



LOCALISED NATIONALISM AS NATION-BUILDER: ADDRESSING ROPUILIANI'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FALL OF THE EMPIRE

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ABSTRACT

The famous Mizo local hero Ropuiliani and her opposition to colonial rule as a chieftess has recently seen a leap in popularity in India's mainstream culture and government initiatives. This has concurrently brought forth two opposing discourses - one that pictures her as a paragon of bravery which puts her in the echelons of India's great freedom fighters, and the other which states that she never fought for the nation state of India, and hence cannot be considered in the same conversation as the likes of popular nationalist leaders. This paper details firstly, the possible rationale and bases for the latter narrative, and secondly, while being in complete agreement, argue that this does not contradict the former narrative i.e. Ropuiliani is indeed one of India's freedom fighters. Such an analysis is derived by taking a critical look at the popular nationalist discourse which prioritises the efforts of freedom fighters who would eventually be canonised in academia; and furthermore highlights the impact of global politics on British colonialism, and the collective effect of the pockets of resistances that have since been grouped and credited in history simply as the "growing dissent" of the colonised.

This paper utilises the efforts taken for an ICSSR Project entitled "The Mizo Queen Lalnu Ropuiliani: Her Legacy in the Context of Nation-Building", and incorporates literature review as well as narratives gathered in pan-Mizoram fieldwork.

Keywords: *Ropuiliani, India's Freedom Movement, Localised Agitation, Nation-Building.*

Introduction

During the 2022 Independence Day celebrations at Red fort, Delhi, an image of Ropuiliani was cast on the walls in honour

of India's freedom fighters. Moreover, for a while, she was featured in the *Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav* website. The story of Ropuiliani's fight against the colonial forces

may be gathered in McCall (1940), Elly (1893), Mackenzie (1884), Reid (1976), Shakespeare (1896), Lalneihzovi (ed. 2005), Zorema (2016), Hluna (1990, 2005), and Robin (2009). This paper moves forward and focusses on the discussion whether Ropuiliani's efforts can be considered as efforts for nation-India.

In order to approach this discussion, this paper first critically examines the mainstream nationalist discourse which tends to circle around a rather narrow set of "acceptable" freedom fighters where no small amount of glorification has been incorporated in the overall poetics of their grandeur. Sobriquets such as "Mahatma", "Netaji", "Iron Man of India", "Lokamanya", "Shaheed-e-Azam" etc. are prime examples. Such an examination simultaneously acknowledges that the success of India's freedom struggle is not absent the effects of global politics, and what has been given the umbrella term of "growing dissent" in colonial history.

This paper is founded on secondary sources and accentuated with fieldwork entailing interviews with key respondents (mainly living relatives of Ropuiliani) and random sampling from pan-Mizoram to ascertain Ropuiliani's significance to contemporary Mizo society.

The Critical View on Ropuiliani's Contribution

Ropuiliani's acceptance in the mainstream, at least on paper, should ostensibly be welcomed with pride by Mizos whose marginalisation has been a subject of discussion for quite some time in academia.

However, field data has not been as simple as assumed. Following is selected preliminary analysis of South and East areas of Mizoram shown (utilising 5 point scale questionnaires):

On whether the Red Fort incident evoked a sense of pride, 45.3% of respondents felt "very much" pride and 28.8% felt "somewhat" pride – totalling 74.1%. Although high in number, especially given the 5 point scale style of questionnaire, it does bring to question the neutral and negative disposition of a quarter of respondents. This is slightly strange considering only 8.5% did not feel a sense of integration with nation-India in general, and only 10.4% felt that Ropuiliani's inclusion in mainstream media did not have any effect on their sense of integration. When compared to multiple selectable answer type questions, where respondents viewed her quite variably as a Mizo patriot (69.4%), Indian freedom fighter (30.6%), and anti-colonial (39.9%). So, in brief, although a good majority are proud of Ropuiliani's mainstream inclusion, there is a stark differentiation in perception of the words "Mizo Patriot", "Indian Freedom Fighter" and "anti-colonial". Moreover, these two points are not dependent on the variable of a general feeling of inclusion with the nation-state.

The only rationale for these varying data is that firstly, the perception of the aforementioned categories has been starkly differentiated, most probably due to the dominant discourse taught in school curricula and popular culture where it is the "Gandhis and the Patels" who are credited

as the ones who got India its freedom (more of that later). Secondly, some rationale has been provided through social media debates (which reflects the aforementioned analysis) that Ropuiliani never fought for India's independence and that her efforts have localised effect at best.

This paper in fact, extends this rationale by stating that Ropuiliani didn't even fight for "Mizoram". However, that does not conclude that Ropuiliani was not a freedom fighter who fought for India. This supposed contradiction is addressed henceforth and hopefully the readers would be presented with a suitable recourse.

