1 Introduction

In November 2018, a protest engulfed the state of Mizoram, demanding the removal of the state's chief election officer (CEO), S. B. Shashank (Figure 1.1). With just a month away from the state's assembly election, the protest came in the wake of the CEO's attempt to allow Bru refugees to vote in the election. The Mizos perceived the move as being politically motivated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) trying to gain support of the Brus and alienate the Mizos against the non-Christians of the state. Ethnic relations between the Mizos and the Brus have been strained since the 1990s, resulting in conflict and displacement, with many Brus fleeing to the neighbouring state of Tripura (Roluahpuia 2018a). The case of the Mizo–Bru tension is embroiled with the state electoral issue, particularly after the coming of the BJP in power at the centre in 2014. Given the party's ideology, the BJP did not find much appeal among the dominant Mizos, who are predominantly Christian. With this, the party shifted its focus onto the ethnic minorities of the state, the Brus, including the Chakmas—who mostly practise animism and Buddhism—as its support base. The final blow came when the centre agreed to the transfer of the state's principal secretary, Pu Lalnunmawia Chuaungo, a Mizo bureaucrat. This had further intensified the discontentment among the Mizos with major organizations, such as the Central Young Mizo Association (CYMA), the Mizo Zirlai Pawl (Mizo Student Federation) (MZP), and state celebrities, including sportspersons, coming out in the open to extend solidarity. An online campaign on various social media platforms demanding Shashank's removal galvanized like-minded netizens. Mizos from Manipur, Tripura, and different parts of India released a press handout to mark their solidarity.

Figure 1.1   Leaders of various Mizo organizations on the stage of the protest during the Mizo *hnam hnatlang* (voluntary action to save the Mizo nation), 2018
Source: Explore   Mizoram,   https://www.exploremizoram.com/2018/11/hnam-chhan-hnatlang.html (accessed in November 2022).

In Mizoram's recent past, the protest to oust Shashank is one of the few political mobilizations that the state has witnessed on such a massive or extensive scale. It demonstrates that local politics, both electoral and ethnic, are entangled with the interplay of regional and national political interests. This is particularly true in the case of the Mizo–Bru ethnic tension. The case of the ethnic tension between the Mizos and the Brus has a longer history. Since the eruption of the conflict in 1997, various organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vanvasi Kalyan have operated in the refugee camps of the Brus, mobilizing the community. The Bru community conveniently fits into the right-wing narrative that projects tribal communities as 'backward Hindus'. The success of the RSS and its sister organizations was soon felt as the Brus began to project themselves as 'Hindus' suffering at the hands of the majority Christian community.

Two crucial features mark the protest (Figure 1.2). First, the protest was held under the name Mizo *hnam hnatlang*, a call upon the public to come out together in protest against the CEO of the state to save their *hnam* (clan, tribe, or nation),[1] Mizo. The Mizos' sense of being a community is informed by their idea of *hnam*. The *hnam* consciousness can refer to or relate to a clan, tribe, ethnicity, or nation. The Mizos' sense of nationalism is closely intertwined with their *ram*[2] (territory or land),

Figure 1.2   Mizo *hnam hnatlang* (voluntary action to save the Mizo nation) in Aizawl, Mizoram, 6 November 2018
Source: Reuben Lalmalsawma, Aizawl, Mizoram.

commonly referred to as Zoram (Zoland) or Mizoram (land of the Mizos). Hence, their idea of nationalism has to do more with Mizo nationalism and not necessarily state nationalism, or, in this case, Indian nationalism. The protest brought to the fore, once again, the question of the Mizos' integration into the Indian Union, an issue that remains an undercurrent in Mizo politics.

Second, a lesser recognized and unacknowledged aspect of the protest is the circulation of *hnam hla* (national songs) during the protest. Social media was flooded with verses of patriotic songs, and artists were invited to sing popular *hnam hla* on the day of the protest. In Mizo political history, *hnam hla* were a vital source of mobilization and continues to be sung in important sociocultural and political events. Specific to the protest, it was the songs composed by Rokunga that became one of the most sung and circulated. Rokunga is a known composer whose songs became widely popular at the dawn of India's independence. As India's independence drew near, various *hnam hla* were composed through which the Mizos expressed their political aspirations. Rokunga's songs swept the hills of Mizoram, Manipur, and Tripura. His song 'Ro Min Rel Sak Ang Che' (Be Thou Our Counsellor) remains widely popular today. Largely, the case of *hnam hla* demonstrates the persistence of a strong *hnam* consciousness among the Mizos.

Hnam hla have an important lesson for us in the way we understand nationalism. *Hnam hla* in Mizo history were particularly significant and widely popular during

the Mizo struggle for independence. For this reason, *hnam hla* were closely associated with the Mizo National Front (MNF). For the MNF, *hnam hla* were an important node for transmitting nationalist ideas. *Hnam hla* proliferated particularly after the outbreak of the conflict with composers mostly being MNF members themselves. Both the MNF and non-MNF members composed songs that shaped the idea of Mizo nationalism. The influence of composers aids our understanding of nationalism and their contribution. In fact, in post-colonial Mizo society, modern electoral politics have engendered an offshoot genre of *party hla*[3] (party songs), where political parties use songs to mobilize support and counter their rivals. *Hnam hla* are political narratives that contain a rich source of information about the ideas and ideology of nationalism.

Another aspect of this is the cultural context that underpins why *hla* (songs) have such a strong resonance. The use of *hla* in general and *hnam hla* in particular needs to be understood within the sociocultural milieu of Mizo society. At its heart, Mizo society is an oral society. The practice of orality has a strong cultural context where knowledge and histories are transmitted orally. For a society that primarily relied on oral communication, the practice is deeply interwoven into the social fabric and easily adaptable to the larger community. *Hla* in Mizo society occupy a central place in understanding the history, literature, and culture of the community. Historically, various genres of *hla* emerged in Mizo society, and such genres reflect the specific time, period, and context to understand Mizo society. For instance, historians used *hla* as a means to periodize Mizo history according to the form and style of the *hla*. The Mizo historian Lalthangliana (1993) categorized *hla* in Mizo society according to the time period in which they were composed; accordingly, he noted more than 30 types of *hla*. Likewise, Chhuanvawra (2011) noted more than 50 types of *hla* whose history dates back to way before colonial rule. While not all types of *hla* are sung any longer and nor are their tunes followed, different forms of *hla* continue to survive and remain significant to this day.

Historical studies analyse how *hla* reflect the sociocultural change and transformation in Mizo society. This is particularly evident from the time the Mizos converted to Christianity, beginning in the late nineteenth century. While there was no fundamental break between the pre-Christian and post-Christian eras in terms of the songs, the tune and tenor of the *hla* were influenced by Christian hymns composed by the missionaries as well as local Mizo composers. On the centrality of Christianity, Thirumal, Laldinpuii, and Lalrozami (2019: 15) note that 'the connection between script and scripture was established through the singing of Christian hymns and the introduction of performative culture instead of a textual culture'. During this period, new styles of singing, such as *puma zai* and *kaihlek hla*,[4] began to be popular. Both genres of songs emerged at a time when religious revivals, locally referred to as *harhna sang*,[5] spread across the hills. The Christian Mizos

quickly adapted to the new religion and made Christianity their 'own' religion, and soon, they repudiated other forms of traditional rituals and singing, with *lengzem hla* (love or romantic songs) being one. The songs that were sung were strictly monitored, and the church leaders decreed against any form of singing or songs that were not Christian hymns.

What made this history significant to understand is that it directly influences the tune and tenor of *party hla* and *hnam hla*. The tone of much of the *party hla* composed by the Mizo Union (MU) supporters were sung using the tune of the gospel hymns. This was the case with *hnam hla* as well. In fact, in the case of *hnam hla*, what has become quite pronounced is the Christian symbolism, showing the profound influence Christianity has had on the Mizos' sociocultural and political world. In all this history, it was in *hla*—in other words, the 'oral'—that Mizos expressed their experience of change. The place of the 'oral' has increasingly gained significance in scholarly studies on the Mizos. More recent studies have examined not the 'oral' per se but the forms and narratives of Mizo oral culture. Often, they are categorized as *thawnthu* and *chanchin*. The former encompasses a wide array of oral practices such as folktales, lore, and myths, while the latter is mostly used to refer to stories, literal and historical (Thirumal, Laldinpuii, and Lalrozami 2019: 21). Others take orality as a way of tracing the history and myths of origin (Zama 2005). *Hla*, in particular, remain imperative in these narratives of history as a specific genre of songs was composed to define an event or emerged as a specific response to historical events (Lalthangliana 1998). Of this, *hla* provide a vital resource to trace and locate the historical agency of the Mizos. In other words, *hla*, in the form of z*ai* (singing), were the predominant means of expression (Thirumal, Laldinpuii, and Lalrozami 2019: 18).

