

ROLE OF CHURCH IN GOVERNANCE: A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE MLTPACT IN MIZORAM

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Abstract: The paper is a critical analysis of the role that Christianity and (by extension) the church play in the Mizoram Government and its policies - specifically the policy of the MLTP Act and its eventual repeal. This paper is a chapter in an ongoing PhD thesis (Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics) which started in 2011 while the Act was still in force. However, recent changes in the law do not hamper the theme of the chapter, which is inquiring the supposed authenticity and absoluteness of a recent foreign religion in a society that I believe has become a 'Religio-Cultural Hybridity', and the subsequent influence the said religion commands in the current governance. The paper will not only bring forth the complications rising out of the church's involvement, but also the questionability of not only the logic, but also the spiritual and cultural bases of its very approach. We shall highlight the influence of liquor in contemporary Mizoram, and, in the process try and grasp the nature of the Mizo psyche influenced by Christianity, which in turn influences the government. In order to do so, a comparative study has been made on instances of prohibition in other spatial and temporal settings - namely, the Temperance Movement, Sunday Closing Act and the Volstead Act. In the process I question the logic of Mizoram government's policy making process which repeats documented failures simply due to the influence of a pressure group i.e. the church.

Key words: Religion, Cultural Practices, Spirituality, Church, Temperance Movement, MLTP Act, Human Rights

Introduction

One can consider three major views regarding the consumption of alcohol in Christianity – all rightly backed by specific verses from the Bible. The first is the consideration of wine as an everyday consumable – a 'fruit of the vine'¹, and its symbolic interpretation as a necessity without which a meal/phenomenon remains incomplete or unwholesome. The second view is that of wine being a gift from God that is integral to bringing joy² but its overindulgence negates the whole process³. Thirdly, rather than the wine, the abuser is considered at fault⁴. However, in Mizoram, the church proposes an overall rejection of liquor from social life altogether. Now, the reason for such abstinence could be one of the three –

- 1) Considering the ambiguity of the morality in its partaking, it is safest to abstain;
- 2) or, the consumption of liquor is in itself, a sin;
- 3) or, it is not a sin to partake liquor, nor is it to be intoxicated, as these issues are restricted to the private sphere; but since the law states so, one should follow abstinence. It should also be noted that what is important here is not so much the following of law but rather, the existence of such a law in the first place.

Due to the larger Christian bodies of Anglicanism, Catholicism, Orthodoxy and a significant minority among Evangelicals adhering to the belief that liquor is not contradictory to being a Christian, liquor consumption can be said to be a common sight among Christians worldwide (PEW, 2011). However, reasons 2 and 3 are what make the issue of liquor prohibition in Mizoram a debatable one.

Banning of Wine by the Missionaries and Percolation to Modern Day Mizoram

When missionaries came to Mizoram, apart from providing modern education, medicine and Christian spirituality, they decided that certain social practices of the Mizos were unsuited to be included in the Christian way of life. This approach downplayed the cultural significance of wine partaking, among others. For example, the rituals surrounding the practice of *nau pui* was an important linkage between *flawmngaihna*¹ and wine. Its percolation to present day Mizoram reflects in testimonies of respondents i.e. Mizos are inherently 'bad drinkers', and that it is in the Mizo nature to seek physical confrontations when intoxicated.

Basis of the Missionaries' View on Mizo Customs of Liquor Consumption - The Temperance Movement

Even though wine consumption among Christians is a necessity not only in the ritual of the Holy Communion but also in the dietary culture of the white west, the possibility of liquor being a factor for social unrest as well as a precursor to sins was brought to light in the temperance movement around the 19th century. It gained massive popularity especially in the Welsh counties – the places of origin of the first missionaries who came to Mizoram. Rev. William Williams (Welsh) came to Mizoram in 1891 followed later in 1894 by FW Savidge (English) and JH Lorrain (Scottish), commissioned by the Arthington Aborigines Mission (English). On 31 August 1897, Welsh Calvinist Methodist (later changed Presbyterian Church of Wales) missionary David Evan Jones founded the first church in Mizoram – the Mizoram Presbyterian Church (Downs, 1980, Strom, 1980, Dena, 1988).

