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Re-reading Suakpuilala: 'The Grand Old Man' and the British Connection

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Abstract:

The Anglo-Mizo encounters in the nineteenth century form an integral part of historical writings of modern Mizoram. This is largely because of the abundance of colonial records and writings, and because these encounters played a significant role in the history of modern Mizoram. However, the large-scale and unfiltered use of colonial writings often led to misrepresentation and a lack of contextual analysis. This case occurs when discussing the relationship between Suakpuilala and the British. While at some point he is presented as a friend of the British, at the same time, he was involved in raids against the British, and all his sons were involved in resisting colonial incursions, and two of his sons were even martyred. The existing works on him struggle to fully account for his relationship with the British. This paper revisits this issue and tries to offer a more contextual analysis of his relationship with the British.

Keywords: Anglo-Mizo encounter, Lushai Hills, raids, frontier, agreement.

Introduction

The nineteenth century was a watershed period for Mizoram (earlier known as the Lushai Hills). The colonial expansion into Northeast India, and the gradual extension of tea cultivation into Assam, especially from the 1840s onwards, pushed the colonial economic frontier directly against the territory adjoining the areas inhabited by the Mizos. The expanding tea plantations in the Cachar plains under the protection of the colonial government were a direct infringement on the Mizo chiefs, who laid their territorial claim up to the Cachar Plains, thereby resulting in frequent, mostly hostile encounters between the colonial government and the Mizo chiefs throughout the nineteenth century.

It was a long-standing pattern of the Mizo chiefs to raid the neighbouring communities for captives, heads, and tributes, as the practice was integral to internal Mizo political and economic life well before the advent of the British in the hills. The nature of their settlement, which required shifting the village site in a cycle of about ten years due to swidden agriculture, required large areas for movement and led to frequent conflict with other chiefs. In such a situation, the allegiance of the villagers to their chiefs depended largely on the power and influence of the chiefs, and they were free to leave a "declining or feeble chief to settle under some one more able and energetic" (Reid 5). To assert their prominence and expand their influence, the chiefs aimed to conduct successful raids on weaker chiefs and nearby villages across Manipur, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and Upper Burma. Since it was a means through which they procured materials which were not available in the Hills, notably metals and guns, and also slaves, conducting a raid was one of the important features of the Mizo political economy.

When the British expanded their rule in the Northeast, those within the range of their raids in Cachar, Sylhet, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts now became British subjects, and their property in the colonial tea gardens, plantation labourers, and revenue-paying villages. The tea plantations and outposts

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of the colonial government lay in the region where the Mizo chiefs conducted raids, and therefore the Mizo chiefs inflicted harm on people from the British protectorates, whom the British government had an obligation to protect and ensure their safety. In fact, according to the colonial official, the tea gardens became "the most attractive" target, "for there are more plunder and heads to be got there, with much less risk than elsewhere…" (Reid 5).

It took some time for the Mizo chiefs to understand the political dynamics at the frontier and the consequences of their raiding activities. The frequent border infringements were seen as a threat to British interests, causing insecurity and eventual economic loss for the government. Mr. D. R. Lyall, the Commissioner of the Chittagong Division, in his letter dated the 4th March, 1888, anticipated the unfavourable situation and stated, "The feeling of insecurity caused by these raids is reacting most injuriously on our revenues. The Hill Tracts revenue consists of tolls on hill produce, and these have gone down from Rs. 89,109 to Rs. 83,222 last year, and the amount collected will be even less this year." (Reid 2)

At this stage, colonial officials on the frontier had no administrative apparatus for dealing with the hill people. Early responses to the raids included the so-called 'punitive expeditions', a policy of non-intervention, and sometimes diplomatic overtures to individual chiefs. This was largely due to their reluctance to commit resources to the unprofitable hill tracts. But when raids began to be read not as isolated frontier incidents but as a pattern threatening the security of a growing colonial economic interest, the policy changed, resulting in a permanent occupation of the Lushai Hills.

While the Mizo chiefs exercised sovereign rule over their villages, they were largely interdependent, which was necessary for survival amid perpetual conflict among them. Sir John Edgar, the Chief Secretary of Bengal, noted his observation on the dynamics of political relations among the Mizo chiefs:

> Almost every village has its own Chief, who generally, however, owes some sort of allegiance to the most powerful chief of the group of villages to which he belongs, whom I may, for convenience sake, call the head of his clan. From time to time, the Chief of some subordinate village gets power and throws off his allegiance to his former head, and found a new clan for himself, which gets known sometimes by his name, sometimes by the name of the hill on which the Chief's village is situated, and sometimes by a variation of the original clan name. (Reid 4-5).

