



## MARA IDENTITY: SOCIO-POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETIES

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### ABSTRACT

*Academic writings on Mara tribe in Mizoram so far are mainly limited to the socio- historical accounts and political development leading to the formation of the Mara Autonomous District Council. The present paper attempt to fill the academic literature gap of the contemporary history of the Mara society in general and civil societies in particular, by highlighting the emergence and role of Mara civil societies, particularly the role of the church, students, and youth organizations in the contemporary Mara society. Due to the lack of academic sources, the paper would deal mainly with the historical descriptive study and general analysis of the Mara civil societies in the context of Mara tribe identity.*

**Keywords:** Ethnicity, Identity, Mara, MADC, MTP, MSO, ECM, Mizoram.

### Introduction

The Mara, who are formerly known as Lakher, Shendu, Miram etc. consisted of five main language groups like Zyhno, Hawthai, Tlosai, Chapi and Vyhtu (Lawbei, C. Personal interview). They are mainly concentrated in the Mara Autonomous District Council, which is located in the southern tip of Mizoram. The MADC area covers 1445 square kms and the Abstract of Village wise household Survey: 2015 Under MADC recorded that there are 12,615 households with a total population of 64,829

persons, out of which 53,929 are Mara, which is around 83% of the total population. Though nothing definite is known about their original home, they appear to inhabit their present area in the latter part of the 17th century. The Mara-occupied area is encircled by the Kolodyne (Beino) river, this natural barrier helps the Mara to maintain their language and culture. After the Mara inhabited area was annexed and brought under British rule, it was partitioned for administrative convenience. Some areas are put under Lushai Hills of Assam province

while a major portion went to Myanmar. As a result, a smaller portion of the Mara tribe remained within the union of India.

The Mara shared myth of origin with the Chin- Kuki- Lushai group that their ancestors come out of the hole or bowels of the earth, with a slightly different version. The Mara version of origin as recorded by Parry (1988) stated that when “Men all come out of a hole below the earth. As the founder of each Mara group came out of the earth he called out his name. Tlongsai called out, “I am Tlosai”; Zeuhnang called out, “I am Zeuhnang”...Accordingly God thought that a very large number of Maras had come out and stooped the way. When the Lusheis came out of the hole, however, only the first one to come out called out, “I am Lushei” and all the rest came out silently. God, only hearing one man announce his arrival, thought that only one Lushei had come out, and gave them a much longer time, during which Lusheis were pouring out of the hole silently in great numbers. It is for this reason that Lusheis to this day are more numerous than Maras.”

The Mara inhabited area was annexed later than other tribes of Mizoram. With the annexation of Zyhno area in 1924, the whole Mara occupied area in the present Mizoram become annexed by the British. In 1907, Rev Reginald Arthur Lorrain and his wife arrived at Mara area and they founded Lakher Pioneer Mission to preach Christianity to the Mara (Robin, 2016). The formation of a Lakher Pioneer Mission, specifically for the Mara tribes has significant consequences for the Mara social and political development. The Missionaries

reduced Tlosai dialect of the Mara language into writing form in 1908; hence Tlosai dialect becomes the modern Mara language (Hlychho, 2011). Apart from converting the Mara to Christianity, the Christian Missionaries shaped and educated the Mara through the introduction of modern education which in turn led to the emergence of educated elites among the people.

### **Political consciousness and formation of Mara Autonomous District Council:**

The political movement began from Saikao, the headquarters of the Lakher Pioneer Mission. Chhohmo Hlychho, the chief of Saikao, convened a conference of Mara chiefs to deliberate on the political future of the Mara people in 1945. The meeting was attended by 23 chiefs among whom there are four Lai chiefs. The participation of Lai chiefs in the Mara Chiefs conference is due to the reasons that their villages are located within Circle no 16 and the ethnical relatedness of the Lai and Mara (Doungel and Beingiachhiezi, 2018). The ethnic relatedness of the Mara and Lai is evident as there are many common clans like - Hlawnehhing of Lai and Hlychho of Mara, Chinzah and Chozah, Bunghai and Bohia, Hnialum and Hnaihly etc. (interview with C Lawbei). The meeting adopted a resolution for submission of a memorandum to the Governor of Assam through the Additional Superintendent, South Lushai hills, Lunglei. The memorandum argues that the Mara tribes are divided into Chin Hills, Lushai Hills and Arakan Hill Tracts and demand a separate District for the Mara. This Memorandum was followed by other

memorandums demanding the separate administrative setup for the Mara (Robin, 2016).

