

## Bawi and Sal in Mizo Society

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**Abstract :** *Slavery has existed in one form or another throughout the world. Slavery is a word often associated with the past, evoking unimaginable injustices difficult to be forgotten by history. Despite the considerable advances in conceptualizing slavery in global histories, studies of the same phenomenon in Mizo society caused profound unease among the modern scholars. Like most tribal societies, the Mizos had their own variety of slaves and bonded labourers. The ethnographers and historians have tried to retrieve this history of slavery/bondedness in the Mizo society. This article is a study of the forms of slavery or bonded labour that existed in Mizoram.*

**Key Words:** *slave, slavery, bonded labour, Mizoram, British.*

Slavery has existed in one form or another throughout the world. Slavery is a word often associated with the past, evoking unimaginable injustices we would rather forget. Despite the considerable advances in conceptualizing slavery in global histories, studies of the same phenomenon in Mizo society caused profound unease among the modern scholars. This writing provided for the form of slavery or bonded labour that existed in Mizoram.

In Mizo society, there was a form of slavery called the 'Bawi system'. According to Lewin,

'Boi (Bawi) is the term in their (Mizo) dialect which betokens of persons who had lost the right of individual freedom of action, but in all other respect, the word 'Slave' would be inapplicable'.<sup>1</sup>

Persons captured in war and raids were called 'Sal'. Ownership of the bawi is the privilege of the Chiefs whereas even the commoners could also own Sal. The most pertinent evil of the system lay in the fact that the children and grandchildren of 'bawi' were born as bawi to the Chief even after their ancestors died. This is due to the fact that the whole Lushai economic system is based on the principle that all debts are hereditary. Debts among the Lushai do not carry interest, and liability for a debt incurred by a father attaches only to the youngest son who inherits the paternal property. They were not free to get education or even change their religious affiliations without the consent of their master- the Chief. The only way to free such slaves was to pay ransom money of Rs 40 to the master. A Chief defeated in war and taken captive was not persecuted. He was not required to do any manual labour to earn his livelihood. A 'Chief' slave was not redeemable, but was usually let free and permitted to return to his village after peace.

The kind of slavery practiced in Mizoram was different from that of 'Feudalism', where a social economy in which landed lords dominated a subject peasantry from whom they demanded rents, labour services and various other dues and over whom they exercised justice or a form of socio political organization dominated by a military class or estate, who were connected to each other by ties of lordship and honourable subordination and who in turn dominated a subject peasantry. Lordship gave protection and defense, vassalage required service, especially service in arms. This personal relationship inseparably involved a tenurial relationship as well, the vassal holding land of his lord. Feudal domination took shape within an economy where the primary source of wealth was land and its product.<sup>2</sup>

But in Mizoram, majority of the slaves was acquired when a person surrendered to the Chief at his own will. They were mainly widowed, orphaned or otherwise impoverished members of the village community. They had a right to claim the protection of the Chief, but once they had done so they and their children were bound to him. They had their basic needs provided for in return for the work they did. The young men (bawi) cut and cultivate the Chief's jhum and attend to his fish traps. The women

and girls fetch up wood and water, clean the daily supply of rice, make cloths and weed the jhums and look after the Chief's children.

The Nieboer – Domar hypothesis suggest that slave system has emerged when labour is in short supply, and therefore highly valuable and land is plentiful. In other words, the hypothesis suggest that landowners become 'labour owners', preventing their workers from exercising an 'exit option' or 'voting with their feet' by compelling them to work or 'tying' them to estates, leading to the emergence of serfs and slave systems. Therefore, control of labour rather than ownership of landed property becomes a maker of power and status, and a source of wealth.<sup>3</sup> The Mizo chiefs needed slaves to work for them in their jhums and the slaves could be procured from the territory of another chief from the area controlled by the British. So, they used to attack the plain areas and took captives. Lister expedition could release 400 captives as slaves. But as many Chiefs treated their slaves well the British found difficulty in returning them. There used to be a gap between a Mizo raid and the British expedition. And when the British used to reach the Chief's village, they observed that the slaves were well settled and even got married. The captives themselves were reluctant to leave the Mizo village. This was true even when Mary Winchester, daughter of a British tea planter who was captured by Mizo raiders on the 23 January 1871-72 organized in collaboration with the Manipur Raja's contingent was reluctant to leave her captors.

Orlando Patterson, in *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), says that 'all human relationships are structured and defined by the relative power of the interacting persons'<sup>4</sup> by comparing dozens of slave – holding societies across time and space to define slavery as 'one of the most extreme forms of the relation of domination, approaching the limits of total power from the viewpoint of the master, and of total powerlessness from the viewpoint of slaves'.<sup>5</sup> He regarded slavery in terms of socio- political relationships and power dynamics in human societies. His way of definition of slavery is useful because it distinguishes between slavery and other forms of 'Unfree' labour. This article will try to locate the status of *Bawi* and *Sal* in Mizo society from the above theoretical formulation.