In the broader context, songs and nationalism are widely studied fields. If nationalism shapes the sound of music, songs themselves also shape the way nationalism is defined. Such literatures have focused more on the relationship between music and nationalism and their significant role in shaping ideas about national identity and culture (Bohlman 2004, 2010; Gooptu 2018; Subramanian 2020). From national anthems to anti-colonial resistance, songs have been effectively used to mobilize the masses. In important national events and commemorations, songs are sung with much valour and pride. Such is the centrality of songs in the national life of the country that even in sporting events, national anthems are played, and today, there is no nation-state without anthems. Anti-colonial movements were infused with songs, and in many cases, it was songs that inspired such movements. In India, too, it was song composers that stirred the movement for independence. Writing on Tagore, Chakrabarty (1999: 31) notes that his poetry offered a mode of expressing and experiencing intense feelings for the nation, a feeling that transports the body beyond the remits of historical time. The imagination of free India was expressed in songs that were later on used by nationalist leaders to mobilize the public.

Within nationalism studies, the study of national songs occupies a central place. The historiography examines the connection between national songs and state nationalism (Bohlman 2004; Riley and Smith 2016). This is true of both European and formerly colonized countries. As formerly colonized societies gained independence, anti-colonial songs were elevated to national songs. They became essential ways by which states infused nationalism through their institutions, extending from schools to government-run institutions. The production and performative aspects of such songs demonstrate how elites used them as a mechanism to govern their citizens. Such songs often carry the imaginaries about the state, usually defined by grandeur, with the intention to stir sentiments. Citizens emotionally connect with them, and this is what makes such songs powerful and relevant in nationalist politics.

National and popular leaders have effectively used songs to mobilize and garner political support. Subramanian (2020) has demonstrated how M. K. Gandhi retorted to public prayers and music as a way to communicate and mobilize the public. In such cases, Gandhi was able to weave his idea about the India he imagined, a multi-faith country. The songs and music he chose were drawn from different regions and religions, displaying the diverse communities that inhabit the country. In this, song composers played a critical role in arousing anti-colonial sentiments and used them to counter colonial policies. Patriotic songs are influenced by the cultural context in which they are composed. The tune and lyrics are rooted in the sociocultural and religious contexts. However, the case has been mostly that such studies tend to focus on the musical work and familiar composers (Curtis 2008; Riley and Smith 2016). It is also the case in India, where composers and poets considered 'national' are mostly familiar composers. This is often at the behest of marginalizing regional composers.

This book situates *hnam hla* and the rise of *hnam* consciousness among the Mizos of northeast India. It argues that the idea of *ram leh hnam* (territory and nation) and *hnam* consciousness is pivotal to understanding Mizo nationalism. The idea of *hnam* encompasses the Mizo sense of 'self'—being 'Mizo' and the distinct way in which 'Mizoness' is articulated in everyday language. It is common to encounter terms and sayings such as 'Ava Zo[6] em' (It is very Zo), Zopa (Zo man), and Zonu (Zo woman) that all point towards a distinct sense of Mizo identity. They are expressions that define Mizoness. It can be ways of talking, appearance, and dressing. This distinctiveness permeates national thinking, which is best encapsulated when one explores how the vernacular language shaped the Mizos' political life-worlds.

The book locates the rise and emergence of Mizo national consciousness by examining various literary sources, with *hla* being one of the most prominent. The lyrical content of *hnam hla* and their tones fit into what are mostly known as patriotic songs. In the book, *hnam hla* are examined within the context of the Mizo oral culture. It further extends into how the Mizos conceive their idea of nation and nationalism, and *hnam hla* represent the 'long term process of vernacularization' (Michelutti 2008: 18). National movements are often associated with tall leaders and

the organizations involved in leading such movements. A reading of *hnam hla* shows how the composers of such songs included both MNF and non-MNF members, elite and non-elite. Not all Mizos are members of the MNF, and non-MNF members equally have a strong *hnam* consciousness and consider themselves nationalists. The vernacularization of nationalist ideas and ideals expands our understanding of nationalism in general and Mizo nationalism in particular.

The MNF has used vernacular expressions such as *ram leh hnam* and *zalenna* (freedom) through which it localizes the nationalist expressions in a language understandable to all. This vernacularization of nationalist ideas further shows how the Mizos reshape modern notions of nation and nationalism in the local. The language of the movement and the ideology that underpins it are framed as *zalenna* and the struggle as *ram leh hnam tan* (for our land and nation). *Zalenna* becomes the core ideological base and the political motive of the movement. The use of *zalenna* contrasts the existing and predominant analytical frames by which the MNF movement is studied, such as insurgency, regionalism, and ethnic movements. Adopting and examining the vernacularization process enables us to appreciate and acknowledge the agency of the so-called rebels. The projection of their struggle as *zalenna* is pivotal in the writings of MNF leaders such as Laldenga and Zoramthanga. *Zalenna* also found its usage in songs, and that formed the core ideology of the movement.

More than the study of the songs per se, the book interrogates the relationship between orality and nationalist politics and shows how the oral and print cultures were mutually constitutive. It examines this through the vernacularization of politics and nationalist ideas by exploring the divergent ways in which Mizos localize expressions by using terms such as *zalenna*, *ram leh hnam tan*, and different genres of *hla* to express and articulate their aspirations, dissent, and disenchantment. Specific to politics, *hla* were one of the first mediums through which political ideas were transmitted. The political visions of individuals and political parties expressed their political desire and articulated their aspirations through *hla*. In this way, the book locates the rise of *hnam* consciousness preceding the emergence of the MNF.

While the MNF did lead the movement for independence, the case of *hnam hla* has a deeper legacy rooted in the political culture of the Mizos. The MU used songs as a weapon of protest against the British political superintendent and the continuing rule of the chiefs. Under democratic India, the party advocated the abolishment of chieftainship and used *party hla* for electoral mobilization against their rival, the United Mizo Freedom Organization (UMFO). Furthermore, the significance of orality becomes evident in how the Mizos resort to *hla* to express their grief and suffering during the period of counter-insurgency. Now known as *rambuai hla* (songs of troubled times), local communities fell back to oral culture, and there was a proliferation of songs about suffering and sacrifice, pain and loss. With media censorship and high surveillance, *rambuai hla* emerged as a form of oral expression

through which experience and encounters of violence are moved to the oral domain. This makes the oral vital to understanding Mizo politics. Hence, the emergence of various genres of *hla*—namely, *party hla*, *hnam hla*, and *rambuai hla*—are means through which the Mizos record and express political ideas, imagination, and discontent. *Hnam hla* and *rambuai hla*, in particular, soon caught the attention of the state and were then subsequently banned from being sung in public. Most of *hnam hla* as such were disallowed on the radio. Today only a few recordings of both the *hnam hla* and *rambuai hla* are done. Likewise, any print materials related to the MNF or politics were also burned, if not banned, during the period of the MNF movement.

The case of the Mizos also raises important questions about how nationalism emerged in backward regions with limited literacy. There was no 'high culture', to use Ernest Gellner's expression, when Mizo nationalism emerged. Moreover, the northeastern part of India, except for Assam, did not experience any form of industrialization, even during the colonial period. The areas inhabited by the Mizos, the 'savagery tribes' in the colonial lexicon, were left out of the colonial economy and excluded from any meaningful political participation. This, however, is not to undermine the presence of print culture and the influence of modern education. Moreover, Mizo society was largely agrarian with a subsistence economy, and during the 1950s and the 1960s, there were no communication links and industrialization. A modernist explanation is inadequate to explain the rise of Mizo nationalism.

Furthermore, various common theoretical approaches have been used to explain Mizo nationalism. However, such works, more than writing about Mizo nationalism, have to do with analysing the MNF movement, its rise, and its fall. In this context, secessionism is one of the common ways through which the MNF movement is studied. In fact, secessionism is a prominent issue in northeast India. Its geographical location and isolation have made it a periphery, both in the ideas and imagination of the national leadership and the powers at the centre. This follows the explanation of the emergence of nationalism in peripheral regions and among minority groups. Prominent examples of this are the Basque Country in Spain, Quebec in Canada, Papua in Indonesia, Karen, Kachin, and other ethnic minorities in Myanmar, and similarly among ethnic and religious minorities in various regions of India such as Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, and Tamil Nadu, among others. Such cases are often referred to as 'peripheral nationalism', where secessionist tendencies have emerged due to the exploitative tendencies of the core region, leading to an uneven and unequal pattern of development (Hechter 1975; Nairn 1977). Peripheral regions and minority groups feel alienated, and this becomes more pronounced when they have a strong sense of cultural identity. Hence, the desire for independence from the core emerges and often translates into nationalist movements aspiring for independence.