When the Government of Assam set up Advisory Council, Vako of Zawngling village and Chhohmo Hlychho represented the Mara tribe as commoners and chief respectively. The Lai and Mara submitted a memorandum demanding Regional Council for them when Rustomji, Adviser to the Governor of Assam visited Lushai Hills. To pursue their demand, the Pawi- Lakher Tribal Union was formed in 1948 and the PLTU relentless efforts resulted in the constitution of Pawi-Lakher Autonomous Regional Council and the Regional Council was inaugurated on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1953 (Beingiachhiezi, 2015). But tussle between the Mara and Lai soon emerged within the Regional Council, particularly over the post of CEM. The Mara began to feel that Regional Council was dominated by the Lai and they decided to move away from the Pawi- Lakher Tribal Union by forming a separate political party of their own.

The Mara leaders called Mara convention at Zyhno village and formed Mara Freedom Party in 1963 with Valua Hlychho as the first President. The aim of the Mara Freedom Party was to fight for a new administrative setup for the Mara. The MFP mobilizes the people culturally and politically and demanded setting up of a separate District Council for the Mara. The MFP boycotted PL Regional Council on 5<sup>th</sup> February 1965 by means of asking Mara people to resign from jobs under PL Regional Council, to pay land and other taxes to the Interim District Council, and to

stop any connection between Village Councils and PL Regional Council. But the MNF movement for Independence in 1966 halted the MFP movement for a separate District Council (Robin, 2016).

Reverting from its earlier decision, The MFP decided to participate in the fourth general election to the Pawi-Lakher Regional Council. At that time, the Lai political leaders joined Indian National Congress Party. But they were soon divided into two factions- L. Chinzah group and F. Manghnuna group. The election to the PLRC which was held on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1970 witnessed a party-wise contest for the first time. With the support of Congress, Manghnuna group, the MFP manages to form a government with Zakhu Hlychho becoming the first Mara CEM of the Pawi-Lakhe Regional Council (Beingiachhiezi, 2015).

Upon hearing the proposal for the elevation of the Mizo District Council to Union Territory of Mizoram, the Pawi and Lakher leaders decided to demand for a higher status as well. As such, they sent delegates and the Union Home Minister informed them that the Pawi-Lakher Regional Council would be upgraded to the status of Autonomous District Council. The delegates of Mara, Lai and Chakma then began to demand a separate Autonomous District of their own (Beingiachhiezi, 2015).

The demand of the MFP for the formation of separate District Council becomes a reality when the Mizo District Council was elevated to the Union Territory of Mizoram on 21<sup>st</sup> January, 1972 and the Pawi-Lakher Regional Council was

trifurcated into three Regional Councils, namely, the Pawi Regional Council, the Lakher Regional Council and the Chakma. The Lakher Regional Council was elevated to a full-fledged Autonomous District Council on 29<sup>th</sup> April, 1972 with its headquarters at Siaha.

### **Mara tribe-based political parties**

In the first general election to MADC held on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1972, the Mara Freedom Party won 8 seats out of the total 9 seats. However, before the completion of the first term, the Mara Freedom Party merged with India National Congress in 1975 which ended Mara tribe-based party for some years. In 1986, United Peoples Party was formed by certain Mara leaders, as they felt that the Peace Accord of 1986 does not provide any special provision for the development of their tribe. The UPP put the formation of a separate UT for Mara as its political agenda, but the UPP soon ended without having any significant electoral success (C. Lawbei, personal interview, July 17, 2021).

