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Rethinking Secularization Process in Mizoram

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the core issues relating to secular and its related terms like, secularism and secularization process in Mizoram. It also focuses on the linkages between religion, social and political system from its historical perspective to contemporary Mizo polity. The paper also discussed in detail the impact of religion in close knit Mizo society and how the society perceives and responses the socio-political issues from religious perspectives. In other words, the paper also briefly discussed the effective role of Church for over some decades, in interpretation and contextualization the social, political and economic issues from religious perspective and its implication on state politics. Apart from the above stated issues, in the midst of dynamic Mizo society, the paper deals with the difficulties of locating the normative notion of secularization and its prospective in pervasive religious Mizo society. Lastly, the paper also discussed the contemporary relations between religion and politics and attempt at reimagining the interlace between religion and political process in Mizoram.

KEYWORDS: Secularization, Christian Missionaries, Church, Mizoram.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite, contemporary debate on variations of secularization process in a global scale. Western normative concept and pattern of secularization process generally refers to three elements of secularization, (1) an increasing structural differentiation of social spaces resulting in the separation of religion from politics, economy, science, and so forth: (2) privatization of religion within its own sphere; and (3) declining social significance of religion belief, commitment and institutions, all of which have been taken, at least since Weber, to be essential to the development of modernity. However, Talal Asad argued that if a legitimate de-privatization is carried out effectively, the allegedly viable part of secularization thesis would be undermined.¹Casanova argued that the presence of secularist historical stadiad consciousness was a crucial factor in the widespread secularization that has accompanied the modernization of western European societies. European societies tend to experience their own secularization, that is, the widespread decline of religious beliefs and practices in their midst, as a quasi-natural consequence of their modernization.²Precisely, Western normative concept of secularization refers to a process, where religious influence and sentiment in decision making process and practice became less important and decline from society and politics. However, considering the dominant role of religion in a contemporary non-Western society, particular in the Christian dominated state of Mizoram, one finds a paradoxically process of relative institutional differentiation, neither accompanied nor followed by the process religious decline and irrelevant or insignificant religious values.³In other words, processes of secularization and modernization in Mizo society have often been accompanied by increasing intensity of religious activities.

Western secularization process can be understood as a product rational thinking and modernization. However, in the context of Mizo society, since, the late nineteenth century, the dominant role of the Christian missionaries and later Church related developmental activities had been a crucial factor towards accelerate social change and modernization. The closed relationship of Church and State as well as its dominant role society and politics has refuted the normative concepts of secularization. Thereby, one can hardly observe an institutional differentiation or clear cut separation between secular and religious realms. Therefore, secularization in Mizo society can be better comprehended from the context of development of Christianity rather than understood within the Western normative concept of secularization.

In other words, secularization process in Mizo society can be understood as a reverse bivalent form. One way to understand secularization process in Mizo society was to view the pattern of secularization process mainly on account of early Christian missionary activities and later Church developmental activities toward modernization of Mizo society. The other way to understand secularization process is to view on the basis of active role of Church in teaching and interpretation of various contemporary socio-political and cultural issues, from Christian perspective, that sharpened the differences between the sacred and profane realm. Thus, in contrast to Western normative concept of secularization process, the reverse pattern of Christian centric secularization process within Mizo society had tremendous impact upon the prospect and implication of secularization process and secularism of Mizo society and politics.

Before the advent of British colonialism and Christianity, the traditional Mizo society, had its own distinctive socio-political culture and religious beliefs that were closely linked with their everyday needs and world views.⁴ The traditional narratives of Mizo religion can be described in many dimensions. Some writers argued that Mizo were animists, that worshiped anything unusually large, be it tree, rock or river, out of fear of the reprisals of unseen devils. Moreover, they also worshipped some imaginary spirits whom they think can bring about blessings. Be that as it may, their fear of curses from evil spirits outweighed their hope for blessings from the good spirits. However, some writers ignore the presence of any elements of theism in the Mizo religion, which should be classified as primal rather than animism.⁵ Thus, it can be established that in the traditional Mizo society, albeit, concept of gods, good and evil spiritual realm, were known to the Mizo, the traditional Mizo society religion can be characterized by a lack of a proper established religion.

With the annexation of Lushai Hills after 1890 and the simultaneously advent of Christian missionaries. In contrast to Christians in Southern part of India, who traced the origin of their church to Apostle Thomas and its flourishing contact and commerce with the Roman Empire. However, these were confined mostly with the Southern part of India.⁶ Churches in Northeast India, were established by Christian missionaries and later growth under indigenous Mizo churches.

