagong Hill tracts of Bangladesh. But the major bulk continued to move westwards, climbed the rugged Chin Hills and settled in the mountainous vastness. Undisturbed by outside forces for a period long enough to evolve their own pattern and settlement and administration, socio-cultural norms and practices beliefs and rituals, myths and legends, folk tales, music and dance and many other customs and traditions, they handed these down from generation to generation right down to the present time.

It was during the Chin Hills settlement that the linear strata became more defined and clanism became more emphasized as each clan and sub clan moved and settled in groups thereby subsequently resulting in the formation of new tribes and sub-tribes In this way, the Zo group of tribes, clans and

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<sup>1</sup> The origin was believed to be in the Yunan Province of China during the Nanchao dynasty. With the collapse of the dynasty it was believed that number of tribes scattered around south and south east Asia, like the Siams in southward direction, the Burmans in west direction and the Zo in the region of northeast India.

sub clans speaking varied Zo dialects were born. As they spread out over different hill, clan by clan, they became more and more isolated from each other and loyalty concentrated more and more on their respective clans. In this way they became fiercely insular, loyal to their clan only and fought each other to gain supremacy over others as well as to defend their lands and honour from intrusion by others. In the absence of centrally controlled authority, therefore, inter tribal rivalries and wars were common, leaving trills of bitterness and hate. This was basically the condition when the British came and subjugated the Zo world and its people.....Till now the Zo can be classified as Chin in Myanmar, Lusei and subsequently Mizo in Mizoram, Kuki in Manipur, Nagaland, Assam, Tripura, and Chittagong Hills Tract even though many tribes within the Zo group have identified themselves and are recognized as separate tribes as such under the Indian Constitution. There are more than 50 Zo dialects of which Duhlian-Lusei dialect now known as Mizo language, is the most developed and understood and is gradually evolving to become the *lingua-franca* of the Zo people.

Following the same tract on the origin of the Mizo, Gangte (48:2008) corroborates that Mizos traditionally claimed that they came out of a very big cave called 'Chhinlung' by the Dulian speaking tribes. 'Singlung' by the Hmars, 'Khur' by the old Kuki tribes, such as, Aimol, Anal, Chothe, Chiru, Maring, Lamgang, Kom, etc., and 'Khul' by Vaiphei, Paite, Gangte, Simte, Zo, Thadou and Cognate groups of New Kukis etc., with the exception of Changsan, Lhangum, Thangeo, Lunkim, etc., who claimed that they were of 'Celestial Origin'. The folk songs and legends of the Mizo have maintained the 'cave origin' concept. Gangte (49:2008) gives an extract of one of the folksongs whose English version reads:

*My Motherland, famous Khul,  
Home of my own ancestors,  
Could it be called back like Chongzil,  
Home of my own ancestor.*

Another theory of the origin of the Mizo propose that the Mizo migrated possibly sometime between 1400 and 1700 or 1800 A.D. from upper Burma. Prasad (1987:3) in his attempt to explain the origin of the Mizos referred to Mizo historians K.Zawla and Rev. Liangkhaia, in “Ancient Glimpse of history of Mizo people” and “History of Lushai” who propounded that, the Mizo were in the Chin hills of Burma (Myanmar) from 1400 A.D. to 1700 A.D. and their gradual movements of migration started between 1700 and 1730 or 1740 A.D. It was believed that the Mizos migrated from Burma for two main reasons, firstly, it was due to the pressure of the Chins or the stronger clans of Burma. Secondly, it was the pressure of over population which compelled the Mizos to migrate, they passed through Chindwin valley and the Chin Hills and finally to present Mizoram. The history of Mizos could be traced for five hundred years. They were believed to have lived in the hill tracts of Burma with their main villages located in the valley between the rivers Run (which runs inside Burma) and Tiau (is in Burma bordering Mizoram).

Whilst illustrating the history of the Mizos, Lalkhama (2006:323) points out that the Mizo tribe which constitute different kindred groups live in the present Chin State of Myanmar, in the hill areas of the surrounding states such as Manipur, Assam, Tripura, and also in Bangladesh. The Mizo tribe did not have common loyalty and allegiance to one authority of Government. In early 1870s, Thomas Lewin, the Deputy Commissioner, Chittagong Hill Tract of Bengal, made an attempt to bring together the tribes under one single native ruler with a single authority disregarding the ethnic divide for the convenience of the British India Government. Lushai Hills was annexed by the British in 1891. The process of amalgamation of different clans of the same tribe into one composite group in Lushai Hills was almost complete by 1895. Lushai Hills remained under Assam while southern half remained under Bengal. In 1898 both these parts were amalgamated to into one district called Lushai Hills District under the Chief Commissioner of Assam. In his discussion about the identity formation of the Mizos, Lalkhama asserts that since most of the ruling chiefs belonged to Lushai tribe, the other smaller clan got absorbed in the Lushai clan. With the reference of ‘Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics’, he further points out that Lushai are “composite community, consisting of those groups which were absorbed and reduced to a more or less complete unity by skill and sagacity of Thangur Chiefs of the Lushai clan,” (19<sup>th</sup> Century) is fairly accurate description of Mizo inside Mizoram (Lalkhama, 2006:324).

The term Mizo quickly gained popular acceptance in the Lushai Hills as a common nomenclature for all people of Zo descent. Consequently, the name of Lushai Hills was changed to Mizo Hills (Keivom, 2006:145). Lushai Hills was changed into Mizo Hills by an Act of Parliament in September 1954 (Lalkhama, 2006:325). With the implementation of the North Eastern Reorganisation Act in 1972, Mizoram became a Union Territory and as a sequel to the signing of the historic memorandum of settlement between the Government of India and the Mizoram Front in 1986, it was granted statehood on 20 February 1987, becoming the 23<sup>rd</sup> State of Indian Union.

### **Language:**

'*Duhlian*' or 'Lushai' which is the dialect of the Lushai clan modified with contact with those of other clan like, Hmar, Pawi, Paite etc. is the lingua franca of all the Lushai Hills and the by product of the mixture of all these language is what constitute the Mizo language (Lalkhama, 2006:324). Some smaller tribes have their own dialects but they usually use Mizo for communication between them. According to Chatterjee (1985:198), the Lushais never attempted to codify the rules of the language, the language was codified later on by the missionaries of Welsh Mission in 1897-98 by compiling Lushai primer. Mizo therefore is the mixture of Lushai or *Dulian* with other dialects spoken by smaller tribes. In so far as language is concerned it is considered as important as it determines the ethnological and cultural bond in ones' society when it comes to relation with other tribes or ethnic groups. Mizo language has affinity with Manipuri and with dialects spoken by the people in Ladakh in Jammu and Kashmir and in some hill areas of Uttar Pradesh State. It is one of the Tibeto – Burman languages (323:2006, Lalkhama). The family mainly consists of the Kukis, Lushais and Meitei Groups. The family is distinct to the Chin, Kuki and Mizo as almost homogenous. There is a belief that the three tribes speaking Chin-Kuki-Mizo had similar history but these groups got diffused due to different channels of migration. Linguista have classified Sino-Tibetan language as the following:

1. Old Kuki- Hrangul, Halan, Chau, Langrong etc.
2. Kuki Chin Meitei, Old Kuki Chin.
3. Northern Chin Group- Thadou, Sukte, Ralte, Paite etc.
4. Central Chin Group- Lushei, Lakher and others.

## **Social Structure of the Mizo Society**

### **Family, Kinship and Marriage:**

The social organization of the Mizos like most of the northeastern society is a patriarchal and a patrilineal society. The Mizos are endogamous groups with extreme patriarchal principles of marriage and inheritance, descent always traced through the male and the father. The society is casteless and to some extent classless, thus every Mizo can contact, meet, dine, and speak with one another with no societal restriction imposed on them. Mizo society is a patriarchal society; the word patriarchy itself connotes principle of the dominion of senior male over juniors, male as well as female, in the family, tribe or nation, allied with the reckoning of descent in male line (Uberoi, 2003:89). A society is called patriarchal when descent is patrilineal, marriage is patrilocal, inheritance and succession are in the male line, and the family is patripotestal (Uberoi, 2003:96). When one says a society is patriarchal it automatically signifies that the authority of the men in that society is justified as it has been structured. By virtue of the fact that Mizo society is Patrilineal, the line of descent always falls through the male line.

Like any other family with a patriarchal set up, even in the Mizo family the father is considered the head of the family who is the authority head of the household. The other members of the family in the household enjoy and share the property but they do not have the right to claim any of the property. In case of Inheritance and Succession mother's line is disregarded. In accordance with the law and custom of the Mizo society, male ultimogeniture is followed where it is the youngest son in the family who is the heir to the father's land and property. While addressing a person Teknonymy is very common among the Mizos, where the parents of a child named Thanga will be called Thanga-Pa (Thanga's Father) or Thanga-Nu (Thanga's Mother). Tecknonymy is a word coined by English Anthropologist Sir Evans Pritchard to denote the custom prevalent among some people addressing the parent from the child (Mitchell, 1979:228).

Marriage for the Mizo is a civil contract (Shakespear, 1912:51). In so far as rules for marriage are concerned the Mizos are not bound by any strict rules to marry into a particular family or clan. Shakespear (ibid: 50) explains that a Mizo man can marry any woman he chooses

except his sister or mother. However there are some prejudices against marriage between paternal cousins, the reason for this was that when a girl marries outside her family she will get her bride price and if she marries her cousin brother the wealth of the family merely transfers from one brother to another. Marriage was endogamous in regard to the clan and exogamous in regard to the family. Monogamy remains the norms of marriage.

### **Clan and Chieftainship:**

The Lushais were divided into clans following the chieftainship of six sons of Thangura who was the first chief among the Mizos. Each clan has its own dialect but *Duhlian* was the lingua franca among the majority of the clan. Overall the Lushais are divided into fourteen clans, and these fourteen clans are further subdivided into Seventy Nine Lineages. Gangte (2008:310-313) gives classification of the Mizo Clans and Lineages as follows:

1. Thangura: Thangura clan is believed to be the primogenitor of the Lushei clan. The lineages of Thangura are:
  - Rokhum
  - Zadeng
  - Thangluah
  - Palian
  - Rivung
  - Sailo
  
2. Pachao: The Pachao clan is believed to be descended from the illegitimate son of Zadenga. The lineages of Pachao are:
  - Charlal
  - Chiawthliak
  - Chhoalak
  - Chonglal
  - Darchao
  - Lalbawm
  - Lianthung
  - Durchaova

- Charlalla
- Lianthunga
- Lianghora
- Lianghor
- Vanpuia-hrin
- Varchuan

3. Changte: The Changte clan is believed to have temporarily settled in Burma as some of the names of the lineages suggest. Lineages of Changte are:

- Darchun
- Pamte
- Viokngak
- Kawlche
- Padaratu
- Tumphu
- Lungte
- Ngakchi
- Chonglun

4. Chongte: The Chongte has four lineages:

- Tuicchung
- Lungte
- Muchhip Chhuak
- Pamte

5. Chuachang: The Chuachang has three lineages namely:

- Chongchir
- Chongchhon
- Lathang

6. Chuango: The Chuango clan has seven lineages:

- Vanpuia-tha
- Hlengel



- Hmunpel
- Laller
- Zongpau
- Chumthluk
- Aohmun

7. Haonar: This clan has four lineages:

- Haothul
- Haobul
- Tuithang
- Shenlai

8. Hrasel: This clan has four lineages:

- Shelpuia
- Sontlunk
- Sumkhum
- Sazah

9. Hualhang: This clan is believed to have originated from a hole in the ground near the Sherpui rocks to the east of the Manipur river. This clan have seven lineage:

- Chalhuk
- Sialchung
- Bialchi
- Chumkal
- Khupao
- Fangtet
- Jaihlum
- Cherthang

10. Hualngo: This clan has five lineages:

- Chalthleng
- Khupao
- Thuazol

- Cherput
- Bochung

11. Lungkhua: This clan has five lineages:

- Sialchung
- Ngalchi
- Ngalchung
- Phungchi
- Ngaphawl

12. Tochung: This clan has five lineages.

- Topui
- Chhakom
- Muchhip-chhuak
- Chemhler
- Tobul

13. Vanchong: This clan has five lineages:

- Vanlung
- Sumkhum
- Chemhler
- Chengrel
- Kaithum

14. Chhak-Chhuak: This is the smallest family unit and has no branches.

A Lushai *Lal* or chief was the head of his clan and he was the head of their political system. The chief was assisted by 'Upas' or elders whose post was not hereditary. Every chief has his own domain with dependent villages attached to it. In matters relating to public affairs and customary laws he was the decision maker, he would also consult his brothers or the *Upas*. It is interesting to note that the Lushais had no codified law and therefore their custom was their source of law and from the chief down to the commoner every one was equally subject to the customary law (Chatterjee, 1985:6). As the Mizos are patriarchal in nature it was natural that

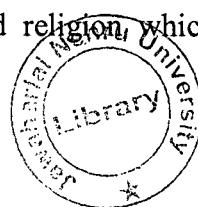
chieftainship was under the domain of men alone. However there was an instance wherein a woman could occupy the position of a chief, when the reigning chief dies and leaves behind a widow and minors, his widow may take his place on account of his death. Lalneihzovi (2009:62) gives the names of widows who took position of chief e.g. Ropuiliani (Denlung chief), Lalhlupuii (Sentlang chief), Pibuki (Durtlang chief), Darbilhi (Darzo chief) and others.

Sailo were the most powerful clan. Often the powerful tribe would assert their authority over the weaker groups leading to vacating of land or system of assimilation was imposed. The Mizo under the powerful Sailo family made their way to attain land, and the pre-Mizo inhabitants, Kukis and their close kindreds were left to their fate. This caused first exodus of tribesmen from Mizoram to other places in Assam, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura. Studies have shown that very frequently clashes occurred between the Chiefs due to jealousy which made the chiefs unpopular amongst the people. Lalkhama (2006:325) gives an account of the east-west war which lasted for several years and as a consequence of such war thousands of people deserted their chiefs and moved to Manipur, Cachar and North Cachar hills. The General Administration Report of Assam Government reports that in 1874-75 about 3000 people deserted Mizo villages and escaped to Manipur and some territories were also lost to Manipur. Emigration to Manipur continued even under Pax- Britanica.

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### **Religion:**

An important social structure of any society is their religious practice as it regulates the daily lives of the members of the society. Religion is the totality of beliefs and sentiments of all sorts relative to the relations of man with a being or beings whose nature he regards as superior to his own (Giddens, 1972:220). Religion did not begin by imagining God, when men started to link themselves to their surrounding they began to link themselves with things which they made use of, or which they suffered or feared. Religion was something which men created to explain and make intelligible the happenings around him to make sense of things around him. Among the primitive men, the sentiments of fear and awe were quite similar to those which he observed in his relationships with his fellows, men conceived of these exceptional beings distinctive qualities which made them Gods (ibid:219). Religion was thus created by men themselves to explain things otherwise unknown to them and for their own security and protection from the things and forces they feared. Many writings on the old Mizo religion argued that the Mizo practiced religion which was superstitious but such



religious practice should not be termed superstitious or false. In his explanation of sociology of religion, Durkheim (1968:3) asserts that, in reality there is no religion which is false. All are true in their own fashion; all answer, though in different ways, to the condition of human existence. All the religion practiced from primitive time to modern day is respectable as the main aim of the religion is to respond to the needs and dependence of the society and to resolve their problem.

Traditionally the Mizos believed in the existence of a Supreme God called *Pathian*. According to Shakespear, Traditional Mizo family believe in a spirit called *Pathian*, who is supposed to be the creator of everything and is a beneficent being, but has little concern with men (Shakespear, 1983:61). The Mizos also believed in the existence of various spirits called *Ram Huais* which dwell in objects of nature such as high mountains, caves, under water, holes in the earth, water falls and water springs etc. The Mizos attribute misfortune and illness to these spirits, to appease them various kinds of animal sacrifices were conducted and the shaman or *Puithiam* played an important role in mediating between the spirits and the people. *Kelmei* or the tuft of the tail of a sacrificed goat was used as a charm to appease the spirits. A close study of Mizo society reveals that their religious practice was quite developed and that they believed in the existence of God.....Mizo had coined their own explanation for the supernatural happenings like other faiths and dogmas of the world.(Baveja, 1970:31).

The Mizos believed that after death their soul goes either to *Pialral* (paradise) or *Mithi Khua* (dwelling of the dead people characterized by sorrow and suffering) depending upon their deeds in their lifetime. It was believed by the traditional Mizo society that one could only achieve *Pialral* if they killed specific number of wild animals or hosted some ceremonial public feasts. To achieve *Pialral* a person had to perform various ceremonies and organize community feasts and dancing.

In addition to the Great God known as *Pathian*, the Mizo religious complex comprised a number of spirits, who are believed to perform different functions. These include:

1. *Pu Vana*: Creator of sound of thunder and thunderbolt.
2. *Vanchung Nula*: Female Goddess of rain and water.
3. *Vanhrika*: God of science and learning.
4. *Khuavang*: God of kindness.

5. *Khua Nu*: Female Goddess believed to be wife of *Pathian*.
6. *Sakhua*: Ancestor spirit of the clan.
7. *Lasi*: A female spirit governing wild animals and hunting.

*Sakhua* means religion or religious rites in Mizo, therefore this implies that the traditional Mizo *Sakhua* was the ancestor worship. Ancestors are believed to possess powers that protect them from forces which they could not control. The *Thangchhuah* feast was held in honor of the dead and *Khuangchawi* festival was held to honor one's ancestor. In this festival, effigies of the departed ancestors were carried in a group in the village and were seated in a platform specially made for them. The living relatives would then drink and dance in the presence of the effigies as they would have done in their life time.

## **Mizos and their Associated Cultural Practices**

### **Tawmngaihna:**

One unique and interesting practice of the Mizo community is the practice of '*tawmngaihna*', which is a social obligation to perform demanded by customs and practices. They are under obligation to attend marriage occasions, when someone dies and some one receives bad news from relatives in other village especially about death. *Tawmngaihna* is not taught in formal education, but they are imprinted in the minds of Mizo people as a practical and desirable way of behavior handed down from generation to generation.....it also does not expect a reward (Lalkhama, 2006:342). An ideal life of a Mizo should be one that portrays selflessness. The practice of *tawmngaihna* is an important Mizo ethos, which continues to be followed even in the present day.

