Religion, Identity and Tribal Sub-national Politics in India

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Abstract

What is the role of religion in tribal politics? Does religion shape tribal political imagination? If so, how and in what manner? Politically, tribal movements since the colonial period have been deeply rooted in religion, and even in post-independent India, they continue to inspire and shape tribal politics. The article argues that tribal politics and religion interact in complex ways. First, the article shows how groups and organisations incorporate religious ideas within their political ideology. Second, religion and politics also come into conflict with one another in terms of the use and interpretation of religious beliefs and commitments for political ends, mainly when it involves the use of violence. This is examined through the case of the Mizo movement for independence in northeast India, where religion was interwoven with the politics of identity, nationalism and violence.

Introduction

The article is concerned with the place of religion in the political life of tribes in India. Politically, several tribal movements during the colonial period were deeply rooted in the religious traditions of the communities. Often, such movements are lumped together by historians and social scientists as instances of 'millenarianism' (Chandra, 2016). The most renowned one includes the movement led by Birsa Munda in Central India and Jadonang in Naga-inhabited areas of northeast India (Longkumer, 2010; Singh, 1983a). Such movements provide clues to the

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interface between religion and politics in tribal society. It is not that the move-
ments were wholly religion-based, but rather what is of interest is the political
nature of the movement that challenged colonial authority, including Christian
missions. However, studies on tribe and religion were limited to the colonial
period, particularly after the initiation of Subaltern Studies, to peasant resistance
against colonial domination and exploitation (Guha, 1999; Shah, 2004; Singh,
1983b). This trend remains despite the continuing relevance of religion in tribal
politics and their political imagination in the post-colonial period.

This article intends to examine the relationship between religion, identity and
tribal sub-national politics in India. For this, it situates the article within the
broader literature that examines the relationship between tribal politics, religion
and sub-national imagination. Within the sociology of religion, there is rich litera-
ture that examines the relationship between religion and identity, with a plethora
of such studies focusing on the role of the colonial state in producing communal
and sectarian identities (Brass, 2003; Pandey, 1990; van der Veer, 1994). Existing
literature mostly sheds light on communal politics and violence, with the bulk of
the focus on the Hindu–Muslim conflict (Robinson, 2005; Shani, 2007; Varshney,
2008). Another important theme of the study is the question of conversion, par-
ticularly in works that focus on the conversion of socially marginalised groups
such as Dalits and Tribes (Jenkins, 2019; Joshi, 2012; Robinson & Kujur, 2010).
A significant contribution of such works is outlining how marginalised communi-
ties used religion to empower themselves and escape different forms of marginali-
sation (Gupta, 2014; Kapadia, 2019). While the article is heavily inspired by such
scholarship, it also departs from and contributes to the existing literature by exam-
ining the role of religion in tribal politics and how religion shaped the political
consciousness of the tribes. In doing so, it does not merely provide a linear narra-
tive by exploring the link between religion and politics but interrogates the
complex relationship between religion, violence and political imagination through
a case study of the Mizos in northeast India.

Generally speaking, northeast India provides an interesting case study to examine
the relationship between tribal politics and religion. The region has a large tribal
concentration, and four out of the region's eight states have tribes as the majority
population. In terms of religion, Christianity is the dominant religion in the states of
Nagaland and Mizoram, with more than 80% professing Christianity. At the same
time, Christianity is also widely followed by the tribal communities in Meghalaya,
Assam, Manipur, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh. Tribal communities such as the
Nagas and the Mizos launched one of the earliest demands for self-determination,
with the movements having a strong religious overtone in their ideology. The
context of the study is the period between the two decades (1966–1986) war of
independence led by the Mizo National Front (MNF). The MNF projects its strug-
gle as one that tries to protect and safeguard the religion of the Mizos, Christianity.
The national movement among the tribes in the northeast requires deeper probing.
As Christian and tribal, their identity has relegated them as the 'other,' outside of the
national mainstream, creating a binary distinction between 'insider' and 'outsider'
within the national imagination (Oommen, 1986). As a measure to claim inclusion,
tribes across India demanded autonomy that would recognise their rights over their

identity, land and resources (Munda & Mallick, 2003; Roluahpuia, 2021; Xaxa, 2008). The national integration[1] policy is at odds with tribal aspirations for autonomy. Specific to the northeast context, the antipathy against conversion to Christianity and the rise of Hindu fundamentalism have also further fuelled movements for autonomy as well as secessionist aspirations (Pachuau, 2002, p. 26).