The Mizo exposure to Colonial government, Christianity and early development of churches brought inevitable change in the traditional Mizo religion and world views. Unlike in various part of India, the fringe tribes of Northeast India, being free from class ridden society, the advent of Christianity did not lead to dehumanization and disempowerment of tribes. Christianity in Northeast India, can be identified with social transformation that is fair, just and free of exploitation on the basis of caste or class.⁷ The cordial relationship with Colonial government and the consideration of Christianity as an instrument of empowerment rather than exploitation could perhaps be the main

reason why the primitive Mizo were easily prone to Christianity. Gradually, the interlaced between new religion with Mizo culture, served to be the strongest bond that defined the normative structure of Mizo society.

CHRISTIANITY AND SECULARIZATION PROCESS IN MIZO SOCIETY

Since late 1890s, the consolidation of Lushia Hills by the British Colonialists and the advent of Christianity has brought a tremendous socio-cultural and structural changes upon the traditional Mizo society. C Nunthara, an imminent scholar summarized that annexation of Lushia Hills in early 1890s immediately affected the Mizo in three ways, first the nomadic character of the Mizo social life rapidly came to an end as a result of restriction on territorial mobility of the chiefs. Second, the Mizo came into contact with the neighbouring people channelized through the British code of peaceful co-existence. Third, change in economy structure immediately giving rise to a small group of privileged class.⁸ However, the Colonial government as an agent of change was limited and concerned relatively with maintenance of law and order rather bringing change at social and cultural level. Various savage, barbaric practices, such as headhunting, burying alive of infants together with their dead mothers, the spearing to death of an eavesdropper, the slitting of the nose and/or ears by the grieved husband of the paramour of his unfaithful wife, the killing of those believed to be magic workers (*Dawithiam*) and the gang rape of reputedly loose woman by young men were prohibited and were declared illegal, punishable with imprisonment and fines. Other measure taken by the government was the introduction of Land Settlement in 1899-99 by Shakespear to cease disturbance and clashes caused by migration.⁹ Thus, apart from Colonial Administrative measures, it was the Christianity that brought social change and far reaching impact upon Mizo traditional socio-culture and political structure.

S K Chaube, summarized that the role of Christianity relative to the process of changes introduced by British administration, as under, the contribution of Administration can be summed up under the following categories, such as establishment of law and order, improvement in communication, introduction of money economy in the remote areas and as will be seen the creation of vested interest. The task of acculturation, at the subjective level, was almost entirely left to the church of various denominations.¹⁰

Infact, within a short span of development of Christianity, it not only changed the religious faith of the people, but altered their whole outlook and way of life completely. Thereby, the sacrificial system (*inthawina*) disappeared within a generation and began to worship the divine Father of Jesus

Christ. Belief in paradise also continued, but the means of entering it which could be attained only by the great and affluent was replaced by the belief that the costly sacrifices of Jesus had made entrance possible for all those who have faith in him.¹¹ The traditional world view of the Mizo which may be described as animistic, characterized by fear and superstition had been replaced by more rational attitudes brought by the Christian philosophy. Christianity through its religious teachings, modern education and health service contributed to demise the traditional beliefs and culture. Christianity, by portraying man as the master of his own body and soul, liberated the Mizos from the certain misconception of religion. Thus it provides the groundwork for scientific perception of the. Therefore, the attitudinal changes among the Mizo, to some extent reflected the rationalization of decision making process of various socio-economic and political realm.

Thus, in brief, it was Christianity rather than the Colonialist that had prepared the once fierce tribe to confronts the new situation brought by inevitable socio-structural and cultural changes. Therefore, in context of Mizo society, various secular activities such as school, medical, social institutions, non-governmental organizations, brought by the Christian missions and later Church have play a significant role not only in bringing socio-religion and cultural change but also redefined the sacred and the profane realm and further accelerated the Christian centric secularization process in the Mizo society.

Christianity and Cultural Modernization of Mizo Society

Despite, it was the greatest trend among all the Christian missionaries to create a prototype of their condition and culture to which they belonged in their own country.¹² Christianity brought cultural changes among the erstwhile Mizo society. However, cultural modernization does not emerged on the brink of total abolition of Mizo indigenous culture, but rather emerged as a confluence of both Christianity and Mizo culture. Many of the existing pre-Christian beliefs of Mizo society were adopted or modified by missionaries to help the Mizo to understand fully Christian concepts and beliefs, especially with reference to the concepts of health, healing and social services. Thus, besides preaching Gospel, various types of education institutions and health services, became an instrumental in transformation the erstwhile ignorant, backward and savage Mizo tribe into a better society on the patterns of new Christian culture.