### **Food:**

For the Mizos rice is the staple diet, maize is the second staple eaten boiled and never ground into flour. They like meat and other vegetable but usually considers as garnish of their rice. They also eat edible roots and herbs found in the jungle. As far as drink is concerned the commonest drink is '*zu*'<sup>2</sup> which is a fermented drink made of rice and *zuthak* is another fermented drink made of rice which is distilled. The *Zu*

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<sup>2</sup> The significance of *Zu* in social gathering withered after the Mizos' embraced Christianity.

is an important item in the society, which is required on different occasions like child's birth, entertaining relations, marriages etc.

### **Festivals:**

Mizos are extremely fond of songs and dances, which form an important part of their recreational activities. A *Zu* gathering or party is one such occasion. The songs would be accompanied by drum beats and gongs. This occasion would be accompanied by narrations of some events or praise of village heroes, description of hunting activities or love stories.

There are three festivals which are connected with crops. The festivals in Mizo are known as Kut. There are three different Kut festivals celebrated each year.

The Chapchar Kut festival is held after the jhums are burnt and at the time of sowing, this festival continues for 3 to 4 days. Each household would kill pig and arrange for *Zu*. The people would dress in their best attire and bring platters of rice, eggs, and flesh, and share among themselves. At night time the young men and women would gather and dance till daylight.

Mim Kut is a festival held when the maize crop is ripened. The festival of *Mim Kut* is celebrated in the month of July in honor of the dead relations. In this festival the people offered cooked food and *Zu* to the departed souls. The food offered were kept for two to three days in hope that the departed relatives will take them.

Pawl Kut is a thanks giving festival held usually in the later part of December and early January every year after the crops are harvested. Like other festivals this festival is also the festival of merriment where every one are expected to eat lots of meat and drink *Zu*.

Certain other ceremonies are related to the religious practices of the Mizo e.g. to attain *Pialral* a person often perform *Khuangchawi* where he is obliged to invite many of the relatives residing in the nearby villages. One famous Mizo dance *Khuallam* is attributed to such practice of the traditional Mizo society. The guests in the *Khuangchawi* ceremony would perform the dance of *Khuallam*. *Khuallam* (*Khual* meaning guest and *lam* meaning dance) is today one of the most famous traditional dance of the Mizo society.

### **Zawlbuk:**

*Zawlbuk* is the youth dormitory for Mizo boys. In physical terms, *Zawlbuk* is a large building made of timber and bamboos tied together with cane and thatched either with cane leaves or grass, built by men of the village or *veng*, usually built on steep hillsides. Shakespear in his description of Mizo Village explains that the village is large and contains mixed population divided into different quarters or *veng*, generally inhabited by people of the same clan, each will have their *zawlbuk*. The institution of *zawlbuk* can be observed as one of the earliest initiators of gender segregation among the Mizo society. The *zawlbuk* was one space which was created for men only and women were not allowed to enter inside this structure. A male child by custom and convention had to move to the *zawlbuk* at a young age for discipline and training under the leadership of the oldest or most courageous boy, who is accepted *hotu* or leader by all, while the girls were very confined to the parent's house. This restriction imposed on girls provided psychological reinforcement to the parents and household (Malsawma, 2002:75).

### **Christianity and Social Change**

The advent of Christianity brought significant changes in the Mizo society. Christianity constitutes an important factor in the social upliftment of the Mizo community as it changed the lifestyles of the Mizos in ways manifold. The Christian missionaries who came into the Lushai Hills in 1890 AD settled in Mizoram and their Missionary Society took keen interest in extending mission work in the region. The first Christian missionary who came to the Mizos was thirty two year old Rev. William from the Welsh Mission. In 1891AD, he had accompanied his missionary friend Pengwen Jones in his visit to Sylhet Jail and during this visit to Sylhet he had his first encounter with the Mizos who were lodged in Sylhet jail charged with murder of British officers. Outside the jail Rev. William met other Mizos many of whom were ignorant and even unconcerned towards the outside world. The missionary took keen interest in them and wanted to start proslytezing among them. The Reverend even tried to take some Mizo youth to Shillong in order to educate them but failed to move them as they believed that once they leave they would not be able to go back to their homes (Zomuani, 2004:11). Rev. William stayed among the Mizos for about 29 days and tried to spread the gospel to them by showing the people pictures of Jesus and distributing it to them. It is believed that it was through Rev. William that the British got acquainted with the word

Lushai (Zomuani, 2004:12). In 1892, the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist General Assembly gave their approval to carry out Missionary work among the Mizos. In the same year Rev. William passed away and the missionary work among the Mizos came to a halt for a long period of time. In the meantime a wealthy person by the name of Robert Arthington (with no connection to the Welsh Missionary) established the 'Arthington Aborigines Mission'. Two Arthington missionaries Rev. J.H. Lorrain and Rev. F.W. Savidge arrived Aizawl in January 11, 1894.

The task taken by the missionaries to convert the Mizos was a very challenging one. On the one hand the Mizos themselves resisted change and on the other they had clashes with the British Government as it did not approve of the missionaries working among them. Ray (1982:57) points out that the military authorities were not inclined to allow any missionary into the Lushai Hills as they thought that it would interfere with the military action towards pacification of the warring tribes and conversion would interfere with the Lushai administration. With the restriction of the entry of the missionaries by the Government the missionaries could not enter Lushai Hills. Missionaries like Lorrain and Savidge were initially not allowed to enter Lushai Hills but with their persistent effort they could enter the north Lushai hills a year later and took up residence in Aijal (Aizawl). The duo arrived at Aizawl in 1893 and right away started the educational activities. They mastered the Mizo language, compiled dictionary and grammar books and set up a school for Mizo boys. The main purpose of imparting education to the Mizos was not for the purpose of education as a means to take the gospel to the Mizos. After Lorrain and Savidge two other prominent missionaries, D.E.Jones and Edwind Rolands of the Welsh Mission came into the Mizo society. These Christian missionaries not only preached the Gospel of Christ, but also worked for the welfare of the people catering to social, educational, medical and economic need of the people; they set up schools, dispensaries, hospitals, orphanages etc. as a result of their effort after almost 10 years in 1899 two Mizos *Khara* and *Khuma* were converted to Christianity. Slowly and steadily the Gospel was spread and more and more Mizos were converted to Christianity. In due course of time, the British government softened its stand towards the missionaries work. Baveja (1970:40) writes that, "The hands of the missionaries were very much strengthened by British Governors of Assam. Sir Bamfield Fuller, the Governor of Assam went to the extent of closing down Government schools in Mizo Hills and made education a monopoly of the Missionaries and the Government would give grants to the missionaries to carry out their educational policy".



The adoption of Christianity had profound impact on the social practices of the Mizo society. The change in the status of women is one such example. Prior to Christianity the Mizo society considered women as 'white animals' occupying very low status in the society, with rigid patriarchal norms operating in the society. Christianity as a religion emphasized on brotherhood of all believers thus providing women scope to better their position. By virtue of this change avenue in education, health and other incremental changes opened up for the women. With conversion to Christianity, social practices like belief in spirits and animal sacrifices were wiped out from the society.

The concept of Westernization can be applied in the study of Mizo society. For M.N. Srinivas westernization mainly refers to the changes that non western countries undergo as a result of prolonged contact with the western one (Srinivas, 1972:50). There has been various changes in the life style of the Mizo society, the term westernization is used here because with adoption of Christianity certain western lifestyles began to be adopted by the Mizo community. Westernization in any community or society has both a positive and negative impact, one important positive impact is the value of humanitarianism, rationality, equalitarianism, but on the other hand many of the traditional practices of the natives disappeared under the influence of western culture. This change is evident in the Mizo society also. With the adoption of Christianity many of the traditional items of daily use were replaced by modern one e.g. the traditional wooden and bamboo utensils are replaced by china cups, plates, dishes etc. Emphasizing on the bad impact of western influence, Malsawma argues that, the loss suffered by the tribe in cultural field is immense, with reference to withering out of traditional folk composition like songs and music, traditional clothes woven for festivals and the age old village bonds (Malsawma, 2002:179). Baveja also opines that with Christianity the Mizo suffered great loss in the field of culture. He explains that the folk compositions which spoke of beautiful hills and valleys have given place to short modern rhymes with no philosophy in them. The energetic Mizo dances are dead. The spirit of voluntary service to the community and feeling of pride in one's clan have lessened (Baveja, 1970:40-41). The impact and the influence of the west has been so immense that to a large extent the Mizos have lost faith in their own culture and tradition; there has been mad imitations of the 'things considered west'. In so far as the population of Christians is concerned Mizoram has the second highest Christian population in percentage

next to Nagaland. According to census of India 2001, 87% of the total population of Mizoram is Christian.

## **Status of Mizo Women**

In the traditional Mizo society especially during pre Christian era the status of women was very low. The low status of women was an ascribed one and is evident right from the time of birth. The birth of a male child would be welcomed by the *Upa* (elder) and blessed with words like '*Mipa Huaisen Sai kap tur*' which means "A valiant, the would be elephant killer'. On the other hand the birth of a female child was acknowledged with the statement like '*Se man tur*' meaning 'the one who would cost a mithun<sup>3</sup>'. Right from the time of her birth itself a female/girl child was perceived as a burden.

Like in most patriarchal societies the men were the sole decision maker in traditional Mizo society. A major factor which was responsible for the exclusion of women as part of the decision making body was the practice of headhunting (Colbert, 2008:340). The practice of the traditional Mizo society was such that freedom of speech, rights, dignity and honor were accomplished through success in headhunting. The person who fetched the highest number of heads was regarded with the highest esteem, they were shown respect by people of the village and they were showered with tributes like *daos* (dagger), spears, clothes, cows, pigs and so on by the people of defeated village. Practice like this elevated the status of men who captured the most heads and belittled those who could not who invariably happen to be women. Headhunting involved risks and men were seen as the only ones fit for it owing to their physical strength. Interestingly while headhunting is associated with physical strength, a lot of training goes into it to hone the skills of men for the tasks so that they get the right kind of training, from an early age boys are sent to the Zawlbuk (boys dormitory) where they learn about the various customs of the tribes and are subjected to rigorous discipline and training in the art of warfare and governance.

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<sup>3</sup>Tamed Bison or *Bosfrontalis* the domesticated free range bovine species, is an important component of the livestock production system on northeastern hilly region of India.

## Norms and Duties Related to Mizo Women

The belief in masculine superiority was infused in the mind of the Mizo male at an early age. Masculinity and femininity or one's gender identity, refers to the degree to which persons see themselves as masculine or feminine given what it means to be a woman or man (Encyclopedia of Sociology, Borgatta and Montgomery:2000). It is interesting to see how some Mizo men exhibit their superiority in the household, they would sit idly near the fireplace and on seeing the rice boiling over, instead of attending to the pot would call out to their work laden wife '*I chaw a liam e*' meaning 'your rice is overflowing'. Men who extend help to their wife were considered '*Thaibawih*' (henpecked), something which men considered degrading to their masculinity. Even congenial conversation between husband and wife are often construed as a man's lack of masculinity. Since wives were brought by men in the act of marriage men could treat their wives as they liked, man who did not beat their wives were often ridiculed by their friends as cowards. Men often displayed their masculinity by controlling their wives; this is reflected in their old saying "*Hmeichhe vo loh leh vau vo loh chu an pawng tual tual*" meaning "untrampled wife like untrampled grass becomes unbearable", which suggests that if women are not suppressed they would surely take undue advantage.

The virtue of obedience and patience is taught to Mizo girls from the very young age. Such kind of socialization of young girls is not unique to the Mizo society alone. In her study of how young girls are compelled to behave in ways that are feminine, Dube (2001:105) points out that "The phenomenon of boundary maintenance is a crucial element in the definition of the cultural apprehension about the vulnerability of young girls and the emphasis on their purity and restraint in behaviour. This is expressed in the construction of 'legitimate' and 'proper' modes of speech, demeanor, and behavior for young girls and their organization of their space and time". The Mizo society attaches immense importance to how their woman should carry herself. She is obliged to sit, smile, and act politely with the man or men who visit especially to court her. All the girls were bound to act politely in front of boys/men even if they detested them, when a girl dared to misbehave with boys, the boys in retaliation of such act were given the right to dismantle the house of the girl by pulling out the supporting post of the structure.

Being a woman in a Mizo society comes with certain roles and responsibility. The duty of a Mizo woman is to keep oneself engaged in one task or the other at all times. In the traditional Mizo society it was mandatory for a woman to fetch water right after she delivered her child. If the woman died while fetching water after delivery it was considered suitable, it was believed that, even if the mother had died on her way to fetch water she was at least doing some work which all women should. It was mandatory for woman to be a good wife or daughter-in-law and to always provide service to the household in which she resides. She should always be on guard to protect her reputation, for such reason she was to be constantly engaged in some household chores or the other like cooking, weaving clothes for her husband and children, working in the field etc. A woman must not be idle. After her marriage a woman must work in her new house from the time she wakes up till the time she sleeps. Woman would take pride in her ability to perform work without a break as she would receive praises from others. After a woman gives birth to a child she would take care of the new born for 2 to 3 days and on the fourth day she would start working in the field. No extra care was deemed necessary for women, her physical weakness and lack of health care was never taken as an issue therefore many mothers died at childbirth. Since no extra care was given at the time of pregnancy, the Infant Mortality Rate was very high in the pre Christian Mizo society (Zomuani, 2004:4) and many mothers died at childbirth because of superstitious ideas and lack of care (Ray, 1982:59-60). The position of women in the traditional Mizo society was very low. There was hardly any society in which women occupied a lower status than in the Mizo society where women are treated like cattle. Their position was so low that they could hardly be classed as human beings (Malsawma, 2002:164-165).

Right from their childhood Mizo girls are taught to work in the household and attend to the household and younger children when their parents are away in the field. Women are primarily restricted to kitchen and field and have no say in day to day affair of the village. An unmarried Mizo girl has to wake up early in the morning to cook food for the family, fetch water from the nearby places as water is extremely scanty, chop fire wood for the kitchen in addition to working in the jhum land along with other members of the family. After coming back from the field, it is her duty to clean the unhusked rice using bamboo tray till it is clear enough to use. She also has to roll the home made cigarettes (*Mizo Ziar*) for visitors who come to the house in the evening time.

## Courtship and Marriage

Courtship or *Nula Rim* as it is called in Mizo is an institution popular among the Mizo community where young boys would visit the house of a girl for purpose of courting her, she in return sit around the hearth and is obliged to attend to the boys. This evening time is usually time of banter and enjoyment. The institution of *Nula Rim* persists till today in present Mizo society. Amongst the Mizos, marriages between boy and a girl takes place mostly through the institution of *Nula Rim*. Lalkhama (2006:365) describes *Nula Rim* as a virtue and principle to be followed in practice of such institution. He states that, no young man would think of courting a girl in public places, the place was always the house of the girl. The acting was carried out in an atmosphere of friendliness. However young men who overstayed may soon find themselves unpopular. The institution of courting or *Nula Rim* among the Mizo is seen as an activity of leisure. But young women on their part have to also conform to certain expectations; the woman who is being courted must be courteous to every man, giving no special attention to any particular lad. She has to be composed in manner, while talking freely and cheerfully with each one of the courtiers in turn (ibid: 365). *Nula Rim* may be seen as a hobby or a part of leisure time activity amongst the Mizo youth, but even in such activities of leisure a woman's sexuality or behavior is often judged upon. A girl was expected to be a virgin till marriage. On the other hand, there was no demand as such in case of the young man. A young man was even considered chivalrous if he could manage to sleep with many girls. According to Lalkhama (ibid:366) a (Mizo) girl was never sexually free, only socially free; constrained to suffer socially regulated continence, expected to be pre-nuptially chaste.

In the olden days before establishing marital alliance the Mizos would make detailed investigation about the prospective mate. They would not only trace the ancestral line but also go to the extent of verifying longevity, character like whether the person is diligent and gentle, proficient in weaving skills(for women) and hunting or warrior skill (for men) etc. In the selection of a mate it was essential to check genealogy, bloodline, family tree and heredity to ensure an unblemished ancestry of the offspring. Taking account of this fact, a Mizo proverb reads:

*"A blotched, mottled, spotted Mithun gives birth to a blotched, mottled, spotted mithun;*

*and a ferocious wild animal gives birth to a ferocious wild animal”.*

In so far as it was possible, parents would try to find a *mawh* or daughter-in-law who would sit down and partake the flesh of the *inthawi* or sacrifice with them. Thus a woman who belongs to the same clan or confederation was preferred but choice was not rigid. The concept of *intawi* was important in the traditional Mizo society as there was a belief that an evil force or spirit works underground therefore the *inthawi* was offered to appease the evil spirit. Both the spirit and the sacrifice offered were given the same appellatant ‘*Hnuai-pui*’. There was also another category of sacrifice known as ‘*Khal*’. If the daughter-in-law comes from a different clan it was taboo for her to take the *inthawi* of the ‘*Hnuai-pui*’ (pork) and the ‘*Kel Khal*’ (mutton). It was believed that when such a daughter in law partake such *inthawi* they had to resort to various means so as not to annoy the evil spirit. They would often say of the daughter-in-law that ‘She is unworthy of notice, She’s only a bitch- a contemptible pariah dog- come and sit and eat you bitch’. To steer clear of such situation they would look for a daughter in law who is of the same clan or confederation. But there was no hard and fast rule that a man should marry a woman from the same clan (Shakespeare, 1912:50). Today personal compatibility is the main consideration in the choice of a mate. The custom of the Mizos is that a boy must marry a girl from his clan. But for the girls this practice is not as rigid as it is for boys. A girl or woman is allowed to even change her religion to that of her husband. Polygamy existed during the pre Christian days where the chiefs were allowed to marry more than one woman. But polyandry was never practiced by the Mizos. Monogamy has remained the norm of Mizo marriage.

## **Women and Social Change**

In traditional Mizo society, women were discriminated against in many ways, education and training (*Zawlbuk*) was confined to the male sex. The Mizos believed that after their death the soul goes either to *Pialral* (paradise) or *Mithi Khua* (dwelling of the dead people characterized by sorrow and suffering) depending upon their deeds in their lifetime. It was believed that one could only achieve *Pialral* if they killed specific number of wild animals or hosted some ceremonial public feasts. To achieve *Pialral* a person had to perform various ceremonies and organize community feasts and dancing. Baveja (1970:33) in his study of the Mizo society claims that he had not come across any reference about any woman going to

paradise and that such ceremonies were meant only for the men. But some elders maintained that a virgin girl/woman would go to paradise with the one who achieves paradise (*Ram Lam Thangchhuah*) to await his pleasure. Thus some of the views of the people suggest that the primary duty of a woman was to please the man. As a matter of fact, it was quite customary for the warriors and the braves to boast of their conquest over the fair sex. With much pride and bravado a warrior returning from the battle with a neighbouring village proclaims 'I have taken three enemy heads and had seven virgins'. Thus women as perceived of as sexual objects, for the men they were mere commodity.