Ropuiliani Did Not Represent "Mizoram"

The contemporary geo-cultural understanding of "Mizoram" has been shaped through various historical events. Previously known as the Lushai Hills District, it was part of Assam before becoming a Union Territory and state:

The British annexed the Lushai Hills after the Lushai Expedition (1871–1872) and formally integrated it into British India in 1895. After independence in 1947, the Lushai Hills became an autonomous district under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, allowing local governance over land, culture, and customs through the Lushai Hills Autonomous District Council. Despite autonomous status, dissatisfaction grew due to Assam's neglect, especially during the Mautam famine of 1959, which devastated crops and led to severe food shortages. The Assam government's inadequate response increased resentment, leading to the formation of the Mizo

National Famine Front (MNFF) in 1961 under Laldenga, which later became the Mizo National Front (MNF). The MNF began demanding independence from India, fueling political tensions and greater autonomy (Lalchungnunga, 1994). The MNF declared independence on March 1, 1966, leading to armed conflict. The Indian government responded with military force, including airstrikes on Aizawl. The conflict led to casualties and political instability, prompting the government to impose President's Rule and dissolve the Mizo District Council (Sinha, 2007). To ease tensions, the Indian government upgraded Mizoram's status to a Union Territory in 1972, separating it from Assam. This gave Mizoram its own legislative assembly and greater political autonomy, although central authority remained dominant. The creation of Mizoram as a Union Territory was a significant step toward political recognition and autonomy for the Mizo people (Chatterjee, 2017). The conflict ended with the signing of the Mizo Peace Accord on June 30, 1986, between the Government of India, led by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, and the MNF, represented by Laldenga. The peace agreement led to the surrender of MNF cadres and the integration of its leaders into politics. Mizoram was granted statehood on February 20, 1987, becoming India's 23rd state, with Laldenga as its first Chief Minister (Lalchungnunga, 1994). The peace accord remains one of the most successful in Indian history, ensuring political stability and ending decades of conflict.

It must be noted that before all these dynamic events occurred post 1947, Sardar

Patel would be instrumental in bringing the northeast region to India's fold – including what would eventually be called Mizoram.

Hence, one can see the rationale that Ropuiliani could not have fought for “Mizoram” when there was no idea of a unified Mizoram as we know of it today. The term “Mizo” is actually an umbrella term for a diverse number of tribes, some of which are spread even outside of the confines of the geographical borders of present day Mizoram. Mizos had a system of chieftainship where a village would be ruled by a chief and besides marriage alliances and their offspring raising further villages, there was no politically charged “we” feeling with “other” Mizo clans.

When one says that Ropuiliani fought for the sake of “her people”, it is safe to assume that the reference was towards a much localised group of people. She did form alliance with other chiefs in opposing the colonials (Lalzarliana et al., 2025, Lalbiakzami, 2005), but simultaneously, there were other chiefs of her era who had diplomatic relations with the British and/or surrendered without a fight (Chief Suakpuilala in Tluang, 2025; Chief Jacopa in Chatterjee, 1995). This shows that, at most, her influence spanned across only a few other villages at most.

Thus, undoubtedly, the criticism stands that Ropuiliani could never have fought for India's independence, as her concerns didn't even encompass Mizoram or the Mizos at large. However, this paper stands that Ropuiliani's legacy is not that of semantic resemblance i.e. freedom fighter for “India”, but rather that of a contribution

towards the fall of the British Raj. Let us now see what this contribution, popularly attributed to “the Gandhis and the Patels”, entails.

“The Gandhis and the Patels” and “Growing Dissent”

When a child is asked who got India its freedom, there is high likelihood the answer would be Mahatma Gandhi. After all, curricula does inculcate that he is the “Father of the Nation”. The paper uses the term the “Gandhis and the Patels” quite loosely to elicit that 1) narratives of the Indian freedom movement have been highly Brahmanised; and 2) there is a predisposition to credit the success of India's freedom movement to a handful few. Although one does colloquially mention that the movement had participation across the country, inevitably only Brahmin led agitations, and the Brahmin leaders themselves have come to be in the limelight. (This paper does not undermine their contributions to India's independence, and is merely highlighting a trend). A possible defence for this narrative could be the fact that at the time due to caste differences, it was only Brahmins who had access to education and thus the agency to run an agitation. Nevertheless, it is clear that there is a “certain” group or rather, “type”, of individuals towards whom there is a tendency to place the mantle of “freedom movement leaders” – as unfair as it may seem. Thus we witness curricula and mainstream discourses celebrate the likes of Brahmins such as Mangal Pandey, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Gopal Krishna Gokhale,

Chandrashekhar Azad, and Jawaharlal Nehru, among others.

