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Her Story in Stone: Women's Voices from the Landmark & Megalithic Culture of Mizoram, India

Amrita Sarkar

Assistant Professor, Dept. of AIHC and Archaeology, Deccan College Post-graduate and Research Institute, Pune. E-mail: amrita.sarkar@dcpune.ac.in

Abstract: *The field of archaeological research in Mizoram, one of the northeastern states of India is relatively young and under-developed. Current archaeological investigations and surveys have brought to light that the State has a rich Megalithic Tradition. This Megalithic tradition offers a unique lens through which one can examine the interplay of gender, power, and spirituality. Mizo beliefs suggest that success in the hunt hinges on the entry of a "feminine spirit" into the heart of the sportsman. Besides, there are few megaliths (although less explicitly documented) commemorating stories associated with women. This paper will discuss few case studies as part of archaeological inquiry, coupled with an in-depth study of Mizo oral traditions and folklore, that can shed light on past societal dictum of portraying women.*

Keywords: *Gender, Women, Mizoram, Megalithic Culture, folklore, Past-society, India*

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Introduction

Northeast India, incorporating eight states namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim, is prominent for its remarkable ethnic and linguistic diversity. This region, particularly the hilly states and districts, is home to a significant tribal population. Each tribe within this region possesses a unique historical background, language, cultural traditions, and way of life, which have been passed down through generations. Archaeological research in the state of Mizoram remains relatively underdeveloped. The vibrant landmarks and megalithic traditions of Mizoram are well documented (Chatterjee, 1979; Malsawnlina, 2017; Lalhminghluva, 2022). Far less numerous, but equally fascinating, are some of the stories or folklores associated with these landmarks or megaliths that portrays women or mentions women.

Research Rationale

Application of gender perspectives to construct an interpretive past has not yet been attempted on archaeological findings in Mizoram. Gender perspectives in archaeology incorporate gender in their analysis and questions predominantly androcentric archaeological interpretations of the past (Conkey and Spector, 1984, Engelstad, 2007). This paper aims to illuminate the historical roles and positions held by women through a few case studies giving a gender twist in interpreting socio-political and ideological standpoint of early Mizo society.

Methodology

This study has employed an interdisciplinary approach to reconstruct and interpret the history of the Mizo people. It has combined the material evidence of archaeological discoveries previously documented and/or published, with the intangible heritage of Mizo oral histories and traditional stories. Local informants were consulted to establish the traditional narrative directly linked to the landmark. To move beyond potential cultural biases in the Mizo context and to develop broader theoretical insights, this study employs comparative ethnographic analogy. Interpretations of the Mizo case studies are contextualized using established theories and case examples from archaeology, anthropology, and gender studies globally (e.g., the role of female spirits, gendered divisions of labour, and the relationship between fertility and social standing in various societies). This method does not claim direct historical continuity but rather provides a framework of possibility for interpreting power dynamics and societal roles embedded in the local Mizo narratives, leading to the author's interpretation. This methodology is designed to overcome the limitations of a single-source approach, using each method to cross-validate, contextualize, and enrich the other.

Lasi: The female spirits in Mizo folklore

According to a long-standing Mizo myth, "Lasi," the female spirit with her stunning beauty and her fairy jungle life, resides in the mountain. According to the notion, a hunter can only succeed in his hunting endeavors when this spirit enters his heart (Chatterjee, 1979). The phenomena of male hunters being possessed by female spirits creates a compelling paradox in this patriarchal setting where hunting prowess was traditionally linked with masculinity. This leads to deeper investigation of the intricate interplay of genders and their cultural and spiritual ramifications. Feasts in Chin societies were thought to enhance the fertility of the host (Stevenson 1943; Hayden & Villeneuve 2011). A similar notion developed into the *Thangchhuah* position among the Mizos, representing an individual who had achieved significant social standing. This prestige was earned through two paths: *Inlam Thangchhuah*, achievements within the village, and *Ramlam Thangchhuah*, demonstrating heroism in hunting specific animals. Attaining *Thangchhuah* involved a series of steps, each requiring multiple feasts (Sarkar and Lalminghluah, 2024). To explore the underlying social significance of this paradox, let us turn to cross-cultural studies. For instance, in many global cultures, femininity is linked to the soil, fertility, and the nurturing aspects of nature (Brisson, 2017). Furthermore, women are frequently linked to intuition and a greater comprehension of the invisible world (Miller, 1987). Fundamentally, intuition is the ability to process information without the use of memory, sensuous perception, or logical reasoning (Kautz, 2003). Building on this logic, the idea might imply that hunting success calls for more than just physical prowess but also a kind of intuitive understanding of the natural world, perhaps a "knowing" that is traditionally associated with feminine wisdom. Women are regarded as spiritual leaders and as bridges between the spiritual and human worlds in certain societies (Razak, 2017). This may also be reflected in the hunt's female spirit, which implies that women are essential