Another trend of studies examines nationalist conflict within the broad framework of the conflict between official nationalism of the state and regional nationalism. In India, this has been widely approached as a tension between

pan-Indian nationalism and regionalism (A. Guha 1982; U. Phadnis 1989; Baruah 1999). From this perspective, it is common to see cultural explanations of nationalism. Hutchinson (1987) examines the significance of how the Gaelic revival stimulates a thinking that promotes an identity consciousness with the potential to recur even after the establishment of nation-states. The argument is that nationalism is not only a political movement alone, as it has a strong cultural aspect. This explanation has a strong influence within the field of nationalism studies (Hroch 1985; Smith 1986, 2008; Hutchinson 1987; 1994; P. Chatterjee 1993). They stress the role of myths, symbols, art, tradition, the *ethnie*, according to Smith (1986), and how they are appropriated by cultural nationalists that get regenerated from time to time. With nationalism thought to wane and fade away with modernity and become irrelevant under the forces of globalization, its persistence is explained by the strong presence of cultural nationalism.

Hardly has there been any real effort to approach the Mizo case within the studies of nationalism. In the context of South Asia, and India in particular, such movements are commonly approached as insurgency or ethnic movements. While most nation-states claim the national question as resolved or the issue of national integration as settled, communities such as the Mizos continue to have a strong sense of being a distinct nation. This distinct sense is emblematic of how they govern, organize, and perceive themselves apart from their Indian counterparts. In other words, the *hnam* consciousness fosters an idea of belonging that is not only imbued with a strong sense of difference vis-à-vis 'Indians' but also involves the assertion of a pan-Mizo identity. A pan-Mizo social network in the form of institutions such as the Young Mizo Association (YMA) fosters an ethnic belonging that transcends national borders, both inter and intra. However, the prevailing view is that *hnam* consciousness is considered a mere identity consciousness, and ethnic mobilizations in the form of protests are relegated as sporadic outbursts and reactionary.

Even today, Mizo nationalism is associated with the MNF movement, and the end of the armed struggle is considered the end of Mizo nationalism. In pursuing my study on Mizo nationalism, I commonly encounter the question 'What is there left to study given that the movement is already over?' In seminars and academic gatherings, this question continues to linger. The point here is not so much about the naivety of the question but how it reflects the way we look at contemporary Mizo society, politics, and nationalism, generally. Following this, a question that began to bother me was 'Does the MNF only signify the emergence or end of Mizo nationalism?' The MNF today, as a political party, has proclaimed itself as the guardian of Mizo nationalism. One may also ask: What did Mizo nationalism mean to the non-MNF members before, and what does it mean today? How do ordinary people perceive and construct their sense of Mizo nationalism?

In writing about nationalism, Billig (1995) argues that what we understand as nationalism is inherently limited and biased. In his critique of the existing theories

of nationalism, he writes: 'Nationalism is equated with the outlook of nationalist movement and when there are no such movements; nationalism is not seen as an issue' (Billig 1995: 16). In *Banal Nationalism* (1995), Billig demonstrates that even in established liberal democracies where nationalism is so routinized and familiar, it goes unrecognized as expressions of nationalism, such as the 'un-waved flags'. He argues that the banality of various acts and events are ways by which the state reminds its citizens of their national place. Succeeding studies on nationalism have attended to the more mundane and quotidian aspect of nationalism, dealing with 'everyday nationhood'. Two significant contributions of these studies are that they have introduced what is now commonly referred to as 'bottom-up' studies of nationalism and put the masses at the heart of nationalism studies.

This book is not necessarily concerned with the everyday practices of nationhood in the Mizo context. However, what is relevant is that the way we think and perceive of nationalism, including that of the Mizos, is underpinned by the fact that it is seen only in the form of an extremist movement—in this case, armed struggle. From this viewpoint, Mizo nationalism is irrelevant and non-existent in contemporary times. There are certain caveats inherent in this explanation. To begin with, it is restrictive because it equates Mizo nationalism with the MNF, thereby denying the contribution and participation of the non-MNF members and ordinary Mizos in shaping the idea of Mizo nationalism. Furthermore, this view is unhelpful in explaining the contemporary tensions about national identity and nationhood in India. As already noted, the Mizos continue to have a strong sense of being a distinct *hnam* in the Indian Union. Most importantly, the nationalist impulse was foregrounded through the consciousness that was expressed in the vernacular notion of *ram leh hnam*, the groundwork for which was laid prior to the emergence of the MNF. Needless to say, the Mizos' sense of being a distinct *hnam* is strongly attached to the notion of *ram*, which, in turn, is deeply connected to the emergent political consciousness that began to take shape during the colonial period.

Today, the Mizos are collectively recognized as Scheduled Tribes (STs) under the Constitution of India. In northeast India, they inhabit a compact geographical area, although they are divided by state and national boundaries. Within northeast India, the predominant population is concentrated in Mizoram, with a much smaller number in Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya, and Assam. Contemporary Mizo consciousness and the conception of Mizo identity are rooted in the long history of their encounters and negotiations with the colonial and post-colonial states. They are a 'product of the specific long-term historical and cultural process', as J. Pachuau (2014: 7) puts it. For instance, there is an intricate connection between the consolidation of Mizo identity and the aspirations for the territorial unity of all the Mizo-inhabited areas under one administrative unit. Furthermore, the choice to rename the place from Lushai[7] Hills to Mizo Hills and subsequently

adopt 'Mizo' against 'Lushai' for self-identification was intentional—an act and assertion to define a sense of collective belonging. Hence, in this book, I locate Mizo agency through the study of Mizo politics with a focus on the MNF movement in northeast India.

Mizo Politics: Background and Context

Politically, the MU first used the term 'Mizo' when it changed the name of the then party, Lushai Commoners Union, to MU. Established in 1946, the MU leaders, belonging to diverse clans and tribal groups, favoured the use of 'Mizo' over 'Lusei', the name of the tribe who were also the ruling and dominant chiefs in the Lushai Hills. This usage gives further credence to the aspirations for territorial unity, what they called 'Mizo inhabited areas', under one administrative unit. Heavily backed by the Mizo public, the MU's anti-chief stance popularized the party among the majority of the commoners. At the dawn of India's independence, it was able to project itself as representing the voice of the people to the British and Indian national leaders. A counter-mobilization by the chiefs and their supporters was made by another party, the UMFO, led by Lalbiakthanga. The political competition became evident in the demands made by the two parties, with the MU opting for integration with the Indian Union while the UMFO sought to join Burma (present-day Myanmar).

Amid this divide, there were also individuals and groups within the MU who aspired for the independence of Mizoram. Both the MU and the UMFO continued to be the main rivals until natural interruptions, in the form of the famine of 1959, led to the gradual downfall of the MU, the more popular of the political parties in the Mizo Hills.[8] Despite their political rivalries, one of the demands of the parties was for territorial integration of the Mizo-inhabited areas into a single administrative unit. Yet, between 1947 and 1960, various Mizo leaders felt a sense of cultural loss due to economic and cultural dominance by the *vai* (plains people). It was during this time that the Mizo Cultural Society (MCS) was established to protect and safeguard the traditions and customs of the Mizos. Notable leaders among them were Laldenga, R. B. Chawnga, R. Zuala, and R. Vanlawma.

The activities of the organization were directed towards protecting and safeguarding the existing Mizo culture. In 1959, the MCS organized a rally in Aizawl to condemn the neglect and ineptitude of the Assam government towards the incoming famine in the Mizo Hills. The rally, however, cost the leaders of the movement—from being suspended if not arrested—as they were government employees, such as its president Chawnga and Laldenga, employed under the Mizo District Council (Chawngsailova 2007: 2–3). In 1959, the MCS was converted into the Mizo National Famine Front (MNFF), focusing entirely on relief and rehabilitation. By this time, Laldenga had emerged as the organization's face. With

the famine receding after two years, the MNFF rechristened itself as a political party and openly proclaimed independence. The loss of lives during the famine reinforced the Mizo view of the need for self-reliance and self-determination and convinced the leaders of the MNF that independence was the only way out (Aplin and Lalsiamliana 2010: 22). In 1961, as the MNFF was transformed into the MNF, it openly expressed the goal of achieving *zalenna sang ber* (the highest form of self-determination). The demand for independence took a violent turn in 1966 when the MNF declared independence at midnight on 28 February 1966.

Broadly speaking, there are two dominant perspectives regarding the emergence of political consciousness among the Mizos. The first view reflects the total reduction of the common people to passive actors, thereby silencing their voices. For instance, in commenting on the Mizos' options of integration and independence at the dawn of India's independence, B. B. Goswami (1979: 135) notes, 'The common people, many of them though literate, did not have the competence to grade the intricacies and the consequences of these problems.' The second perspective is the oft-repeated argument that the colonial exclusion policy of tribes, such as the Mizos, brought about a rift between them and the mainland Indians. Hence, this created fertile ground for secessionist movements. Therefore, the conclusion is that colonial policy and religious proselytization were the reasons for the unrest in the region. On this line, S. Chatterjee (1994: 7) observed, 'The secluded line confined the intellect of the Mizos to narrow limits. They did not take very seriously the changes that were brought about by World War I. They had practically no idea about the political dynamics of their own country.' This seclusion of the Mizos not only isolated them from the larger Indian society but also 'sowed the seeds of hatred between the rest of the Indians and the Mizos' (Goswami 1979: 136).