### Different kinds of bawi

The Chief had three types of 'Bawi'. They were '*Inpuichhung Bawi*', '*Chemsen Bawi*' and '*Tukluh Bawi*'.

The first type ***Inpuichhung Bawi*** means, literally, 'a slave within the main house or *Indwelling Bawi*'. '*In*' being 'house', '*pui*' means 'main', '*chhung*' within and '*bawi*' almost equivalent to 'slave'.<sup>6</sup> This type of *bawi* was applied to person (s) who, driven out by want of food and shelter or because of sickness, took refuge in the Chief's house. Orphans and widows who were unable to support themselves and had no relatives willing to do so, formed the bulk of this class of *bawi*.<sup>7</sup> These *bawi* would work for the Chiefs. The *bawi* would remain under the control and protection of the Chief till their death or they could regain freedom by paying a freedom price of Sepui or she Mithun. These *bawi* were always treated well by the Chief and were to some extent regarded as one of the members of the Chief's family. Those who set up houses of their own, known as out dwelling *bawi*, who thus become more or less independent, but who are still *bawis* in certain respects, and in particular in the sense that if they get themselves declared free, they must pay the chiefs for their ransom. It must however be explained in regard to the latter class that it is only the head of the family, or on his demise, the youngest son, who inherits the property, who is a *bawi*, the rest of the family being entirely free. The person released must not be compelled to leave the houses of the Chiefs, if they do not desire to do so and if the chiefs are willing to let them stay.<sup>8</sup>

The second category of *bawi* was called '***Chemsen bawi***' who were applied to criminals. The term '*chem*' being a 'dao' and '*sen*' means 'red' or short a '*murderer*'. Such a person would seek refuge in the Chief's house. Once he entered the Chief's house, he got immunity against punishment. He had to work for the Chief thereafter he became the property of the Chief and nobody could touch a Chief's property.

Mc Call wrote –

'This kind of *chemsen bawi* was under no obligation to work for the chief but the measure of submission was great in that the chief acquired the right to the marriage price of

his chemsen bawi daughters, when they came of marriageable age'.<sup>9</sup>

'*Tukluh bawi*' was applied to person who, during war, had deserted the losing side and joined the victorious Chief by promising he and his descendant would be *bawi*. These *bawi* were comparatively free and were permitted to live in separate house. They could also regain their freedom by paying the required fee, that is, *Sial* or mithun.

The relationship between the Chief and *bawi* seemed to be a cordial one. This is clear from the British reports which says,

'...and in particular in the sense that if they get themselves declared free, they must pay the chiefs for their ransom. It must however be explained in regard to the latter class that it is only the head of the family, or on his demise, the youngest son, who inherits the property, who is a *bawi*, the rest of the family being entirely free. The person released must not be compelled to leave the houses of the chiefs, if they do not desire to do so and if the chiefs are willing to let them stay'.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to *bawi*, there were also a number of *sals* or captives. *Sal* were applied to persons who were captured in war and raids. The position of *Sal* was quite different from that of any classes of *bawi*. *Sals* were the personal property of the Chief. Sometimes, a Chief, who was defeated in war, was captured as *Sal*, but was usually let free and permitted to return to his village after war. The release of *Sal* taken in war depended entirely on the goodwill of the owner, that is, Chief. Majority of the slaves were women and children. Only a small minority of them are able-bodied men who might be able to earn wages to pay off the ransom money required.<sup>11</sup> Generally, children taken as *Sal* or captives were released when became mature. In the words of J. Shakespeare,

'As a rule only children and marriageable women were taken captive and latter were disposed of in marriage, the lucky captor acting in *Loco Parentis* and taking the marriage price. The children grew up in the captor's house

as his children, and as a rule were so well treated that they seldom wished to return to their former homes'.<sup>12</sup>

It is also important to note that majority of the slaves were acquired from the neighbouring plain areas since the collection of slaves from this areas was such a right that the Chiefs enjoyed for a long time by means of raids and rebellions.

The existence of *bawi* and *sal* in Mizo society created a big controversy when the British came to Mizoram. Lieutenant Colonel Shakespear, one of the earliest and most knowledgeable of the Lushai Hills Superintendents had seen little wrong in the system and felt that a *bawi* in the Chief's household was as well- off as a 'free' man. And village elders says that they were just below the Chief in status and considered as members of the Chief's family. On the other hand, Dr Fraser, who was a missionary argued that the presence of bonded labour in the Chief's household were clear instances of 'slavery within the British empire'. As such they were against the constitution and should be immediately abolished. Fraser regarded it as blatant undisguised slavery which should be destroyed root and branch.