in establishing a connection with and pacifying the spiritual forces that control their environment. Furthermore, the presence of a female spirit next to the male hunter may represent the necessity of harmony and balance in the hunting process. It implies that a respectful and harmonious interplay between masculine and feminine energy leads to achievement rather than power or force. Males have traditionally been identified as hunters and females as gatherers in the sexual division of labor among human foraging communities. But the work of Sarkar (2022) has proven that the role of women has been significant in hunting thus dramatically shifting stereotypes of labor, as well as mobility. In this work she has mentioned the Neolithic hunting scene from Burzahom, India. The scene from Burzahom depicts human figures hunting a stag, one of them attacking from the front with a bow and arrow, the arrow already has pierced through the chest of the animal, and the other person attacking it from behind with a long spear. The one attacking from the front can be easily identified as a male based on the exaggerated genital while the one holding a spear from the back does not show an exaggerated genital but rather depicts a bosom. Thus, clearly depicting a female. The presence of a female in the hunting scene kind of contradicts 'Man the Hunter' (Lee and Devore, 1968) and 'Women the Gatherer' (Dahlberg, 1983) model put forth in social anthropology, archaeology, biology, and studies of human evolution. The work done by Anderson et al (2023) on women's contribution to the hunt across ethnographic contexts could be compelling evidence to Sarkar's observation.

Thasiama Se No Neihna- A historical landmark

Thasiama Se No Neihna is a historical landmark in Mizoram. It is a steep, hilly cliff appearing non-negotiable by man and animal in its natural form. However, this landmark has an intriguing folklore attached to it (Chatterjee, 1979). Thasiama, a handsome and brave young man from the village of Vaphai near Tan Mountain, owned a jhoom land. Lasis living in the mountain regularly ate the food he brought there. Determined to discover who was taking his food, Thasiama hid and saw two beautiful maidens, mountain spirits, taking it. He captured them, but after they pleaded for their freedom, he released them. Grateful for his kindness, the spirits, who were believed to control hunting success in the mountains, blessed him. This brought Thasiama great luck, and he eventually amassed a large herd of gayals. Legend says these gayals, seeking refuge from tigers, would climb a nearby hillock.

This story of Thasiama and the Lasis, while entertaining, carries several implications, particularly regarding the portrayal of the Lasis. The spirits are depicted as beautiful and powerful, capable of influencing hunting success. However, they are also shown as dependent on Thasiama's mercy. This suggests a complex view of female power, where it exists but can be contingent on male generosity. They are powerful in their domain (hunting success) but vulnerable outside it (captured and pleading). Thasiama's act of releasing the spirits is framed as a virtuous act of generosity. The reward he receives (wealth and success) reinforces the idea that male kindness towards women is reciprocated with blessings and good fortune. This probably is a way of reinforcing a patriarchal structure where male virtue is rewarded through female gratitude. Thus, the story of Thasiama and the Lasis, while rooted in local folklore, reflects some common patriarchal tropes. The female spirits, though powerful in some ways, are ultimately dependent on male kindness and primarily function to reward male virtue. This reinforces a power dynamic where male agency and control are central, even when acknowledging the spiritual influence of women.

Darthiangi Lung- Megalith

A megalith located about three km north outside the village of Farkawn, features carvings depicting Darthiangi, the beloved wife of Chief Chertuala along with other symbols. The story associated



Fig. 1: Thasiama Se No neihna (public domain: <https://champhai.nic.in/mz/tourist-place/thasiama-seno-neihnanz/>)

with this megalith mentions that this couple was barren (Chatterjee, 1979). Darthiangi, known for her beauty, came from Dulzawl village. Despite the honour of the marriage, the couple's inability to conceive caused them great unhappiness and internal conflict. The societal pressure to produce an heir to maintain the chief's lineage created a dilemma for Chertuala, torn between his love for Darthiangi and his duty. Though he considered divorce, her charm and his affection always swayed his hand. Ultimately, the need for an heir prevailed, leading to their separation. Darthiangi's sorrow at the parting was expressed in songs, and before they went their separate ways, they erected a memorial stone as a testament to their love.