The philosophical footprints of the Welsh missionaries are deeply imprinted in Mizo Christianity as shown in the mindset of the people. It is not uncommon to have them link liquor and sin as shown in the following excerpts:

'It's like a preacher once said, Satan doesn't drink, he uses your mouth instead (laugh)'

*'yes I drink... (when asked if he said it was alright to do so) no it just means I am a bad Christian... I should do better... but Satan calls me again (laughs)'*⁶

Importance of the Sunday Closing Act 1881 on the Perception of Liquor

Discussing the process of conversion undertaken by Spanish colonisers in the 16th century Americas, Michael Wood asserts that the colonisers were shaped by 'centuries of Ethnocentrism, and Christian monotheism, which espoused one truth, one time and version of reality' (Wood 2000: 20).

A decade before the missionaries first came to Mizoram, the parliament of the United Kingdom had enacted an act called The Sunday Closing Act in 1881. The Act required the closure of all public houses (pubs) in Wales on Sundays. It wasn't until 1961 that it got repealed.

According to historian John Davies (1993), the legislation was a result of the pressure of the temperance movement and the Nonconformists⁷. Temperance movement was, in theory, a religio-social act of piety and abstinence, while the Nonconformist agenda was a political move meant to displace conservative and Catholic schema. The public houses had supposedly become recruiting centres for the Conservative Party and, this was the rationale the opposing party used to enact the restriction. What remained significant though is that alcohol, in theory, became symbolic of a 'negative' Wales – politically, religiously and socially.

It is thus safe to assume that the likes of Rev. William Williams and other English, Welsh and Scottish missionaries already had a set notion of the 'negativity' of alcohol. Moreover, in the said time period, it is very possible that the extra-religious agenda of the nonconformists did not hinder the general religious opinion on liquor since it was a happy complement to what was considered pious. This begs the question - was the Temperance Movement of the 19th century really a matter of piety and abstinence; and was it an indication of a holistic spirituality?

Rise, Decline and End of Prohibition in the US: Comparative Study with Prohibition in Mizoram

Mizoram's prohibition may be a result of the Welsh attitude but in terms of legislation and control, the state shows a number of similarities with the US in its prohibition policies. The eventual intention of the comparative study is to highlight the inability of the Mizoram government to oppose the influence of the missionaries despite the documented failed trajectory of US's legislation.

Birth of Prohibition

In 1784, Benjamin Rush argued that the excessive use of alcohol was injurious to physical and psychological health, and went on to label drunkenness as a disease (Blocker, 1989). Apparently influenced by Rush's widely discussed belief, about 200 farmers in a Connecticut community formed a temperance association in 1789. Similar associations were formed in Virginia in 1800 and New York in 1808. Within the next decade, other temperance organisations were formed in 8 states, some being statewide organisations (Blocker, 1989).

Further Rise of Prohibition; State Enforced Piety – Volstead Act and MLTP Act

The American Temperance Society was formed in 1826 and gained immense popularity quickly (Blocker 1989). In the US, the Maine Law was passed in 1851 and prohibited sale of alcoholic beverages except for medicinal, mechanical or manufacturing purposes and by 1855, 12 states had joined in total prohibition (Clubb, 1856). The temperance movement

faced a setback during the American Civil war where both sides relied on alcohol duty for finances, but was resurrected post war with the Anti Saloon League.

In 1919, the League spearheaded the Eighteenth Amendment in post World War I US and introduced prohibition with the Volstead Act. The Act set down the rules for enforcing the ban and defined the types of alcoholic beverages that were prohibited (Blocker et al 2003). In general, informal social controls in the home and community helped maintain the expectation that the abuse of alcohol was unacceptable.⁸

The informal control exercised by the missionaries in Mizoram may not have been as restrictive but drinking was still seen to be a negative impact on social life. The church continued building up pressure to the government to come out with a formalised rule of law. Subsequently, similar to the Volstead Act, the legislation for the MLTP Act was also passed in Mizoram in 1995. The Act sought to 'provide for total prohibition of import, transport, manufacture, possession, sale and consumption of liquor in the state of Mizoram' (Mizoram Excise and Narcotics Department 2008).