Contrary to such a view, this book demonstrates how the Mizos were conscious political actors and actively involved in the politics of their time. In this process, the role of the traditional and educated elites remains significant. For the Mizos, this was activated through their demand to recognize Mizo identity (*hnam*) and for the autonomy of their territory (*ram*), either within the Indian Union or outside of it. Likewise, the trend was similar in other tribal areas of northeast India, where issues of identity and autonomy were two central concerns. The task of this book then is to explain how this was envisioned and articulated and how and why this idea has become internalized and embedded, even in contemporary Mizo society. Additionally, Mizo identity and nationalism found resonance beyond the territorial borders of Mizoram. This book therefore probes what made this political transgression of boundaries possible. Furthermore, it seeks to explore what enabled the emergence of a strong political consciousness, leading to the struggle for independence, given the backward economic condition of the Mizos in the 1950s and the 1960s.

Edensor (2002) states that the major theories of nationalism have focused mainly on the dominant elite culture, often equating them with the national culture.

One of the most salient aspects of Edensor's argument is what he calls the 'cultic milieu', which he uses to show how the various cultural elements are dismissed as 'wild', 'vernacular', 'traditional', and 'irrelevant'. However, to Edensor, they can, in fact, be the main determining factors of contemporary national identity. In a similar vein, Fahmy (2011), in the case of Egypt, notes that the emergence of national identity did not occur merely around the high culture or the literate masses. Rather, he argues that it was through the Egyptian colloquial language that the masses were exposed to a national culture that further helped create a modern Egyptian national identity. In concurring with Edensor, Fahmy shows how news, rumours, jokes, and gossip, which he calls 'oral sources and direct social interactions', effectively reach a broad audience—literate and illiterate.

Cueing in on Edensor and Fahmy's observation, this book focuses on two key issues. First, it looks at the critical role of the oral to understand Mizo politics. This is examined in two forms. The first is songs as a form of oral expression, examining the emergence of various genres of *hla* that are now known as *party hla*, *hnam hla*, and *rambuai hla*. All of them are tied to nationalist politics. In fact, one of the most visible manifestations of this is how songs play a pivotal role throughout the Mizo national movement. Prior to the outbreak of the conflict in 1966, numerous songs were composed with a strong nationalistic fervour. The MNF made skillful use of the songs composed by individuals such as Rokunga and Laltanpuia and later on by the MNF rebels themselves. The second is the oral narration as a way of uncovering the diverse voices in relation to the movement. Studies on violence and nation-making show that oral narratives have a unique capacity to unearth both the voice and testimonies of hitherto silenced persons and histories that official records suppressed (Butalia 1998; Saikia 2011). Oral narratives of the MNF rebels provide insight into the contestations and complexities surrounding the question of peace, violence, and the movement at large.

Second, the MNF used local idioms to construct and circulate nationalist ideas. For instance, for every member of the MNF, the struggle was for *zalenna* and the sacrifice for *ram leh hnam*. This book then explores the vernacular notion of *zalenna* and *ram leh hnam* to engage Mizo nationalism. Using local terms such as *zalenna* and *ram leh hnam* is what I call 'vernacular nationalism', which reframes and reconstructs the nation in local terms, making it distinctively Mizo. I adopted the idea of vernacularization within the body of scholarship that examines how democratic and nationalist ideas are embedded in the people's everyday consciousness and how the elites and non-elites are involved in the creation of this vernacular work (Michelutti 2008; Wouters 2014). The vernacularized expressions, *zalenna* and *ram leh hnam*, formed the core of the ideology of the movement and, by extension, Mizo nationalism. In other words, *zalenna* is the ideology that underpinned the MNF movement. The MNF leaders articulated their idea of *zalenna* in their speech and text, which in turn padded the idea more coherently. As early as the 1960s, the

idea of *zalenna* figured prominently in the political discourse, with leaders such as Laldenga referring to it both in his speeches and writings. A particular mention can be made of his 'Zalenna Thuchah' (Message of Freedom). Likewise, leaders of the movement, such as Zoramthanga and Lalhmingthanga, put *zalenna* at the core of their analyses in their writings, using *Zalenna Lungphum* (Foundation of Freedom) (1980) and *Exodus Politics* (2009 [1965]), respectively. In reading such texts, this book uncovers how the MNF leaders constructed the idea of *zalenna*, the context of their articulation, and the meanings attributed to it.

The use of songs and the vernacularization of nationalist expressions are closely interrelated as they overlap quite significantly. This is so because both vernacularization and the use of songs work in tandem with each other. On the one hand, vernacularization means that songs are easily received by the people, irrespective of their status or literacy level. On the other hand, it grants agency to the Mizos by showing how they assert and self-define ideas of nationalism on their own terms. Furthermore, oral narratives are vital in revealing people's experiences, particularly in cases and situations involving violence and human rights abuse. In the Mizo case, too, the effectiveness of songs and oral narratives was demonstrated by their survival even in times of heightened counter-insurgency. Numerous songs were composed against the backdrop of the violent counter-insurgency response, and these are now testaments of violent encounters and experiences.

Over the years, the Mizo experience has attracted attention due to the stability that Mizoram has experienced since the signing of the Mizo Accord (1986) between the MNF and the government of India (Roluahpuia 2018b). While the 'peace' in the post-MNF period has been remarkable, this book critically examines the making of said 'peace' and what the signing of the accord means for the former rebels in contemporary Mizo society. The oral testimonies from the former rebels challenge the singular frame in which peace and peace-making are understood as an act of ending the conflict. It uncovers how the making of peace was interlocked within power equations in the MNF and how the peace-making process was accompanied by a contest of power and position, often exploited by political and rebel actors, local and national. The complexity of the accord-signing process is underscored by the fact that the making of peace in regions of conflict is not only about achieving stability but also guided by multiple interests for which the benefits are often unevenly distributed.

The Mizos: History and Identity Formation

The Mizos are a trans-border community. Inhabiting territories that border three different countries—India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar—the Mizos live in marginal regions in all the states they inhabit. Within northeast India, the Mizos inhabit the states of Manipur, Tripura, and Mizoram, with a smaller population in states such

as Meghalaya and Assam. Their cross-border presence within the states of northeast India has determined their sense of identity and how they define and position themselves.

The actual origin and meaning of the term 'Mizo' is a vexed one. However, the general understanding is that 'Mizo' is a transliteration of two words—*mi* meaning people and *zo* meaning highland. Mizo then means hill men or highlanders (Nunthara 1996: 33; U. Phadnis 1989: 149). While one may question the appropriateness of the term (Thanga 1978: xii), it has become entrenched in the consciousness of the people who now collectively identify themselves as Mizo. The sense of a Mizo self is produced and reproduced in different forms, at different sites, and through various interactions and exchanges. In all this, multiple agencies and institutions, such as the YMA, churches, and student bodies, collectively help create and recreate the Mizo sense of self.

Scholars have used the term 'Mizo' as a broad appellation. For example, Nunthara (1996: 33) uses the term to include all those who identify themselves as Mizos, and all the related branches or sub-groups of the Mizo tribes now scattered over the neighbouring territories are relatively fluent in the use of the Lusei language. Along similar lines, U. Phadnis (1989: 149) notes that the term 'Mizo' cuts across tribal boundaries and have wider territorial connotations. This has been more or less the general understanding in Mizoram. However, Nunthara (1996) further adds that this excludes tribal groups, such as the Chakmas and the Brus of the state, while also acknowledging the contestation surrounding the acceptance by the Lai and Mara tribes of being identified as Mizo. Others, like Lalthangliana (2005), use the term as a collective name to refer to the various clans and tribes of the state of Mizoram. These include the Hmar, Paite, Lusei, Ralte, Lai, and Mara, among others.

Colonial rule was premised on gathering information on colonized subjects and recording and documenting them (Dirks 2001). The power of the colonial state was built around the production of knowledge and its dissemination, which become pivotal to colonial strategies of rule and domination. In this way, Mizo history is closely bound with colonial ethnography, and even today colonial texts remain indisputably the main source of Mizo history. Considered in this way, colonialism marks the beginning of written history for the Mizos—a break from the oral tradition. Like anywhere else, colonial writings disaggregated populations based on clans and tribes, which began to fix both administrative boundaries and the identity of the communities.