In this article, we focus on the interface between religion, violence and nationalism among the tribes in India. In the first section, we locate tribes within the sociology of religion in India. Here, we note how studies of tribes and religion have been late entrants to the sociological discourse in India. In the third section, we look at the intersection of religion, nationalism and violence. At one level, religion is central to the origins of nationalism, while at the other level, there is a close association between religious-inspired nationalism and violence. The fourth section looks at the ideological discourse of Mizo nationalism and how religion was integral in its imagining. Given that the movement was violent, this has produced tensions and contestations between the MNF and the church, with the former condemning the use of violence by the MNF while the latter justifying it as defending the cause of Mizo nationalism. In the final section, the article notes how the use of violence poses ethical and moral questions, particularly in situations where violence is perpetuated on civilian populations.

Tribes and the Sociology of Religion

In the socio-anthropological literature, tribal religions are recorded as 'primitive.' There is a long tradition of this, and noted anthropological works have established this idea. In India, too, the association between tribal communities and primitive religion is well established within the anthropological literature and colonial monographs produced by the British. To this end, Xaxa (2005) notes that the colonial conceptualisation of tribes referred to them as followers of animism or tribal religion. This also means that the religion of the tribes is used as a marker of 'difference' from the dominant caste society, hence 'placing them outside of the historical and textual religions and their social organisations' (Xaxa, 2005, pp. 1363–1364).

Within the Sociology of India, religion has been an important field of inquiry since the colonial period. The British used religion to enumerate communities, hence, noting the centrality of religion in both public and private life. In the first colonial census, tribes were classified as followers of 'animism.' This established the idea of a tribe that is associated with animism. The sociological construction of tribes as 'backward Hindus' (Ghurye, 1943) gained currency as well. This follows the colonialist view, which constructed Indian society in terms of Brahmanic Hinduism. For a long time, the Sociology of Religion has been largely a Sociology of Hindu religion. Minority religions such as Islam, Christians, Jains and Buddhists did not find much mention or attention among sociologists (Robinson, 2004).

As the trend of Sociology of Religion expanded, religious minorities or minority studies brought into focus the different religious groups of the country. What made religion particularly salient was the colonial intervention and political mobilisation that ensued along the lines of religion. Of this, the census and the

colonial production of knowledge played a key role. Pandey (1990) has shown the implications of this and how it affects the production of riots and communal identities. Colonial enumerative policies such as the census reinforced religious differences and shaped the political contours in colonial India. The Partition of British India in 1947 and the aftermath of violence on religious lines are deeply etched in the history of post-colonial state formation in South Asia. Further to this, the period following the demolition of Babri Masjid in the year 1992 has been a significant event in how religious nationalism shapes public life as well as political discourse (Hansen, 1999).

The question of tribes and religion is a complex and contested issue. Tribes belong to multiple religions, and there are several tribal communities that subscribe to more than one religion. In fact, there are many tribes who have not entirely converted to Christianity or who are not entirely absorbed into the Hindu fold. There are others who continue to practice their own indigenous religion, and even among those who convert, one finds that older religious traditions are still observed and followed. This is the case of tribes such as Oraons, with tension prevailing between those who are Christians, non-Christian Sarnas and those seeking to Hinduise the tribes (Robinson & Kujur, 2010, p. 8). Often, inter-ethnic conflicts are projected as between Christians and non-Christian groups. This was the case in Jharkhand between Christian Oraons and Sarnas Oraons in the 1960s (Kujur, 2012) and between Mizos and Brus in Mizoram, where the latter were often projected as Hindus (Roluahpuia, 2018b). Mizos being predominantly Christians, the conflict was projected by right-wing organisations as religious violence that targets the Bru Hindus, the majority of whom are still practicing indigenous religion.

Studies also pointed out how tribes creatively indigenised the new religion and adapted it within their local traditions (Pachuau, 2014; Thomas, 2015). The process of indigenising Christianity is a pattern widely observed across communities such as the Mizos and Nagas in northeast India, as well as tribes in the states of Jharkhand and Odisha, among others. Such studies also bring forth the question of the agency of tribes and their right to convert and not convert. The agency involves the capacity of the tribes to act and take action, recognising the power and struggles of individuals and groups, or, in other words, actions that concern events of which an individual is the perpetrator (Giddens, 1984, p. 9). This is most evident among Christian tribals today where the practice of Christianity has largely been indigenised to suit local traditions and they are involved in the process of choosing their faith and beliefs. Even today, converts or religious conversions are assumed to be undertaken by the poor, who are allured to convert with the promise of material gains. This ignores how many of the recent converts in states such as Arunachal Pradesh belong to the elite class of tribal society. As such, the religion question in tribal society is complex, defined by local issues and politics.

