

A Study of Folklores and Folktales of the Mizos- Mapping Incredible India

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Abstract:

Generally, when a person from India's mainland sees someone from North-eastern region of India, instead of addressing him/her as a citizen of India, he very easily recognizes the person from China, Bhutan or Japan due to their biological resemblance more to these countries' people. Sometimes, they are so ignorant to accept that they are Indians like any Indian from any other part of the country. This happens because they are not informed, educated or probably due to remote geographical location. India's North eastern part is also known for the rise of insurgence, socio-political turmoil and unrest despite having wonderful atmospheric beauty. It is usually punctuated with violence and stories of gun and bullets. But beyond these temporary tales there is an enchanting world of their culture, folklores and folktales. They have unique oral tradition to preserve their culture. This paper is an attempt to explore and record unheard folklores and tales of Mizos that inhabitants of Mizoram have, one of the seven sisters' states in the region. This study also aims to reconnect Mizoram and the entire North East to mainland by mapping it to Incredible India, by making it India's North East rather North-east India.

Keywords: Mizo,folklore,folktale,north east,animal tales,India.

The North-East region of India comprises approximately an area of 262,230 square kilometers, which is almost eight percentage of that of India and is home to an incredible and diverse species of flora and fauna which can be found only in this region of the world. This region of India is covered by the river Brahmaputra and their tributaries. North-East India has a subtropical climate that is influenced by the southwest and northeast monsoons. The climate in this region is ideal for settling as it is neither too hot nor too warm during the change in seasons. The people of this region mostly depend on agriculture for their livelihood as it has a suitable temperature for the growth of many crops. The inaccessible terrain has made industrialization difficult in this region. Though north-east is a part of India and there is a very huge difference in social and political spheres as compared to the mainland's. The region had been under the colonization of the British for a long time period and this had brought many problems for the people in the social and political scenario.

The culture of the Mizo tribes and their social structure went through a lot of change over the past hundred years, since the advent of Christianity in the late 19th century by the British. The people here celebrate Christmas and other Christian celebrations replacing many of the old tribal customs and practices. The Mizo folktales are authentic in and probably untouched as not much

translation has been done by anyone and since they were passed down from one generation to another through the oral tradition they have certain uniqueness to it. This paper is an attempt to explore and highlight the culture, tradition and customs of Mizoram and to promote them to find a synthesis with the soul of incredible India.

Though north-east is a part of India there is a very huge difference in social and political spheres as compared to the mainlands. The region had been under the colonization of the British for a period and this had brought many problems for the people in the social and political scenario. After India gained its independence and Pakistan got their share, the north-east then began to seek out to have their own land and their struggle for independence from the Indian government began, giving birth to the fight for freedom and leading to insurgency in the region. Since most of the inhabitants of this region are people who have migrated from the neighbouring places a strong sense of love for their ancestral land had taken roots in them as they had fought long and hard to be in that place long before the colonization.

The origin of the Mizos like those of the other states in the region is shrouded in mystery and no information is there, they were generally referred to as the 'Kukis' by their neighbouring ethnic groups. The majority of the tribes classified as "Mizo" today most likely migrated to their present territories from the neighbouring countries in several waves starting around 1500 CE. Like several north eastern states, Mizoram was previously part of Assam until 1972; it later became the 23rd state of India on 20 February 1987. It was also under the colonization of the British and records show that the earliest raids and intertribal conflicts took place from the early 19th Century.

Folklore is defined as stories, customs and beliefs in a culture that are unwritten and passed down orally from generation to generation. All of the unwritten traditional beliefs, legends, sayings, customs, etc. of a culture can be considered as folk lore.

Myths are a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events. Myths are usually concerning some being or hero or some event in history, with or without a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation, especially one that is concerned with deities or demigods and explains some practice, rite or phenomenon of nature.

The Mizo folk tales had been told mainly for the purpose of entertainment and dissemination has been through telling tales to the children. The oral tales have served to preserve tradition and history, used for educational method since there was no proper educational institution during that time. Through these tales we came to know about the culture, the social concepts and their way of life in the past. In these tales, mainly there are some concepts of the supernatural, some magical beings or a godly figure that makes it very interesting. There are tales that also show us the history about the British colonization in India, where these tales mention about the English invading their land and the wars they fought with the outsiders. Other stories also tell of the mainland India and the journey the Mizo ancestors had where they experienced many events and how they migrated to the present Mizoram.