What we need to understand is that when we say that India was united in its struggle for independence, these handful of leaders could not have been involved in every local level agitation. In fact, as we shall see in detail later, there were important history changing agitations like the Royal Indian Navy mutiny of 1946, where they actively decided to not participate. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919 is a prime example. This incident is infamous due to the severity of violence and inhumane approach towards Indians. What makes the matter even more heinous is the fact that the gathered crowd were undergoing a peaceful protest against the Rowlett Act, and the arrest of pro-Indian independence activists Saifuddin Kitchlew and Satyapal; and that the crowd gathering was an opportune one where the primarily reason was Amritsar's annual Baisakhi fair. It was not only a peaceful protest, but also a passive one; and General Dyer's actions on the day had motivations other than disruption of an anti-British protest – specifically of avenging an attack on a British woman by the locals sometime prior. It was a combination of these factors that later aided in greatly amplifying the dissent towards the colonisers.

This paper would like to highlight two key points that are usually not discussed in mainstream discourses. Firstly, interestingly, what is not usually noted is the lack of “the Gandhis and the Patels” at the spearhead. The organiser Dr Mohammed Bashir and a speaker Brij Gopi Nath, have

been mentioned in Colvin's (1929) biography of General Dyer, and incidentally these are two non-Brahmin names, and relatively unknown. One may even say that Kitchlew and Satyapal's relative recognition is a result of the massacre, rather than it causing the incident to be widely known.

Secondly, what is also not noted is that India was witness to a multitude of such protests across the country, albeit, not making it in the annals of mainstream history books. True, their relative obscurity is testament to their minimal impact on the national scene, but that does not mean that they did not have an impact at all. One can say that General Dyer's intervention gave the protest its amplified significance, but not its value. When one attributes the frustrations of the British towards the “growing dissent” in the colony, it refers not only to the national level protests, but also to these small scale and less “impactful” demonstrations of dissent.

Ropuiliani's contribution thus, while lacking the scale of that of “the Gandhis and the Patels”, cannot be considered insignificant; and was, at the very least, a small but crucial element of India's “growing dissent”.

WWII and the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny

The impact of WWII on global politics including Britain is undeniable. Chief among them is the mentality towards continuing with colonial expansion. Firstly, Britain came out of the war financially exhausted and heavily in debt because of its high wartime spending and dependence on outside support. Studies on the Anglo-

American financial relationship (Solomon, 2019) show that Britain had already used up much of its gold reserves and foreign exchange during the war. As a result, it became increasingly dependent on American economic aid, including programmes like Lend-Lease and later loans (ibid.). Secondly, the sudden end of wartime economic support – especially the termination of the Lend-Lease program in 1945 – revealed how weak Britain’s financial position was. Without this external aid, Britain had to face immediate balance of payments problems and rethink its global commitments (ibid.). After 1945, Britain’s priorities shifted toward rebuilding the country. This included developing the welfare state, reducing high public debt, and dealing with economic instability. The government focused more on restoring the national economy and stabilising domestic conditions rather than continuing expensive imperial control (Crafts, 2021).

A less talked about event of the national movement is the mutiny of the Royal Indian Navy which occurred 18 months before independence. Dutt (1971) explicitly claims how historical accounts are often shaped through selective use of archives. The documentations on the mutiny are in the defence archives of the Defence Ministry and requires authorisation through appropriate channels to access. For dubious reasons, the mutiny’s details are yet to be published for the general masses. Dutt himself urges future researchers to look into the matter at a time when prejudices are perhaps less prominent.

According to Dutt (ibid.), events such as the Royal Indian Navy mutiny of

1946 reflected a deeper crisis within the colonial state, especially the weakening of loyalty among the Indian military. The mutiny which started from everyday problems, such as poor rations and racial discrimination eventually turned into a politically charged uprising; and has been described as “as symbolic as Gandhi’s Salt March (ibid., pp. 1)”, Even though suppressed, the mutiny had other consequences. It discouraged the British further because resentment had spread to the two other wings of the armed services. One can assume that due to this, the British now no longer had faith in the loyalty of its military; thus compromising their ability to impose brute force. Without this power, the British had to reconcile with the realities of the Indian situation. Giving up the colony was now an inevitability when viewed through practical and logistical lens.

Dutt also says that even nationalist leaders were hesitant to support the uprising, as they preferred a negotiated transfer of power rather than violence. This is an interesting claim because one can now pose the question: why did the mutiny occur in the first place if freedom was merely 18 months away? Why were the nationalist leaders waiting for a “transfer of power” at a time when the British supposedly had its full military might?

Further investigation is necessary to draw objective conclusions regarding the above mentioned questions. However, it is enough for the contents of the paper to conclude that, just like the local skirmishes mentioned in the earlier section, the mutiny made its fair share of impact on colonial

politics – perhaps more than popularly accepted.