Religion, Nationalism and Violence

Religion is intrinsic to the construction of modern nationhood (Hastings, 1997; Smith, 2003). More broadly, religion occupies a central place in the study of

nationalism (Smith, 1986; Hastings, 1997; Juergensmeyer, 2000). Anthony Smith notes how nationalism in itself is the new religion of the people. The global upsurge in populism has further provided the impetus that re-centres the study of religion and nationalism. Thus, as van der Veer (2013) notes, religion has been nationalised in modern times, and the association between religion and national identity was all produced in the second half of the 19th century. One central aspect of such work is focused on the 'link' between the two. The 'link' defined the way in which religion is used to delineate group and national boundaries. Even in culturally and religiously diverse societies, members associate themselves with their co-religion members through associations, media, or cultural and recreational activities (Brubaker, 2012).

In South Asia and in India in particular, there is an established view on the relationship between nationalism, identity and violence (Brass, 1974; Kaviraj, 1997; Robinson, 2004; Tambiah, 1996). On the one hand, religion influences political doctrine and ideology. Various religious-based organisations and political parties are established along the lines of ideas that seek to envision citizenship and belonging in religious terms. The goal is to establish a national community along with religious ideas and beliefs. On the other hand, the nation is imagined as a religious community. Hence, membership in the national community presupposes a unitary belonging to a single religion. Minority religious communities also used violence to 'defend' their faith. Mahmood (1996) has shown this through the Sikh nationalist discourse in India, where the idea of martyrdom was integrated within the community history and invoked to defend the religious identity of the Sikhs.

Broadly speaking, groups often invoke religious ideals to legitimise the use of violence. More commonly clubbed as communal violence, the legitimation of violence serves as a tool to establish a political order that justifies bloodshed. Examples of this are manifold. The Zionist movement, as much as it is a nationalist movement, is guided by religious dogmatism that victimises and perpetuates violent acts that aim to cleanse and exterminate the 'other.' The use of *jihad* by several Muslim organisations has also shown how religion can be used to justify acts of violence. Likewise, communities such as the Tibetans also used different forms of violence as a resistance strategy against the Chinese State. Today, self-immolation has become central to the Tibetan nationalist discourse that portrays anger and disenchantment against Chinese rule.

If violence is integral to religion, the past and present of modern states are also intricately connected to violence (Kedourie, 1996; Tilly, 1992). Understood this way, violence remains an integral part of modernity. This does not imply that religion-based nationalisms are inherently violent. Instead, it acknowledges the relationship between nationalism and violence. Even today, modern states remain persistent in their effort to monopolise violence to control and exert authority. However, existing studies have largely used the 'state' or existent nation-state as the frame of their study, limiting how ethno-national groups used and advanced religion in their nationalist imaginings. The Mizo case in India represents such an effort where the armed organisation integrates religion into the nationalist discourse. Other nationalist movements within India, such as in Kashmir, Punjab and

Nagaland in northeast India, also have elements of religion in their movements. All these movements have also used violence as a means to achieve their stated objective of independence. In the Mizo case, what becomes interesting but complicated is the opposition to the use of violence by the church, the body representing the Christian religion. It is this that we now turn to in the next section.

The Religious Life of Mizo Nationalism

The Mizo movement for independence was led by the MNF from the period between 1966 and 1986. The movement sought to unite the dispersed Mizo populations administratively divided by international borders between India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. The party first emerged as a cultural organisation known as the Mizo Cultural Society (1955), which was later renamed the Mizo National Famine Front (MNFF) in the year 1959 in the wake of the *mautam* (bamboo flowering) resulting in famine, causing widespread hunger and the loss of lives. The MNFF was popularised by leaders such as Laldenga, under whose leadership a new political party in the form of the MNF was established in the year 1961 (Roluahpuia, 2018a). Since its very inception, the party's forays into politics signalled how MNF leaders had integrated religion as part of their nationalist discourse. For them, one cannot separate Mizo identity from their religious identity. These can be observed at two levels: first, in the speeches and writings of the MNF leaders, and second, in the organisational structure of the MNF.