In a sense, the term 'Mizo' was not a colonial invention, even though its formal usage appeared during the colonial period. Colonial writers primarily used 'Lushai', an Anglicized version of 'Lusei', to designate populations living in present-day Mizoram. This use of 'Lushai' to identify and classify the people subsequently became a part of the official administrative language of the colonial state. Examples of how this term was used by many colonial writers can be seen in John Shakespear's

The Lushei Kuki Clans (1912) and A. G. McCall's *Lushai Chrysalis* (1949). Both writers show how 'Lushai' became the official term used by the colonial state. Every clan and tribe under the present district, excluding the Chakmas, Lais, and Maras, who inhabit the southern district of present-day Mizoram, are collectively identified under the term 'Lushai'.

The use of 'Lushai' by the colonial state was no surprise. At the time of the expansion of the colonial state, the Lusei chiefs ruled the majority of areas in the Lushai Hills, and so it was through them that the British consolidated their rule in the Lushai Hills. Even though clan and tribal identifications predated British colonization, it was either the chiefs or the village through which people identified themselves. The encounter with colonialism created a rupture where identity began to take on a homogenous character. Consequently, in the colonial accounts, the land and the people came to be recorded as 'Lushai'—hence, Lushai tribes and the Lushai Hills. The Duhlian language, which was also the language of the Lusei tribes, began to be used in colonial bureaucracy and was later extended to missions and educational institutions.

The propagation of the Duhlian language by the British significantly contributed to its popularization, making it eventually the common language for the disparate tribes and groups. The customs and language of the Lusei were codified to govern and rule the hills. Putting aside the customary practices, language has become one of the most significant markers of Mizo identity. This is particularly the case with the Mizos of Manipur and Tripura, where language is an important ethnic marker. In fact, one of the most visible imprints of colonial rule is the standardization of language. In administration, education, and missionary activities, the language of the Lusei became popularized and intrinsic to Mizos' ethnic consciousness. The close association between missionary activities and education efforts also played a pivotal role in entrenching the Mizo identity (Kipgen 1997; L. Pachuau 2002). Given the situation, religion and language became essential markers of Mizo identity formation.

The act of naming communities was a part of the larger colonial enterprise. This was evident among the tribes of India, as naming was also a means of 'anthropologizing them'. Influenced by the orientalist discourse of their time, colonial authors produced a wealth of writings on the Mizos, emphasizing their culture, customs, and histories. This was carried forward in the post-colonial period when the study of tribes was largely undertaken by non-tribals or the state. Such accounts gave nearly similar findings to those left by the colonial agents and so, in many ways, ended up reinforcing colonial biases and stereotypes (L. Jenkins 2003).

Given the dominance of the Luseis and the adoption of their language and culture, there is a strong association between Lusei and Mizo identity. As noted earlier, this has also been the view in scholarly research. While there is an element of truth in it, it ignores the longer history of absorption and assimilation and the incoming and outgoing of the clans and tribes. Colonial accounts of the Mizos are essentially tilted

towards Lusei history and are not necessarily about the disparate clans and tribes. Of course, exceptions exist, as in the case of Shakespear's *The Lushei Kuki Clans*, where he discusses non-Lusei clans. What is interesting to note from Shakespear's account is how such clans have adopted the Lusei manners and customs. These include clans such as Chawhte, Chawngthu, Khiangte, Ngente, Pautu, Vangchhia, and Zawngte (Shakespear 1912: 130–135). Shakespear (1912: 136–147) also notes various other clans, such as the Fanai, Ralte, and Paite, among others, who came under the influence of the Luseis and had gradually adopted the Lusei manners and customs. In short, during their role as chiefs, the Luseis could absorb smaller clans and tribes into their fold (Nunthara 1996: 235). This influence of the Lusei upon the non-Lusei clans remains a significant part of Mizo history and ethnic identity formation.

In addition to this, the suzerainty of the Lusei chiefs spread beyond the present territorial borders of Mizoram to regions such as Tripura. As a result, even as 'Mizo' was largely adopted in place of 'Lusei', it has become generally accepted in areas and among groups influenced by the Lusei tribe. The situatedness of Mizo identity in terms of its acceptance and rejection underscores this fact. In areas where Lusei chiefs held dominance, particularly in the northern areas of Mizoram and the Jampui Hills of Tripura, Mizo identity was gladly accepted. In the now southern regions of Mizoram inhabited by the Mara and the Lai tribes, Mizo identity was considered Lusei-centric, thereby limiting its acceptance. This contest over identity continues to mark the sociopolitical processes in the state of Mizoram.

By the 1940s, the Lusei language was already well developed, even in the field of literature. Books and writings in the vernacular made their appearance outside the interests of the church (missionary activities) and the colonial state. The issue of Mizo history and identity was the focus of such vernacular writings. The title of books published began to carry 'Mizo' in place of 'Lusei' or the colonial term 'Lushai'. The first Mizo history book was written by Liangkhaia, entitled *Mizo Chanchin* (Accounts on Mizo) (1938), and was followed by numerous others such as *Mizo History* by V. L. Siama (1953) and *Mizo Pi Pute Leh An Thlahte Chanchin* (The History of Mizo Ancestors and Their Descendants) by K. Zawla (1964). It is no surprise that the bulk of literature focused on Mizoram, given the high concentration of Mizos in the state, while there are very few works on the Mizos of Manipur and Tripura (Zairemthanga 1992; Darkhuma 2009).

Early Mizo historians and writers have stressed the significance of the myth of origin and cultures as the defining characteristics of the Mizo identity. Of these, the Chhinlung narrative is one of the most profound ones. Therefore, it is common to see terms such as 'Chhinlung *chhuak*' (people of Chhinlung origin), with Chhinlung, as the myth goes, believed to be the root of the origin of the Mizos. One of the common claims is the ethnic similarities of those identified as 'Kuki', 'Chin', and 'Mizos', or collectively as 'Zo', by some scholars (Vumson 1988; Khai 1995). The claim of ethnic similarities is based on their similar histories of migration and the myth of origin.

The Mizos' sense of self is therefore evolving and being constructed over time. Scholarly research on ethnicity and identity has increasingly focused on the construction of ethnic identities. This is a tradition in the studies of ethnicity initiated by Barth (1969), where he argues that ethnic groups get constituted through the maintenance of boundaries. The notion of the 'self' and the 'other' is fundamental to how the Mizos construct and conceive the notion of themselves. This ethnic 'othering' is constructed against the perceived outsider such as the *vai* or the people from Burma and among those who identify themselves as Mizo. J. Pachuau (2014) has cogently delineated and successfully showed how the sense of 'being Mizo' was an outcome of a long historical process intertwined with the production of historical writings and how the Mizos' sense of self is connected to their micro (*veng*, or locality) and macro reality. In this context, on the one hand, the Chhinlung narrative is utilized to articulate a sense of pan-Mizo identity and belonging beyond borders; on the other hand, the social practices of burying the dead define the attachment and belonging of a person as members of the *veng*—hence, inclusion and exclusion at the local or micro level.

Up until the publication of J. Pachuau's *Being Mizo* (2014), there had been no significant research done on Mizo ethnicity. Mizo identity has often been projected as 'given' and 'homogeneous'. Such studies have largely left the political history untouched, leaving aside how identity assertion and political aspiration were interlinked. Even though this book is not on Mizo ethnicity per se, it attempts to show how the consciousness of being a *hnam* is concomitant to the construction of the Mizos' ethnic self. It brings into focus the political construction of Mizo identity and the role of political parties in the entrenchment of Mizo identity. This is explored through the exploration of the historical specificities of the construction of Mizo identity, its adoption, and the demand for recognition and how it came—not merely as an identity in itself but also how the Mizo engaged and negotiated with the state.

Mizo Nationalism, the MNF Movement, and Nationalism Studies

Three broad paradigms can be identified in the studies of Mizo nationalism—namely, the ethno-nationalist, the constructivist that focuses on the role of the elites, and the studies that examine the relationship between religion and Mizo nationalism. Of them, the most common theme is the ethno-nationalist paradigm (B. B. Goswami 1979; U. Phadnis 1989; Nunthara 1996). A basic characteristic of ethno-nationalism is its focus on the ethnic, and therefore, ethno-nationalism is a manifestation of the politicization of ethnicity premised on the 'politics of difference' (Wilmsen and McAllister 1996). It is therefore not surprising that explanations of Mizo nationalism through this frame focus on the ethnic dimension—that is, the politicization of Mizo identity. To an extent, such studies located the rise of the MNF movement within the change that the Mizo communities were undergoing with colonial intervention, particularly in the fields of culture and education.

It is noteworthy that ethnic interpretations of the movement remain the dominant theme in scholarly studies. There is a burgeoning literature on ethno-nationalism, particularly after the 1990s when nationalism rebounded to haunt most established nation-states, particularly in Eastern Europe (Ignatieff 1993; Brubaker 1996). This goes against the common wisdom that ethnicity and nationalism would wane due to technological and economic development making them irrelevant. Connor (1972), writing as early as the 1970s, is one of the scholars who argued about the potency of ethno-nationalism.