Problems of Enforcement and Decline of Prohibition

Burns and Novick's (2011) documentary illustrates that the Volstead Act was seen by its supporters as a step forward for public morals (similar to the MLTP Act), while its opposers saw it as an intrusion of rural Protestant ideals into the urban, immigrant and Catholic everyday life (some Mizos saw the MLTP Act as an unnecessary but unquestionable imposition in the private sphere). What has been absolutely common in both the case, is the lack of proper enforcement of the passed laws.

Ineffective enforcement of the Volstead Act during the prohibition era unintentionally led to growth of vast criminal organisations, including the modern American mafia (Von, 2010). In Mizoram, the MLTP Act faced similar problems as well.⁹ Moreover, the advocates for pro prohibition turned to vigilantism. However, there are a number of flaws in the very nature of such kind of vigilantism. On one hand, the overall purpose is of betterment of society but on the other, due to undemocratic, subjective and individual decision making powers, the former reason gets hazy.

*the VCP is in collaboration with the police, so when we catch someone we hand them to the police. Every once in a while there is a stubborn fellow who needs to be beaten. I don't like it but it is necessary especially when the on duty people are tired and angry. A few punches here and there, and the purpose is served.*¹⁰

The important point here is that irrespective of humane or inhumane handling of lawbreakers, the state will unlikely interfere in the case of the latter. Mizoram Chief Minister Lal Thanhawla, ("Will Mizoram", 2013) supported the actions of voluntary organisations in their ongoing campaign, and went on to further imply that it was the 'outsiders' who were at fault in dealing in drug trafficking, and buying property off the 'sons of the soil'. This type of official position of the government seems at loggerheads with recent events. In the summer

of 2013, local YMA groups evicted known liquor producing 'sons of the soil' from their homes - displacing approximately 100 households in Phunchawng area and 50 households in Rangvamaul area.

The nature of alcohol regulation being so that a mere regulation of its consumption hours can cause a public backlash (Phillips, 1980), it is inevitable for such regulations to tone down. Seeing the decline in the popularity of the Volstead Act, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Cullen-Harrison Act On March 22, 1933, legalising beer which had alcohol content of 3.2%, and wine of similarly low alcohol content (Phillips, 1980). Similarly, the Mizoram government enacted the MLTP Amendment Act of 2007 that sought 'to regulate manufacture, sale, possession and consumption of wine in Mizoram in relaxation of the provisions of the Principal Act...'. The Mizoram Excise & Narcotics (Wine) Rules, 2008 was later made 'to regulate, manufacture, export, sale, possession and consumption of wine in Mizoram'. More recently, the Mizoram Liquor Total Prohibition (Amendment) Bill, 2013 was enacted authorising the state government to appoint officers as experts for the purpose of analysis or examination of liquor. Considering the fact that there existed a law of total prohibition in the state (backed by strong support groups), these amendments and relaxations merely served as a complication.

End of Prohibition

Finding no future, prohibition was ended in the US with the ratification of the Twenty-first Amendment on December 5, 1933. Kyvig (2000) believes that it finally lost its popularity and public support not only due to its adverse and unintended results, but also due to infringement of public liberty, new tax revenues, and problems of organised crime. It is no secret that the so called Total Prohibition in Mizoram was also not a success, if not a raging failure.¹¹

Despite the strong stance taken by the YMA and the church, on July 10th 2014, in the 40 member State Assembly, the Congress led government repealed the 17 years old MLTP Act in favour of the Mizoram Liquor (Prohibition and Control) Bill 2014. The new bill not only has provisions for sale of liquor by eligible license holders but also for punishments up to 5 years for those engaged in the misuse of liquor in public. However, there are a number of social factors that had come into play before and after the passing of the bill.

Pre Bill Problems

Prior to the Assembly meeting, the YMA as well as the youth group of church took upon themselves to spread awareness that a repeal was not something that the Mizo society as well as their religion deemed healthy for the future. Time has already answered questions on piety and criminal activities that would result out of repealing of prohibition acts. In 1830, on average, Americans consumed 1.7 bottles of hard liquor per week, which is three times the amount consumed in 2010 (Von, 2010: 56). Yet, pro prohibitionists in Mizoram vocalised a medical scare of health issues arising out of the lifting of the ban despite prominent personalities like Sailo¹² and Governor Vakkom Purushothaman¹³ voicing otherwise thoughts.