Recent Excavations

Recognised freedom fighters' elevation, despite their inclusion in curricula, is not set in stone. One would be hard pressed to find a single historical figure who, after scrutiny, still upholds the absolute values we have come to attach to their names.

For instance, “Lakshmi Bai's patriotism was called into question by R.C. Majumdar in the 1970s. He writes that she ‘had to carry on a fight against her own kinsmen and rival Indian chiefs, and to the very last ... she was yet undecided whether she would fight against the British or make alliance with them.’ This indecisiveness is not spoken about in either nationalist history or the popular Bollywood adaptations of Lakshmi Bai's life (Wixtrom, 2022, pp. 5)”. Although admittedly, there is little advantage to the nationalist zeal when such kinds of knowledge are unearthed, that does not make such knowledge insignificant. One can provide a defence to such criticisms by stating that such scrutiny will always bring out areas of criticisms. Even with regards to Gandhi, discussions come and go as per changing political landscapes. Did he really have India's interest in mind or his own personal idea of power? Did he really need to accept Pakistan's exit? Some more recent discussions range: from the Hindu Mahasabha deciding to erect a statue of Nathuram Godse at the very location where he assassinated Gandhi (Press Trust of India, 2021), to the RSS insisting Godse had left the organisation prior to the assassination, to

another research that claims that he never did so (Jha, 2020).

A paradox may be further entertained regarding Gandhi. If he is undoubtedly the most popular of the freedom fighters, and that it was his leadership and direction that led to India's freedom, then ostensibly, all his political opposers should not be considered in the same category as him. This we know is not true for the likes of VD Savarkar, Subhash Chandra Bose, Bhagat Singh, and Annie Besant, among others. This hints to the fact that mass involvement, rather than individual efforts, was crucial to the freedom movement – and thus logically, even those of the unsung ones.

The very push for recognition of new heroes of the freedom movement in the mainstream highlights a phenomenon of forgotten heroes. In recent times a number of them have found recognition: Rani Gaidinliu (Nagaland, 1972), Pandiyapathy (Tamil Nadu, 2021), Lachit Borphukan (Assam, 2024), Uda Devi, a sniper in the 1857 Revolt (Lucknow, 1990), and so on. One may refer to recent works such as Behera (2021) for the multitude of tribal rebellions against the British for a variety of reasons and at various levels of intensity. In fact, a total of 10,360 unsung heroes have been added in the *Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav* website on the initiative of the latest government.

As of now, one can safely surmise that the list of India's freedom fighters is not an exhaustive one; and one might even say that such cannot be anyhow considering the

national level participation during the struggle.

Conclusion

This we may conclude that, firstly, the categorisation of “India’s Freedom Fighters” is not a closed box with a well-defined set of rules. Secondly, efforts other than those of said popular freedom fighters have been as integral to the overall struggle and success of India’s independence.

Ropuiliani’s retaliation is therefore, one of the smaller incursions that did not make it in mainstream media (at least not till recently). As solidified earlier, her impact may have had only local or even micro-local limitations, but that does not mean 1) that they did not contribute to the overall administrative hurdles of the Raj, and 2) that did not contribute to making the colonials realise unsustainability of suppressing the communal pride against being ruled by foreigners. Regarding the second point, it is a common natural feeling of indigenous pride that exists among the colonised; but it is not without catalysts that such feelings of hurt pride would surface and become the new social reality. Just like other Indian freedom fighters, popular or otherwise, recent or otherwise, these leaders have acted as the said necessary catalysts; and notably, their importance in history changing events does not lie in the very contents of their direct influence, but rather, their contribution to the “growing dissent” towards colonial administration. Furthermore, while popular discourse credits the efforts of India’s freedom fighters in its independence, one cannot but muse at the fact that their efforts held more meaning in

context with external factors – WWII and the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny being some good examples.

Ropuiliani never fought for “India” but neither did the popular leaders simply because just like “Mizoram” was not yet established during her time, neither was “India”. What is important here is not the geographical boundaries, but the common opponent and the philosophy behind the agitations. The categorisation of a freedom fighter does not entail a public and widespread announcement that the agitation was “for India”, and not necessarily for the sake of the immediate surroundings. Judging the value of a freedom struggle by its tangible impact is furthermore, a moot point, as such quantitative measurement is neither possible nor apt as what really matters is its existence in the overall freedom movement. When one talks of nation-building, it is imperative for all sections of the nation state to feel a communal sense of belonging. Icons such as Ropuiliani aid in forming that bridge to the mainstream. This paper hopes that it has provided enough information and rationale to encourage the marginalised Mizo community to feel not just communal pride to have had a leader such as Ropuiliani in its history, but also feel a sense of oneness with the mainstream due to her contributions to the fall of the British colonisation of India.

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