Until the 1990s, scholars overlooked the issue of ethnicity and nationalism. As Connor (1972) observes, scholars associated with the theories of 'nation-building' have tended to either ignore the question of ethnic diversity or treat the matter of ethnic identity superficially as merely one of a number of minor impediments to state integration. Connor's understanding of ethno-nationalism is also different from the dominant view, as he treats ethno-nationalism as being synonymous with nationalism. As he defines it, the nation 'connotes a group of people who believe they are culturally related', and nationalism means identification with and loyalty to one's nation. He further notes that the terminological confusion between state, nation, patriotism, and nationalism contributes to the haziness within the study of nationalism (Connor 1994: 73). This view goes against the oft-repeated typologies commonly applied in the study of nationalism—that is, civic versus ethnic nationalism (Kohn 1944). Ethnic nationalism is therefore often treated with a suspicion that impedes the understating of the issues and challenges. In India, too, ethnicity was considered a danger and a threat to the unity and integrity of the nation-state (Krishna 1999: 25).

The role of the elite and ethnicity is another primary focus of nationalism studies. The constructivist and modernist theories of nationalism attribute the emergence of nations and nationalism under modern conditions of industrialization (Gellner 1983). This is achieved by promoting a monoculture and education—hence, a homogenous culture and national community. One of the primary contentions of the constructivist view is the role of the elites in the construction of national identities, given their existing privilege to construct and shape national ideologies, often to further their interests. They are usually responsible for the 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and the circulation of nationalist ideas (Anderson 1983) and remain actively involved in the bourgeois public sphere (Habermas 1991).

The constructivist approach also remains dominant in the study of nationalism in India. For instance, Brass (1991) argues that national identity arises from the specific interactions between the modern states and the elites of dominant regional groups. In studies on nationalism in the northeast, too, the role of the elites has figured prominently (Hussain 1993; Datta-Ray 1983); in the context of the Mizos, it was the emergence of the elites that sowed the seeds of unrest, first against the chiefs and the British, led by the MU, and then against the Indian state under the

MNF. The rise of the educated middle class was one of the pivotal foci of such studies (Datta-Ray 1983; Lalrimawia 1995), and this class of individuals were described as 'articulate' (McCall 1949: 217) and 'enlightened' (C. Nag 1999: 18). Consequently, nationalist movements in the region were driven by the elites' interest in power and controlling the resources (A. Guha 1979). Varghese and Thanzawna (1997: 21–23) have noted that Laldenga used the nationalist card to influence the Mizo youth to join the MNF and later the movement.

The elites in Mizo society were not a homogeneous group, and the literate class comprised both secular and religious backgrounds. Both had a strong influence on the social, economic, and political life of Mizo society. In fact, given the missionary roots of education, the early literate Mizos were primarily educated in missionary-run schools, irrespective of their orientation and outlook. Even among those who received higher education, many preferred to serve or be affiliated with the church and so became important and influential members of society. In this way, religion was integral to the Mizo ethnic and national consciousness. In fact, religion was indispensable to the MNF's idea of nationalism and therefore intrinsic to the consciousness of Mizo identity. L. Pachuau (2002) argues that a Christian identity gave the Mizos a sense of collective identity and belonging. This further paved the way for the creation of a unified political identity that overrode former inter-tribal differences.

The religious nature of nationalism is exemplified in the way the MNF propagated Christian identity as a part of its nationalist ideology (U. Phadnis 1989). In some sense, it is not surprising to see that many considered Christianity as one of the catalysts of change among the Mizos. Fernandes (2009: 131) further argues that evangelical activities paved the way for the emergence of civic spaces through which the tribals articulated and advanced their political goals in the Indian federalist system. However, there is a danger in reducing the MNF movement to a mere expression of religious nationalism. As L. Pachuau (1997) notes, the impetus for ethno-nationalism among the Mizos was driven by the motive to protect and safeguard the historical, racial, and cultural differences (see Chapter 4). However, when it comes to the church as an institution in Mizoram, it neither advocated any form of secessionism nor lent support to the MNF movement (Lalchungnunga 1994: 52).

Given that the MNF emerged in the late 1960s—first as a cultural society under the banner of the MCS in 1955—the organization's success in terms of its popularity was credited to its intervention during the famine that hit the Lushai Hills and adjoining areas in 1959. In the same year, the MCS was renamed as the MNFF under the leadership of Laldenga, among others, who were involved in recruiting volunteers to help the famine-stricken people. S. Nag (2002) ascribes the rise of Mizo nationalism to the neglect faced by the Mizos during the famine, which resulted in widespread discontent. The popular appeal of the MNF, S. Nag (2002) contends, was the outcome of the Assam government's inept response that

drove the Mizo youth to rebellion. Others like Lalchungnunga (1994) view the MNF movement as politics of regionalism. Mizo regionalism, Lalchungnunga (1994) argues, was persistent since the colonial period, and the MNF movement was a manifestation of this regionalism. Both Nag and Lalchungnunga have commented that the correct response to insurgency and regionalism lies in integrating the region into the national mainstream.

Ethnicity, culture, and religion all play a major role in the articulation of Mizo nationalism. In other words, one observes what Appadurai (1996: 15) calls the 'conscious mobilization of cultural difference'. However, as R. Jenkins (2008 [1997]: 164–167) contends, nationalisms, in as much as they are about political projects, are also social productions produced and reproduced by ordinary people in their everyday lives. Over the years, one finds how research on nationalism began to address the intimate, innate, and quotidian aspects of national identity and nationhood. Such studies acknowledge the diverse manifestations of nationhood and national identity while simultaneously recognizing the universal manifestation of nationalism (Billig 1995; Edensor 2002).

These scholarly studies are helpful in understanding the rise of the MNF into mainstream Mizo politics. For instance, the MNF's use of songs for nationalist mobilization, even though this was not unique to the Mizo situation, introduced a new idiom into the political life and culture. The composers of the songs were ordinary and educated Mizos engaged in different professions, with the most notable being Rokunga. Rokunga himself was employed by the Presbyterian Synod and never joined or participated in the activities of the MNF. The point here is not about his affiliation with the MNF but how individuals like him were pivotal in shaping the ideas of Mizo nationalism. During the period of the movement, numerous songs continued to be composed by the rebels, advocating the Mizo national cause that further (re)produced the imaginings of the nation. This demonstrated the need to diversify the voices by incorporating the non-elites into the historical narratives of the national movement (Fahmy 2011: xi). The idea and meaning of nationalism did not emanate from the Mizo elites alone. The nationalist expressions of *zalenna* and *ram leh hnam* percolated in the minds of the Mizo public and found expression in the songs and speeches of the leaders of the movement. Such terms became embedded in the lives of the people, arousing the passion for struggle and sacrifice for the nation (Smith 2009).

In addition, the caveat for research on Mizo nationalism and the MNF movement is that existing studies are confined to only examining the causes of the movement, particularly the famine and the peace accord. There is now an excessive focus on Mizoram's stability with the signing of the accord. Since the signing of the accord in 1986, the discourse in Mizoram has shifted towards focusing on the 'success' of the Mizo Accord. Political parties such as the MNF and the Indian National Congress (INC) often compete to stake claims to the 'success' (see Chapter 6).

Often, former rebel leaders of the MNF such as Zoramthanga are deputed as a peace ambassador in the region to bring rebel groups to the negotiating table and open doors for other states to follow the Mizo path. In fact, the issue of Mizoram's transition from a conflict-ridden state to a peaceful state has garnered much recognition both in academia and public discourse, and it gives a singular view of the counter-insurgency experience and the peace accord. This again brings back the significance of oral culture in Mizo society, where songs became a way of retrieving the voices of the people who lived through terror and violence. In the heyday of the MNF movement, the Indian state resorted to a counter-insurgency strategy that disrupted the lives of a majority of Mizos through village groupings, physical torture, and everyday violence. Drawing upon the songs and narratives of the people, the oral culture has the potential to unveil the divergent and complex narratives of violence and peace. Most importantly, they are narrations of the lived experiences of the people or 'what these happenings meant to people' (Carye Jr 2017: 196). In short, this book also interrogates what the peace accord means for the survivors and participants of the movement.

On Fieldwork: Arguments and Reflections

The primary data for this work were collected by using in-depth interviews that started in 2015, stretching up to 2017. The Mizos as a community are used to what they call *titi*, an unstructured conversation, and hence, the in-depth interviews made for a suitable choice to conduct fieldwork. There are two critical aspects to this: First, the questions had to be formulated in words familiar to the people. Second, there was no fixed sequence applied to the research participants while conducting an interview (Bryman 2012 [2005]; Denzin 2017: 125). This allowed a more free-flowing interview and tailoring of the questions to fit the specific context of each interview. Interviews were conducted at homes, workplaces, or sometimes in government and non-government offices, and this influenced how the interview process was conducted and the nature of the interaction. In this way, an in-depth interview gives a great deal of freedom to probe various areas (Denzin 2017: 126).