The MNF leaders hail from the early educated class of Mizo society. With their educational background, many of them were engaged in political mobilisation and became key ideologues of the movement. In their speeches and political writings, the MNF leaders stress the need to defend the identity and culture of the people, with Christian identity at the heart of it. The 4-year gap between the year of its establishment as a political party and the declaration of independence in 1966 was the most crucial year. During this period, the young, educated leaders were instrumental in articulating Mizo nationalism. Many of them possess a charismatic quality coupled with good oratory skills, with Laldenga being one of the most well-known. In a public meeting held under the Mizo District Congress Committee in 1961, political leaders belonging to the Congress, MNF and other party leaders were invited to debate their party ideologies and manifestos. Laldenga, in his speech, reiterated the standpoint of the MNF, which is a party that stands for the self-determination rights of the Mizos. Further to this, his speech also noted how the Mizos will gradually be assimilated and lose their religious identity in a country dominated by Hindus. As he notes,

> *nakinah chuan heng kan unau, Vai pawl zawmtute hian Krista aia Krishna min pawmtir tumin sebawngte pawh hi an la rawn sawi mawi ang a. 'Bawngpate hi kan than len nana hnutetui mi petu kan nu a nih hi', ti te pawhin min la rawn zirtir ang*

> [It will not be long when the Vais (a term used homogeneously to refer to the plainsmen, in this case with racial and religious overtone) will propagate cow worshipping in their effort to make us worship Krishna in place of Krista (the Mizo term for Jesus). They will also start to teach us how cow is our mother, who gives us milk for our health and growth].

The MNF's turn to Christianity became more pronounced as the movement progressed. A critical aspect of this was the insertion of Biblical imaginaries into the nationalist discourse. This also shows a shift in terms of how the MNF propagated their idea of nationalism. MNF leaders toured villages and set up volunteers across Mizo Hills, in the hilly areas of Manipur and Tripura, where Mizos live. Soon, the MNF idea of nationalism percolated into the local society, and volunteers enrolled in the MNF were fighting for *Pathian leh Kan Ram Tan* (For God and the Country), the organisation's slogan. At midnight of 28 February 1966, the MNF launched the armed struggle for independence. It was Operation Jericho underway, named after the Biblical story of the Jericho Wall and the Israelites taking conquest of the promised land of Canaan. The plan was to attack all the major security outposts across Mizo Hills, take complete control of Mizo Hills, and establish Mizoram *Sawrkar* (the Government of Mizoram).

Further to this, there is also a strong correlation between Christianity and the nationalist ideology of the MNF. The ideological foundation of the MNF is *zalenna* (freedom), which was popularised through writings by MNF leaders such as Laldenga, Zoramthanga and Lalhmingthanga, among others. Laldenga, who is the main ideologue of Mizo nationalism, codified the idea of freedom in his book, *Mizoram Marches Towards Freedom*. Freedom was conceptualised against the domination and subjugation they suffer at the hands of dominant majority communities. Mizos, due to their racial, ethnic and religious identities, feel unwanted and alienated in a country where they are treated as the 'other'. As Laldenga puts it, the Mizos are forced to 'swallow and follow Indian ways of life with Hindu culture and code of social living and alien (Indian) language imposed upon them' (Laldenga, 1963, p. 17).

Laldenga's book was followed by the publication of *Exodus Politics,* written by Lalhmingthanga, who was also a prominent leader of the MNF. In *Exodus Politics,* the author referenced the model of a nation-state that is premised on the goal of homogenising the national community. Gellner (1983), in a different context, notes how the state used education as a means to promote national unity and achieve homogenisation. Literacy, accompanied by industrialisation, will eventually lead to the emergence of a common consciousness and the erosion of identities. Lalhmingthanga warns against this, as he sees how the Mizo will lose their Mizo-ness as they get absorbed and assimilated into the dominant culture and religion. The propagation of the Hindi language and the spread of its culture and history through education will lead to the internalisation of their cultural values. Hence, *zalenna* is posited against the domineering tendencies of the majority community.

Within the MNF organisation, Christianity became an important 'ethnic marker' to promote group solidarity among the Mizos. It transcended clan, kinship and tribal belongings and acted as the glue that binds the community together. This is reflected with the establishment of the Mizoram Evangelical Committee (MEC) within the MNF, and accounts by the former rebels also note how religious activities were undertaken in their camps, both within and outside of India (Chawnglianthuama, 2011). The MEC was established as non-denominational and refrained from advancing specific denominational doctrine in their activities, although it was more inclined towards Presbyterian practices. Various religious

duties such as prayers and payment of *tithe*, were widely practiced within the organisation's rank and file. The MEC administered the churches and the task of organising Sunday school in the way it is normally done in Mizoram. Understood this way, the establishment of MEC reveals the deep sense of attachment the Mizo have with Christianity.