Also, many of the Mizo tales are based upon the nature, they give much importance to nature and there are tales that talk about the origin of different species of animals and how they are as we know in the present time, for example; in the tale of “Tualvungi leh Zawlpala”, there is a scene where the animals are asked to call Tualvungi home, but as much as they tried, they failed; for instance, the crab was stomped upon thus resulting to the fact that it became flat and walk sideways and the crow which was spilled with black ink thus from then on, the crow becomes black and so on with many other animals. The story tells us of how these different animals become what we see them and know today. Most of the Mizo folk tales come with a moral, we can learn about life and what to do and not to. It guides us in many aspects of life and in most of the Mizo tales, we can see ‘selflessness’ and politeness. It teaches on how one should be kind towards another and should not discriminate one another based on their social status. In many tales, it also tells about Karma, what you do, will come back to you.

The settings in most of the Folk tales in the Mizo community mainly are introduced with the phrase, “Hmanlai hian mawm..” meaning ‘A very long time ago’. It determines that the tale actually, happened at one point of time but is unspecified or undetermined.

There are many places named after the characters or some settings in these tales and are believed to have been the actual settings for some episodes in the tales. The characters in most of the tales are usually flat and are not much emotional or mental torments, show little or no reaction to startling events. The stepmother, the orphan, the widow, the beautiful daughter of the village chief, an affluent man, poor or some other suitors with some supernatural or inhuman powers. Several other tales mentioned “Vailal” meaning “Raja” and “Pawi sumdawng” who were travelers selling things wherever they go. This shows the Mizo interaction with outsiders. Also, there are tales that speak of animal characters and these animals are quite helpful or wise in the tales. The plots of most of the Mizo folk tales are simple; there are repetitious patterns in most of the tales. They are usually, swiftly, moving and there are not much of explanations done but rather actions in the story are concentrated. There are also many tales that consist of more than one plot, episodes yielding new functions and can be treated as new tales in their own rights. In most of the Mizo folk tales, the themes rise of goodness and hold up a mirror to the lives of the folks. The themes revolve around the characters and mostly the Mizo tales are named after the main character and mostly all the Mizo tales carry a moral and romance, and relationships are the most common theme.

Uses of dialogues are rare and there is a formulaic introduction to the tales although the endings are varied. The uses of verse, both as a dialogue and as an expression of emotions are an interesting element. The use of stress on individual words is common to show the intensity, this helps in creating suspense during the narration of the tales.

In most of the Mizo folk tales, the motifs of characters include the cruel stepmother, the poor child, the mistreated stepchild, the underdog hero, some handsome and brave hero victimized by circumstances, many magical animals and motifs of objects. There are also motifs of events and actions in these Mizo folk tales.

WHERE FOLK TALES ARE TOLD

In the Mizo society back in the days, Folk tales are one of the most important ways of teaching and passing on knowledge to the youth. Apart from their homes, they are usually told in a place called “Zawlbuk”. The “Zawlbuk” is a bachelor’s dormitory and is mandatory for all Mizo youth above the age of 15 to stay in this “Zawlbuk”. It is a place where they received trainings, tribal welfare wrestling, hunting, disciplines and village government, it is a place where they exchanged ideas, sing songs of heroism, speak of their ancestors’ achievements and the elders would tell the tales to these youth. Several other tribal clans have their own version of this “Zawlbuk”. According to Lt. Col.J. Shakespeare, the Chiru, Kom and Tikhap clans also had the bachelor dormitory system but a little different with the common form of the Zawlbuk by other clans. The Paites had no ‘Zawlbuk’ but uses the front verandahs of some of their bigger houses and served it as their ‘Zawlbuk’. The Zawlbuk began to lose its importance after the appearance of the British. The introduction of formal education and conversion to Christianity on a mass scale struck at the roots of the indigenous village administration leading to the decline of the utility and relevance of the Zawlbuk.