The process was time-consuming, with each interview easily taking up to two hours. In other words, they were 'long interviews' (McCracken 1988). The interviews were also long because they mostly began with *titi* on personal issues such as family background, occupation, and the purpose of the interview. This experience was true across different districts of Manipur, Mizoram, and Tripura, where fieldwork was undertaken. The in-depth interviews were particularly helpful in understanding narratives of the movement, the ideas of nationalism, and the contestation surrounding the movement. In my meeting with former MNF rebels, I realized how many of them identified themselves as song composers. As the interviews and fieldwork progressed, I was informed that many of the MNF leaders

composed songs not only of the movement but also gospel hymns, love songs, and Christmas songs. Within the MNF, the genre of songs was popularly referred to as *hnam hla*, and many former rebels trace their inspiration to the songs of composers such as Rokunga. The *hnam hla* reflected the life-words of the MNF rebels and became a critical part of the movement as it was through *hnam hla* that the MNF rebels expressed their aspirations, hopes, and visions. It was from this that I began to draw a close connection between orality and nationalist politics.

Subsequently, I began to locate and identify how different genres of *hla* emerged before and after the movement. Political parties in Mizoram have used *hla* as a medium to connect with the people. The interview process expanded to trying to situate and understand *hla* within the context of their emergence. Political leaders who I interviewed narrated how *hla* were convenient and easily understood by the people. *Hla* democratized the political culture as the composers were drawn from both the literate and non-literate classes, and the vernacular form in which they were composed further aided their rapid spread and popularity. Historically, as noted earlier, *hla* were always the preferred mode of expression, and as such, I analyse *hla* within the oral culture of the Mizos and examine the close relationship between *hla* and modern Mizo politics.

Yet reliance on a single mode of interviews is not enough to capture the dynamics and complexities of the MNF movement. The work also involves heavy realiance on pamphlets, secondary materials, and archival records, and I specifically analyse the written works of three leaders of the movement. Such texts further enable us to understand the ideological underpinnings of the movement. The early educated sections of the Mizo population were active in writing and publishing, despite their limited audience and readership. The texts under analysis provide cues to ideas and imaginations of the movement, particularly the idea of *zalenna*. In my interview with former rebels, the movement was described and referred to as *zalenna sual* (freedom struggle), and this figures prominently in the songs that were composed as well. In the writings produced by the MNF leaders, the idea of *zalenna* is at the heart of it, and for this, I examine three key texts—namely Laldenga's *Mizoram Marches towards Freedom* (2001), Zoramthanga's *Zoram Zalenna Lungphum* (Foundation of Zoram Freedom) (1980), and Lalhmingthanga's *Exodus Politics* (2009 [1965]). Overall, the work draws upon a combination of in-depth qualitative interviews with more than 70 individuals—inclusive of both former MNF and non-MNF members—field notes, and observations, along with the analysis of archival materials from national and international institutions, newspaper archives, and files of personal collections in the form of photographs, diaries, and monographs.

The data sources are diverse, and this reflects my belief in using multiple methods of data collection. This approach is advantageous as the data collected through in-depth interviews or official sources such as government records supplement one another. For instance, the accounts from the interviews provide a rich insight into

the movement, enabling one to understand it from the perspective of former MNF leaders and rebels. The archival data are very significant in understanding the anti-chieftainship movement and the struggle for autonomy by the MU leading up to the independence of India. For this, records from the Mizoram State Archives (MSA), Aizawl Theological College (ATC), and the National Archives of India (NAI), as well as library resources of Harvard University, were consulted.

The fieldwork was done in four phases: from January to September 2015; November to December 2015; January to March 2016; and January to February 2017. In fact, as the writing of the book progressed, I continued to remain connected with my field and my research participants and engaged myself with them, only to realize that fieldwork has no real 'end'. It has become a personal endeavour at times as it affects my way of interacting with people in my home state of Manipur and my friends. Given the nature of my work, the fieldwork was carried out in multiple locales, which started off at Aizawl, the capital city of Mizoram, and then extended to different parts of the state, in addition to trips to Tripura and Manipur. Although Mizoram was the epicentre of the MNF movement, the narratives came from across the borders and boundaries of these places. By conducting fieldwork in multiple locations, the intention was to integrate the experiences of the struggle in Manipur, Mizoram, and Tripura. The objective was not to compare and contrast the events and experiences of the different states but to map out how the MNF movement penetrated and influenced the Mizo inhabited areas. It must also be reiterated that the MNF rebels were constantly crossing borders and regions, making it possible that an informer from Manipur might have spent his entire time in the movement in Mizoram or elsewhere. Hence, there is a constant overlap in the nature of the experiences and narratives across state borders.

In the studies of the MNF, the larger trend has been to limit them to the territorial boundaries of present-day Mizoram, particularly the northern part of the state (Lalchungnunga 1994; Nunthara 1996; L. Pachuau 2002), and to urban centres (J. Pachuau 2014). This not only gives a lopsided view of the movement but also silences the support and participation of the Mizos outside of Mizoram. The MNF movement in itself was spread out across multiple regions, and my research participants' experiences were more or less 'partial' for two reasons. First, many of them left the movement before the conclusion of the movement, so they only knew about the movement during the specific period they were part of. Even for those who were part of the movement for the entire two decades, their encounters and experience were limited, depending on the area they lived in. Second, in as much as the movement enjoyed mass support, it also had its fair share of opposition. This came from the MU members and volunteers, from the Lai, Mara, and Chakma tribes, and, to some extent, from the Paite and Hmar tribes in Manipur. For all these reasons, there is a need for a contextual understanding of the problems with the movement, and this book attempts to provide this, although it remains 'partial—committed and incomplete' (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 7).

Even as I was unable to cover the whole area that was under the influence of the MNF movement, the regions I studied, in terms of geography, covered a major part of it. The field was constructed during the time of my fieldwork as I began to identify my research participants and trace their narratives. Given the high concentration of the Mizo population in Aizawl, fieldwork was much easier in the capital city. In addition, collecting documents was also convenient due to the access to major libraries such as the state and district libraries, the ATC library, and the MSA. The archival materials at the MSA and the ATC were particularly useful in understanding the political processes and events. However, personal documents, such as those in Manipur and Tripura, were also helpful, depending on who my research participants were. In short, the depth of data collected and the focus varied from site to site due to the differing levels of accessibility and the nature of the field (Nadai and Maeder 2005).

The nature of my fieldwork also exposed me to multiple encounters that shaped and opened up different avenues of research. In fact, my research participants significantly shaped the way this research was undertaken. In academic discourse, while the MNF movement is more or less known as an insurgency, and as *rambuai lai* (troubled years) in the popular discourse, my research participants repeatedly referred to it as *zalenna sual*. Based on this description, I began to pick up the term *zalenna*, which became a central idea for my research work and writing. Identifying and contacting my research participants was fairly easy as this was done through the networks maintained by the former MNF's armies and leaders. These groups included the Ex-Mizo National Army (Ex-MNA) Associations and the Peace Accord MNF Returnees Association (PAMRA). The MNF party office in Aizawl and other districts of the state were equally helpful in the identification of research participants.

These networks enabled me to connect with research participants from diverse backgrounds, which was evident from how many of them expressed themselves with reference to the MNF as a party and as a movement. While many continued to speak highly of the movement and the sacrifice they had made, some expressed disenchantment arising from the appalling conditions under which they are presently living. This narrative became a central part of the understanding of the peace accord that is discussed in Chapter 5. However, a limitation that I encountered during the study was the difficulty of maintaining sustained interaction with my research participants. This was because I had to move from one place to another, which did not permit me to build close relationships with the participants. Consequently, there were fewer opportunities for face-to-face interactions with them.

In the field, my identity as a Mizo greatly facilitated access to the fieldwork sites and also helped during the interview process. I found out that I was constantly 'renegotiating identities in different sites', to quote Marcus (1995: 113). As a Mizo, I was able to conduct my fieldwork, speaking fluently in the local language. This made it easier to build relationships, and it encouraged conversation. In any research, the insider is presumed to gain deeper insights and greater access to more information.

However, while I acknowledged my privileged position as a Mizo in this regard, in a region where politics is defined along ethnic lines, my ethnic identity often became intertwined with the everyday politics of identity and belonging at my field sites. Furthermore, my knowledge of Mizoram and Tripura was limited, and it was an entirely new place for me, except for the knowledge gained through the reading of secondary sources.