After the lapse of ten years, a new Mara-based party, the Maraland Democratic Front was formed on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1996 with PP Thawla as the President. The party put a formation of separate UT for the existing MADC area which they called as Maraland as its main political agenda (C. Lawbei, personal interview, July 17, 2021). In the Seventh election to MADC held in 2000, the MDF won 8 seats out of the total 19 seats and become the party with the largest elected MDC. As there was no single majority party to form the Executive Committee, a coalition government was

formed by MDF and MNF with PP. Thawla as Chief Executive Member (Beingiachhiezi, 2015). In the 2003 Mizoram MLA elections, PP Thawla was elected from Tuipang constituency to become the first MLA and Minister of State elected on the ticket of Mara tribe based Party (Mizoram MLA elections 2003 abstract). In the Eight elections to Mara Autonomous District Council held in 2005, the MDF captured 7 seats and formed a coalition government with INC and an independent member. In the Ninth MADC elections 2007, out of 22 seats, INC won 8 seats, MDF won 7 seats and MNF won 7 seats. Initially, MDF and INC formed a coalition government, but it was voted out in 2008 by elected members from MDF and MNF to form a new Executive body. In the Mizoram Legislative Assembly elections 2008, PP Thawla won MLA seat as MDF again for the second term. However, the MDF began to decline since the Tenth general election to MADC 2012 on which it won only 5 seats out of 25 seats (Beingiachhiezi, 2015). The India times reported that with the merger of Maraland Democratic Front party with BJP in 2017, there is no Mara tribe-based political Party presently operating in MADC area.

### **The Mara Thyutlia Py**

In 1953, few Mara Students in Shillong came to an agreement that it is necessary to form a separate organization for the Mara youths in line with Mizo Young Association to preserve, uplift and promote Mara culture and tradition. As such the present largest and most influential NGO within the MADC area, the Mara Thyutlia

Py, which means Mara Youth Association, was formed on 9<sup>th</sup> October, 1954 at Earl Hostel, Shillong with V Hlychho as the first President (Mylai Hlychho, personal communication, July 13, 2021). Anyone who wishes for the betterment of the Mara society, tribe and identity, and is willing to help and uplift the destitute, can become a member and membership is purely voluntary. The objective of the MTP as highlighted in MTP constitution as amended in 2016 includes- to reach out those in need and provide support, to protect and promote Mara Identity, dialect and culture, to stabilize and promote unity and integration among the Mara community, to inculcate and build up the Christian way of life etc.

As a nonpolitical organization with a motto “To help and to stand together in the service of those in need” the MTP has been working for helping anybody in need of help, irrespective of tribe, within its area of operation. To achieve its aims and objectives relating to the upliftment of the Mara Society, the MTP organized many programme or festival for promotion and protection of the Mara culture. As per the resolution adopted at 2019 MTP General Conference, the MTP declared “Protection of Mara tribe and language”<sup>1</sup> as the yearly theme or stress area of the MTP. The Association passed resolution, submit memorandums, verbal petition to Mara Autonomous District Council (MADC) to use Mara dialect as a means of communication within MADC office (Pakhaw Chozah, personal communication, July 17, 2021).

### **Mara Students’ Organisation**

While the the Pawi (Lai) and Lakher (Mara) students were under the Regional Students Association, the Mara students at Shillong felt that a need for the formation of separate students organization for the Mara to have a better cooperation among them and as the Mara have a separate dialect, culture, tradition and custom. Hence, Mara Students’ Organisation (MSO) was formed on 4<sup>th</sup> November, 1965 at Shillong with S Hiato as the first President (AB Roma, personal communication, July 1, 2021). The headquarters of MSO was shifted to Siaha in 1980 and presently, there are two Joint Headquarters at Aizawl and Delhi, two Sub Headquarters at Shillong and Bangalore (Judson KT Zephatha, personal communication, July 17, 2021). The motto of MSO as highlighted in MSO constitution (Revised and amended 2019) reads as, “For God and Maraland” and has its objectives including- To preserve Mara vernacular and takes steps for introduction of education in Mara vernacular from primary to University level, to lead Maraland in the road of development, to protect and promote Mara tribe and promote unity amongst the Mara tribe, to protect and promote Mara literatures etc.