Classification of Mizo Folk Tales:

Mizo folk tales can be classified into several points. The themes and motifs understandably overlap but leading features within the tales allow classification into accepted tale-types. Some of these tales do verge on the mythical and legendary but are narrated not as facts, even if they are considered fictional. Moreover, these tales are not marked by specific time or place and on this basis have been included among folk tales generally accepted as fictional. The classification of Mizo folk tales are as follows:

Animal Tales:

Mizo folk tales do not feature fantastic animals that are cultural heroes responsible for the good and bad in life of the tribe. The only special quality given to animals in these Mizo folk tales are their ability. Mizo traditional literature believed that animals were at par with human beings at the beginning of creation and that both species could communicate freely.

Anthropomorphosis is another feature in Mizo animal tales, we can see that there are tales that talk of “Keimi” which can be literally translated as a Were-Tiger or a Tiger-man, meaning that a tiger that can change the form of a human being or a human being that can transform into a tiger, these tales do not clearly explain this phenomenon but this “keimi” is the only one having the ability to shape shift among several instances of transformation to animals.

In the Mizo folktales, the monkey and the snake are the most commonly featured animal. The monkey is usually portrayed as a cunning animal in several of the Mizo tales and the snake to be sly and the snake is known as a powerful and feared species, we can see this in the story “Chungleng leh hnuaileng indo” (War of the birds and the land animals) as it was the leader among the land animals. Also, there are many superstitions about a snake, the story of “Chawngchilhi” is supposedly explained as the origin of a “Rulpui” or a Big

Snake, she had a snake for a lover and even got impregnated by the snake. She was killed by her father as he slashed her pregnant stomach and as the baby snakes made their way out, he killed most of the snakes except one which escaped and grew to be a very large snake. This “Rulpui”, the one that escaped started terrorizing the villagers and devoured even human beings. There are legends that say that the snake hid itself in a cave which was known as “Rulchawm kua” literally translated as Snake feeding cave where the villagers would offer goats, cows, etc. to prevent it from terrorizing the village. The village where the snake hid is believed to be known as the village of ‘Rulchawm’ in the present time.

Other animals that appear often in the Mizo folktales are the tortoise, the bear and the tiger. The people have a certain belief that there is a hierarchy among the animals as the tales often tell about one kind of animal working for another or being dominated by another, the tale ‘War of Birds and Animals’ can be one example of this belief. The common folktale patterns that can be found in the Mizos, is the presence of a trial or competition held among the animals. Many of the animal tales also highlight the presence of a relationship between the human beings and the animals.

Tales of magic or wonder:

These kinds of tales as defined by folklorists, are known to be purely fictional, usually occurring in a different realm, a land of wonder and not set in the real world as we know it. It is hard and almost impossible to comfortably place any Mizo folktale under this as the tales are all believed to be true incidents that really happened at that time and diffused over time for the sole purpose of entertainment. But several of the folktales have to be classified under this as they often included supernatural elements and the portrayal of this pattern found in this class. When using such classification for the tales it can be noted that the largest number of Mizo folktales come under this class as the Mizos believed in the supernatural and their strong animistic tendencies found their way into the tales they told. According to the story “Lalruanga leh Keichala”, the art of magic was learnt by mankind from a deity called ‘Vanhrika’, who was the keeper of all knowledge.

A typical plot in these tales is one where the hero or heroine has to go through trials or face a task which seems to be impossible, but with the help of some magic or magical interventions are able to complete these tasks. Magical objects such as Chhura’s “Sekibuhchhuak”, an object which is found in the adventures of ‘Chhura’, which was made from the horn of a ‘mithun’ and could produce a tasty meal that one wishes for at the command of the owner, is among the well-known objects to those who have a familiar knowledge about the Mizo folktales, another magical object that is well known is Rairahtea’s “Bahhnukte”, a powerful object that could perform a variety of otherwise impossible tasks such as bringing back his dead father to life and building a palace of gold within a night, he gained this from a “Rulpui” as a show of gratitude for sheltering him from the enemies.

Another magical element that can be found in these folktales, is the changing of forms. In the story “Vanchungnula”, the main female character gets swallowed by a ‘Taunu,’ one of

the many harmful spirits which is believed to exist in the human world, and it expelled her out in the form of a seed that later grew into a gourd plant. When the hero of the tale found out about this he saved the plant and the plant changed into the human version whenever the evil spirit was not around. The most well-known tale about shapeshifting is the tale of “Kungawrhi”, where in a “Keimi”, literally translated to tiger-man is able to shift between the human or tiger form. In various of the Mizo tales we also come across the appearance of harmful spirits called “Khuavang”. In the tale of “Pa-fa hruaibo”, one of the abandoned sons got transformed into a bird whose egg he swallowed, another well-known change of forms is found in the tale of “Mauruangi”, where the mother of the heroine is changed into a big fish after the father pushed her to drown in a large flowing river.