My identity as a Mizo comes in two different ways—first as a Mizo *of* Manipur and second as a Mizo *in* Manipur. This interplay of my identity informed my field site visits. Two events are worthy of mention here. First, in March 2015, the Hmar armed group named the Hmar People's Convention (Democratic) (HPC-D) ambushed a member of legislative assembly (MLA) convoy in the northern part of Mizoram. In the ambush, three Mizo policemen lost their lives while the HPC-D militants fled. This caused widespread anger across Mizoram, with the public demanding a fierce response from the state government. It was not the ambush per se that was significant, but my identity as a Mizo *of* Manipur that was increasingly coming to the fore while conducting interviews. The HPC-D is considered a Manipur-based militant group in Mizoram, and its penetration into Mizoram could turn the state into a conflict-ridden and ethnically divided one like Manipur. From my personal encounters with my research participants and the public in general, it would seem that Manipur is enmeshed in violence with sharp ethnic divisions. The image of Manipur is construed negatively within the state of Mizoram. I often came across people who advised me to settle in Mizoram. Interestingly, my research participants often interviewed me about the issue after the incident rather than me interviewing them (Geleta 2014: 139).

In Manipur, my experience was different, given my belonging to Churachandpur, the district where I was conducting the fieldwork. My knowledge of the district, the people, and the places were generally better compared to that of Mizoram. However, despite my belonging, my research participants related to me not necessarily as an 'insider' but according to my identity. For instance, I was considered as an 'ethnic other', a Mizo *in* Manipur and my identity as an insider oscillated, depending on who my respondent was. To those who identified themselves as Mizo, I was one of them, but not to a Paite or a Hmar. In a state that is highly polarized along ethnic lines, ethnic belonging cannnot be downplayed as irrelevant. In Manipur, ethnic belonging determines not only one's attachment but also one's political allegiance, which further decides the prevailing network of trust and distrust.

I tried to remain sensitive to the local realities and refrained from discussing local politics. This was, at times, challenging, as the first question that my research participants usually asked was about my identity. My name itself is enough to denote my identity as it is a typical Mizo name that is easily identified due to the gender suffix attached to each name: *a* for male and *i* for female. In my case, it is Puia, with Pui being a common name in Mizo, irrespective of gender. On the contrary, in Manipur,

my identity as a Mizo gave me an easy entry into the Mizo community. A noted community leader introduced me to his friends as 'one of us, a YMA member'. Being a Mizo and native of Churachandpur itself made me an insider, and by all criteria, I fit within the insider category. For a non-Mizo, I was an insider, but not one of them.

My experience in the Jampui Hills of Tripura was again different from that in Manipur and Mizoram. The Jampui Hills are more or less homogeneous, and the inhabitants are closely connected and predominantly Mizos. Despite being from Manipur, I was considered one of them due to my ethnic belonging. In a multi-ethnic and ethnically polarized region, my identity as an insider or outsider was uncertain. In other words, the boundaries of my identity as an insider and outsider were rather changeable and could be overlapping, depending on the location where I was doing my fieldwork. Apart from this, my encounters and experiences raised the more significant question about identity and belonging among the Mizos in northeast India. This also shows that the static notion of Mizo identity being homogeneous is certainly dismissive of the contextual realities of Mizo ethnic belonging.

Chapter Outlines

The book is organized into seven chapters, with this being the first. Chapter 2 gives a broad outline of national integration in the context of northeast India. In India, tensions over nationality and movements for independence are considered a problem of integration. The chapter points out that more than a problem of integration, the national question in India is an issue of inclusion. Integration underlies assimilation and homogeneity, erasing differences and diversity. This chapter places the issue of inclusion within the framework of the 'tribal question' in post-colonial India. For marginalized communities in India, the issue remains that of being identified as equal members, which the state often tried to address through integration. In this context, the chapter draws upon the current agenda of integration within the Mizo context and the contestation surrounding national integration.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on Mizo politics, tracing it from the colonial period. Going against the grain, Chapter 3 presents political development and the rise of political consciousness among the Mizos as a transformative act that not only sought the end of the chief's rule but also challenged colonial authority. Even as the leaders of the MU largely comprised of the educated class who later led the anti-chieftainship movement, what was distinctive about Mizo politics was how political consciousness became ingrained in the consciousness of the Mizo commoners. The acts and assertions of the Mizo public against colonial paternalism and the aspirations of autonomy and the struggle against the traditional power structures were expressed through the medium of songs. It was here that *hla* began to take root in Mizo politics. Both parties prominent at that time, the MU and the UMFO, used *party hla* to contest and mobilize the public. In other words, songs, in as much as

they were an important political tool for mobilization, were also a medium through which rival political parties contested each other within the political landscape of the hills. Songs became the voice of expression that enabled the transmission of political ideas that transgressed village boundaries and national borders. Rooted in the traditions and ethnic life-world of the people, songs were easily receptible and accessible to the commoners. They were effective for political mobilization and were employed to garner political support.

Songs played a pivotal role in the rise and popularity of the MNF. This resulted in a new genre of songs among the Mizos, which came to be known as *hnam hla*. While the use of songs to articulate, envision, and inspire is not new, in the Mizo context, what was introduced through such songs were the terms that became associated with the MNF movement. For the MNF, the movement was for *zalenna* and *ram leh hnam tan*, and as such, *hnam hla* significantly pointed towards popularizing such ideas. In other words, through *hnam hla*, *zalenna* and *ram leh hnam* became widely circulated and were infused with strong patriotic fervour. Chapter 4 is an examination of nationalist mobilization and expression through a reading of the songs and texts, which demonstrated how the MNF put conscious effort into legitimizing its struggle and political cause by referring to it as *zalenna sual*.

Chapters 5 and 6 address the issue of peace. The background to this lies in the continuing sustenance of peace in the state after the signing of the Mizo Peace Accord, 1986, between the MNF and the government of India. In short, 'peace' or 'peaceful state' is what Mizoram is now associated with. Given this, the Mizo Peace Accord is widely celebrated as a case of a successful peace accord. This is attributed to the counter-insurgency strategy, particularly the village groupings, that staved off the MNF armies by isolating them from the civilian population. In the larger discourse of counter-insurgency, particularly in the official one, there is a silencing of the people's experiences of counter-insurgency. While acknowledging the stability of Mizoram, the chapter shows how the state was unable to repress orality or censor its contents despite mass surveillance and control. Common Mizos and the civilian public resorted to songs to express their anguish and loss as well as their encounters with and experiences of violence.

In Chapter 6, the question of peace is examined, factoring in the various political and power struggles occurring intermittently in the making of peace in Mizoram. The signing of the peace accord was not only about a peaceful settlement between the MNF and the goverment, who were ensnared in local rivalries and the contest for power. Brigadier Thenphunga Sailo's emergence as a prominent political actor, the rise of the People's Conference (PC), and the subsequent fallout between Sailo and Laldenga, the president of the MNF, resulted in fratricidal killings. All of these demonstrate how peace was entrapped in local politics and interests. The party that gained the most from this was the INC, which, through the promise of peace, unseated the PC, the then ruling government, in the state election of 1984. Beyond

this, the chapter also seeks to understand what the accord meant to the former leaders and the armies. The divergent narratives that emerged are testimony to some of the unsettled issues in contemporary Mizoram. Chapter 7, the conclusion, is an overall reflection on the arguments of the book.

Notes

1   A *hnam* is often loosely used to refer to a clan, tribe, or even nation. For the purposes of this book, I use *hnam* to refer to nation.

2   *Ram* can be used to refer to land privately or publicly owned, while it is also used to refer to territory, in the more political sense. In this book, my use of *ram* connotes a more political understanding of the term.

3   *Party hla* refer to songs that are composed by members of political parties or individuals in support of specific parties to advance their own party. It is common to find campaign songs and songs of political parties even today in Mizoram.

4   Both *puma zai* and *kaihlek hla* were largely viewed as anti-Christian songs and, as such, hostile to Christian activities, such as the proselytizing activities of the missionaries. However, recent interpretations, particularly on *puma zai*, has shown how it paved the way for future revivals and enabled the consolidation of Christianity with its celebration of singing in the open and in public.

5   *Harhna sang* marked a form of 'revival' or 'awakening', which was accompanied by intense emotional outburst through songs, movements, and actions. The revivals took place in multiple waves, in 1906, 1913, 1919, and 1930, and was an important event in Mizo history that marked the consolidation and spread of Christianity.

6   'Zo' is an ethnic category inasmuch as it is used to refer to distinct attributes and cultural expressions of the Mizo way of being and life. In this case, 'Zo' is used to mean the attributes and cultural expressions that define Mizo-ness.

7   'Lushai' is an Anglicized version of 'Lusei', and I will be using the two terms interchangeably. 'Lushai' will be used when colonial sources are cited and references made to the colonial period. Otherwise, 'Lusei' will be used throughout.

8   'Lushai Hills', 'Mizo Hills', and 'Mizoram' will be used interchangeably in accordance with the time period being referred to. For instance, 'Lushai Hills' was used by the colonial administrator, or during the colonial period, until it was changed to 'Mizo Hills' in 1954.