The early Mizo Christians were not in a position to differentiate substance from form and therefore simply adopted Christianity in the western form. Believing western culture to be Christian culture, they discarded most of their cultural heritage. In the process they discarded some elements that were of great value and in no way incompatible with Christianity-such as the traditional tunes

for their songs and the use of drum.¹³ But, in the later stage, remained itself limited to those cultural traits such as dress, food habits and ethical life styles. Therefore, it is significant to note that the interaction between the new faith and the traditional culture, led to the development of new Mizo indigenous socio-culture structure. As Yogendra Singh has observed, this form of westernisation does not have its basis in the assimilation of values or cognitive categories but merely in the imitation of external forms of culture.¹⁴ In fact, though the early Mizo Christians were against selected traditional customs, values and beliefs, but retained those traditional cultural values which were of not inconsistent with Christian.

The first revival movement of 1906 began to bring about change. It brought a new sense of joy as a result of the experience of forgiveness of sin and the freedom to express that joy in dancing and proclamation of the faith to others. It was also a turning point in the growth of the churches. The emphasis on sin and repentance led the Mizo Christian to see things in a new light, sharpening the difference between what they perceived to be the sacred and the profane. They became very judgemental of their old ways. However, the third revival began to create in large numbers a new type of spiritual song which superseded the earlier translated western hymns that had been sung in the churches. They were an expression of the freedom from missionary control and the imposed western forms that the Christians had first experienced in the second revival. The new freedom to create their own forms of Christian life was manifested in many indigenous ways. One early manifestation of this was the bringing back of the drum for use in Christian worship, a practice that had earlier been banned by the missionaries. Another popular expression and most significant path that developed was the readiness to do whatsoever my Lord the King shall command, in the same way as the *Tlawmngai* person would do for his or her chief in the traditional set up. All these developments contributed to the formation of unique indigenous Mizo Christianity.¹⁵ Therefore, cultural change within Mizo society does not actualised in total change of traditional cultural traits. In fact, most of the traditional social values adopted were reconceptualised on the basis of Christian principle, further substantiates the Mizo contemporary socio-cultural values and norm. In contemporary Mizo society, the Church acts as an institution of social solidarity that articulates the socio-cultural traits of Mizo society.

Christianity and Education

Prior to the advent of Colonialism and Christian missionaries, formal education was unknown to the Mizo.¹⁶ The traditional institution of the *Zawlbuk* was only the mean of educating the male youth. The Colonial government was indifference towards development of education. Various

measures, such as Charter Act of 1813, (which gave the East India company the responsibility to educate the Indian), the Wood's Despatch of 1854, Education Commission of 1882, under President Sir WW Hunter, was hardly effective in the Lushai Hills.¹⁷ It was only under the initiative of Christian missions and later churches that educational institutions were established and education reached among the fringe Mizo tribes. The primary object of the missionaries was to convert the people to Christianity. The missionaries believed that through primary schools they could spread the gospel among the masses in villages. During this time, there was hardly any difference between the School and Church. Schools were used as Church, therefore going to School also meant attending church and vice-versa.¹⁸ Education was seen as a necessary access and instrument to preach Christianity among the illiterate converts so as to enable them to read the Bible and provide the convert with intelligent leadership. Therefore, during the early phase of education, it served both the purpose of immediate evangelism and a long term objective of building indigenous Christian community.¹⁹ Thus, in Lushai Hills, early phase of education which was entirely left in the hands of Christian missionaries and early churches gave an advantage in imparting a Christian centric education and secularization process among the Mizo.

Albeit, the educational system under the Missions was Christian oriented. However, education system provided by the early Christian schools was not exclusively religious. Rochunga Pudaite, an observer of Mission educational activities, summed up that the aimed of education under the early Christian missionaries were equipped with religious instruction to the new converts. The people were taught the three R's in preparation for Bible reading, understanding of writing and simple Arithmetic for their religious exercise. Primary emphasize was placed upon their ability to read Bible.²⁰ Apart from religious instruction such as, Scripture, Christian doctrines, there were various secular aspects of education taught in the mission schools, subjects such as Dictation, Zirtirbu (Lushai Reader), an outline of World History-III, the Legend of Old Lushai (in English), Aritmatic, English Grammer and Geography of India and Assam and simple Arithmetic,²¹ were also included. Thus, the secular aspect of education was also provided, as the missionaries believed that it would inevitably weaken the people's faith in traditional beliefs. Rev. Zairema remarks, that the advancement of modern education and medical work was one of the most effective means of destroying the traditional world views and belief system, which was super-naturalistic.²² Thus, the education pattern initiated by the Christian mission and later Church had a tremendous impact on not only in evangelical work but development of secular attitude among the Mizo.