Women were also intellectually looked down upon; ideas propounded by women should be suppressed like the wild plants and thus were strictly prohibited to voice their opinion on the affairs of the village. The belief in women's intellectual inferiority is reflected in many Mizo sayings like:

*"Hmeichhe thu thu ni suh, chakai sa sa ni suh"*

"A woman's opinion is no opinion at all".

*"Hmeichhaia leh chakaiin sakhua an nei lo"*

"Crabs and women never have any religion".

*"Hmeicchia le palchhia chu thlak theih a ni"*

"A wife and rotten fence can always be changed".

*"Hmeicche finin tuikhur ral a kai lo"*

"The wisdom of women does not cross the village spring".

After embracing Christianity around the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some changes in the position of Mizo woman became visible. One major change in Mizo society which was brought about by Christianity was the education of women. Policies of the Christian missionaries besides imparting Christian values of equality of all creatures irrespective of sex and race were dissemination of education. The first alphabet in Roman Script was introduced by J.H. Lorrain in 1894 AD for the purpose of education and propagating Christianity, and in time both Mizo men and women started to learn alphabet and consequently learned how to read

and write. Education became an important element in leveling down biases against women; women were not debarred from learning and attending schools by the men or the village authority.

The first school started on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1894 with nineteen students which included two women. The first lower primary level examination was held in 25<sup>th</sup> June 1903 and all the 19 students in the examination passed. The sole woman who passed the Upper Primary level examination became one of the first teachers appointed in Missionary schools by the missionaries in Mizoram. Mizo women who received education encouraged their uneducated sisters to enroll in schools for education and sometimes they outnumbered men in their enrolment. Therefore Christianity became an important factor in altering the status of women. With education women came out of the confines of the house and brought them into contact with the philosophy of liberalism and the democratic ideals of the west. Soon Mizo women gained employment in the Government services and mission services. In his discussion on the position of Mizo women Lianzela (2009:53) provides a list of the first Mizo women who received educational degrees in various fields.

Names	Examination Passed	Year of passing.
Varlhunchhungi	HSLC (Matriculation or Class X)	1929
Lalsanpui	B.A.	1942
Rokimi	M.Sc.	1961
Rita Neihpui	M.A.	1952
Vanlhupuii	M.Com.	1970
Thangpari	B.Sc. Nursing	1963
Dr. Lalengi	MBBS	1964
Lalsangpuii	Bachelor of Theology	1954
Lalhmingliani	Bachelor of Engineering	1986
R.L.Hnuni	Masters of Theology	1985

The female literacy rate in Mizoram is the second highest in India, next only to Kerala and highest in Northeast India. With the spread of education, and Mizo women achieving success in different educational fields, women entered other fields of human activity and their areas



of interest have broadened. Women have entered fields like social welfare, administration, politics, church, medical etc. The Mizo women have also been more assertive in voicing their point of view in the day to day affairs both at the individual and group levels. The formation of women's group like Mizo Women Federation has become conducive in confronting the emerging male attitude and the inferior role stamped on women in relation to the civic space. The Mizo Women Federation which is also known as MHIP i.e. Mizoram *Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl* was founded in 1974, the MHIP is the largest women's organization and women from different segments of the society as well as different economic background were member of the MHIP. The organization is engaged in social welfare programs like children and women welfare, improvement in the Mizo customary laws etc. is done solely by women which would contribute to the society as a whole. The MHIP aims for widening the role of women in society, enlarging space for women, a space related to women to be recognized as an individual.

Despite the fact that women have established themselves in fields like administration, academics, medical etc. in so far as politics in Mizoram is concerned, women so not have a stable position in politics. The traditional sayings like "A woman's opinion is no opinion at all" and "The wisdom of women does not cross the village spring" may still hold true in the present situation where women's decision making capability have still been underestimated by the men. In the following table Laldinpuii (2007:7) shows the Male and Female members of the Legislative Assembly of Mizoram state to demonstrate women lack of participation in politics:

Year	Male	Female	Total
1987	39 (97.5%)	1 (2.5%)	40 (100%)
1989	40 (100%)	Nil	40 (100%)
1993	40 (100%)	Nil	40 (100%)
1998	40 (100%)	Nil	40 (100%)
2003	40 (100%)	Nil	40 (100%)
2008	40 (100%)	Nil	40 (100%)

Note: Information on 2008 has been added with source from Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, Aizawl.

In the first general election of independent India held in 1952, one Mizo woman (Lalziki), was nominated as member of Mizo District Council. After declaration of Mizoram as a state, the first State Legislative Assembly election was held in 1987, in this election two women candidate contested and only one woman (Lalhimpui) won the election and was inducted as minister. In the next General Election held in 1989, four women candidates contested but all were defeated. This held true for the next General Election in 1994. Since 1998 election 33 percent seat for reservation of women was debated but no major political party allotted seat to women candidate except for Mizo National Front (Nationalist). A number of women contested in the 1998 election but none had won. Since then, the status of Mizo women in politics has remained uncertain and gloomy. After 1987 no female representative has been elected till date. Needless to say, it is essential for women to play important role and participate in politics, not only for their empowerment but also to fulfill the Constitutional Mandate for equality.

People of Mizoram in general still look at men to be their leaders and the preconceived notion that women are not capable of holding responsible position or post is still instilled in the minds of many, until now even though there has been many social change in Mizo society and with high literacy rate, men have not learned to see women as capable leaders. The overall status of Mizo women is more progressive than her women counterpart in India, but on the other hand women in other parts or regions of India have low status in general. Status here is a relative term and one puzzle in determining the status of Mizo women is that while comparing her status to women of different region she may be better but it is important to determine her status in relation to the men in the Mizo society and men are more privileged by virtue of status attain in their societies' customary laws. Women improved position in the society in the fields of politics, education, family affairs often fails to exhibit the hidden inequality that prevails between men and women.

## Chapter Two

### Social Construction of Gender

#### Gender a Social Construct

The difference between genders can be internalized in an individual even before one truly gains his or her own consciousness. In many societies there is a general tendency to associate a baby girl with the color of pink and a baby boy with the color of blue. Demarcation of gender on the basis of color is nothing but a social construction of gender. Gender, race, ethnicity, and social class are the most commonly used categories in sociology. They represent the major social statuses that determine the life chances of individuals in heterogeneous societies, and together they form a hierarchy of access to property, power and prestige (Borgotta and Montgomery, Encyclopedia of sociology, 2000). Whether gender is biologically determined or culturally determined is a debate that has been going on for ages. There have been ample arguments about how processes like socialization of a child, customary laws and religion etc. play a significant role in the perception of the community in how they conceive the matter of gender difference. According to Encyclopedia of Sociology, Gender is a division of people into two categories, 'men' and 'women'. Through interactions with care takers, socialization in childhood and peer pressure in adolescence, women and men are being socially constructed to be different in behavior, attitudes, and emotions. The gendered social order is based on and maintains these differences (Borgotta and Montgomery, Encyclopedia of sociology, 2000).

Gender, sexuality and reproduction are treated as symbols, invested with meanings by the society (Ortner and Whitehead, 1981:1). Sex and gender thereby becomes a symbolic investigation and point of understanding, which is intricately related to the cultural system and social life within a society. The distinction between the male and female reproduction contribute much to the way gender is distinguished. Gender, as many sociologists have argued, is an inevitable product of the social and cultural process. Gender, sexuality, and reproduction are conforming to symbolic definitions as all societal symbols eventually do. Therefore the study of gender needs to reconsider and reckon itself to the point of being analyzed in a matter of symbolic analysis and interpretation, a matter of tracing the symbolic

trails against the backdrop of cultural symbols and meanings and also in relation to the forms of their social experience. In the same line, Ortner argues that 'not that biological facts are irrelevant, or that men and women are not different, but that these facts and differences only take on significance of superior/ inferior within the framework of culturally defined value systems (Ortner, 1972:71). Thus the framework of culturally defined value systems are stronger in redefining differences that are existent in between men and women in a stark opposition to the definition based solely on the physical or biological set up of men or women.

India from ancient times conceives human reproduction in terms of male seed germinating in the female child. Leela Dube's (1978:1) extensive researches have shown that the process of biological reproduction is culturally described using the metaphor of 'seed' and 'earth', wherein the seed symbolizes the contribution of the father to his child and earth the contribution of the mother. Seed is provided by the man which is believed to be the essence which creates the offspring and therefore the identity of the child is determined by the father. She uses the term 'field' synonymously with earth. It is something of a generic notion in almost all the society that Seed symbolizes the role of a man and on the other hand women are symbolized as the nurturer the protector, and hence mother earth. The meaning of maleness and femaleness, sex and reproduction in different societies emerge in large part from the systematic relations, both logical and associational, in which they are shown to participate with other symbols (Ortner and Whitehead, 1981:3).

In almost all of the patrilineal societies in India there is a strong belief in the idea that, seed is related to the blood of father, from which a child acquires its identity. Paternal identity in every society is indispensable for group placement and rights to access to resources, especially in the case of patrilineal society. The seed (of men) is contained in the semen which is said to bear an internal relationship to blood; this symbolism of 'seed' and 'earth' is a common belief in most parts of India. The seed according to the popular notion contains the semen which is equated with blood. Thus it is only the male who has the potential to transmit blood to the next generation and ensure the perpetuation of the blood line. On the other hand the blood of a female child cannot be transmitted and ultimately women have to join men of another bloodline and reproduce children for him. The main role of a woman is thus to be the provider of the field where a man would sow his seed. Women are seen only as the vehicle for production of the offspring. The role of a mother is to carry the child in her womb, and provide warmth and nourishment and help the child grow. A belief like this has also been

documented in ancient India where the texts used during the rituals of marriage and other crisis of life mentions the process of human reproduction in terms of male seeds germinating in the female field (Dube, 1978:2).

Sherry Ortner argues that the secondary status of women in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact (Ortner, 1972:66). She articulates the subjugated position of women in society by the term 'universal devaluation of women' (ibid: 69). In her explanation for the universality of the cultural subordination of women Ortner argues that each culture in their own ways have evaluation of women which in turn positions them into a status inferior to that of the men in the society. She finds out three data to base her argument:

1. The cultural ideologies which explicitly demarcates the roles, tasks and prestige to women.
2. The symbolic devices which attributes to defilement of women which implicitly contributes to the inferior status of women e.g. Menstruation is conceived of as something impure in different society and since it is associated to women it automatically puts her in an inferior status.
3. The social structural arrangement of the society also puts women in an inferior status in comparison to the men as women are excluded from participation in important social events e.g. women's exclusion in sacred rites, political council etc.

In her argument on the issue relating to the universal subordination of women, Ortner points out that in almost all societies, women are seen closer to nature and men as closer to culture (Ortner, 1972:73). Status of women in society is ascribed in accordance to how culture evaluates the female biology. By virtue of their biological make up, woman and her body are involved with species life which pertains to her closeness with nature, also her physiology also places her in a social role considered lower to that of men and owing to the traditional role given to her because of her physical set up women have a different psychic structure (Ortner, 1972:74) different from that of men as it brings her closer to that of nature. Roles and responsibilities which is given to both man and woman instantaneously affirms their position in the society,

Woman's body seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life; the male, in contrast, lacking creative functions, must (or has the opportunity to) assert his creativity externally, "artificially", through the medium of

technology and symbols. In doing so, he creates relatively lasting, eternal, transcendent objects, while the woman creates only perishables- human beings.

Ortner explains that men's activity; like hunting and warfare are given more prestige than women's role as a birth giver or nurturer. Hunting and warfare has important cultural value as it involves risking of life compared to women activity concerning process of birth as it is considered natural.

The fact that women are confined to the domestic realm automatically identifies her as subordinate to man in social organization. Their economic and political activities are constrained by the responsibilities of child care, and focus of their emotion and attention is particularistic and directed towards children and home (Rosaldo, 1972:24). Men on the other hand are related to culture and they are engaged in politics, warfare, hunting and religion, and thus they are seen as more objective and less emotional. The power of cultural reasoning rest with the men and they are the natural proprietors of religion, ritual, politics and other realms of cultural thought and action in which universalistic statement of spiritual and social synthesis are made. Thus man are identified not only with culture, in the sense of all human creativity, as opposed to nature; they are identified in particular with culture in the old fashion sense of the finer and higher aspects of human thought-art, religion, law, etc (Ortner, 1972:79). The role given to women in this specific division of labor, contribute to their second class status and this status given to women is universal. Rosaldo in 'Women Culture and Society: A Theoretical overview' argues that women may be important, powerful and influential, but it seems that, relative to men of their age and social status, women everywhere lack generally recognized and culturally valued authority (Rosaldo, 1974:17).

### **Gender and Ideology: Glimpses of different Communities**

Ideology plays an absolutely crucial role in the social construction of gender and the concomitant subordination of women. Gender ideologies in different societies have definite set of rules and regulations for its male and female members. According to Agarwal, ideology plays a crucial role in determining a social construct of gender and further in the process of women's subordination. The family, the community, the media, the educational, legal, cultural

and religious institution all variously reflect, reinforce, shape and create prevailing ideological norms- norms which may well conflict with and contradict one another, and usually vary in their specification and enforcement across classes and region (Agarwal, 1988:14). Since time immemorial myths and mythologies have in some ways or the other demarcated the roles of the female by glorifying the incorruptible persona of the ideal woman laid down by a patronizing sense of so called propriety that runs deep in the social set-up. In turn women try and constantly aspire to live up to the role which fits right into the expectations of the society. The usage of ideology particularly that of religious ones thrust women into domesticity and also suppresses their sexuality. It is rules like these that eke out the image of the 'ideal girl' or 'ideal woman'. There are a number of sets of rules and norms as to how women should behave as per the norms and it is the society itself which assigns such a high premium on woman being the ideal woman, and the woman on the other hand complacently abides with the demands made by the society. In Manipuri mythology, deity *Imoinu* is portrayed as an ideal woman, the flawless portrait of one who is faithful to her husband and regards her husband as divine and worships him, she serves him subserviently and even consumes her meal only after he has eaten and so on, thus girls from the very folds of their fragile childhood are socialized and brought up to live up to the supplicating image of 'ideal women'. Daughters are carefully monitored from birth in such a way that they are indoctrinated to possess a sacrificing nature and fully internalize the feeling that they are somehow inferior to their brothers (Irengbam, 2000. 1:11).

For Linton, process of personality formation is primarily one of integrating the individual's experience with his constitutional qualities to form a mutually adjusted functional whole (Linton, 1964:466). Every known society recognizes and elaborates some differences between the sexes, and although there are group in which men wear skirts and women wear pants or trousers, it is everywhere the case that there are characteristics, tasks, manners, and responsibilities primarily associated with women or with men (Rosaldo, 1972:18). Many societies in the northeast socialize the girl child by imbining in them a belief that a good girl is the one who is efficient in household chores, and this society at times demand that a girl should be shy and quiet and thus girls are molded in such manipulative ways. Whilst discussing personality development of girls, Rosaldo (ibid: 25-26) highlights Chodorow's discussion on how early involvement with female figure develops the characteristics of a girl, emphasizes her point by stating, that

‘Insofar as a young girl has a mother to love and to follow, she also has the option of becoming a ‘little mother’, and consequently of being absorbed into womanhood without effort. Female manners and activities are acquired in a way that seems easy and natural. The young girl’s family provides her with an adequate and intelligible picture of most of the possibilities and important relationships that will define her throughout life. And growing up in a family, the young girl probably has more experience of others as individuals than as occupants of formal institutionalized roles; so she learns how to pursue her own interest, by appeals of other people, by being nurturant, responsive and kind. She develops a feminine psychology’.

Even in the Mizo society the virtue of patience are taught to little girls right from the time they attain puberty and they spared absolutely no sacrifice to please their men (Lianzela, 2009:52). Right from their childhood, Mizo girls are socialized and instructed to get up early in the morning and cook food for the family and serve her family through manual work which are challenging physically and sometimes mentally (in the act of entertaining unwelcome visitors etc.). From fetching water from the nearby water source and chopping wood for building a fire as her household chores, and then work in the jhum, her task to perform familial or household responsibilities linger on till evening after which she has to cook for her family members and at the same time she has the duty and obligation to be the quintessential host to all the guests or visitors who come to her house. Lianzela in his study of the women in Mizo society notes that, she (Mizo woman) is also obliged to sit around the hearth and chat with young men who inevitably turn up to court her. All girls are expected to behave very politely with boys and keep on smiling even if they do not like any one of them (Lianzela, 2009:52). Even though in all the societies there is existence of division of labor in terms of sex, the man in any society is glorified than the woman even though she works equally hard in her capacity. Rosaldo (1972:19) opines that, what is perhaps most striking and surprising is the fact that male, as opposed to female, activities are recognized as predominantly important, and cultural systems give authority and value to the roles and activities of men. She substantiates her point by giving example of the Philippine society, where men hunted in groups and women are involved in gardening, the crops produced (rice) from gardening becomes the primary food supply of her immediate family, whereas meat attained from hunting by the men were a highly valued commodity and such kinds of meat were shared by the community.



The preference of son over daughter is one phenomenon among most of the various patriarchal societies in northeast India but it is not as severe as those which are practiced in other regions of India, cases like that of female infanticide is absent in these regions. The study of "Culture and Fertility" by Srinivas and Ramaswamy points out that sociological studies are replete with references to the importance of children in the domestic sphere, and in particular the overwhelming desire for the male child (Srinivas and Ramaswamy, 1977:9). In the social system among the Hindus in India, barrenness is the greatest curse for a woman, and the failure to give birth to a male child is not easily tolerated. The status of a newly wedded bride in her new home largely depends on the success of her reproductive career, and her ability to bear male children. Among the Tarao tribe of Manipur, the ceremonies of child birth are given separate treatments for a girl child in comparison to that of a boy child. Offerings are made to family deity *Arao* in the act of sacrificing of a cock for male child and a hen for female child. Among the Mao society of Manipur, in order to get a son the parents must meditate on God. If after several girls, a son has been born, the parents sometimes celebrate the event by killing a bull and giving a feast to the villagers. Traditions and customs followed in a society may benefit the status of a woman but in turn may also lead to the discrimination of the women as such. At every step women's role and status are determined by social institutions and norms, ideologies and taboo. In her study of the Naga Women (in Khezhakeno village) Vitso argues that, in the patrilineal societies discrimination between males and females starts right from the birth which in turn has great impact on the attitude of the people (Vitso, 2003:59).