Since liquor policy is under the legislative power of state governments as found in Article 47 of the Directive Principles of State Policy, the state does have the legitimate power to lift prohibition. And yet, the lifting of the ban has to be answered not only to the opposition, but to the church and local groups as well.

Post Bill Problems

Even though it is still early to discuss the post bill repercussions, there are a number of variables that have been already put into play. Most of these variables stem from the stigma attached to the tag of 'zu zuar', which means 'seller of liquor'. When the MLTP Act made provisions for sale of locally produced grape wine called *zawlaidi*, there were a couple of complications. Firstly, it could not gain much popularity due to the low alcohol content, and people complained that it induced stomach ailments. Secondly, since consuming a huge amount caused intoxication, it was still classifiable under *zu*. The reluctance to engage in this trade is due to, apart from the capital needed to purchase a license, the age old infamy attached to it.

In talking about infamous professions - although colloquially called the oldest profession in the world, prostitution is a frowned upon trade in most of the world, tiptoeing the fine line between legal and illegal. Among the Mizos, the trade of 'zu zuar' can be considered as degrading as that of 'nawhehizuar' (seller of body/ a sex worker). The term 'child of a zu zuar' is an infamous curse term and in many cases, is used to defame an individual who happens to be the child of a single mother with unclear forms of income.

The reason the aforementioned observations are interesting is that the profession of prostitution has survived the test of time because it has developed the business techniques and defenses that balance the moral (and hygienic) dilemma of being a client. But, such cannot be for the profession of a *zu zuar* in Mizoram.

'... this is Mizoram. Money cannot be everything ... especially if you don't want disrespect in the neighbourhood. You will be a zu zuar and your children will be called zu zuar fa.'

'If I buy (license for selling liquor) I still run a risk... but if Hotel Regency buys it then they can call themselves a 3 star hotel and everyone will say it is good for tourism...'

Soon after the MLPC Bill was passed, the YMA issued directives in their respective localities stating that they will not tolerate liquor sellers in their locality and perpetrators will be evicted. The opposition party, the MNF also has openly encouraged this decision. This situation is echoic of the eviction of Phunchawng and Rangvamaual. The second aspect of the Bill which is almost certainly meant to appease the YMA and the Church, only gives more jurisdiction to such unethical acts. Individual who bought this commodity before will observably continue to do so, but the supposed legal freedom of a seller as highlighted by the MLPC Bill is yet to overcome complication. As of now, for fear of eviction, the option of openly attempting to debunk existing social stigmas attached to liquor also seems improbable as well.

Conclusion

In retracing the steps of current views on liquor by the Mizos, we have gone back to the mindset of the Missionaries vis-a-vis their social backgrounds, and the ongoing political and social topics of debate in their places of origin. In the process, we have also observed the possibility that their views on liquor (and the subsequent shaping of the Mizos' psyche), although having religious undertones, was actually a result of the hybridity of the ongoing Welsh religious, political and social factors, which in turn created a religio-cultural hybrid system for the Mizo.

When one retraces the steps that lead to this current attitude, we see that the origin, i.e. the ideas of piety championed by the temperance movement, was merely a stab at achieving societal harmony. It gained prominence and popularity only due to extra-religious factors. The very fact that the earliest laws on prohibition were halted during the American Civil War (as both sides relied on alcohol duty for finances) questions the pious principle of the ban. And in the case of Mizoram, the very survival of this misunderstood piety in the face of logical and economical prudence serves to show the fear of retribution from the church.

The 'Mizo' religious view of alcohol consumption today stems from the stereotyped mindsets of the missionaries and has now branched out to governance. Moreover, issue of power in the functioning of the church is not an impossible correlation. It is the influence of the church that has led the government to turn a blind eye to documented case studies of the failure of prohibition. Recapping the paper, we see a startling similarity in the stages of prohibition in the US and in Mizoram. 1) the beginnings were based on an ideological wave, 2) there was a legitimacy granted to the ideology by the government, 3) the legitimacy was cemented by legislation and law, 4) there were problems of enforcement of the law, 5) this led to the government in making relaxations in the law, 6) the prohibition would be finally repealed. The only difference is that even after the repeal, the Mizo society at large still maintains the prohibition era mindset about the intrinsic values of liquor, and this is relayed by both the church and NGOs.