The idea of protecting Christianity also gained strength over the course of the struggle. The counter-insurgency policies by the Indian State involved the desecration of the churches and the setting up of army camps within church premises, along with incidents of torture and rape that antagonised the larger Mizo public. Counter-insurgency policies such as village groupings have adversely affected the everyday lives of the people (Sundar, 2011). In fact, India's counter-insurgency policy and the actions of the Indian military show how its actions were directed towards punishing a recalcitrant subject through the targeting of religious institutions. Such actions caused 'hurt' (Chopra, 2010), a feeling that was collectively shared, one that signals a sense of deliberate offence or politically intentioned injury of community sentiment. As Chopra shows in the case of the Sikhs in India, the 'hurt' was felt when the Indian Government attacked and desecrated their most holy temple, the Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple) at Amritsar. Furthermore, the operation was perceived by the Sikhs as the Indian State's attempt to humiliate their religion. In a similar vein, the MNF and the Mizo population at large were 'hurt' by the actions of the Indian security forces on the church. Even when the churches contested the MNF's use of violence, the MNF responded by claiming that the church did not challenge the violence perpetrated by the Indian State. The church heavily criticised the use of violence by the MNF, which subsequently soured the relationship between the two.

Contesting Violence: The Fragments of Nationalism

Religion-inspired nationalist movements have commonly used violence as a means to achieve their stated goal of independence. Many nationalist movements have seen the tension between religious institutions and the use of violence. From the 1980s onward, religious-based nationalism and violence have surpassed non-religious nationalist groups (Tambiah, 1992; van der Veer, 1994). There is no single consistent perspective on the issue of violence across various religious traditions (Steffen, 2017, p. 109). Yet, it has been the case that violence in the name of religion has been pervasive across all religious traditions. Those involved in acts of violence claimed divine justification and legitimised the use of violence as a struggle to liberate (van der Veer, 1987; Juergensmeyer et al., 2017). Yet, nonetheless, every religious tradition universally abhors violence and claims to be pacifist; however, all religious traditions cling to legends of war, sacrifice and martyrdom, and often they are invoked to justify the use of violence (Juergensmeyer et al., 2017, p. 2).

The use of violence by the MNF received wide and open condemnation from the church. The church in Mizo society is one of the most visible institutions with a stronghold over community life. The church also plays a significant role in constructing Mizo identity-making. To a large extent, the church's presence in

mainstream political life in Mizoram can be traced to its role during the period of the MNF movement (Hluna, 1985). The challenge by the church on the use of violence has strained the relationship with MNF and pitted the two organisations against each other, particularly in the early years of the movement. Both the MNF and the church have justified their position using religion and engaged in a war of words to legitimise their position.

How does one explain this differing attitude, if not interpretation, of the use of violence? Under what condition, if not context, is the use of violence justified? As in the Mizo context, what defines the differing positions of the church and the MNF on the use of violence? At one level, the question of whether Christianity sanctioned the use of violence is an issue that has hounded the church from its earliest days—or one of Christianity's oldest ethical problems (Juergensmeyer, 2000). Based on a study of Christian militants who used violence to advance their goals, Juergensmeyer (2000) has noted how over time Christian leaders and states have justified the use of violence for a 'just war'. This war is to be fought against institutions and practices that are against the teachings of Christianity.

Soon after the outbreak of the armed struggle, the church was one of the first institutions to respond in terms of calling for peace. Accordingly, a committee under the auspices of the church leadership was formed that came to be known as the Aizawl Citizens Committee (hereafter ACC), barely within a week of the MNF armed struggle. The main purpose of its formation was to act as a broker of peace between the MNF and the GoI. The members of the committee were drawn mostly from the Presbyterian and Baptist denominations. From its inception, it began to play a pro-active role in trying to persuade the MNF to shun violence and seek an amicable solution with the GoI.

Taking forward the purpose of its formation, the ACC soon began to reach out to the MNF. What ensued was a heated exchange of letters between the MNF leaders and the ACC. Likewise, the committee also reached out to the Government of Assam to restore peace and normalcy. The committee, in outlining its objective, made it clear that it rejects the use of violence. It notes:

> The main objective of the Citizens' Committee, however, would be courageously struggle for restoration of peace in Mizoram and Aizawl town. What has been made clear to both the MNF and the government for restoration of peace is THERE SHOULD BE NO VIOLENCE. The Citizen's Committee will never accept and support any violence by whichever side to achieve its objectives. The reason why the Citizens' Committee hates and opposes violence is that innocent civilians have and will suffer immense physical and mental pain including hunger and thirst[2].