1. *“A ia chan nuam che maw Zawllunghnemi,
Kan khaw karah Hranglungphun thiang chang dun i,
Chang dun ilang liankhuaah mi za selin”*

Darling, would you like to erect our memorial stone which will commemorate our deep mutual love and make everybody remember our names on this account.

(Translation by Chatterji, 1979)

2. *“Chhungah chuli pawnah chulchhuaki
Fa panglian chawiin ka mawi love”*

Withering inside I wither on the outside
I am in no condition to bear any healthy child
(Translation by Lalminghlua and Sarkar, 2017: 10)

Such songs of grief were sung while departing.

This story, while distressing and focused on a specific personal tragedy, offers several insights into the position of women in the society and culture it depicts. The central conflict revolves around

the couple's inability to have children. This highlights the immense societal pressure on women to bear offspring, particularly for maintaining lineage and ensuring the continuation of leadership (in this case, the chief's bloodline). A woman's worth appears to be strongly tied to her fertility. Furthermore it also establishes the assumption that barrenness in a couple is always the woman's fault. Darthiangi's weeping and singing as she departs suggest that women were allowed, or perhaps even expected, to express their emotions openly, especially grief. This might indicate a degree of emotional freedom, though it's within the confines of a patriarchal structure. Nonetheless the story clearly demonstrates the power of social norms and expectations. Even a powerful chief like Chertuala is ultimately bound by them. His personal feelings are secondary to the perceived need to continue his lineage. This highlights the strong influence of tradition and societal pressure on individual lives. An additional note to this is, while the story focuses on Darthiangi and Chertuala's separation due to their childlessness, it's unknown whether Chertuala later married another woman who bore him children. If he did, and that union produced heirs, it might suggest that Darthiangi was infertile. However, without that information, it's impossible to determine who, if either, was the cause of their inability to conceive.



Fig 2: Darthiangi Lung (Lalhminghlua and Sarkar, 2017: 7)

Sibuta Lung- Megalith

Sibuta Lung is a memorial stone found at Tachhip village, 20 Km from Aizawl town. Sibuta was the son of a concubine of a very powerful chief (Chatterjee, 1979). Because he was not an offspring of the real wife he never enjoyed prestige and social status of a Chief's son. Rather the Chief's legitimate daughter named a s Darlalpuui was more respected in family and society. This made him furious and he decided to take a revenge. It so happened that after his father's death he succeeded as a Chief as the father left no son from his legal wife. Upon becoming Chief his mind planned retaliation on Darlalpuui his half-sister. As a proud chief aspiring to ensure his place in the heaven after his death, he performed Khuangchawi ceremony. However in place of Midhun (*Bos frontalis*) to be sacrificed

as part of the ritual, he decided to sacrifice his half-sister Darlalpuui which is a sacrificial ritual. When he gave out the decision the villagers were shocked seeing the cruelty of the Chief. But no one dared to go against the Chief. Sibuta's Lung was erected later on by the villagers to commemorate Sibuta's cruel perversity.

This story though apparently focused on Sibuta's cruelty, can give us insightful observation of power dynamics and societal norms. The story reflects a patriarchal system that accepted legitimate child and resentment towards those born outside legal marriage. At one hand it shows marginalization and vulnerability of women not being considered as a legal wife and the lasting effect on their children and at the same time Darlalpuui's elevated social standing and acceptance as a female just because of the fact that she was the legitimate daughter. Interestingly both these antithetical behaviour towards woman are products of patriarchal system. The highlight of the story is Darlalpuui's impending doom of becoming a human sacrifice. Although in the beginning she enjoyed higher social standing and safety, at the end she became a victim of his brother's ambition substantiating the fact that a woman's fate, good or bad is decided by a man. It is also noteworthy to highlight the villager's silence that would also eventually showcase patriarchal system that not only empower Sibuta to take his sister's life but the silenced dissent.