In her study of folklores and folk ideas, Aier points out that folklores and oral narratives of the Nagas indicate symbolic and ritual representations of the social construction of the role of man and woman. The traditional institutions (oral tradition) in different Naga societies uphold the idea of male dominance with reference to their myth, migration stories etc. Among the Nagas while there are many folklores or folktales, one common theme in the various myths is the division of the universe into three parts, one controlled by men and the other two controlled by wild animals and spirits. The man and tiger in the folktales symbolize strength and the depiction of the woman in folktales is that of the mother who gives life but represents not a strong but a rather weak personality who is under constant threat of the tiger lest she fails to protect the man. The folklores and oral narratives of various tribes contain various elements that embrace the idea of women as caregivers and nurturer equating them

with mother earth while man are equated with the qualities of bravery and strength usually represented by various characters from the animal kingdom, specially the Tiger (Aier, 2008:89). A popular saying among the Naga *Chi lo chiamo, chilo su ni tsiimi lu ba kelie bi* means that 'one cannot predict the weather, it is like a woman's heart' this saying underestimates the decision making capability of a woman. The cultural constitution of gender can be ascertained by observing the language and kinship. In her study of the Khasi society, Nongbri asserts that language provides the idiom through which ideas of maleness and femaleness are communicated, kinship provides the context within which these ideas are constituted and enacted (Nongbri, 2008:75). While explaining the role of language as an agent of gender construction, Nongbri gives an abstract of gender speech among the Khasi community, she elucidates her point by bringing out some phrases and terms in Khasi language which symbolizes the unequal power that is shared by that of man and woman in the Khasi community. In parlance of the Khasi language, the word *U Rangbah* is used in reference to Khasi man which connotes the high esteem that is associated with the male among the Khasis. In Khasi terminology *shynrang* or *rang* refers to male and *bah* meaning to bear, and in joining together the two words *Rangbah* signifies the male as a powerful individual who is considered to be the one with integrity, power (both mentally and physically) and bears with the given status multifarious duties and obligation. The saying among the Khasi *ka kynthei shi bor* implies that woman has only one unit of power or energy (whereas man is regarded as having twelve unit of power or energy). Such sayings among the Khasi who are of matrilineal society express the powerlessness of women in comparison to the men of the community. Saying like that of *ka kynthei shi bor* among the Khasis also put the women of the society on par with that of children in terms of their intellect and thus conviction like that naturally reinforces the lower position of women in the society by virtue of the ideology that is believed in the society and undoubtedly it automatically raises the status of the male in the matrilineal Khasi society.

Likewise the Kuki-Chin-Mizo oral traditions reflect the broad spectrum of marginalization of women in the Zo or Mizo society. The women in Mizo society have been ascribed the role of an 'outlet' to creation but not the status of procreator, for such a revered position is reserved only for the male vigour, the powerful *Pasaltha* who among the Mizos are considered the Knight in shining armour (Chakraborty, 2008:28). Here Chakraborty wants to argue that such an ascribed role given to the women in the Mizo society reduces the role of women to a mere vehicle as producer of the offspring of the man (Dube, 1986:5). By virtue of such ideology,

men in the Mizo society consciously or unconsciously treated women as sexual objects whose urges need to be repressed as directed and also serve as a justification for the distorted and stereotyped construction of the gender practice in the Mizo society (ibid:28). Such practice substantiates Ortner's argument according to whom it is the 'underlying logic of cultural thinking that assumes the inferiority of women' (Ortner, 1972:68).

## **Women and Religion**

One quintessential factor required to grasp the differences that prevails in understanding gender is that of ascertaining the social structure of the society. Social structure is an ordered inter-relationship between the different elements of a social system or society, for example, the different kinship, religious, economic, political, and other institutions of a society may be said to comprise its social structure, as might such components as its norms, values and social roles (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, Marshall: 2005). Social structure present in different society plays an important role in the formation of individual perception and way of acting and behaving in the society, one important constituent of structure of a society is the religious belief or the religion. Religion provides ideological and moral bases for the accorded status and institutionalized roles of women in a society. The social restrictions on women, and also the people's notions about their proper roles in the domestic and extra-domestic spheres, are largely derived from the religious conceptions of a woman's basic characteristics, her assumed 'virtues' and 'vices', her proverbial strengths and weaknesses, and the stereotypes regarding her nature and capacities. Each religion has a treasure of myths and legends which through descriptions of events and activities emphasize certain values (Towards Equality: 1974). Be it among Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, the religious texts and teachings play significant role in the internalization of values, norms and behavior patterns. To discuss the role of religion in shaping gender differences could only be comprehended with looking into the perspective of the different religion:

### **Hinduism:**

In Hinduism women are associated with things derogatory. Women are known to be root of all evil, the seducer of men, and also are equated with trickery, folly, greed, impurity and thoughtless action. In the later vedic period women were prohibited to read the Vedas and

also not allowed to perform any sacrifices. In so far as grouping was concerned women (of higher caste) were grouped along with the shudras and were termed as *Papayoni* meaning of sinful birth or one who is preordained to a low station in life. According to Manu, a religious text of the Hindu, "In childhood women must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her lord is dead to her sons. A woman must never be independent". Subordination of women is thus rectified by religion itself. Why religion is considered an important agent in gender differentiation may be due to the fact that religion in some means or the other allocates role for both men and the women. In Hinduism the role of motherhood amongst the women is being exalted, it is believed that the true destiny of a woman is to be married and to bear a son. Majority of the religion including the Hindu emphasizes on the ideal women and one essential quality of such women as believed in the Hindu community is that of being a sacrificial mother and the women on the other hand conform to the status provided for them as it becomes part of their religious duty, which in turn strengthens the gender biases.

The ideal woman is the devoted wife who is willing to suffer all kinds of adversaries for the sake of loyalty to her husband. The dominant characteristics of well-known characters of hindu mythology- Sita, Savitri, Ahalya, Draupadi, Gandhari, Mandodari, Damyanti to name a few are loyalty to their husbands, steadfastness and chastity. This has been the essence of women's role as wife. Her husband is her lord and master. She has no separate existence. As part of her Dharma she has to look after her parents in law and other members of her conjugal family, look after her home and take care of guests and servants (Towards Equality, 1975:41).

The glorification of the male and his specifications that a woman's duty is to be compassionate towards him and serve him is well written and implications are vivid in the religious text. A woman's entire existence is deemed meaningful only by fulfilling her purpose as one destined solely for marriage and motherhood. In the Hindu society, these so called divine virtues in a woman are revered and becomes most honorable and a mark of significant religious achievement. Religious texts are accountable for the high status men acquire in the society, the duties and responsibilities for women are implicitly presented, one of the statement of Draupadi goes, "the husband is a women's God; it is through her husband alone that a woman, obtains progeny, enjoys comforts and luxury, attains fame in this world

and heaven in the next (Towards Equality, 1975:41). such a statement would imply that women's existence is no existence at all if not for a man and also that it is only by serving her husband to his satisfaction can a woman attain fame in heaven. The religion itself exalts the status of man and equated his position to that of God and women position is close to a servants where her whole life's purpose is to work and toil for the satisfaction of man.

### **Islam:**

According to Islam both men and women have the right to be believers and both men and women can perform religious duties like fasting and praying (but exceptions are there for women during the time of menstruation). But even though men and women share certain amount of equality in activities like performance of religious duty, the underpinning of gender biases can be found in the religious practice per se. Muslim Shariat Law which have developed overtime has in ways manifold contributed to the subordinate status of Muslim women. Women in Islamic society are prohibited from becoming a priest, and also forbidden from leading prayers. Such restriction contributes to the unequal status of men and women in the Muslim community. Women by virtue of their religious laws have status much lower than the men in their community; women are disallowed to participate in formal religious organizations and legal affairs of the community and also women cannot be appointed as a Kazi. The Quran has emphasized on the chastity of women and has instructed the women to be simple in appearance and not to wear any ornaments of beauty. It is by their religious laws women behavior is highly restricted for e.g. she should not converse with other men, they should not talk loudly, letting their voices be heard by other men, they should not receive guest without the permission of their husband. Even in the mosques women are not allowed to be seated with the men and separate and secluded area is reserved for the women for prayer. Hence religion plays an important role in the construction of gender in islamic society. Separation of rules for men and women in the mosque clearly shows the division of sexes and the prohibition of women in leading prayers, becoming Kazi and the usage of veil is the social construct of gender and such religious laws which defines and redefines status of women time and over emphasizes difference in position of both man and woman in the society. According to Gonsalves, society governed by Islam, remains patriarchal and the Koran reaffirms the superiority of men. In the realm of marriage and sex women are also unequal. Polygamy is sanctioned and woman exists for the enjoyment of her husband. As the

Koran reads: 'Women are your fields: go then into your fields as you please' (Gonsalves, 2001:34).

### **Christianity:**

According to the Bible both the man and the woman were created by God in his own image and also salvation is available for both men and women. Christian women have the liberty to study and learn the Bible and its gospel and participate in the religious ceremonies, and women along with the men are entitled for baptism and as such there is no discrimination on the grounds of sex. In the holy Bible the contributions or powerful stories of women like 'Esther' and 'Ruth' have also been recognized in the Old Testament. But a glance in the New Testament shows that there are no writings or contributions by women. The Bible lays great emphasis on the image of woman as a strong and steady influence for the good. According to the Bible the ideal character of a woman is sketched as one who is hardworking, provides love and care to her family, generous, wise and clothed with strength and dignity (Bible, Proverbs 31:10-26). But in comparison to the men in the community women occupy a position subordinated to the men. Women have never been given full ecclesiastic responsibility in the organization of the church. Ordination of women in offices of the church is a recent phenomenon which was not practiced earlier but till date it is not a very common phenomenon. But with the allocation of roles to women in religious congregations, religious rules against polygamy, and absence of segregation in terms of sex has kept Christian women in a better position in comparison to her counterparts in other religious systems.

### **Mizo Religion and Women:**

Before Christianity the Mizo lived a life totally created by their own belief which made sense to the reality of their existence, they believed in spirits and practiced ancestor worship and their social life was guided by customary laws, such beliefs were accompanied by cumbersome practices like *Bawi*<sup>4</sup> system (Slavery), raids, complicated funeral system, purchase of bride in credit etc. In her narration of life of Mizo in the pre Christian period Zomuani (2004:1) states that the Mizo in the Pre Christian era lived a life of obscurity and

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<sup>4</sup> They were the slave of the chiefs who were captured after war or raids. Another type of Bawi were criminals or person stricken with poverty, who sought sanctuaries in the house of the Chiefs. The Bawis were permanently bonded and worked under the authority of the chief.

unfussiness, they did not settle in one particular place shifting every five year to a new place for livelihood, they did not possess any property and their only property were utensils which were made of clay and mud. Their houses were made in the simplest of way, which does not even have any window. The pre Mizo community was revolved around awe of evil spirits and demons. Different aches in the body would be believed to be caused by evil spirits, e.g. prolonged stomach ache was believed to be doing of an evil spirit (possessed by person) and for cure of such ill ness it was deemed mandatory to kill or ostracize the person believed to be possessed by evil spirits. In one instance in a village named *Hmuizawl*, the wife of a chief was believed to be possessed by an evil spirit and for a cure the accused and his/her family was thrown in the river. Such was the ignorance of the Mizo in the olden days. The Mizo also strongly believed in black magic, even constant coughing like Tuberculosis was believed to have been caused by black magic, in one instance a Rangte man was believed to have performed black magic on a man named *Thangvuka* who was suffering from Tuberculosis, in order to cure the black magic the Rangte man was killed and *Thangvuka* ate part of his liver in order to be cured (Zomuani, 2004:2). The fear of *Ramhuai* was strongly prevalent and it was believed that the *Ramhuai* would visit women in times of child birth and cause maternal mortality, the Mizo related evil spirit to woman. Woman suffered immensely in this period of immense ignorance and superstition. Right after the time of delivery women were sent to fetch water, such inhuman practice was followed because the Mizo believed that if a woman dies while doing some chore like fetching water and not due to her fragile condition because of child birth the *Ramhuai* would not unleash his full fury and his apparition will be lesser. A woman, who died in child birth, had to be bathed properly before burial; otherwise her soul would not find its way to the ultimate destination (Baveja, 1970:31). The Mizos believed that each clan had special spirits presiding over its fate and they named it *Sakhua*. In order to appease these spirits, sacrifices were performed by the *Puithiam* (shaman) of the clan and members of the involved family alone including men and women. They believed in the concept of *Mithi khua* (dead men's village) and *Pial ral* (abode of bliss), *Pial ral* could be attained by leading a life of virtue on earth, which involved performing sacrifices and killing of men and some specific animals. One important fact is that all these activities were concerned only with the men and not the women (Shakespeare, 1983:62). The first man was believed to be *Pu pawla* and according to the mythical narrative he was the first to die before all mankind who were born. The general belief that existed was that *Pu pawla* would shoot at the people who died after him with a big pellet bow and those who were hit with his pellet could not attain *Pial ral* and were condemned to a limboic state of existence in the realm

known as *Mithi khua*. There were some people who even *Pu pawla* himself could not shoot at like the *Hlamzuih*<sup>5</sup>, *Thangchhuah*<sup>6</sup> and young men who have consorted with 3 virgins or at least seven different women, such beliefs reduced the role of a woman to a sexual object. Every woman would always be shot at which implied that all women, irrespective of having performed any good deed or not inevitably, were all bound for *Mithi khua*. There was no regular concept of priesthood, the nearest approach to being a priest were the role of *Puithiam* who were well versed with the different sacrifices and chants (Shakespear, 1983:80). Malsawma (2002:156) notes that the *Puithiam* dealt with the performance of all rites and ceremonies for the appeasement of evil spirits. He offered sacrifices to them and presided over the festivals which were celebrated in their honor. He is also a soothsayer and one who dabbles with supernatural elements in the village. All the sacrifices in a village could only be performed by a *Puithiam*. It was usually the men and not women who achieved the status of *Puithiam*, even though women were permitted to participate in sacrificial ceremonies they were always excluded when it came to officiating of the rites and rituals. Thus the social structural arrangement of the society perceived women as inferior to men by not permitting them to play the role of a priest or denying the right to achieve *Pial ral*.

With the advent of Christianity the position of women in the Mizo society underwent significant change. Christianity as a religion has not discriminated the status of women and has given both men and women the right to salvation and also gave equal right to participate in the religious performances. According to Hnuni, the most important theological sources for empowerment of women in ministry can be drawn from life example and teaching of Jesus Christ himself (Hnuni, 1999:136). Jesus himself in his own lifetime empowered women of different background, in one instance Jesus met a Samaritan women and interacted with her which was uncommon as the Jews and the Samaritans were not allowed to interact, this particular woman was a woman of loose morals or character but Jesus enabled her to experience a fullness of life and transformed her (Bible: John 4: 1-26). In another instance Jesus also touched and healed an ill woman who was subjected to twelve years of bleeding. With such an act Jesus had gone against the law according to which touching of such person was regarded as unclean (Bible: Luke 8: 43-48). Teachings of the Christianity may propagate equality between men and women, however the questions on how religious teaching contribute to women's position in a community needs to be dealt with. Even though the

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<sup>5</sup> A first born child (male or female) that dies within a year of its birth and is buried without any ceremony.

<sup>6</sup> A man who has given series of feast to his village.



religious teachings of Christianity empowered the status of women, the actual practice shows a different picture. In all societies religious teachings are the guiding principles through which a community life is channeled. Christianity brought education and sped up new opportunity for Mizo women but does little to alter the ideology of the Mizo society towards them. Persistence of patriarchal ideology can still be reflected in the way religion is practiced.

It is important to note here that when the missionaries came to Lushai Hills in the 1890s, their aim was to preach the gospel of Christ and spread Christianity and not to improve the social position of women. Education was their means to communicate with the masses and the missionaries felt that with literacy of the Mizos their mission work would be less cumbersome. Arthington Missionaries, Lorrain and Savidge themselves learned the native language and made dictionary and grammar books; they also started educational activities in Aijal (Aizawl) in 1893 and started school for boys only. Here one can observe that even with the missionaries it was the male who reaped the benefit of education first and both boys and girls were not treated equally. In the year 1899-1900 they had more than 50 boys attended school on regular basis while only 6 girls' names were entered. The missionaries were aware of the fact that Mizo were a society with a strong patriarchal set up. The boys were trained and received education and training in *Zawlbuk* (youth dormitory) while the girls stayed with her parents and cater to the need and requirement of their household. The missionaries never questioned such practice they never mentioned nor questioned the unequal attendance of boys and girls in schools showing that that did not give importance to education for girls in the beginning of their mission work.

Gender is truly a social construct and how and where women are placed in structures of any institution is largely dependent on how society is built. With the spread of Christianity came the hierarchical administration system of the church (Chatterjee, 1985:61). The social, cultural and even political life of the Mizo began to be guided by the church. One important question to be raised is, Are the churches and its administration conducive in uplifting the social position of women? When one observes the church the patriarchal nature of the church cannot be denied. The church has fallen short of its true nature by having become patriarchal. The community gathered around Jesus was egalitarian. Only later did the church become patriarchal, unequal. In the earliest Christian communities women were included in the ministry. This was break with the patriarchal Jewish tradition (Hnuni, 1999:72). In a society with a patriarchal set up it so happens that its patriarchal nature becomes all encompassing in

other facet of the social life. In the Mizo society church is the most important institutions which directs how each and every individual should live and to some extent it even is a source of social control. The patriarchal nature has also seeped into this important institution where the male dominated society is reflected in the male dominated church. Christianity as a religion may have preaching on equality of both men and women but the church as an organization still maintains the patriarchal nature of the society. Highlights the patriarchal structure of church and exclusion of women, Hnuni (1999:68) shows data on the exclusion of women at different levels in different churches of Mizoram:

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH	BAPTIST CHURCH
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>SYNOD</b></p> <p>Members: Moderator, Ministers and elders            Women Secretary as ex-officio  <b>No women delegates</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Executive Committee</b></p> <p>Members: 3 Executive secretaries            Ministers and Elders  <b>No Women</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Pastoral Committee</b></p> <p>Members: Ministers and Elders  <b>No Women</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Departmental Committee</b></p> <p>Mission and Evangelism            Sunday School            Press and Book Room            Board of Institutions:            Theological Education Pension,            Literature etc.  <b>No Women member in all these communities</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>ASSEMBLY</b></p> <p>Members: Ministers and Elders            Women Secretary as ex officio  <b>No woman delegates</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Executive Committee</b></p> <p>Members: 1 Gen. Secy and 2 Asso. Gen. Secy            Ministers and Elders  <b>No women</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>General Committee</b></p> <p>Members: Ministers and Elders  <b>No women</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Departmental Committee</b></p> <p>Mission and Evangelism            Sunday School            Pastoral Committee            Board of Institutions:            Medical, Pension            Literature etc.  <b>No Women member in all these communities</b></p>

**PRESBYTERY**

It consist of 3 or more parishes  
Members: Moderator, Pastors and Elders

**Generally no women delegate**  
(once in 1997)

**Presbytery Committee**

Members: Pastors and Elders  
**No women**

**PARISH**

Members: Chairman (Minister) and Elders  
**No women**

**Departmental Committee**

Sunday School  
Mission and Evangelism  
Youth Fellowship

**No Women except in Women Fellowship**

**LOCAL CHURCH**

Committee Member: Chairman (Pastor)  
and Elders

**No Women**

**Departmental Committee:**

Sunday School  
Mission and Evangelism, Building etc.