Christianity and Structural Change of Mizo Society

Colonialism and Christianity also brought drastic changes within social structure of Mizo society. Prior to the formation of any modern institution in Mizoram, social and political life of Mizo revolved around the institution of Chieftainship and *Zawlbuk*. The *Zawlbuk* system can be characterised as a traditional way of life for the bachelors in every village and was considered as an important institution to impart social values and discipline among the youth.²³ However, gradually it disappeared from Mizo society. McCall traced the extinction of *Zawlbuk* to the antipathy of the Lushai church leaders. As the mission did not take a positive attitude either to preserve the institution or to abolish it, the local church leaders and the local school teachers took an active lead in abolishing the *Zawlbuk* in the villages, as some of the practices in the *Zawlbuk* were not strictly in conformity with the Christian ideals. This led most of the Lushai church leaders to condemn the *Zawlbuk*.²⁴ In fact, the abandonment of *Zawlbuk* was partially resulted on account of advancement changes and more inclusive democratic institutions, not solely on the account of antipathy by Church.

Considering the rapid changes in socio-cultural lives and abolition of traditional chieftainship in Mizo society, people felt the need for an alternative institution that could meet and serve many of their undercurrent socio-cultural needs under the changed situation. The Christian community in each locality built their own chapel everywhere, in replacement for *Zawlbuk* and gather there regularly for prayer and worship, listening to the sermons that cover exhortations to the standard of life expected of a Christian.²⁵ Thus, the development Church and growth of schools, has provided a new realm for imparting social ethic and many youth has left *Zawlbuk* to attend schools. In contemporary Mizo society, the Mizo church and YMA became the principle institutions to uphold the code of social discipline and renders social service to the community.²⁶ Thereby, it can be observed that Church, YMA and schools have substituted the traditional institutions, not as a result of Christian disapproval of it but rather as an inevitable consequence of socio-economic and political changes. In other words, in the midst of changing socio-cultural milieu, the *Zawlbuk*, could no longer meet the changing socio-economic and political needs of the Mizos.

Apart from abolition of institutions of chieftainship, *Zawlbuk* and *Bawisystem*, Christianity also play a pivotal role in promotion of gender equality. In a traditional Mizo society, despite women were treated with love and care, and adorned in much the same manner as men are treated. Women are not treated equally with men; their position is placed at a very insignificant position.²⁷ However, with the advancement of Christianity, the Gospel impart the notion of equality among the Mizo. The Gospel with its message taught them that in the eyes of God, there was no distinction between man and women, they were equal in every aspect. The educated women formed *Mizo Hmeichche Tangrual* (women organization) on 16 July, 1946, with the main objective of promotion the causes of

women in society. One instance of success of this organization was that the authorities allowed woman to inherit property by formal deeds of will.²⁸Therefore, in a contemporary society, Mizo woman by participating in every aspect of society proved that they are no less intelligent and less able than their male counterpart.

Impact of Christianity on Intellectual Development

Christianity and later churches which became a centre of power and patronage of modern education became the most significant factor for the emergence of intellectual in Mizo society. Referring to Lushai Hills District, McCall traced the origin of new class, the intelligentsia, he remarked that it was the churches and its various organizations for the most part, which led towards black coatism. Black coated occupation became synonymous with progress. The result was the creation of an oligarchy, the privilege, the salaried and therefore, the materially powerful. Most of them are on mission's payroll, church executives or in the employment of Government, in which case they are probably, subject spiritually to the Lushai church. McCall further argued that Christianity and oligarchy bred individualism, flourishing in the headquarters, towns and naturally imbued with the thrill of seeking independence of the chiefs, and freedom from customary communal discipline.²⁹Thus, the new religion produced intelligentsia that in turn, made it possible for the tribes to adjust and demystify the secular-religious realm created by the modernization and secularisation process.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, in a tiny state of Mizoram, in contrast to normative secularization process, a reversed secularization based on Christian centric and pattern of secularization initiated by early Christian missionaries and Church has a tremendous impact upon the nature of relationship between temporal and sacred. In fact, the interlaced of Mizo culture with Christianity, which resulted in the development highly indigenised social system has become the normative socio-political and cultural structure of the contemporary Mizo society. In a Mizo society, despite the assumption of decreasing church activities in the midst of rapid secularization of Mizo society, it can also be observed that the increasing intensity of secularization process is also followed by increasing church activities. Particularly, in the midst of deteriorating socio-political system, inroad of various social problems, such as HIV/AIDS, corruption, drugs abuse, party politics, social disintegration and disparity within Mizo society, Church has widened its role and become more active in addressing the contemporary problems confronted by Mizo society.

Therefore, to generalised the secularization thesis, as a trend towards institutional differentiation between secular and religion, the exclusion of religion from public realm and the demise of religion would be misnomer in Mizo society. This reversed pattern of secularization of Mizo society on Christian centric and principles also do a tremendous impact upon the prospect and development of secularism. Indeed, in Mizo society, secularism does not imply a separation of religion from politics, but rather imply equality of all religion. Moreover, a majority of Mizo prefers a close relationship and cooperation between state and church in various social, economic and political aspects.³⁰ Therefore, in context of Mizo society and politics, normative concept and practice of secularization and secularism can hardly be located in Mizo society.

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