The issue assumed controversial proportions when Fraser began to take up the cause of abolishing the *Bawi* system but since the condition in which they maintain slavery in the Lushai hills was different from that of the other, even the Britishers were very confused on whether to abolished it or not. Should the custom be abolished, the chiefs could not be blamed if they only took in persons who could earn their own living. The subject of 'Semi-Slavery in Assam-India' was debated was thus debated in the House of Commons during the period between July 11 and August 3, 1914.<sup>13</sup> This finally resulted in the emancipation of slaves in Mizoram but unfortunately, it also resulted in the expulsion of Fraser and his friend H.W.G Cole from Mizoram.

### **Conclusion**

Many traced the origin of chattel<sup>14</sup> slavery, the most extreme form of 'Unfreedom' originating in the ancient world, to the practice of treating enemy captives as the property of their conquerors in warfare. These

captives ceased to be members of an independent community and became instead the property.

Patterson's theory has proven durable in the Mizo context as he stated that, 'slavery was at fundamental level a relation of domination'. He further says that slavery was not primarily an economic system, but was instead defined by three kinds of relationship of oppression that, together constituted 'Social Death' which then allowed the slaves labour or services to be employed in a new system of control. The first condition was that the subjugation of slaves is underpinned by violence, and the ability of their owners to physically coerce them. Secondly, slavery involves 'Natal alienation'.<sup>15</sup> Finally slaves are considered socially debased (dishonored), whereas their owners are seen as social elites (honorable).<sup>16</sup>

In Mizo society, even though the able-bodied servants were employed, they were never paid for their labour. But, it may thence be said that the imbecile, penniless and incapables have a right to enter the Chief's houses and were supported. The fact that poor persons have the right to enter the Chief's houses when unable to support themselves, no doubt explains the origin of 'bawi'. If the Chief's house was to be made a poor house and an asylum, it was only equitable that he should be given some hold over inmates. No doubt the Chiefs do get some work from the most of their 'bawi's', they are more or less bound to take them in. But there are many instances of Chiefs maintaining old *bawi* long past work, and no instances appear to be known of Chiefs turning out an old or incapable 'bawi'.<sup>17</sup> Mr Hezzlet, the then superintendent of Lushai Hills observed that *bawi* have not the status of free men.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, much of the position of the Chief depended on the *bawi* custom, which had been an institution of dependence of certain categories of 'bawi'. They represented a valuable assets to the Chiefs, and that if they were free, they would obtain the proper value for their services. Not only men but also the women and children were useful to the Chiefs. Chiefs sometimes called their slaves by the name of 'family' (chhunte) but if the slaves ran away they were then called 'my real slaves' (*ka bawi tak tak*).<sup>19</sup>

Throughout much of human history and across different societies, prisoners of war were often seen as having lost their right to personhood and membership in the conqueror's community. But in Mizo society, usually criminals and paupers took refuge in the Chief's house and usually surrendered themselves as slaves to the Chief. Therefore, slavery was recognised in the past as also the right to purchase one's freedom,<sup>20</sup> since Bawis were simply paupers or criminals who took refuge in a Chief's house and lived as members, not slaves, of the Chief's family.

Therefore, it is clear that throughout the world, the outcome of slavery tended to be similar but the forms of enslavement are more varied. The form of slavery in a particular place reflected cultural, religious, political, ethnic, commercial and psychological influence and combination of these influences of the area it existed.

From the above discussion, it is learned that the practice of Bawi system in Mizoram was a means of supporting and protecting the weaker subjects in the society to earn their living. And there are repeated instances of bawi who, having once obtained their discharged, voluntarily returned to their former condition. Some people who were accused of being wizards and were in danger of their lives saved themselves by becoming bawi and receiving Chief's protection. Lastly, the list of fatherless, destitute, and physically or mentally defective individuals who have found food, shelter and protection in the Chief's house proved that bawi system was in any case not a system which bought and sold human beings.<sup>21</sup> And those acquired from the neighbouring plain areas were well treated and well settled. Therefore, *Bawi* were not slaves but the equivalent of the Chief's hired servants and that the arrangement acted as a kind of welfare system.

Today, *Bawi* and *Sal* system is considered a thing of the past, however, it occupied a unique place in the pre-colonial Mizo society.

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  13. J. Shakespeare, *op.cit.*, p. 49.
  14. **Chattel** - Chattel is a term for moveable forms of physical property, i.e. not land or buildings.
  15. **Natal Alienation** - A complete removal of family and community ties, leaving them without any form of legal or social protection or the ability to inherit or pass on rights or property.
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