This observation significantly shaped colonial policies towards the Mizo chiefs when they followed the 'policy of conciliation', leading to an effort to identify the 'head of the clan' among them. To some extent, this view holds true. This idea influenced the British dealings with Chief Suakpuilala. More powerful and robust chiefs often initiated wars or raids, rallying other chiefs to their cause. Most conflicts between Mizo chiefs involved alliances of two, three, or more leaders. However, while the initiating chief might hold a respected status, he did not necessarily have authority over other chiefs or the right to treat them as subordinates. Alliances in battles did not create binding obligations, and partners could switch sides later. For example, Ngursailova, a Palian chief, married Suakpuilala's sister; they later divorced but were believed to have raided Adampur together in January 1862. By 1868, after a conflict with Suakpuilala, Ngursailova joined Savunga's faction, which was rivaling Suakpuilala (Lalremsiama 95-96).

Despite this situation, the colonial government, in its effort to manage the volatile situation with the daring raiders of the Lushai Hills, chose to identify and negotiate with the most influential chiefs it recognized. Suakpuilala was the chief they ultimately made an agreement with. The colonial authorities acknowledged him as the most influential and authoritative chief, earning him the title of 'the Grand Old Man' of the Mizo.

Suakpuilala- A Sailo Chief

Suakpuilala was the son of Mangpawrha (also known as Manga) and a grandson of the great Sailo Chief Lallula. He was born around 1824 (Thanglawma and Vanlallawma 142), the youngest of three brothers; his elder brothers were Thawmpawnga and Runphunga (Lalthanliana, *Chanchin*, 439). Vanhnuaithangi (Baniatangi in British records) was his sister. It is generally believed that he took over the chiefship after his father died around 1850, and his first diplomatic move seems to have been his

meeting with Col. Lister in Silchar in 1850.

There are very few references to Suakpuilala's domestic engagement or his administration. It appears that he began his rule at Kanghmun in western Mizoram, later moved to Reiek, and after moving to a few other sites, eventually settled at Tanhril (Zothanpuii 3), where he died in December, 1880 (Shakespear 67). He is believed to have ruled for more than thirty years. He had twelve sons, namely, Lalchhunga, Sailianpuia, Lianphunga, Kalkhama, Thanruma, Lalsavuta, Lalsavunga, Tulera, Lalhrima, Zahrawka, Hrangkhupa, and Dokhuma (Lalthanliana, *Chanchin* 447). His sons became chiefs in different villages in the Lushai Hills and became the strongest challengers to British expansion.

Suakpuilala was one of the Mizo chiefs who was in a position to manage monetary transactions in an economy that ran largely on a barter system. It was remarkable that while most people in the Lushai Hills did not possess, or even probably see, money or cash, he was able to transact in terms of hundreds. His main source of monetary income seems to be the frontier bazar under his protection. The Changsil bazar, one of the frontier bazars during that time, was under the protection of Suakpuilala as long as he lived, and after his death, his sister, Vanhnuaithangi, and his six sons shared the responsibility and profit (Shakespear 67).

The Changsil bazar, during 1869-70 had thirteen shops operating, and Suakpuilala was collecting rents from these shops at the rate of Rs. 10/- for a shop per month, along with two baskets of salt a month for his mother Pi Buki, Lalchhunga and Lengphunga, and three baskets for Vanhnuaithangi (Shakespear 68). This rental was reached after negotiation with the Chief Commissioner and the Deputy Commissioner. At its peak, there were eighteen shops in April 1875, but it began to deteriorate due to the decline in rubber trade (Shakespear 69).

In November, 1878, the Changsil bazar was looted, for which Suakpuilala was made responsible. Though the traders were found getting away "with rafts heavily laden with their property" two days after the incident, the blame was on Suakpuilala, and he was "called on to pay a fine of Rs. 1000/- to Government and to agree to remit future shop rents of the same amount before the bazar would be again reopened" (Shakespear 70). Suakpuilala protested that he was falsely charged, but he was compelled to pay the fine. He paid the partial amount of Rs. 560/- to the Deputy Commissioner in April 1879, and the remaining amount was waived off, and the bazar was reopened shortly after (Shakespear 70-71).

Shakespear noted that "Suakpuilala always admitted his responsibility for protecting the bazar and ensuring the safety of traders, while also being careful to keep control as much as possible himself" (67). This shows that Suakpuilala asserted the authority and duties appropriate for a chief, demonstrating that he was a confident and capable leader. Colonial officials observed this, which may have made him stand out among other Mizo chiefs as a competent and trustworthy leader suitable for negotiations.