**No Women Member**

**Youth Fellowship**

One or two women

**Women Fellowship**

Senior adviser: Elder (man)

**AREA BAPTIST COUNCIL**

It consist of 3 or more parishes  
President, Pastors, and Elders

**No Women Delegate**

**Area Baptist Council Committee**

Members: Pastors and Elders  
**No Women**

**PARISH**

Members: Pastor (elder) and Elders  
**No women**

**Departmental Committee**

Sunday School  
Mission and Evangelism  
Youth Fellowship

**No Women except in Women Fellowship**

**LOCAL CHURCH**

Committee Member: Chairman  
(Pastor or elder)

and Elders

**No Women**

**Departmental Committee:**

Sunday School  
Mission and Evangelism, Building etc.

**No Women Member**

**Youth Fellowship**

One or two women

**Women Fellowship**

Senior adviser: Elder (man)

When Mizoram celebrated the Gospel Centenary in 1994, the advice and exhortation from abroad in their greetings was that while the church in Mizoram has prospered in many ways during its one hundred year history, it still needed to make further progress by giving equal opportunities to women. When the Mizoram Presbyterian Church wants to work in partnership with the German leaders, the latter had responded by saying that if Mizoram Church wants to work in partnership with them they must change their attitudes towards women and give them equal participation in all aspects of church ministry.

One unique feature of religion is that it is responsible for both the betterment and the subordination of women. Certain man made laws have contributed to the better position of the position the male hold today. Women on their part often question the legality of such laws on the grounds that they challenge and violate their Right to Equality. Fragility of such argument lies in the fact that the State provides both the Right to Equality (Art. 14 Indian Constitution) and the Right to Freedom to practice, profess and propagate any religion (Art. 25 of Indian Constitution). In the Mizo community religion is one the essential component of the social fabric and the backbone of their existence. By the name of religion women often fail to address their subordination in comparison to that of men.

## **Women and Customary Laws**

Customary laws constructed by the society are in manifold ways responsible for the position women occupy in the society. Studies on Naga society show that during the era of head hunting, women were subjected to several restrictions which up to this day have a stronghold in conditioning the status of women in terms of customs and laws. In the days of head hunting men were not allowed to sleep with their wives or any other woman as it was believed that even the touch of a woman would only bring them nothing but ills. This signifies that women were considered impure and related to something unclean. Women were also prohibited from going to the fields to carry out their daily activities like weaving, pounding of paddy, washing of clothes for fear that this would bring misfortune to the village as a whole. The sanctions imposed on women clearly demarcate the space where a man or a woman should be located, and simultaneously bring out the gender inequalities in the society. For instance if an unmarried girl becomes pregnant and the father of the child is not known she would be thrown out of the village. The only circumstance under which she could return

to her own village was if she would kill her own child. Even if the father is known, it is still the unmarried girl who has to pay fine and not the father of the child (Vitso, 2003:62). In every society it has been like a universal norm that the customary laws are discriminatory towards women with regard to, marriage, divorce, chastity, dress, food habits etc. Agarwal argues that in examining the relationship between the state and ideology of gender in Asia, examples can be found of the state operating through all or some of these institutions to push forward a particular ideology for legitimizing its position and policies, or to mediate between prevailing contradictory ideologies, or set itself up in opposition to a prevailing ideology. What is striking though is the content of this ideological thrust reflects a singular pre-occupation with particularly two aspects – the domestication of women and control over female sexuality (Agarwal, 1988:14).

By virtue of the fact that Mizo society is Patrilineal, the line of descent always falls through the father. Like any other family with a Patriarchal set up, even in the Mizo family the father is considered the head of the family who is the authority head of the household. The other members of the family in the household enjoy and share the property but they do not have the right to claim any of the property. In case of Inheritance and Succession mother's line is disregarded. In accordance with the law and custom of the Mizo society, ultimo-genitor is followed where it is the youngest son in the family who is the heir to the father's land and property. The concept of 'personal law' is placed with high esteem with all the religious communities. Personal laws which are formed by the society channel both the social, familial and personal life. Haksar (1995:104-105) has drawn some personal laws which are common in all the communities (in patriarchal society). Some of the universal features of personal laws are:

1. Man is the legal head of the household.
2. Men and women do have equal right to property either in parental property or in the matrimonial property.
3. The man is the legal guardian of the children.
4. The line of succession is traced through male line.
5. Divorce is easier for man.
6. A woman's freedom for mobility is restricted.

Thus customary laws play a vital role in how gender is constructed. By framing rules and regulations to be followed in a society with a sanction attached with it, customary laws

especially in the patriarchal society by default put men in a much higher position in comparison to women folks. By the confinement of Land Right to the male in the society it has by and large given the benefit of per and control to the men folks in the society.

## **Gender and Education**

Gender biasness can be discerned from the education system of society both in the traditional and modern Mizo society. The role of education is mainly to impart knowledge and for the development of both mental and physical health of an individual.

Education is not only related with institution like schools but also what children learn through socialization within their family and community. The basic aim of education is the transmission of norms and values to the individual. According to Swift, education is something which takes place in society because of three basic facts about the human race. Firstly, everything which comprises the way of life of a society or group of people is learned. Nothing of it is biologically inherited. Secondly, the human in fact is incredibly receptive to experience. By this we mean he is capable of developing a wide range of beliefs about the world around him, skills in manipulating it and values as to how he should manipulate it. Thirdly, this infant is also totally dependent from birth and for a very long period thereafter upon other people. He is capable of developing human personality without a very great deal of accidental or intended help from other (Swift, 1969:8). Educational institutions like schools play a significant role in the construction of individual's way of thinking, acting and behaving. Education is the induction of new comers into a society and teaching them how to respond to the value of the society. Educational institutions in schools have implicitly contributed to gender stereotyping and passed on the message of gender differentiations. According to Dube (1997:149) the content of the education of females reflect norms of domesticity, with emphasis on domestic skills and feminine social accomplishments. Curriculum differentiation is often gender based. The stress on sex role stereotypes during socialization tends to push girls towards courses of study that are associated with their gender. In 1904, when the school was set up in Aizawl, the curriculum for girls was planned in such a way that the girls acquired skills to enable them to become more useful as a mother and as a wife (Laldinpuii, 2007:4). Following the same line, Lakshmi asserts that it is easy to see that the values enshrined in the school curriculum are in consonance with the gender

stereotypes prevalent in the society.... school textbooks embody the dominant ideologies of the social and the public domain, and thereby reflect the relations of domination and control that are inherent in society (Lakshmi, 2007:211). Lakshmi substantiates her point by giving an account of the school curriculum of Mizoram school, she states that in 'Work Education', a subject in school curriculum 'Crafts' are gendered as society: Girls student are required to take up weaving and tailoring, while boys opt for basketry, carpentry and such like (ibid:213). Education is the way the individual acquires the many physical, moral and social capacities demanded of him by the group into which he is born and within which he must function (Swift, 1969:8). Socialization and molding of an individual in such manner would eventually generate gender differences and thus from childhood itself allocation of roles and responsibilities taught by the institutions are more likely to get imbibed in the young minds and probability for it to perpetuate in the later age of an individual life.

Education is not entirely confined to modern institution, in traditional times it was family who would impart knowledge and conduct to the young ones. Education is the way the individual acquires the many physical, moral and social capacities demanded of him by the group into which he is born and within which he must function (Swift, 1969:8). As a system of education male child by custom and convention had to move to the *zawlbuk* at young age for discipline and training under the leadership of the eldest or most influential boy, considered *hotu* or leader by them, while girls were very much confined to home. The *Zawlbuk* is the centre of village and is a most useful institution (Dev and Lahiri, 1982:8). The young men were taught the art of hunting, wrestling, and other games, in the *Zawlbuk* the young man were taught how to be disciplined and industrious. Such a youth dormitory was confined only for the males.

For the Mizo girls there was no youth dormitory or a specific institution for them to learn, she was confined to the household, her instructions or learning was from the elder members of the family, the girls were taught how to be hardworking, docile, or a provider to the family by serving the family members. All the responsibilities of the home rest with the female: preparing food, washing, cleaning, fetching water and working in jhum. Dube (2001:110) in her study of women in South Asia emphasizes that, work around the kitchen, menial and dirty household work, and childcare generally fall in the feminine sphere. The notion of appropriateness or inappropriateness of particular kinds of work for adult females and males get reflected, if not replicated, in the work assigned to girls and boys. Apart from the roles

girls are assigned in the household, the Mizo girls in accordance with their social norm were taught how to treat and serve visitors with patience even if they abhor them. The girls in the family were taught qualities of obedience, patience, docility and diligence, which was considered qualities an ideal women should possess while the men are expected to be strong, masculine and expected to be good warrior and hunter which was considered virile. Even in modern Mizo society the gender stereotype for both men and women have persisted. Women are still considered to be playing the role of mother, who cooks, nurtures and cater to the basic need of the household. Lakshmi (2007:203) gives an extract from the textbook of Mizoram schools to explain how gender differences is constructed through education. Her extract is from textbook for primary school known as Zoram Bharti. She notes the gender construction in the chapter Hamara Parivar (Our Family) which writes:

*Meere Pitaji ghar ke malik hain.* (My father is the head of the household)

*Mere dada boodhe ho gaye hain.* (My grandfather has grown old)

*Pitaji adhyapak hain.* (Father is a teacher)

*Veh angrezi padhate hai.* (He teaches English)

*Meri maa hamare liye khana*

*banati hain.* (My mother cooks food for us)

*Veh kabhi-kabhi bagiche mein*

*kaam karti hain.* (She sometimes works in the garden)

Apart from education media plays an important role in the construction of gender stereotyping, in commercial advertisements it is often the women who would advertise for kitchen wares and one rarely sees a man promoting a brand for kitchen wares like non stick cookware, of detergents etc. rather men would be associated with brands like cars, bikes and very often take up the role of the superior in the office set up etc. while the women plays the role of a housewife. Promotions of beauty products often connote woman need to look beautiful so as to be accepted and admired by the men, in a latent manner exhibiting the ways and means to please the men.



### **Chapter Three**

## **Customary Laws and the Mizo Women**

In any society customary laws play an important role as they are the guiding principles of social life. Though some forms of customary laws are found in all societies of the world, different societies have different customary laws which are unique to their society. Customary laws dominate the way of life among the pre-literate, literate and even the illiterates as laws such as these, which may not even be codified have emotional value attached to them. Customary Laws are those age old code of conduct for living which may be unwritten or uncodified but followed within a particular socio-cultural unit. In general, customary laws are reasonable, clear and unambiguous and abided by the members of the society. The customary law of any society is approved and acknowledged by members of the society. Customary laws are one of the essential ingredients that imparts a distinctive identity to a society and therefore serves as an important factor in social cohesion.

Whilst discussing customary laws it is necessary to make a clear distinction between 'customs' and 'customary laws'. 'Custom' is a regular, patterned way of behaving and appearing that is characteristic of life in social systems e.g. shaking hands, bowing, and kissing are customary ways of greeting people that distinguish one society from another (Johnson, Dictionary of Sociology: 1995). 'Customary laws' on the other hand are obligatory and are backed by sanctions which society may impose in the event of failure to obey. Durkheim cited by Morrison discusses about Collective Conscience which refers to a body of beliefs, practices and collective sentiments which are held by all members of the society in common (Morrison, 1995:154). Collective Conscience can be regarded as part and parcel of the concept of Customary laws as it is the collective conscience of the community as a whole which evolves with time determining systems of beliefs and ideas with the community as a whole conform to them. Conscience is an important component of customary laws and as customary laws are implemented by the community as a whole it is essential that there is a feeling of commonalty underlying such conscience and the need for the people in a community to follow customary laws.

To understand the role of customary laws in any society one needs to delve into or relate them to the concept of social control. According to 'The Social Science Encyclopedia' Social Control, as a concept was first developed by sociologists of early twentieth century USA, particularly by E.A. Ross and W.G. Sumner, who sought to identify the myriad ways in which the group exerts its influence upon the conduct of an individual. W.G. Sumner uses the term Folkways which according to him described how usages, manners, customs and morals provided the basic underpinning of social regulation upon which the more formal system of law was built (The Social Science Encyclopedia: Second Edition, Kuper and Kuper: 1996). The customary laws in many societies are kept alive even in the modern times as the common conscience, so to say, has been instilled in the beliefs and practices of the community and these beliefs and practices become important factors for distinguishing one community from the other.

Like most tribes which are present in the Northeast Region of India Mizo community attaches immense importance to their customary laws. Certain customary laws may have faded due to intrusion of Christianity, yet many of the customary practices in the traditional Mizo society can be seen even in the modern times as the remnants of the past in the day to day life and activity of the Mizos. According to Goswami (1983:18) Mizo society is guided by some customary principles which are strictly observed and meticulously followed by the members of the Mizo tribes. The Mizos continue to attach great importance to the set of norms of human behavior which they have been accustomed to and which is sanctioned by public opinion and collective feelings. Customary laws in any society become an intrinsic and inherent part of the society and with the change of time, they get imbibed in individual and social life. They do not wither away with changing times.

For the study of the customary laws of Mizoram it is essential to know the processes of social, cultural, religious and political transformation the Mizos have gone through over the centuries. One of the main reasons for change in the traditional Mizo lifestyle was the coming of the British. The colonial incorporation of Lushai Hills occurred between 1890-91. Unlike the other parts of India, especially the plains, the history of annexation of the Lushai Hills by the British was quite contrasting. The plains were occupied by the British with the objective of exploitation of their economic resources and hence make a quick attempt to establish themselves in the plains. On the other hand, when it came to Lushai hills they knew that the hills would only be an economic burden as such they tried to avoid the administration of the

hills as much as they could. Their interest in the Lushai hill was mainly due to the fact that they were in the borderlines and were closely connected with the British frontiers. With the annexations of their territories, the Lushai came under the influence of two outside forces- the Government (British India) and the Missionaries. While the government was only interested in maintaining law and order, the missionaries were to make them Christians alienating them from their animistic religion (Ray, 1982:65). Even after the British had annexed the Lushai hills, governance was left to the Lushai chiefs in matters related to settlements of petty disputes, collection of revenue and tributes etc. Thus the Lushais were left free without affecting the local tribal autonomy which helped in preserving the social and political traditions of the Lushais (Chatterjee, 1985:127).

In the sphere of the customary laws very little changes have been witnessed from the past Mizo society. In the past it was the Chief who would administer justice vide customary laws but the function of the Chief has been replaced by Village Council and District Council Courts. Hence in the study of status of women in the Mizo society, it is important to know their customary laws since, as discussed earlier, customary laws are the guiding principles which regulate the behavior of the people. Customary laws like that of marriage, divorce, and inheritance do govern the lives of the women and therefore whether women is oppressed or liberated largely depends on the customary laws or personal laws, it is the customary laws that places women to the position or status they hold. In the study of the Mizo society it is imperative to keep in mind that though Christianity may have emerged as an important factor that regulate their daily lives but even to this day the customary laws that were practiced in the pre Christian days continue to rule the roost from the cradle to the grave in many aspects of the Mizo's life like in cases relating to marriage, divorce, succession, inheritance etc. Very few of the customary laws have been altered.

### **Marriage Customs Among the Mizos**

Encyclopedia of sociology explains marriage as an institution which represent all the behaviors, norms, roles, expectations, and values that are associated with the legal union of a man and a woman. It is the institution in society in which a man and a woman are joined in a special kind of social and legal dependence to form and maintain a family (Encyclopedia of Sociology, Borgatta and Borgatta: 1992). In accordance with the old Mizo custom, marriage

is an important institution in the society that is vitally necessary to maintain the continuity of the Mizo people and their culture, customs and traditions. For the Mizos, marriages are the fulfillment of social duties which every individual should perform. The sole exception are the handicapped or the mentally ill, not because there are regulations attached against marrying a handicap or mentally ill individuals in the laws but because of the complication they may face in marrying. Marriage for the Mizo is a civil contract (Shakespeare, 1912:51). In so far as rules of marriage are concerned the Mizos are not bound by any strict code to marry into a particular family or clan. Shakespeare (ibid: 50). Though the Chiefs and the wealthy practiced concubinage in the olden days, polyandry was unheard of. There is no fine for incest, however it is believed that if incest occurs, the village crop will fail for the year (Dev and Lahiri, 1982:58). Though there are no specific punishments prescribed for persons committing incest. The moral sanction contained in the belief made incest a rarity. The institutionalized custom of *Nula Rim* or courtship may have prevented such an act as the youngsters were provided sufficient avenues for interaction with each other and were given a space and time for romantic love.

Like many patriarchal societies in India, the Mizo society follows the rule of virilocal residence where after marriage a bride has to reside in her husband's house leaving her natal home. Dube states that in every patrilineal society marriage displaces the bride from her natal home to that of her husband (1997:84). Right from the moment she enters her affinal home, her primary duty is towards her husband's family. A Mizo wife should dedicate herself fully for the welfare of her new home; she works from morning till night in order to please the members of her husband and his family, in case she works outside her home, the money she earns goes to the maintenance of the husband's house. Among the Mizos, a woman's moral right to decide on her own earning discontinues the moment she marries.