Some of the Mizo tales of this particular type often bears a very close resemblance to some well-known tales that are known worldwide. Similarity between Beauty and the Beast can be found in the tale of “Kawrdumbela”, where a beautiful princess agreed to marry the ugliest man in the village to save her family and her people from a great destruction; Thumbelina strikes a resemblance to the tale of “Kungawrhi”, it tells the tale of a tiny girl who was born out of the wound of her father’s thumb and who later grew up to be a beautiful young girl.

Noodle head Story:

A noodle head story is also called a numbskull or humorous story and it revolves round a dumb character who makes mistakes that are quite unbelievable and often at times plain stupid. The point of this kind of story is that in spite of the character’s stupid mistakes, he nonetheless strives and become successful in the end and this provides an uncomplicated and unique means of entertainment for its audience. The most famous character in the Mizo folktale is Chhurbura and is the undisputed hero of all the Mizo folktales whose character is a study in paradox. Chhura was a person who was humorous, silly and one who had an entertaining anecdote through his many adventure, he was an exemplary figure of a numbskull. Nahaia, his brother on the other hand, was a trickster who at times often strikes out to take advantage of his gullible and trusting brother in order to bring his downfall. However, in some instances, we find that Chhura always seems to get the better of his scheming brother due to his innocence and naïve personality. The famed “Chhura’s Sekibuhchhuak”, was gained by Chhura due to the scheming of his brother Nahaia, wherein he got his brother Chhura to exchange his field with him, which was inhabited by a female spirit, known as “Phungnu”. Chhura out of his naivety, who was not at all afraid of it, managed to get favour in his way and got the powerful magical object.

Cumulative tale:

These kinds of tales are simple folktales which follow a definite pattern, not much of a plot is involved, but they have lots of rhythm and the events follow the other logically, in a pattern of cadence and repetition. The most well-known cumulative tale in the Mizo folktales is the tale of “Chemtatrawta” and may be the only Mizo folktale that follows

the trend of the cumulative tale. The hero of the tale, Chemtawta went to a river to sharpen his knife and was bitten by a lobster. He was very exasperated by this act and reacted in a very violent manner by cutting a bamboo upon which a creeper was growing. This action of his started a chain of events that eventually resulted in a greater set of reaction which affected the whole of his village, who later set about finding the reason for each and every of the action and went through the entire action in a reverse in order to find out the cause of it, the lobster and the hero bring peace to the village. The actions follow a logical sense of order and repetition and at the same time offer an animated entertainment to its audience.

Romantic tales:

The most common theme in the Mizo folktales is romance where enchantments and magical elements also make an appearance. The tales tell us of the love story between a young boy and a girl and the hardships they usually face in their relationship. The most common hardship or obstacle faced by the lovers being the opposition by their parents due to the differences in their social standings and their economic background. Some of the well-known tales of romance includes “Tlingi leh Ngama”, “Zawlpala leh Tualvungi”, “Lianchhiari leh Chawngfianga”. In the tale of Tlingi leh Ngama, these two had a liking for each other since they were babies, but when the boy’s family asked for the girl’s hand in marriage, the mother unexpectedly, refused it and so they decided to elope. In the course of time the girl became sick and died but they were later reunited in the land of the death; this gives us evidence of the early Mizo’s belief in life after death. The romance tales of the Mizo follows a common theme of the boy being a humble one, the wicked mother or stepmother, the parents being overly conscious of social status, the jealous emissary, a wicked king, and presence of magic. The tales are told beautifully and have withstood the stand of time.

The Mizo folktales are authentic and probably untouched as ample translation has not been done by anyone and since they were passed down from one generation to another through the oral tradition they have a certain uniqueness to it that will keep on inspiring the generations after generations. Mizos’ folklores are indeed a beautiful part of Indian tradition and culture that makes India incredible.

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