In short, the committee put non-violence as their main policy[3]. The above notice came at the backdrop of the church leaders experience of the destruction and suffering of the people. For instance, on March 5, the bombing of Aizawl and the air strafing by the Indian Air Force (IAF) resulted in the destruction of homes, with the locals fearing to come out and remaining in hiding. As such, it was the church leaders, or the churches in general, who came out to help the people—the injured as well as identify the dead bodies as well.

To affirm its standpoint, the ACC issued what is known as *Kohran Thuchhuak* (Church Notification), wherein it sent out a strong message against the MNF. A section of their notification read as follows:

> *Khawvel chanchin ah pawh sakhaw zalenna duha tharum thawha rammut thu leh indona thianghlim chanchin tam tak kan hmu a. Nimahsela chung zawng zawngte chu hlawhch-hamin an tawp a ni. Tin, Kristian hming chawi meuhva sorkar indinna hmunah pawh, kristian pawl tlemzawkte chunga tihduh dahna leh nekchepna a awm thei thin a ni.*

> *Mi zawng zawngin mahni rin dan an pawm a, tha an tih berte an um a, hnam tin zalenna an zawm chuan kohhran hian a hriat thiam pui a, amaerawhchu Kristiante chuan chut-iang an zawm dan kawng chu an Lalpa zirtirna nen a inrem em tih an chhut ngun fo tur a ni (Joh. 8:31, I Pet 2:16, Rom 6:16-23, Joh 4:34)[4].*

> (Human history is a witness to numerous struggles for religious freedom using violence and holy wars. However, they all fail in one way or another and do not really sustain themselves. Also, even among governments that are established as Christian States, there can still be persecution of the smaller denominations.

> It is the right of every individual to profess their own belief and follow what they think is right, and the church will have no issue as long as it respects the freedom of every community. However, for Christians, it is always necessary to ensure that they are right in the eyes of God's teachings (Joh. 8:31, I Pet 2:16, Rom 6:16-23, Joh 4:34).

In the last section of the notification, the church outlines their *Ngenna* (Request) to the MNF which goes as follows:

> *Khawvel hnam tinin hnam dang zalenna tibuai lova mahni tanghma an hai chu an dikna pual ani a, nimahsela kristiante chuan ngaih dan thuaah pawh Krista rirlu nena inmil chauh an pawm tur a ni a zalenna an zawn pawhin an Hotu hmanrua chauh an hmang tur a ni e.[5]*

> (Every nation in the world has the right to pursue their own right to freedom without disrupting other nation's freedom; however, for Christians, it is always important that things that are in tune with the teachings of Jesus only be accepted and even if they seek freedom, they should use the weapons of God alone.)

Following this, the Baptist and Presbyterian Churches issued a public notification rejecting the use of violence. The letter by the Baptist Church clearly spells this out by denouncing the use of violence, which read as follows:

> We are of the opinion that the agony and suffering of common people can also affect the Indian government and the MNF. We do not think that is your intention and what you want. Though the Assembly cannot give opinions on what you have to do, we appeal that you seek the path which will ease the pain and suffering of the people. The Assembly does not want any violent confrontation. It despises any confrontation that is meant to end human lives. So, the Zoram Baptist Church Assembly fervently appeal to you not to indulge in this kind of activity from now on.[6]

Similarly, the Presbyterian Church issued a notice which read as follows:

> *Kohran chuan he tharum thawhna avanga ram buaina lo thleng hi, chanchin Tha*
> *zirtirna leh, mi zawng zawng nungchang put dan reltu tur kalh a nih avangin a hnawl a.*
>
> (The church denounces the use of violence as it is against the teaching of Gospel, and
> also against the principle of mankind. (Lalngurauva, 2008, p. 47).

For the church, the use of violence represents what Tambiah (1992), in the context of Sri Lanka, calls 'betrayal' of the teaching and beliefs of Christianity. Tambiah explicitly explores the puzzling question as to why Buddhist monks participate in political violence against the country's minority Tamils. For a religion that preached non-violence, the use of violence is nothing other than a 'betrayal' to Buddhism. The church in Mizoram feels equally 'betrayed,' even if they are not directly part of the movement. Beyond this, a reading of the position of the church resonates with the argument by O'Neill (2010) 'Christian citizenship' to underlie how the actions of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity should perform their role as citizens through their faith. As Christian citizens, they direct their efforts towards establishing order in society, praying for the nation and fasting for less political corruption. This performance is inspired by the acts of doing 'good' and becoming productive members of the nation. The church, therefore, is not only confined to performing the practices of teaching and spreading the message of the gospels but is also involved in the everyday socio-political discourse that affects the nation or even the world at large.