#### *Thisenpal: A Duty of Mizo Woman*

Marriage according to Malinowski is 'a contract for the production and maintenance of children'. For Malinowski, "Marriage is a contract between two people which implies the community of life under the same roof or shelter, cooperation in the household and in the management of property, but above all the production of legitimate children, whose care, education, and endowment for life is made obligatory on the parents" (Malinowski, 1944:205). In the patrilineal society it can be seen that the main purpose of marriage is for the

procreation of offspring, with a distinct emphasis on male progeny (Dube, 1978:4). For the Mizo women marriage and motherhood are both significant as it gives them honour and status in the society. Therefore marriage for the Mizo woman is desirable as she gains respect, identity and reputation when being married. The role and duty of a Mizo woman like in any other patrilineal society is to marry and to procreate. The Mizo society validates these two major roles and responsibility of women in their customary laws. *Thisenpal* is the status achieved when a woman marries and gives birth to a child. Customary law such as this is discriminatory to women who do not marry or have children. A woman who is pregnant with an illegitimate child is also considered a *Thisenpal* if she marries before she gives birth to her child. But if in case a woman conceives an illegitimate child at her home and not her husband's house, she is not considered as *Thisenpal*. This signifies the importance of virilocality in a patrilineal society where a woman achieves her *Thisenpal* status only if she gives birth to a child in her husband's house.

The importance of having a child is emphasized in the customary law like *Thisenpal* which emphasizes the need to have a child; the customary law states that if a wife dies without becoming *Thisenpal*, she will be denied unpaid balance of her bride price. For a married woman who is *Thisenpal* the unpaid balance of her marriage price should be paid both in the case of divorce and death. The importance of the status attached to *Thisenpal* strengthens the idea that the Mizo is a male dominated society; the role of a woman reduces to that of a reproductive machine producing offspring for the man she marries.

### **Selection of Mizo Bride**

The traditional Mizo society particularly laid great emphasis on the selection of bride. Qualities like virginity, chastity and physical fitness were given great importance. To be eligible to be a wife of a chief, a woman had to prove that she did not have any kind of physical deformity, blemish or even a scar on her body. Lalthangliana (2005:211) points out that at the marriage negotiation 'the girl in question wore only short skirts. After careful scrutiny from head to toes, if they found no defective, faulty or objectionable blemish on her, they would commence preparation for the wedding'. Men never went through such undignified process.

Though the Mizos traditionally have well defined rules and customs for the selection of bride, the ways and means to get married were not rigid and there were no definite rules about how one should be married. The common ways in which one would get married were as follows:

*Luh-khung*: A young lady entering and living in a man's house without ceremony.

*Fan*: A man entering a woman's house to live with her.

*Tawn-sa-Bawpa innei*: Marrying without previous intercourse, intimacy, fellowship or knowledge of each other.

*Riah-buk thing fawm*: Simple, easy wedlock without previous arrangement, rules or customs.

*Tlan-dun*: Elopement.

Numerous studies on Hindu society show that high value is placed on the virginity of women therefore management of the female sexuality becomes the responsibility of the members of the family. This accounts for the early marriage of Hindu women where the girls are married off before they mature and be able to independently express their sexuality. Virginity is a must for girls and therefore marriage is considered to be the responsibility of elders. To many the idea of young people choosing their partners is scandalizing. It smacks of loose behavior particularly on the part of a girl (Dube, 1997:110). As per the Mizo customary rules, it is the elders who arrange the marriage but liberty to choose their bride or groom is given to young boys and girls.

Unlike the Hindu society where marriage is strictly arranged by the family, in the Mizo society selection of one's bride or groom are done through the institutionalized courtship known as *Nula Rim*<sup>7</sup>. Courting even though seen as an activity of fun and amusement, gives the girl and the boy the time and space to judge each other's character. *Nula Rim* gives certain amount of freedom to the girls in terms of mate selection when compared to the Hindu society. In the Mizo society courtship is well institutionalized and the location is always the house of a girl. A girl has the freedom to choose her eligible suitor and in case of any opposition by her family she may resort to elopement. A practice like that of *Nula Rim* gives the woman the right to choose her groom and as such forced marriage of a girl in the Mizo society is a rarity.

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<sup>7</sup> *Nula Rim* disallowed to boys and girls who have not attained puberty.

Traditionally, in *Nula Rim* the boys would visit a girl's house after her parents have gone to sleep; if the parents become aware of such occurrence, they would wait to catch the boy or man as he gets on to the *Khumpui*<sup>8</sup> (master bed), and if they happen to do so they will claim *Khumpui kai man* (fine for crossing the master bed). Such acts were resorted to in order to protect the reputation of the girl. Men in patriarchal society control the sexuality of the females in different ways and in the case of the Mizo *Khumpui kai man* can be cited as an example where the family especially the male members keep guard over the girls in the household. Mizo women in comparison to the men have to be always on guard to maintain their reputation. Dube (1997:50) argues that the principle of protection is basic to the regulation of female sexuality. Like other societies in India the protection of unmarried Mizo girls becomes the responsibility of her father or brothers. Therefore female sexuality is controlled by men in the household and they must do so in the Mizo society because bad reputation of a girl directly effects the reputation of the men who protect her. In her study of households in patriarchal South Asia, Dube (ibid: 50) states that "The 'honour' of males and of the larger family vests in that of the women". She cites an example of Andhra Pradesh, where a brother would scold his sister for standing in the doorway particularly in the dark, for that smacks of inviting outsiders in the manner that prostitutes adopt. In the guise of protecting their houses, the male members exercise power over the female members and in turn they control their sexuality and other aspects of their lives by putting restrictions on the women members of the household.

### **Widowhood**

If a widower wishes to marry again, the family of the deceased wife cannot prevent him for doing so; such form of remarriage is known as *Makpa Hnamhrual Chat*. The widower however has to clear the balance of the marriage price of his deceased wife, and only after that he can pay for his second wife. Different societies have different ways of evaluating the status of widows and widowers in their societies. Among the Mizos a *Pathlawi* or widower can court girls in the same way as the unmarried youths suggesting that no prejudice is attached to widowers. There is no social stigma attached to widowhood, in fact according to

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<sup>8</sup> In his study on the Mizo society Baveja (1970) claims that the practice of sharing *Khumpui* (bed) by parents and children originated during their migration period wherein all the family members would sleep together for protection and security. There never was a case of indiscreet conduct with such practice.

Dev and Lahiri (1983:22), girls often prefer these young married men to unmarried youths, as they have greater experience and are more versed in the art of love.

The position of widows in Mizo society unlike her counterpart in Hindu society is better off. Writings of Dube (1997:114) illustrate that among the Hindus, widowhood is feared by all married women as it is associated with inauspiciousness, widows are restricted from participating in festivities associated with life cycles e.g. widows are not allowed to participate in wedding ceremony, and are not even permitted to receive their sons' bride when she comes home for the first time. Ideologically it signifies that a woman who had lost her husband had forfeited her right to live. Contrary to this, the widows in Mizo society are not victims of such derogatory practices.

In the Mizo customary laws, there are no restrictions placed on widow remarriage. But if a widow remarries the *bride price*<sup>9</sup> will be Rs.20/- lower than unmarried women. Unlike the widower who has autonomy to take decisions to remarry on his own even if he has children, for a widow the decision to remarry does not come easy. If a woman has a young son and there is property to manage it was considered advisable under the custom that she remained unmarried and look after her son and his interest, and if she decided to remarry she had to forsake her children and property to her deceased husband's relative (Shakespeare, 1983:52). Customary laws pertaining to widows gives them the right to remarry but at the same time it stunts her liberty by burdening her with 'choice' either to 'remarry' or to 'stay with her children', whereas men do not have to go through such a situation.

### **Bride Price**

According to Parkin, marriage is accompanied by prestations, that is, property transfer. Bride wealth is paid for the bride by the groom and very often by his kin group also (family, lineage segment, village and so on), being consonant with the fact that marriage is frequently an alliance between groups and not simply a matter affecting the marriage partners and their closest kin alone (Parkin, 1997:40). Bride price according to Uberoi (2006: 26) refers to the gifts from the groom's family to the bride's family in consideration of the marriage. In Mizo society, the position of the chief was very high till the early fifties; the high position of the

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<sup>9</sup> The mentioned amount is just a symbolic token of the sanctions embodied in the law and are of no monetary significance.



chief clan was reflected in the bride price wherein the bride price of the daughter of chief clan was much higher than the other clans. The following gives the account of bride price of girls from different clans of chiefs:

Sailo Clan or Chiefs	-----	10 Mithuns
Pachauau Clan	-----	7 Mithuns
Lusei Clan	-----	5 Mithuns
Clans speaking other dialects	-----	4 Mithuns

In the past bride price was generally paid in kind (usually in a form of mithun). Today people have resorted to paying in cash instead of mithun. The following gives the monetary value of mithun and its parts used as the bride price:

Head of one mithun ( <i>Tlai</i> )	Rs.20/-
Half mithun ( <i>Tlai Sial</i> )	Rs. 20/-
Full grown mithun ( <i>Sepui</i> )	Rs. 40/-
Full grown mithun ( <i>Seding</i> )	Rs. 40/-
Mithun and a calf ( <i>Senufa</i> )	Rs. 60/-
Payment in cash ( <i>Puikhhat</i> )	Rs.20/-
Payment in cash ( <i>Puisawnsia</i> ):	Rs.20/-

As far as the bride price amongst the Mizo is concerned it is not the amount rather it is the value attached to the relations and persons that matters. No Mizo marriage could be solemnized without the payment of the bride price. It is not mandatory to pay the bride price in full at the time of marriage. The marriage payment is broadly classified into two parts:

1. *Manpui* or Main Marriage Price
2. *Mantang* or Subsidiary Marriage Price

*Manpui* is the price paid to the father of the bride or brother of the bride and in case of absence of father or brother it can be claimed by the nearest relative of the bride. Usually the main marriage price is around Rs.100/- but it can be increased by another Rs.20/- if a bride is given a gift (*Thuam*) by her family. *Mantang*, on the other hand is the price that is paid to the wider family of the bride.

The bride price under the category of *Mantang* and the recipients of such price are as follows:

1. *Sunhmahruai*: A marriage price received by father or brother of the bride. The amount paid in this category is Rs.20/-
2. *Sumfang*: It is generally received by the bride's father or brother, amounting to Rs.10/-.
3. *Pu-Sum*: The bride price paid to the bride's maternal relations particularly mother's father or mother's brother. The *Pu sum* is Rs.10/-.
4. *Pa-Lal*: The bride price paid to a person whom the bride regards as her God Father. The person who receives the *Pa-Lal* has the responsibility or duty to provide a fowl and pot of rice beer or its equivalence in monetary terms for the marriage. The price given to the *Pa-lal* is again Rs.10/-.
5. *Ni-Ar*: The bride price reserved for the bride's father's sister. The price of *Ni-Ar* is Rs.10/-.
6. *Nau-Puan-Puak*: This bride price is a token of the sisterly bond between the bride and her elder sister, it is a price paid in recognition of the service rendered by the elder sister towards the younger sister in her younger days especially carrying her in the back in a *puanpuak* (a piece of cloth that is used for carrying babies in the back). The price is Rs.5/-.

Marriage in a patriarchal society connotes exchange of woman from one household to another and transfer of control over her from the father to the husband. Analytically speaking, payment in cash and kind to the bride's father by the bridegroom's father is made in exchange for the authority over the bride which passes from her kin group to the bridegroom's kin group. This idea of compensation for the loss of a productive worker is also implicit in it (Towards Equality: 1975:70). In theory, bride price connotes transfer of wealth but in reality it is a token of exchange of the male authority over the bride which passes from her father's family to the groom's family. A close analysis of the Mizo system of bride price exhibits the male domination in their society. The bride price given by the groom to the bride's family does not have any monetary value but social value and prestige. Only the male relative of the bride's family (father or brother) are the lawful recipients of *Manpui* the main bride price. Such demarcation between the male and female members as recipients of bride price or marriage payment reinforces the authority men have over women.

The payment of main bride price only to the male members of the family indicates the high value is placed on the male in the family and in the society. The subsidiary bride price or

*Mantang* also signifies the importance of the men and supports the belief that payment of bride price is nothing but exchange of control over the woman from her father's house to her husband's house. All the bride price *Sunhmahruai*, *Sumfang*, *Pa-Lal*, and *Pu sum* are again paid only to the men, the *Mantang* received by woman is the *Ni Ar* (who is again the father's sister) and *Nau Puan Puak* which is paid to bride's sister in lieu of the service towards the bride in her childhood, carries the least monetary value. The stronghold of the men in Mizo society can be easily discerned from at the way the bride price is distributed. The father of the bride or in his absence the brother receives the main bride price and the mother does not figure at all as a recipient, showing that the position of a son is more valued than that of a mother in the Mizo society.

Besides the *Manpui* and *Mantang*, there are other marriage payments which are optional and non refundable in case of separation or divorce. Such payment is made to persons in recognition of the relations or bonds which are outside the family circle. These include:

1. *Thian Man* or *Mo Thian Man*: This price is paid by the groom to *Mo Thian* who plays the role of a Bride's Maid on the wedding day. The price of the *Thian Man* is between Rs 2/- to Rs.3/-.
2. *Lawichal*: This price is given to a leader who leads the bride's party to the house of the bride groom in the same village or different village. The amount of *Lawichal* is Rs. 2/-
3. *Nu-Man*: This price is given to mother who was divorced before her daughter's marriage.
4. *Khualkai*: Payment made to the family in whose house the bride stayed in case the groom is from another village.
5. *Chhuatkil Kaiman*: Payment made to the householder in whose house a bride performs her marriage in case marriage is not performed in her own house.
6. *Chharsutphawi*: Payment made to elder sister as fine in case the younger sister marries earlier than her.

## Customary Law on Divorce

Divorce according to Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, is the formal legal dissolution of legally constituted marriage. The conditions necessary to terminate a marriage in divorce vary widely from culture to culture overtime (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, 2005, Marshall). Even after they embraced Christianity, study of the Mizo society shows that in issues such as that of divorce one observes possibilities of conflict between the new religion and customary law, Christianity strongly forbids practices like divorce and adultery, however under the customary law divorce is easy and liberal and adultery is an excusable offence. Christianity strongly abhors divorce and considers it to be something which is against the will of God, according to the bible. When the Pharisees raised the question of divorce, Jesus himself said that,

“...at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female’. For this reason man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what god had joined together, let men not separate”. (The Holy Bible, Marks 10:5-9).

If one looks at the Hindu society, one observes that the Hindu Shastras regard marriage bond as indissoluble in life; the wife is to worship her husband as God and there was no such thing as divorce in the Hindu law. Despite the fact that the Mizos have embraced Christianity, divorce is not as much stigmatized in the Mizo society. Customary laws have set up certain rules and regulations for divorce and it is usually in the form of payment which makes divorce an easy affair. The bonds of matrimony are extremely loose and if a couple disagrees they simply separate (Malsawma, 2002:93). The customary law of the Mizo provides that if a man divorces his wife for no valid reason he must pay the balance of the bride price in its fullest amount.

### Forms of Divorce (*Inthen*)

There are about ten different forms of divorce as recognized by the Mizo customary laws. The different types of divorce or *inthen* are discussed below:

1. *Ma* or *Mak*: This is the most common existing form of divorce and such kind of divorce occurs when a man divorces his wife against her will. In *Ma* or *Mak inthen*, a man will simply utter the word “*Ka ma che*” (I divorce you), and thereafter their marriage is considered to be dissolved. In *Ma* or *Mak* divorce, the husband has to pay the whole bride price (in Mizo society the bride price are not usually paid in full at the time of marriage) which in the Mizo community is called the ‘*thutphah*’ or the last installment of the bride price which have been pending. A woman on her part can take along with her, her personal belongings or property. Gender bias is clearly reflected in practice like this as it is only the male or the husband who has the authority to unilaterally declare divorce on his wife.
2. *Sumchhuah*: A divorce like that of *Sumchhuah* signifies a somewhat liberal status for women in Mizo community as this category of divorce occurs when a woman divorces her husband under a circumstance that she refuses to live with him. In a bad marriage so to say, it can be said that the woman has the liberty to choose whether to live with her husband or not. In a *Sumchhuah* divorce, the bride price paid to her by her husband at the time of marriage is mandatory to be returned. Such return of bride price from wife to her husband can not exactly be viewed as gender bias, since in the case of *Ma* or *Mak* divorce even the men pay for the divorce.
3. *Sumlaitan*: This is a category of divorce in which the divorce is filed mutually by both the parties. In such a form of divorce both the parties mutually agree to divide the bride price and it applies to both *Manpui* (main marriage price) and *Mantang* (subsidiary marriage price). According to custom, the bride price is to be divided into halves of Rs. 250/- each to be paid by both the parties, but the amount already paid to the husband as the bride price would be deducted from this amount and only the unpaid balance would be the share of the husband. This is the local idiom and ideology. The husband need not pay the whole amount (Goswami, 1983:72).
4. *Peksachhang*: This form of divorce is similar to *Sumlaitan* to the extent that this form of divorce is also divorce by mutual consent. The difference here lies in the fact that in this form of divorce the question of bride price paid and price to be paid does not arise. In this

form of divorce it is assumed or taken for granted that the bride price already paid would suffice and there is no further demand for the unpaid dues.