Engaging the Colonial Power

Suakpuilala frequently appeared in colonial records because of his diplomatic engagement with the British authorities. Unlike many other Mizo chiefs, his first encounter with the British was peaceful. It is remarkable that he approached the British officers himself, a confident yet daring act for a young chief who had just begun his reign and had limited knowledge of the colonial power and its strength.

Following Colonel Lister's expedition against Ngura's village, Sentlang in 1850, the Mizo chiefs had become aware of the growing strength of the British power in the region. Suakpuilala, along with chiefs such as Vanpuilala and Vanhnuailiana, considered it worth trying to establish diplomatic relations with the colonial power at Silchar, and hoped to secure British assistance against the Pawi, who posed a constant threat from the Chin Hills. Initially, the chiefs sent their elders to convey their message to the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar. However, the Deputy Commissioner refused to meet them and insisted that the chiefs themselves should come. While the other chiefs refused to meet Col. Lister, only Suakpuilala traveled to Silchar, making him the first Sailo chief to visit the town. The Deputy Commissioner subsequently arranged a meeting between Suakpuilala and Colonel Lister (Lalthanliana, *Chanchin* 441).

At the meeting, Colonel Lister plainly informed Suakpuilala that the British government could not

interfere in conflicts between rival chiefs, nor could it assist him in warfare to protect him unless he submitted himself to British authority. Suakpuilala rejected the idea of submission to the British. Lister discussed further the need for a clearly defined boundary, to which Suakpuilala agreed. Lister also conveyed that the British government did not want the Lushais to conduct raids or create disturbances in its protectorates, and that the Mizo chiefs should release the captives they had taken from the plains. Suakpuilala did not object to it. However, he refused Lister's proposal that the children of the chiefs be sent to Silchar for education under British sponsorship, as he was suspicious of their intentions (Lalthanliana, *Chanchin* 441-42).

The meeting between Suakpuilala and Colonel Lister suggests that Suakpuilala approached the negotiation not as a subordinate but as an equal chief engaging with another political authority. He politely agreed to proposals that seemed reasonable, yet refused those that left him unconvinced. He respected the words of Colonel Lister's regarding Mizo incursions into the plains and consequently refrained from participating in raids for more than a decade after the meeting. However, because the political system in the Lushai Hills did not confer authoritative power on a single chief, he lacked the authority to control the raiding activities of other chiefs, nor could he dictate the release of their captives. Moreover, the boundaries discussed during the meeting were never clearly demarcated. The competition for power in the Hills continued in perpetual warfare, both among the chiefs and against the plain settlers, eventually drawing Suakpuilala into incursions into the plains.

Encountering the Colonial Power

Twelve years after his meeting with Lister, Suakpuilala was involved in the 1862 invasion of three villages near the Adampore Cachar Military Outpost, killed many people, and burnt down their village. Colonial officials recorded it as 'the Adampore Massacre'. At first, the raiders were unknown, but in 1863, fugitive captives identified Suakpuilala and Palian chiefs Ngurchuailova, Huliana, and others as responsible (Lalthanliana, *Zalen Nan* 19). Capt. Stewart, Deputy Commissioner of Cachar, was appointed to deal with Suakpuilala. Suakpuilala's delegates reported to Silchar in October 1864 and declared that the raid was conducted with chief Ngurchuailova to settle the bride price for Ngurchuailova, who married Suakpuilala's sister. While there was no follow-up for the Palian chiefs, Capt. Stewart decided that Suakpuilala should release all his captives, pay tribute to the government, and continue to receive the annual grant of Rs. 50/- from the government. Suakpuilala sent tribute to the government the next year, but he did not release the captives, saying some had died, some were sold off, and some had already got married. (Lalthanliana, *Zalen Nan* 19-20; Lalremsiama 86; Elly 3-4).

In the winter of 1868, Suakpuilala and Vanpuilala attacked the two tea gardens at Loharbond and Monierkhal. Though a detailed account of this raid is lacking, the British Expedition to the Lushai Hills in 1869 under Gen. Simpson was probably the outcome. But due to poor timing, the expedition did not inflict any significant event (Lalthanliana, *Chanchin*, 442). Lalremsiama mentioned that on January 15, 1869, Suakpuilala and Dothiauva raided Nowarbund and Monierkhal again, but they did not find anyone because Dothiauva had already attacked Monierkhal the previous day (146). Records show that during this raid, the Manipur rebel prince, Kanai Singh, joined the raiders and received the spoils, while Suakpuilala took all the captives (Lalremsiama 146).

After these invasions, the British government, in an attempt to execute a policy of conciliation, tried to appease the Lushai chiefs and entered into an agreement with Suakpuilala. This prevented him from involving himself directly against the British government, but after his death, his children were actively fighting against the colonial government.