Fig. 3: Sibuta Lung (public domain: https://www.google.com/search?q=Sibuta+Lung&sca_esv)

Discussion

The concept of “Lasi” and the case studies discussed in this paper shows universal pattern of woman’s quandary under patriarchal system. A woman is the one who walks the contested borderlands between spirituality, ethnicity and society. We stand at the cross road where renewed and reclaimed divine goddesses and feminine spirituality meets the ancient oppressed gender’s roles, rights and powers/powerlessness. Voicing the women of the past is important as we claim and reclaim ancestral traditions. By doing this we can uncover traditions associated with women buried in frameworks labelled patriarchal. These stories looked through gendered lenses actually brings out very complex notions of power, agency, gender and social justice.

The story of Thasiama and the Lasis, while rooted in local folklore, reflects some common patriarchal image. The female spirits, though powerful in some ways, are ultimately dependent on male kindness and primarily function to reward male virtue. This underpins a power dynamic where male agency and control are dominant, even when acknowledging the spiritual power of women. However, their association with nature and hunting success also hints at a deeper respect for feminine power within the community's traditional beliefs.

The story of Darthiangi Lung provides valuable clues about the potential social dynamics and expectations surrounding women in the society it represents, particularly concerning fertility, agency, and the power of social norms. The Mizo saying that woman is like a bamboo fencing to be thrown out for replacement as soon as considered unwanted by her male counterpart (Chatterjee, 1979) does provide context to this unfortunate, forced separation of a loving couple.

Finally, the story of Sibuta Lung allows us to move beyond a simple narrative of good versus evil and explore the nuances of power, gender, and social justice.

Conclusion

This paper set out to explore the interplay of gender, power, and spirituality within the nascent field of Mizo archaeological research by bridging the gap between tangible material remains (megaliths) and intangible cultural heritage (folklore). The preliminary investigation is centred on the critical analysis of specific landmarks.

Most of us understand that the struggle of women for justice and empowerment is a global one. Although the women in India’s northeastern region seem to be enjoying a higher status compared to their counterparts in the rest of the country, in reality traditional and customary practices discriminate the women in so many ways (Buongpui, 2013). The customary laws and practices among most of the tribal societies in northeast India treat women as ‘second sex’ (Gough, 1971). This research is an attempt to help us understand that the issue of women’s rights and powers has a long past to it and is more complex than many of us have considered. The author would however like to mention a note of caution that these data are from a specific cultural context and limited in its scope. Moreover, subjective nature of cultural concepts significantly contributes to their potential for contestation. For example, the interpretation of 'Lasi' presented in this paper, while drawing from certain sources, warrants further scrutiny. One of my Mizo students astutely pointed out, the concept of Lasi within their cultural understanding is more nuanced and specifically associated with spiritual figures who act as temptresses, intentionally luring hunters into the wilderness and disagrees with Chatterjee's perspective of bestowing success in hunting (personal communication with Scott Pachau). This alternative view does not undermine feminine importance, but rather shows feminine power as contested and volatile—capable of bestowing life/success (fertility/nature) or causing destruction/loss (temptation). Rather than static categories, gender appears to have been a dynamic interplay of

roles, responsibilities, and social expectations, demanding a more nuanced and historically grounded analysis.

Assigning a clear chronology or absolute dates to the cultural history of Mizoram is difficult primarily due to the lack of extensive, securely dated archaeological evidence and the nature of the region's traditional practices. Mizo history was primarily preserved through oral traditions (folklore, songs, and historical chants) until relatively recently (post-contact with missionaries). While invaluable for social history (as is shown with the *Lasi* and *Thangchhuah* concepts), oral tradition provides thematic and social chronology, not precise calendar dates. While absolute dating of these structures remains a critical area for future work, their association with deep-seated oral histories provides a vital, thematically-grounded chronological anchor. The point of convergence between the artifact and the narrative is not strictly chronological, but rather one of social persistence, where stone monuments function as physical repositories for enduring gendered societal dictums. In synthesizing Mizo material culture with folklore and cross-cultural ethnographic theory, this paper offers a foundational model for interpreting gender in societies with limited excavated archaeological data. Future research must prioritize systematic documentation of all megalithic sites, with excavation and detailed artefact typology analysis for establishing relative chronology.

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Competing Interest Statement

The author declares no competing interests.

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