An argument for the case of the logical is not frequent among the Mizos when the argument is against the church. There are only a few, especially among notable figures, who do openly question the influence of the church and NGOs in governance like Sailo does:

*'Various NGOs like the YMA, MZP... which are not affiliated to the church and groups like MHIP, KTP... which are church affiliated, pressure the government with their grievances. But that's it... they are simply pressure groups. The government should take a stand for the overall betterment of the people like in the case of the total prohibition (MLTP Act). They (the pressure groups) do not belong in administration. They should remain in the spiritual domain and in preserving of culture.'*¹⁵

According to Jake Meador (2010: 1), '... some Christians have tried to make sense of post-colonial Christianity by renouncing practically everything about the Christianity of the colonisers. They reason that if the colonialists' understanding of Christianity could be

used to justify rape, murder, theft, and empire then their understanding of Christianity is completely wrong.' Mizos have fortunately not faced such extremities in their conversion, but they are yet to be among those Christians who do seek to question the Christianity of the coloniser. They are also yet to be aware of the 'rape, murder' of certain cultural customs and rituals that have resulted in a Mizo religio-social hybridity – a hybridity that not only relates teetotalism to piety, and liquor to Satan, but makes sure of the survival of this attitude through pressure to the government and the people.

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(Endnotes)

¹ "I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matthew 26:29 New International Version)

² "Then he said to them, 'Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet liquor and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord.'" (Nehemiah 8:10)

³ "For the heavy drinker and the glutton will come to poverty". Ephesians 5:18 – "Don (Proverbs 23:21)

⁴ "Do not join those that drink too much liquor" (Proverbs 23:20). "You are not to associate with anyone who claims to be a believer yet... is a drunker" (1 Corinthians 5:11).

⁵ an untranslatable word akin to the *Dharma* code which represents that an individual conscientiously puts himself second to the others and the community in general, and does the most for others, often putting himself at discomfort. It is a unique cultural code of the quintessential Mizo.

⁶ Interview (Various)

⁷ Protestant Christians in England and Wales who rejected the reign of the Catholic church.

⁸ "Drunkenness was condemned and punished, but only as an abuse of a God-given gift. Drink itself was not looked upon as culpable, any more than food deserved blame for the sin of gluttony. Excess was a personal indiscretion" (Aaron and Musto 1981: 132).

⁹ Ex-Minister for Health Mr. Lalrinliana Sailo says, 'the MLIP Act is directly responsible for the alarming high rate of drug abusers and liquor induced deaths in the state... due to the resultant illegal production of expensive and unhealthy local made liquor. (Interview)

¹⁰ Hrima, Interview

¹¹ "The Mizoram Journalists Association and the Mizoram Bar Association in their responses to the Study Group on Prohibition suggested that the dry law should be lifted and liquor should not be prohibited but properly regulated as in

other states. The powerful Young Mizo Association (YMA), the Mizo Hmeichhe Insuikhawm Pawl (MIHP) ... the Zoram Taxi Owners Association (ZTOA) and the Mizoram College Teachers Association (MCTA) all said in their replies that prohibition has been a total failure.... ("Prohibition", 2013). However, church leaders were adamant that the dry law was a success ("Prohibition", 2013).

People are scared that more will die due to alcohol consumption if the ban is repealed. But today, many are currently dying or are in the process of dying due to consumption of alcohol adulterated with spirit... then there is also the problem of increased substance abusers who do not have the patience or finances to attain proper liquor... (Interview).

¹² "In my personal opinion, and not in my capacity as the head of the state, the Mizoram Liquor Total Prohibition Act, 1995, has done more harm than good and people who wanted to drink were forced to consume spurious liquor" ("Liquor-Ban", 2013). He also went on to say that he had put his thought forward to church leaders and even presented the case of his home state Kerala where the government's PSU manufactured good liquor and earned Rs 10,000 crore a year from revenue.

¹⁴ Amul, Interview.

¹⁵ Lalrinliana Sailo, Interview.