The Agreement

The Anglo-Lushai encounters during the nineteenth century were governed by various policies issued by the British from time to time. The British adopted a non-intervention policy, a carrot-and-stick policy, and a policy of conciliation or appeasement toward the Lushai chiefs before eventually deciding to permanently occupy their land. While the British government tried to avoid intervention

in the internal disputes among the chiefs, they felt compelled to cross over the Hills to retaliate against the invasion of the frontier areas by the Lushai chiefs. While they displayed their power by completely destroying the villages of the accused chiefs, the raiding did not stop. And the British expedition to the Lushai Hills did not always succeed. For instance, the Expedition of 1869 of two military columns under General Nuthall and Baker, Deputy Inspector General, returned without much impact "owing to the lateness of the season" (Zorema 133).

It was accepted that the policy of conciliation alone was insufficient to protect the British frontier. Yet, the government tended to follow it while laying down plans to check the Lushai incursions to the frontier areas, and to meet the raids with "condign punishment in the shape of a military occupation of the raiders' villages" as long as possible, along with the seizure of their crops and stored grains. The government decided to engage with the Lushai chiefs, demanding from them a nominal tribute, and "to place intercourse with them on a sound and improved basis" (Zorema 134).

The task fell to the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar, John Ware Edgar. Edgar set out on 20th December, 1869, accompanied by Major MacDonald, three sepoys, Inspector of Police and twenty-one constables, three native officials and a few Lushai guides. He succeeded in making friendly terms with Suakpuilala, whom he thought would be representing the Western Lushai Chiefs (Zorema 135). In his second visit to the Lushai Hills during 1870-71, Edgar met Suakpuilala again, and Suakpuilala executed with him an agreement, commonly referred to as a *sanad*[1] in early 1871.[2] It was the only *sanad* any Lushai chief had ever negotiated with the British government (Zorema 135). Edgar's assistant, Rai Bahadur Surma, who spoke the Mizo language, played an important role in persuading Suakpuilala to accept the terms. Eventually, the agreement was concluded through a solemn ceremony held on the banks of the Tuirial River (Lalthanliana 443). A silver cup was presented to Suakpuilala on this occasion which is still kept by his descendants (Zothanpuii 5).

E.B. Elly mentioned that Suakpuilala paid a visit to Edgar who was on tour with a tea planter, Mr. Burland on the 15th February, 1871, and a diplomatic engagement took place between them:

> "A written engagement regarding the new boundary, in which it was clearly defined, was explained to him clause by clause, and he declared himself perfectly satisfied with it and accepted all responsibilities so far as it related to the country between the Sonai and Chattachura range, but said that he had no authority east of the river. The engagement was then signed by Sukpilal [Suakpuilala] and his munries and by the civil officer, and made over to Sukpilal" (Elly 6).

It further stipulated that traders and woodcutters from the plains should not be disturbed, and that Suakpuilala should either prevent southern invaders from passing through his territory or report their movements to the government at Silchar. Moreover, any disputes involving British subjects from the neighbouring states of Manipur and Tipperah were to be referred to the authorities at Silchar. In return, the colonial government promised not to interfere with the chief so long as these conditions were observed (Lalthanliana, *Chanchin* 444-45).

However, the agreement could not be fully implemented because many chiefs remained beyond Suakpuilala's authority. Even while the agreement was being concluded, other chiefs carried out raids on the Cachar tea gardens, resulting in the killing of a manager and the abduction of his daughter, Mary Winchester. Furthermore, it is unclear to what extent the British government recognized the agreement, and if the government did not give in to its operation, Suakpuilala alone could not execute it successfully. As the raids into the plains did not cease, the government followed up with the Cachar Inner Line policy, drawing a border for Cachar, largely based on the border laid out by Edgar (Lalthanliana, *Chanchin* 446).

Suakpuilala- A Friend or Foe?

Early in his reign, Suakpuilala recognized the growing power in the neighbouring territory and explored the viability of diplomatic relations with them soon after he assumed chiefship. This move

gave him the chance to take greater advantage of colonial interaction than the other Lushai chiefs. The colonial government, on the other hand, reckoned him to be a chief worthy of contact, perhaps because he was familiar to them, and also because he was perceived to be a chief of influence. He, therefore, became one of the most well-known Lushai chiefs to the British. His familiarity with the British earned him close association with the colonial officials, and he was perhaps the only Lushai chief with whom the British engaged in official talks during his lifetime.