5. *Atna vanga inthen*: This is a form of divorce which arises in a case where the wife becomes mentally unstable, in short *Atna vanga inthen* is a divorce on account of madness both in the case of husband or the wife. This form of divorce cannot arise abruptly for the wife or the husband has to wait for a stipulated time of three years to file for such a divorce. If the deranged spouse does not improve upon the condition of her/his mental incapability then a divorce can be filed using the similar method followed for *Peksachhang* divorce.
6. *Nupui Tlansan*: This is a form of divorce which arises under the circumstance when a man abandons his wife and family and settles elsewhere. In such a form of divorce the wife who is left behind acquires the custody of the house and other property which the man leaves behind. One interesting fact about such a divorce is that the woman not only acquires the property, she acquires other rights and responsibilities as well. For example, when the children she raises (by customary law the children in case of *Nupui Tlansan* stay with the mother) are grown up, it is the mother who gets the bride price. In case her husband wants to return to her she has the full right to accept or reject such a proposition.
7. *Kawngkasulamak*: The meaning of *Kawngkasulamak* in Mizo is 'the old wife goes out of the door and the new wife comes in'. If a man divorces his wife merely due to the fact that he has fallen in love with another woman and marries his new love on the very day or the next day, such form of divorce is known as the *Kawngkasulamak*. In such form of divorce the husband divorces his wife by the *Mak* system, wherein he simply declares 'I divorce you'. This kind of divorce is still prevalent among the Mizos (Malsawma, 2002:95). In such a divorce the divorced wife who is left behind is entitled to a share of "*Buhbal*" or field produce, such as, rice and other edibles like millets, maize apart from articles like earthen wares and household pots. But the wife does not receive her *Buhbal* if she stays in her husband's parents household. In such a divorce the children have the right to choose whether they want to stay with their mother or father.
8. *Zawngzaw*: When a man is proved to be impotent or unable to have sexual intercourse with his wife, under the Mizo customary law the village priest (*puithiam*) will perform

chant for solution of the problem and in a period of three months or certain other period proposed by the parties involved, if the man is still proved to be impotent then his wife can divorce her husband. The divorce in the case of *Zawngzaw* is according to law equivalent to *Peksachhang* divorce. In modern times however the role of the priest is performed by specialists or doctors.

9. *Chhuping*: *Zawngzaw* divorce may be due to the incapability of man in satisfying his wife sexually, on the other hand *Chhuping* is a form of divorce when husband files for the divorce if the wife is unable to perform her duty owing to her physical oddity. As in the case of *Zawngzaw* the wife is put under treatment for a period of six months or time period fixed by both parties and if the situation does not improve the divorce may be finalized. In such a case a woman is entitled to be divorced on *Sumchhuah inthen*.
10. *Uire* or Adultery: Amongst the Mizo adultery or *Uire* committed by woman is regarded as one of the most disdained acts of human beings. As per Mizo customary laws, if a woman commits adultery while her husband is alive or she commits adultery within three months of her husband's death, she is declared to have been an adulteress. In the past, a husband whose wife committed adultery had the right to kill her lover (Baveja, 1970:18). A woman who commits adultery will be turned out of her house naked, and will have to return the whole of the bride price paid by the husband to her family and will also lose her dowry and property (Malsawma, 2002:96). The degree of punishment for woman who commits adultery differs on whether her husband is alive or dead. A woman who commits adultery while her husband is alive is given severe punishment. Female chastity is highly valued in the Mizo community and a woman is bound to have high standard of morality. The same however is not applicable to men. In comparison to woman, men are rarely judged on the grounds of morality or chastity.

## **Divorce and the Mizo Women**

If one analyses carefully *Uire* is associated only with women, there is no such law which a woman can invoke if a husband commits adultery. Another fact about divorce in Mizo society is the issue of economic entitlement of the divorced wife. Except in divorce which arises due to the desertion of the husband as in *Nupui Tlansan* where the wife acquires the right over the

house and property the husband leaves behind, there is no such economic provision for women in other forms of divorce.

The customary laws are often favorable to men and they enjoy the status which is provided to them by virtue of their gender; their superior status is reinforced strongly by the customary laws, and if such status between male and female are differentiated by the customary laws itself it becomes a difficult and impossible task to sway away from the code of conduct followed from generations to generations. Nongbri (2003:203) and Gangte (2008:201) in their studies of tribes of North Eastern India found that women of several tribes like Naga, Kuki and Lakher often restrain themselves from taking steps like divorce as it necessitates them to return their bride price to the husband. Therefore women in such a society cannot resolve to take decision like divorce as they have to pay back heavy bride price which they have received at the time of their marriage and rarely one manages to do so. However the Mizo are not over burdened with the necessity to pay back heavy bride price as the marriage payment among the Mizo is lower as compared to tribes like Kuki, Lakhers etc.

Besides the fact that women occasionally have the right to initiate divorce as per the customary laws, divorce usually takes place at the instance of the husband and not the wife. Gangte (2003:200) points out that although divorce can be initiated by either party (wife or husband), divorce usually takes place at the instance of the husband, a practice that is supported by the old Mizo saying "A wife and a bad fencing can be changed at any time".

Nevertheless divorce is avoided and even unwanted by womenfolk as it becomes a question of prestige for the women, and the Mizo women are cautious not to resort to unwanted practice of divorce. In his study of the Mizo women Baveja (1970:29) notes that, a wife has to keep the home warm and be on best of terms with the husband because getting divorce is easy. Thus even though the customary law allows both the men and women to initiate divorce, women in actuality avoid divorce as it is usually in their being married that they gain their identity, security and respect from the society.



## **Inheritance**

Inheritance is the legal transmission of resources from elder to the younger generation in the family either at the death of the ancestors or intestate succession or by will. Any system of inheritance promotes the continuity of family and societal structure over generations. The transfer of resources from older to younger generation helps maintain a family's position and power in social order. Such transfer also provides stability to existing societal caste and class arrangements and ensconced deeply in tradition and myth. It is more likely that inheritance system functions to perpetuate existing social structure than to change society's organization and institution (Encyclopedia of Sociology, 2000, Borgotta and Montgomery). Inheritance or *Rokhawm* as it is known in Mizo is only permitted to natural heir and no Mizo according to their customary laws can appoint any person to be his heir. Women are not entitled to inherit or succeed to the family property. Inheritance in the Mizo society is strictly transmitted in the male line that is from father to sons, brothers, and brother's son and so on.

### **Forms of Inheritance**

Under the Mizo customary laws there are different rules of inheritance, namely:

*Pa Rokhawm*: The direct inheritance from a father to a son is known as the *Pa Rokhawm*. The Customary law of Mizo clearly states that the youngest son who is known as *Fathu* is the rightful inheritor. As a customary law an illegitimate son cannot claim inheritance of his putative father's property as the illegitimate son does not have the right to claim father's property but if the putative father regularizes the birth of the illegitimate son by paying *sawmman* the son may claim for inheritance.

*Roluah Tura Siam* or *Faro Luah*: This custom is related to adoption but according to Mizo custom one cannot adopt a son so as to entitle the adopted person to succeed his father's property to the exclusion of his natural heir. There is no such law providing for a legal heir from outside the family circle. If a man adopts a son without the consent of the natural heir, he would be considered as breaking the familial ties and disowning his family. On the other hand, if a person without any close relative to maintain him adopts a child to inherit his property, and if such adopted person looks after the well being of the man who adopted him

till the time of his death he may succeed him. A man may also adopt a child if his brother or brother's son declines to support him in old age. If such a scenario arises then the man has to inform the village authority about his intention to adopt and seek the approval of the village authority. There is a limitation in so far as the inheritance of the property by an adopted child is concerned. Once the adoption has been legalized with the consent of the village authority, the brothers of the father who had adopted a child will not have the right to inherit all the property, in such a circumstance the properties will be divided into three parts one each for the brothers, natural heir and the adopted son. The adopted son will not have the right to inherit the property of his father (adoptive father) until and unless he has been disowned by his natural heirs. If the heir and the deceased family do not reside in the same village, it becomes essential for the deceased family to change their residence to that of the inheritor's village because mobility becomes an important factor. Certain customs are practiced because of the convenience.

*Pami Rokhawm*: this is a category of inheritance where the property of a man passes on to the son of his brother. This particular customary law illustrates the insignificance of woman in so far as land holding rights is concerned because *Pami Rokhawm* is a one scenario where a deceased if he does not have a child of his own, his inheritor is not his wife or the widow he leaves behind rather it is his brother's son who is the rightful inheritor and if the brother of the deceased do not have a son the brother of the deceased can inherit the property.

*Unau Rokhawm*: Inheritance from the brother is known as *Unau Rokhawm*. According to the customary law the brother inherits property of his deceased brother if he does not have a son to inherit his deceased brother's property. In the case of *unau rokhawm* if a brother inherits his deceased brother's property then he in turn has to look after his deceased brother's widow and children. If he is unable to perform such duties then the widow has the liberty to choose some one to take the role of the brother.

There are other rules of inheritance among the Mizo which have been adopted as demanded by circumstances:

*Pu Rokhawm*: Inheritance from paternal grand father.

*Ni Rokhawm*: Inheritance from paternal aunt.

*Fa Rokhawm*: Inheritance by father from deceased son.

*Michuang Rokhawm*: Inheritance by a vagabond. If a homeless person dies while being a guest, the owner of the household where the death has occurred has the right to inherit his belongings.

*Chawmhlum Rokhawm*. The inheritance is known sometimes as the inheritance from a non family and non clan member.

In India and also in other countries land defines social status and political power in the village, and it structures relationships both within and outside the household. For the tribesmen the land is not just a source of life but it is also a symbol of identity and unity as it holds together family, clan and tribe. In accordance with the Mizo customary laws when men have no heir the person next in line for inheritance is the nearest male clan member and not the women in his family as land is symbolic to clan identity. Passing on the land to clan member is justified by the community as it is believed that it will protect and perpetuate the clan's identity. According to Longchar (1995:65), "the land is not only the mother, but also the source of life and is also sacred. Everything springs forth from earth: the trees, the rivers, the flowers, fruits, grains and so on. The tribals do not think of land and all the things in it being inanimate objects but regard them as having life and power in themselves". And in the same line Agarwal argues that, in the agrarian economies of South Asia, arable land is the most valued form of property, for its economic as well as its political and symbolic importance. It is productive, wealth-creating, and livelihood sustaining asset. Traditionally it has been the basis of political power and social status (Agarwal, 1998:17).

Men obtain the rights of cultivation, by virtue of the membership they have in the patrilineage. As wives women have the rights of use of land of husband's land and daughters have the right to maintenance in their natal lineage. According to Dube these are more of a privilege than rights (Dube, 1978:20). Women do not have independent ownership of land both as wives or daughters. Ideologies and associated practices debar women in tribal society to exercise control over land and property. Studies have shown that very often women give up their claims in parental ancestral land to brothers. In northern India sisters give up their share of inheritance in favor of their brothers to maintain good relation after their marriage. Access to natal home can be significant for women as a fallback position. For such reasons women sacrifice their share to their brothers.

Among the matrilineal tribes of Khasis, Garos, and Lalungs daughters inherit the ancestral properties, however even among the matrilineal tribes due to the recent trends towards virilocality and neolocality, there are some changes in the pattern of landholdings. The lack of control of land impedes women development in both economic and political sphere. While discussing the significance of land as property, Bina Agarwal argues that, land provides a sense of identity and rootedness and also ownership of land provides durability and permanence which no other assets possesses. Restricting women's right and ownership of property promotes gender inequality. Religious practices, customary laws etc. play an important role in constructing ideas related to ownership of land and property in accordance with gender. Among the Moyon tribe of Manipur, there is a saying '*Ruwpanuw arae umah*' meaning women have no principle because they do not have a particular or permanent clan. No woman has the right of inheritance to her parents' property even if she is the only child. The study among the Zaliangrong tribe show that men not only enjoy authority but also inheritance of property. Women in society are considered weaker than men which is why a Zalianrong feels responsible for women. Women are not entitled to share in property even in the absence of men, in such case the property goes to the father's clan.

## **Women and Inheritance**

On the question of how customary law plays with the status of women? It can be argued that customary laws set up distinct status for men and women. If we take into account principles of inheritance we find that the line of inheritance follows strictly into male line. *Hmeichhia in Rokhawm* or Inheritance by women is no where mentioned in the customary laws. As a rule no woman is permitted to inherit property, Married daughters or even widows are not entitled to inherit properties of both husbands and father. An important property which a Mizo woman possesses are items or articles which usually have important 'social value', some of women's properties are:

*Thul*: basket container

*Zawlpuan or Puandum*: a special woven cloth

*Thival*: bead of strings

*Thifen*: bead of one string

Property of a woman is the property she carries along with her in her husband's house at the time of marriage. The property of a woman is divided into two different categories:

Firstly, the ordinary possession consisting of,

- A. (i) *Puanpui* and *Thul*,
- (ii) *Hmeichhe Bungrua*, and

B. Secondly, the formal dowry of the *Thuam*

A. (i) *Puanpui* and *Thul*:

A) (i) *Puanpui* is a thick cotton blanket and a *Thul* is a basket made up of a large cane basket with a lid on it. The main usage of *Thul* is to store clothes and other important possessions. When a bride enters her husband's house it is deemed almost mandatory to bring *Puanpui* and *Thul* along with her. *Puanpui* and *Thul* in traditional Mizo society has very high symbolic significance (Malsawma, 2002:90). The *Puanpui* and *Thul* form an essential part of a woman's possessions and it is considered very disgraceful if a bride is not given these things to take to her husband's house (Dev and Lahiri, 1983:27). If a bride does not bring her *Puanpui* and *Thul* at the time of marriage and if her husband has to purchase it for her or she makes it herself in her husband's house then according to the customary law the bride price will be reduced to Rs.20. The bride price of a bride does not get reduced if she does not bring *Puanpui* and *Thul* to her husband's house at the time of marriage. But it is reduced only when her husband buys it for her or she makes them out of her husband's money or in his house.

When a married woman dies her family can retrieve her *Puanpui* but if the husband is very young and after the death of his wife he goes to reside in the *Zawlbuk*, then the wife's family can not retrieve the *Puanpui*. If it is taken away from him before he remarries then Rs.20 is to be deducted from the unpaid bride price. The reason behind such customary law is ambiguous; nevertheless, it shows that *Puanpui* holds a significant mark for a woman as its possession is restricted to her.

A. (ii) *Hmeichhe Bungrua*

According to the Mizo customary laws *Hmeicche Bungrua* is a property which belongs exclusively to the women. The properties which are included in the *Heicchhe Bungrua* are:

*Puan*: Ordinary Clothes

*Puanpui*: Thick Blanket.

*Puanfei*: The clothes used as woman's Skirt.

*Puandum*: A black cloth for wrapping the dead body of her husband.

*Thul*: Basket used for keeping cloths.

*Thembu*: A weaving machine.

*Hmui*: Spindle.

*Phurhlan*: Different kinds of basket for every day use.

*Thi Nghawng Thlun*: Bead necklaces.

*Tingduang*: Blue threads.

*Thingrem*: Wooden box.

B. *Thuam* is widely used to refer to women's property, but strictly speaking it applies only to gifts given to the bride by her natal family. According to Lalthangliana (2005:219), *Thuam* can be interpreted as woman's gift by her family. It is the most important property which belongs to her and not to her husband. *Thuam* consists of:

- *Thival hrui thum nei*: Thival beads of three strings
- *Thifen hrui khat leh Thival hrui khat*: Thifen beads of one string and one string of *Thival*.
- *Thi hua*: String of old amber beads whose value is about Rs.20/-
- *Sum*: *Thuam* in the form of cash which should be more than Rs.20/-

As per the customary rules women's sole possession or property are the *Hmeicche Bungrua* and *Thuam* and it is only these two kinds of property over which she has the sole right. Karen Sacks substantiating viewpoint of Engels claims that 'only goods and resources with productive potential can be considered property' (Sacks, 1974:209). Following the same line of thought, Dube (1978:28) in her study of the Hindu society asserts that 'any immovable or movable property or even small amount given to a daughter/sister are referred to as gift for the sake of support and maintenance of honour or for helping her to buy auspicious articles of

use, such as bangles, turmeric, and vermilion which are indicative of her culturally valued married state'. If one looks at the productive potential of *Hmeicche Bungrua* or *Thuam*, we find that they have no productive value rather they are articles with social values attached to married women. Therefore the so called properties of women are in fact no property at all.

According to the customary law, cash is not considered viable for women's property and the only form of cash a woman can include in her property is the cash received by her as a dowry or *Thuam*. These inabilities of holding cash as a property in many ways render women to powerlessness. The cash earned by a woman after marriage unquestionably and unassumingly accrues to her husband's house. The woman's dowry is her rightful property and it belongs only to her. Agarwal argues that a dowry in movables is not equivalent to an inheritance share in land; and although a popular fiction is maintained that dowry constitute a daughter's inheritance share, in fact the difference between a dowry in movables and a share in landed property is implicitly well recognized by communities (Agarwal, 1998:251).

Bride price in the case of the Mizo society may carry important social value but it has no economic value at all. The Mizo customary laws do not recognize women as the rightful inheritor of property unless women's rights over certain property is perceived as the last resort. Inability to hold cash as the property among the women reinforces the voiceless ness of the women, though their mobility may not be restricted as it would be in the case of women like her counterpart Hindu women, the Mizo women by virtue of their customary laws forfeit their freedom to movement and also their decision making power.

### **Customary Laws and Social Change:**

Study of the Mizo society is an interesting one as the society itself has undergone significant changes over a period of time. Therefore for analytical purpose we may divide the society into different phases namely the pre Christianity phase where the customary laws were followed piously and the phase of Christianity. For the study of the Mizo society it is imperative that one looks at their social life in terms of continuity and change. With the coming of Christianity around 1890s, many changes have appeared in customs and lifestyles of the Mizos. According to Ray (1982:64), in the old Lushai custom marriage and divorce were very easily contracted without any religious rituals. Before Christianity the system of

bride price entailed a very rigid and complicated procedure. Lalthanliana (2005:208) gives an extract of an old song which indicated the burden on man to pay the bride price:

*To earn Money to pay for a bride,  
My home has no necklace or gong inside,  
Salt springs<sup>10</sup> on the horizon- I must decide.*

*I need much money in my poor state,  
I shall not wed my heart's desire at this rate,  
Its all because I am in dire strait.*

With the advent of Christianity the cumbersome task of paying costly bride price (mostly in form of mithun) came to a halt. Christianity has introduced new elements in marriage, both religious as well as secular. With the coming of Christianity westernization came as a package and the Mizo have learnt to adapt both their traditional way of life to the westernized styles of life. With the adoption of Christianity marriage is solemnized in the church in the presence of church leaders and fellow members. Like most Christian weddings in the west, the wedding is conducted by the pastor and formalities like exchange of rings and taking of wedding vows (in Mizo) have become part of Mizo marriage. If a girl gets pregnant before the wedding, such couples are not permitted to marry in the church. Such marriages are performed in vestry (back room attached to the church building) and not the main Church Hall (Baveja, 1970:29). Significant changes have also appeared in the mode of dressing, the bride and groom wear western attire, black suit by the groom, and a white wedding gown for the bride as they do in the west. Some brides wear *Puanchei*<sup>11</sup> along with white veil a judicious combination of both traditional and western wear under the influence of Christianity.