O'Neill's (2010) work is further instructive in understanding the Mizo context. In post-war Guatemala City, he shows how the Neo-Pentecostal church takes the leading role in directing efforts to save Guatemala from poverty and corruption and actively engaged itself in the country's democratisation process. This reframes the notion of personhood among Neo-Pentecostals who carry the 'weight' of the nation, where 'believers have the moral responsibility to save Guatemala—to be good Christian citizens' (O'Neill, 2010, p. 3). The position of the church and their attitude towards the state relate to the perception of how Mizo Christians should act and live. In Mizoram, the church is active in engaging and inculcating the values of good citizenship by asking its members to vote and exercise their rights. During the early years of independent India too, the church took a moral stand in terms of cleansing the society of the 'evils' of corruption and other social problems, such as campaigning for the prohibition of liquor in the state.

The MNF takes a contrary position to the church. From the start, the MNF was critical of the ACC. The first response of the MNF to the church was that they were engaging in selective condemnation by only targeting the MNF and not the Indian State. The use of violence also gets legitimated as they are at war with the Indian State. As the MNF leaders and rebels narrate, *tual that kan ni lo a, ral that kan ni* (we are not committing murder, but we are killing the enemy). What seems to have irked the MNF was the very fact of the ACC's non-recognition of Mizoram *Sawrkar* (the Government). A more serious question that the MNF

posed to the ACC was the question of the use of violence. The reply by Sainghaka, the then Home Minister of the MNF, to the church leaders read as:

Tin, THARUM HMANG LOVA THILTIH TUR tih hi he Committee hian a thupui ni awmin I han sawia. A nih leh tuna THARUM HMANGA SIPAITE LEH RALTHUAM NENA MIZORAM AWPBET LUI MEKTU INDIA SAWRKAR HI thiamloh chan tirin, a sipai te zawng zawng leh thuneihna te hnukkir nghal turin I ngen tawh reng em? I mit hmuh ngeiah chiang takin Tharum Hmangin Aizawl chu an awpbet mek ani si a. Mizo Sawrkar chuan THARUM hmanga min awpbet lui tute chu, DIKNA hmangin sut kian tumin Aizawl Khawpuia awpbet tu sipaite chu han bei ta sela, he Committee hian eng ang in nge min puh leh tak ang? A tir atang pawhin Tharum hmanga buaina siamtu chu India sipai tih chiang takin I hmu si a, nge, I hre ngam leh ta lo? Tuna India tharum a thawh avanga riltam mangang leh taksaa tuar mek Mizoram mi tam tak, Mizo Sarkar mite hi, thiamloh chan tira hnawlin; he Committee hian lainatna leh hmangaihna leh khawngaihna a nei hauh lo tihna em ni?[7]

(The position of the committee seems to put the principle of non-violence as its policy. If so, had the committee condemned and asked the Indian security forces, who are violently suppressing the Mizo through the use of force, to retreat from Mizoram? It is clear to you that they are clearly occupying Aizawl by using violent means. If the Mizoram Government tried to liberate those that were forcefully occupying Aizawl by using truth, how will the committee react, and will it condemn us again? From the very beginning, it was clear that it was the Indian security force that created problems through the use of brute force, which you yourself witnessed, or you did not want to acknowledge it. So, does this mean that this committee does not have any sympathy for the suffering caused to the Mizo populace and the people living under the Mizoram Government due to the military suppression?)

Lalnunmawia, the then Vice President of the Mizoram *Sawrkar*, posed a similar question to the ACC. In his letter, he notes, *ram chhungah hian ringlo miten ro an rel a, thu an neih hi kan Lalpa duh zawng a niin kan ringlo hul hual* a (we strongly believe that God will not accept the fact that we are ruled by a non-believer in our own territory). On the question of peace, he further notes, *remna chu kan duh a, daiwhzep vanga mahni DIKNA phatsan khawpa remna chu kan pawm thei lo. Chiang taka in hriat atana pawimawh chu Buai hi Mizoram Sawrkar siam ani lova, India Sawrkar siam a ni* (we do desire for peace; however, we will not agree to peace at the cost of sacrificing our own rights. We would want all of you to know and remember that the conflict is the creation of the Indian Government and not the Mizoram Government)[8].