While the terms of agreements with the colonial officials were heavily weighted in favor of colonial interests, it would be difficult for Suakpuilala to read and understand them as they really were, given the lack of a complete picture of colonial ambition and strength in his context. Yet Suakpuilala received the official delegations in a manner befitting a chief. He tried to err on the safe side as far as possible and was open to an official relationship to the extent possible, which shows his diplomatic skill. Suakpuilala preserved his dignity and respect as a chief, even in the face of colonial power. The colonial power also showed him respect. Suakpuilala continued to enjoy the favour of the colonial government until his final years. It is said that the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar sent a doctor to treat the ailing chief, but before the doctor could reach him, Suakpuilala had passed away. He died at Tanhril at around sixty years of age.

In some accounts of Suakpuilala's relation with the British, he is presented as a subordinate chief to the colonial government, saying that Suakpuilala allowed the British to interfere in his administration and agreed to all the British proposals (Lalremsiama 157). However, it is important to study him within his own context. During his lifetime, he did not fully witness the broader imperial ambitions of the colonial state, and his knowledge of the colonial power was very limited. He did not approach the colonial power as a subordinate. He viewed the British as one among several competing powers in the region and therefore chose a diplomatic course, while continuing to regard them as political equals.

His failure to meet the colonial government's expectations was beyond his control. When British officials sought to recognize the 'head of the clans' in the Lushai Hills and selected Suakpuilala, they expected him to fulfill his assigned duties by controlling the Lushai chiefs. That did not happen, not so much because of Suakpuilala's weakness or unfaithfulness, but because the political system in the Lushai Hills did not operate that way. The nuances of political engagement among the Chiefs in the Lushai Hills disrupted the colonial officials' calculations and ultimately undermined their attempt to secure successful terms of agreement. As a result, Suakpuilala bore the blame as an untrustworthy chief who could not fulfill his promise. The flaws lay in the British officials' failure to understand the political dynamics of the Lushai Hills.

Although Suakpuilala himself did not wage a serious military resistance against the British, his sons later fought fiercely against colonial expansion. McCabe had noted thus:

> "As far as I have been able to ascertain, the Western Lushais under the headship of Sukpilal [Suakpuilala], formed decidedly the most powerful combination of villages in these hills. After his death, about 1880-81, the chieftainship devolved on Khalkam [Kalkhama], who has, from that date, virtually assumed control of this section of the Lushais, and has been more than able to hold his own against aggressive action on the part of the tribes east of the Sonai" (Reid 25).

The sons of Suakpuilala formed what the colonial government labelled the 'Western Chiefs'. "The Western Lushai Chiefs were restive and determined neither to pay revenue or to supply labour", and they objected to the decision to depose Chief Lengphunga for four years, which Captain Browne announced at the Durbar of Chiefs on 14th June, 1890. This resulted in the ambushing of Captain Browne on 9th September, 1890, on his way from Aizawl to Changsil, followed by an attack on another party on the same day. It led to the death of Captain Browne and many other sepoys and coolies (Reid 23). It was only after they were subdued that the British could start their establishment in the Lushai Hills. Two of Suakpuilala's sons, Lianphunga and Kalkhama, were ultimately martyred in the Hazaribagh Jail for resisting colonial rule (Reid 29).

During Suakpuilala's reign, he adopted a cautious, diplomatic approach toward the colonial government, which led many to view him as a subordinate or, at best, a friend of the British. In his attempt to maintain a peaceful relationship with powers he knew were greater than his own and to seek economic gain from the engagement, he handled the situation diplomatically, but he never bet his independence. He continued to pursue his own course and thus became involved in launching raids against the colonial protectorates. When the time came to resist the colonial government with force, his sons took a stand, even at the cost of their lives.

Conclusion

The name of Suakpuilala appeared frequently in colonial accounts, making him one of the most prominent Mizo chiefs. Much of his political career was shaped by his relationship with the British. Even though he was involved in raids into the British protectorates, and though he could not stop other chiefs from raiding the plains, colonial officials did not deal with him as they did others. He continued to enjoy the control of a frontier bazar at Changsil and earned money under the auspices of the colonial government.

There is not doubt that Suakpuilala was a diplomatic ruler, and the British government held him in high regard, as reflected in their assumption that he could exercise influence over the other Mizo chiefs. However, no single chief could effectively control the other powerful chiefs, which often weakened the authority of Suakpuilala's assurances and agreements. Nevertheless, he was a respected chief. His sons upheld his legacy by asserting their chieftainship and bravely opposing the threat to their chieftainship, and the colonial officials remained concerned about him until his last breath. Regardless of the colonial power's intentions and motives in its approach to Suakpuilala, he lived and died as a dignified Mizo chief.