Despite the external changes brought by Christianity the Mizos continue to follow their customary laws with respect to marriage rules and customs e.g. the concept of bride price still prevails even in modern day Mizo life. The custom of bride price is so important that no wedding takes place unless the groom pays a part of the bride price in advance (Baveja, 1970:24). The traditional practice of giving and taking fowl during marriage ceremonies

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<sup>10</sup> To earn money the Mizo men would go long journey to a place where salt springs, they would evaporate and take out salt from the salt water.

<sup>11</sup> A traditional Mizo costume which is usually woven. It is worn by Mizo women. At the time of her wedding if a woman must wear it, she wears it with white blouse.



persist even today. Certain customary laws and practices which do not threaten the ethics and belief of Christianity continue to this day e.g. marriage is carried out by the *pallai* from the male side, who is generally a close friend of the groom's father. The chosen *pallai* discusses the marriage arrangements with the parents of the bride to be. *Sehruisatchat* as practice before Christianity is prevalent to this day, *Sehruisatchat* is a situation wherein a former lover of the bride or groom comes to stake a claim of either the bride or groom. If such a situation arises the bride or groom may deny the accusations and go ahead with the wedding. If the accusations are found baseless the accuser has to pay a fine for trying to ruin the reputation of the bride or groom but if the accusation is proven correct it could even lead to the dissolution of marriage. *Sehruisatchat* however can occur only before marriage, it becomes ineffective after the wedding ceremony.

Continuity can be witnessed in the patrilineal set up of the Mizo society, the line of descent always follows through the male. Like any other family with a patriarchal set up, even in the Mizo family the father is considered the head of the family who is the authority in the household. The other members of the family in the household enjoy and share the property but they do not have the right to claim any of the property. In matters of inheritance and Succession mother's line is disregarded. In accordance with the law and custom of the Mizo society, male ultimo-geniture is followed where it is the youngest son in the family who is the heir to the father's land and property. This customary law has been reinforced and legalized by the Guwahati High Court in a case reported in AIR 1973 Gau 116.

In the Mizo society succession to the Chieftainship, as well as the land and property are traditionally inherited by the son. This was one way of distribution of role and responsibilities to all the sons, the Chief would often send the elder sons to other villages and give them the right to hold their jurisdiction there and, on the other hand, it would be the younger son who would live with the parents and become the sole inheritor after the death of his father. Though on certain occasions, the elder son too may inherit the land and property of the father. If a case occurs where the family is a polygamous one, then the son born to the first wife even if older to the son born of a concubine will inherit the father's land and property. In practice as the society has undergone rapid changes due to modernization, a man's property are often divided among all his sons but the youngest son gets a major share of the ancestral properties (Goswami, 1983:101). When a case of indifference crops up or the youngest son refuses to take care of his parents, then the father can disinherit his youngest son with the village elders

as witness or writing a 'Will Deed' transferring his property to other sons preferably the next senior son. An illegitimate son or *sawm* can claim inheritance of his putative father's property. Modern trend in the Mizo society appears to be somewhat in favour of the illegitimately born sons whose paternity is acknowledged by the putative father. Such sons born outside the marital union also are given in modern times, a share of the father's property (Goswami, 1983:102).

Some other changes were also incorporated in the system of inheritance in modern day Mizo society and such practices were legalized by the Gauhati High Court. In the instances the court ruled a Mizo woman has the right to inherit the property of the deceased husband if she is nominated in his 'Will'. A female is given the right to inherit property of her deceased relative if she is nominated as a rightful inheritor. Goswami cites a case decided by Guwahati High Court under Civil Revision 11(H) of 1971 dated 1972, where, Mrs. Rochungi lived with her brother's daughter Laldinpui, who has attained both school and college education. On the death of her aunt issues of inheritance arose. The High Court held that Laldinpui was nominated by Mrs. Rochungi to inherit her property and was granted the right to claim her aunt's inheritance. Though there was no written nomination as such but on the basis of the relation between the two it was assumed that Laldinpui was nominated because of their close relationship (Goswami, 1983:110). But if it is a case between a woman and a man it is the man (for all time) who will be the rightful inheritor. According to Civil Revision 1 (H)/72, dated 27.07.73, the Guwahati High Court declared that, in the presence of near Kinsmen or Collaterals the females do not inherit the estate of a deceased. Females can succeed only when there are no male relatives.

### **Challenges for the Mizo Women**

In so far as land rights for Mizo women are concerned, agitation or movement addressed by women over land rights in large scale is near absent. Women are often termed as carrier of culture and they, thereby conforming to laws and custom become silent spectator of their own misery. According to "Power, Voice and Rights- A turning point for Gender Equality in Asia and the Pacific" Report of UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) - In South Asia few women hold property. Although women predominate in agriculture, they head only 7 per cent of farms, compared to 20 per cent in most other regions of the world (*The Hindu*, March

9, 2010). Custom and religious beliefs have become a rationale for laws and legal system to ignore or soft peddle or even justify discriminatory inheritance practices and the multiple forms of violence that specifically target women. Many women are also prevented from accessing justice if it involves challenging their husbands, other family members or broader social status quo.

The Mizo women like the other women belonging to different tribes in northeast region of India do not have any formal laws recognizing and protecting their rights. Her Indian counterpart (women belonging to Hindu community) relatively speaking are better placed due to several legislative initiatives like, the right to retain personal earnings by the Gains of learning Act, 1930, the Hindu Law of Inheritance (Amendment Act) Act, 1929 and later after independence the Hindu Law of Succession Act, 1956 and the Hindu Women's Right to property Act, 1937 (Bottomore, 1986:255). What is clear here is that women belonging to different tribes of northeast India do not have a legal right or a platform where they could vent their grievances. Laws such as those enacted for the Hindu women are virtually absent among the tribes and thus they have to comply with their customary laws. The Mizo customary law like *Pa Mi Rokhawm* gives the right of inheritance to women but only 'if there are no male members to inherit property in the family'. And unlike the man who inherits property of the deceased family member, if a woman or a wife inherits the property of her deceased husband it is mandatory for her to go through court proceedings. There have been many success stories in India of women organizations like those of Ekal Nari Sangathan or ENSS in Rajasthan, ENSS is a Women's Organization formed in 1999 which focus on Widow's Rights to Land. Such organization focuses on the strategy of direct action whereby women take direct action at the local level instead of approaching the court. What is near absent among the Mizo is formation of women organization which would demand their right to inherit property. The customary law thus has placed the male member of the household in an absolutely supreme position, and outside their household it is again the men who constitute the decision makers.

## Conclusion

A patriarchal society automatically signifies authority of the men in the society. It may not necessarily mean that in a patriarchal society the women are discriminated and they suffer in each and every aspect of their life but they do have lesser privileges by virtue of their gender. In a patriarchal Mizo society women have always been at the receiving end, the norms and duties of women directed by society have been unjust to them. For the man in the society masculinity and virility is the norm, and the expression of such norms subordinates their women. Men have always been perceived as the decision maker for the family, the clan and at the larger social level, the society. Women on the other hand are confined to the domestic sphere and are trained to support the men in the society and not to question them. Women have often been questioned for their intellectual capability; which finds expression in the old saying "A woman's opinion is no opinion at all". Interestingly, making men today tacitly uphold this statement; the present political scenario of Mizoram clearly demonstrates the subordination of women in the society. The absence of women in politics only reiterates the fact that till now men are not willing to acknowledge the decision making abilities of women. The patriarchal ideology is so strong that decision and authority have been controlled by men alone.

On the question of how gender is a social construct, it is learned that biologically men and women are distinguished by their sex, but it is the society which assigns different meaning to man and woman. The popular metaphor of the 'seed' and the 'earth' clearly shows how, in almost all the societies, men are associated with seed and women with earth. It is the men, the seed who carries the blood line of an individual and women are only the nurturer of what they reproduce with no right over them. It is the paternal identity which gives identity to the individual, and it is with the father that an individual shares his/her bloodline. These kinds of beliefs reinforce the stronghold that the male has in their relation with the women. The gender ideology articulated through myths and mythologies puts a woman in a position where her status becomes less powerful and minimal than that of a man. Glorification of an ideal woman who respects and worships her man, who is sacrificing and obedient and who serves her family manipulates the thinking process of the woman which serves to put woman very close to servitude. Such gender ideologies result in making work around kitchen, childcare etc. into the realms embedded within the feminine sphere. A woman's behavior is always judged

through a microscopic glance of the society. It is society that determines even postures that are right or wrong for a woman. On the question of how socialization influences gender, one can observe how the family and community socialize girls from their childhood and groomed and taught relentlessly to cater to the needs of her family right from a very young age. Care of the young, cooking, fetching water and entertaining visitors, especially the males, are being taught to them in the process of their socialization. Questioning of authority is something which is considered unfeminine and girls from their very young age are taught to be obedient. The girls in the family were tutored to possess and cultivate qualities of obedience, patience, docility and diligence, which were considered qualities an ideal woman should inherently inculcate. The modern educational system continues to play an influential role in allocating roles according to gender, such claims have been validated by studies of school curriculum in Mizoram wherein 'Work Education' and 'Crafts' are gender based, for instance the girl students are taught weaving and tailoring etc. while boys opt for basketry, carpentry and such practices perpetuate gender differences, and particular emphasis on teaching related with the domestic sphere grooms the young girls to be good wives and mothers.

The influence of religion cannot be ignored as it has a very deep impact in the formation of modern day Mizo society. According to the belief of Christianity both man and woman are created by God in his own image and also salvation is opened up for both men and women. Christian women have the liberty to study and learn the bible and its gospel and participate in the religious ceremonies, and women along with the men are entitled for baptism and as such there is no discrimination on the grounds of sex. Religion as a system of belief and religion as practiced in everyday life are two very different concepts. It is easy to preach about the equality of men and women but in reality it is difficult to actually practice as one may not perceive the self and the other as equals. There is a difference between religious teaching and practice whose rules and regulations are made by men and it can even be altered by them. The religious practices do not always go hand in hand with the religious ideas.

When Christian missionaries' came to Lushai Hills, their main concern was to spread the gospel throughout Mizoram and believed education would be the mode of communication and will eventually penetrate the walls of Mizo society. The missionaries were not concerned about the improvement of the position of girls and took minimal steps to encourage girls to come out of their domestic sphere and join schools. It was the boys in the Mizo society who were educated first and not the girls. The benefit of education was first reaped by the male of

the Mizo society, in the academic year 1899-1900, they had more than fifty boys attending school on regular basis while only six girls' names were entered. The girls did attain education but at a much slower pace in comparison to the boys. The status of women in Mizo society improved after they embraced Christianity, it paved a way for social change among the Mizos. It can be said that women's position improved with the onset of the education process. The contradiction lies in the ironic state of condition wherein the religion which has helped in the up-gradation of women has also stunted their growth too. With modern education, mobility of women in different spheres of life can be observed but position of women has improved only at the secular level and not the religious level. The patriarchal structure of the church cannot be ignored. Women in church still have many challenges ahead; the patriarchal nature has also seeped into this eminent institution where the male dominated society is reflected in the male dominated church. The Church is a main governing body for the Mizo people and almost all the decisions are taken in the church. Sometimes the power of the church is equated with politics because of the strong hold it has in governing the day to day Mizo life. Women are still denied their right to be church leaders and since major decisions are taken by leaders of the church, women are kept in the periphery in so far as distribution of power and authority are concerned. The leader of the church, the pastor has always been a man and no woman in the history of the Mizos has ever been ordained to be pastor. No woman has ever become a church leader till date. Thus one can state that Christianity has improved the position of women in secular sphere but not in the religious sphere.

Customary laws practiced in societies can be attributed to changes that affect culture and social structure and also mould the social order and influence the role and status of women and unconsciously differentiate between gender and promote gender biases. The Mizo society showcases a society which is regulated by the blend of Christianity and age old customary laws. If we take the case of divorce for instance, by the very fact that divorce is forbidden by Christianity, and if a case occurs it is not the church but the customary law that starts to take its course. The customary laws may give liberty and freedom to both husband and wife to initiate divorce but it is the different criteria for the men and the women which highlights the gender differentiation. A close scrutiny of the ten forms of divorce illustrates that the men have privileges over the women in five divorce forms like *Ma* or *Mak* (a case where the husband simply utter the words 'I divorce you'); *Nupui Tlansan* (a case where the husband abandons wife); *Kawngkasulamak* (a case where husband divorces his wife as he finds new

love interest); *Uire* (a case where husband divorces his adulteress wife); and *Chhuping* (a case wherein the wife cannot satisfy her husband sexually). These five forms of divorce give a vivid picture of how divorce is easy for men. Since divorce is approved by the customary law itself, this in turns puts women in a very fragile position. Divorce itself is a very sensitive issue when it comes to women. It may have been mentioned in the customary laws that a divorcee is entitled to her property and bride price namely *Hmeicche Bungrua* and *Thuam*. A woman's property namely the *Hmeicche Bungrua* and *Thuam* are nothing but articles of social value and not economic value. Marriage payment among the Mizo as discussed earlier amounts to only about Rs.300/- as these payments have more of a socio-cultural connotations and it is by no means meant for the economic security of the bride. Thus looking at all these aspects one can easily discern the fragility which envelops the life of a Mizo woman.

Marxist argue that the basis for male dominance is their need to establish and enhance economic power and sexual authority. In the Mizo society this is combined with ideology that views women as inferior to men – thereby barring them access to the social and economic resource of the society. Men in the Mizo society gain their economic power solely by virtue of their customary law. The customary laws have clearly bestowed the land right and property right only on men. On the question of sexual authority of men over women, we observe that a woman's sexuality in a Mizo society is controlled by the man. A close analysis of the practice of *Nula Rim* exhibits that courtship may be seen as a hobby or a time of leisure for the Mizo youth, but even in such activities of leisure a woman's sexuality or behavior is often judged upon. A girl was expected to be a chaste virgin till marriage whereas men were never judged in such terms. Their lack of chastity often portrays their masculinity and they would take much pride in boasting about the number of women they had physical relations with but if a girl was to adopt such an attitude, she would be judged as a person of questionable character. In a male dominated society, it is the women who are more easily defiled and it is the character of a woman that brings praise or shame to her family. Marriage as an institution is recognized all over the world, different societies have different rules and procedures. In a patrilineal society marriage connotes the exchange of the bride from her father to the husband. The path to be trodden by the bride, leaving her maternal home and headed towards the groom's domain metaphorically represents her journey where her position is that of one whose life was destined for servitude under the dominance of men. The role of a woman is restricted to that of one who would bear children and continue the lineage or family name relegating women to a very insignificant role in patrilineal society.

By the very fact that customary laws are to some extent guided by emotion, they are held close to every member of the society and as such these sentiments are carried on from generation to generation, and thus it becomes a complicated task to alter certain customary practices. Women can, only on rare occasions inherit property, for instance, when a person who does not have any natural heir or close relatives, he may appoint a person of his choice to be the inheritor; in this kind of inheritance known as *Zawnhkhawp Rokhawm* even women can be appointed. Also *Pa Mi Rokhawm* inheritance system entitles a woman to her share of the ancestral property of her husband, but only under the circumstances that after his death no male members including son, brother, and even brother's son survive. But for a woman to claim her *Pa Mi Rokhawm* unlike the other type of inheritance court proceedings are mandatory and it is only after the declaration by the court that a woman can claim her right to *Pa Mi Rokhawm*. Among the Mizo society there was a belief that agricultural land if given to women would be fragmented, it was also believed that the field should go to the men rather than the women because it was the chief vocation of the men folks and not an appropriate occupation for women.

Customary laws play an important role in bestowing the patriarchal nature of the society and also reinforcing such nature of the society. Analysis of the customary laws shows that they are not always intended to be discriminatory towards women. But it is how they define gender role and how they allocate definitive spaces to men and women which in turn create the gender biases. The study of gender relations and gender biases among the Mizo society becomes one challenging task and many are still under misconception that both men and women share equal spaces. At certain instances, subordination of women can be discerned when they are expressed in different modes of communication. The issues of gender inequality have often been sidelined by women themselves. This may be due to the fact that women themselves are oblivious of their deprivation. Women's right to ownership of land and property is important in agrarian society as land is an important source in shaping power relations between them and the men; the allocation of land rights only to the men keeps women in a very fragile position. Studies on women in south Asia have shown that when it comes to the social legitimacy of the land rights, women do not get the full control or the ownership of the land but only serve as a trustee on behalf of her minor son or other male members. Even today it is observed among the Mizos that provision of property for women still depends on the discretion of the male members in the family. A daughter can get or



inherit portion of her father's property if the father leaves a will for her. Though today Mizoram has the second highest literacy rate (census 2001) in the country, inheritance for women is still not a reality, as their customary rules continue to deny them inheritance rights.

In a society where women are considered at par with men, it is observed that often women bear the brunt of customary laws, hence the status of women in assumed egalitarian society is that of 'imagined equality'. Men from time immemorial have enjoyed their superior status and the customary laws have strengthened their comfortable position they hold today.

## Glossary

*Bawi*: Slave of the Mizo chiefs who were captured after war or raids.

*Hlam-zuih*: First born child that dies within a year of its birth and is buried without ceremony.

*Hmeicche*: women

*Huai*: Demons who cause sickness.

*Inthawi*: Sacrifice

*Inthen*: Divorce.

*Jhum*: A field on which the jungle has been felled and burned for cultivation.

*Khum pui*: The master bed.

*Kut*: Festivals connected with crops

*Lal*: Chief

*Man*: Marriage payment.

*Manpui*: Main marriage price.

*Mantang*: Subsidiary marriage price.

*Mithi-khua*: Dead men's village.

*Nula rim*: Courting of girl.

*Pallai*: a friend of the groom's father who acts as a spokesperson and go-between at the time of marriage.

*Pathlawi*: Widower.

*Pathian*: The creator.

*Pial ral*: The land beyond the pial river, in the abode of the dead, to which the spirits of those who have acquired merit.

*Puithiam*: Sorcerer, priest, shaman and medicine man.

*Pu pawla*: The first man of all creation and the first to die.

*Ramhuai*: Spirits that resides in nature such as high mountains caves, under water etc. which is attributed to misfortune.

*Rokhawm*: Inheritance

*Sakhua*: Religious rites.

*Sawm*: An illegitimate son.

*Thangchhuah*: A man who has given a series of feasts to his village to achieve honor in this world and comfort in the other worlds (*Pial ral*).

*Thian*: A women who receives part of the bride price, and acts as friend or trustee of the bride.

*Thuam*: Gift given to bride by her natal family.

*Upa*: Elder

*Zawlbuk*: Youth dormitory.

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