The MNF went to the extent of accusing the ACC of indulging in self-aggrandisement. As put by Lalnunmawia, the Vice President of the Mizoram Sawrkar

He Committee in a thil tum leh tih tawh 2-na leh 4-na te phei hi chu nguntaka han chhiarin, Mizoram mipui tana tha hnem ngaih tak vang leh mipuite leh Ram hmangaih tak tak vanga he Committee hi ding a ang lo hial e. Mahni mimal in-tih-lar tumna leh manhi mimal tuar hlauhnate leh hnam dangte hlauh vanga mahni dikna phatsanna thu mai niin a lang. Mi mangan lai remchang a hmanga hetianga thil lo ti tute hi hnam tin zingah an awm chawk reng ani tih chu mipute an hai silova. Mahni infakna leh sawi mawina thu chhhuah hi kan Bible ziritirna nen pawh a in kalh tlat si a.

(After careful scrutiny of objectives no. 2 and 4 of the Committee and what it has done so far, it does not seem that this Committee was formed out of concern for the people

of Mizoram. It seems that the Committee was constituted with an intention for self-aggrandisement and popularise its members, as well as to avoid personal suffering for themselves and to be a mute spectator even if one's rights are violated because of the fear of foreigners/outsiders. The people will not be fooled by such individuals who take advantage of their suffering.)

The MNF consistently maintains a position that acts of violence are justified, morally challenging the state's monopoly of violence. Through the use of violence, the Mizos can restructure their polity and establish a political order for themselves.

The exchange between the ACC and the MNF continued for an extended period. What the case of the MNF shows is that the use of religion in articulating and advancing political ends is not without contestation. Even as the MNF claimed itself to be advancing the cause of Christianity in their political struggle, the church denounced the act of violence as an act of 'betrayal' to the teachings of Christianity. The MNF experience tells a larger story about the complex interface between religion and politics. Far from a mere 'link' between the two, religion and violence interacted in complex ways, connecting them to issues of theology and belief practices. As such, viewed from this perspective, the relationship between religion, identity and sub-national politics is far from linear and simple but enmeshed with contesting positions and conflicting interpretations.

Conclusion

In this article, we draw upon the case of the Mizos in northeast India to examine the relationship between tribal politics, religion and violence. The case of Mizos shows how religion has shaped the Mizo nationalist discourse espoused by the MNF. This aspect has long been neglected within studies related to the MNF movement and applies to the larger studies on tribes, where the role of religion in tribal politics has often been ignored. In northeast India, many national movements usually take on a religious character, as religion transcends older tribal divisions and allows for the assertion of pan-ethnic identity. Among the Mizos too, Christianity allows them to assert a collective sense of belonging.

Political mobilisation in the form of nationalist movements among tribes has also seen recourse to the use of violence. This is particularly the case when one looks at movements in the northeast region. These are marked by armed mobilisations, which the state homogeneously labels as 'insurgency.' For armed organisations such as the MNF, the use of violence can be read as one that challenges the state monopoly of violence and, second, secures freedom and their self-determination rights. However, one also finds a problematic reading of MNF's position, as violence is inflicted upon Mizos and other civilians who have borne the brunt of state violence. Both at the ethical and moral level, the violence of the MNF also subjugates and silences dissenters that question the very foundation of the MNF's use of violence. In all nationalist violence, this is the question that requires critical attention.

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Notes

1. National integration, commonly understood, points to the process of ethnic and territorial integration. In this article, I use national integration to refer to the process of nation-building by assimilating minority communities within the mainstream of the society. Specifically, in the context of tribes, they are posited to belong to outside of the mainstream of society, and they are largely construed as the national 'other'. The tribal question in India is often framed as a problem of integration, which will end with the mainstreaming of tribal societies.
2. What is the Aizawl Citizens' Committee About? *Frontier Despatch*. (2016). *1*(10): 1–12.
3. This was stated categorically in their public notification that was issued in the 28 March 1966. See, Mizoram State Archives (hereafter MSA), MNF Document II.
4. MSA, Aizawl. MNF Document II.
5. MSA, Aizawl. MNF Document II.
6. This appeal letter was made on 3 May 1966.
7. Aizawl Theological College Archives, MNF Document.
8. This was sent on 22 March 1966. For details, see MSA, MNF Document II.

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