The constitution of MSO (Revised and amended 2019) opens membership to:

- i. Anyone who has completed his/ her education whether employed (government service) or unemployed, who is willing to become a member can be a member by paying membership fee.



- ii. Mara student from primary to University level can become a member.
- iii. Anyone who obey and comply with the MSO Constitution can become a member.

President of MSO Ch. Beikhochhi (personal communication, July 17, 2021) has the opinion that preservation of Mara language is one of the most important factors in identity preservation mainly because many Mara within the MADC area do not speak Mara language. This has caused great concerned among the leaders and felt that Mara dialect should be preserved and promote within the household and use as a means of communication among themselves. As a result of this, MSO headquarter always use Mara dialect as a primary means of communication for circulation of information apart from certain occasions where the issues it deals with demands for English or Mizo. For preservation and protection of Mara dialect, MSO in its General Conference passed a resolution that demands should be made to MADC that all Member of District Council (MDC) and MADC Staff should be elected and appointed only those who speak Mara dialect. MSO Assembly held in 2015 also passed a resolution that medium of instruction in primary and middle school should be imparted through Mara dialect, if not possible for all subjects, at least Science and Mathematics should be imparted in Mara dialect and further made a demand to MADC for the realization of this demand.

### **Mara Tribe-based churches**

Geographical isolation as well as the formation of a separate Christian mission specifically for the Mara provides help in social compactness. Unlike other tribes of Mizoram, who are under the Welsh Presbyterian or Baptist missionaries, the Mara have Lakher Pioneer Mission which concentrates only on the Mara tribe provides relative social cohesiveness within the group as majority of the Mara tribe belongs to Mara tribe-based churches, namely ECM and CCI(M). There are no significant other groups in the area with the exception of small communities who migrated to the area due to being Siaha was the district administrative headquarters of Chhimtuipui district and then Siaha district and also being headquarters of Pawi- Lakher regional Council until the formation of MADC.

By 1910, the the Lakher Pionner missionaries have their first Mara Christian, his name is Thytu. By 1915, the number of Christian has increased to 24. In 1916, the first Christian church was constructed at Serkawr Mission compound and the early Mara Christian named their church as Lakher church for more than 50 years until the name of the church was changed to Lakher Independent Evangelical Church (LIEC) in 1960. The growing consciousness as Mara led to the changing of LIEC to Mara Independent Evangelical Church in 1967 but after short period, the name of the church was changed to Independent Church of Maraland (ICM) to accommodate non Mara within the church. In 1989, the Assembly again changed its name to Evangelical Church of Maraland (ECM).

After the formation of Mara Autonomous District Council, Siaha becomes the headquarters of the MADC. Many church leaders felt that to change the Headquarters of the Church to Siaha was essential for the further development of the Church. The decision of the Assembly to shift the headquarters of the Church to Siaha have a deep consequences as those who are in favour of keeping Serkawr as the headquarters retain their old name Independent Church of Maraland and break away from ECM (Hlychho, 2011). The Statistical Handbook 2011 of ECM recorded that the church has 46136 members belonging to 8230 households with 90 local churches becomes the largest Church within MADC. As the headquarters of PLRC and Siaha District, a significant number of non-Mara has settled in the area and hence other Christian denominations like PCI, BCM, UPC and others are also sprung up within the MADC area and the ECM also has as many as 12 churches namely: Bethel, Edentharr, Gilgal, New Siaha, Immanuel, Bethlehem, Council Vaih, Salem, Tipa beivaih, No-aotlah, Kaochao and Salemtharr conducted service in Mizo language and the report of the church and newsletter are also published both in Mara and Mizo language.

### **Conclusion**

The Mara are one of the most compact and isolated tribe in Mizoram. The big Chhimtuipui River, by encircling the area, makes the MADC area geographically isolated area inhabited by comparatively compact Mara tribe. It was only in 16<sup>th</sup> May 2000 that the Chhimtuipui Bridge which connects MADC area to other parts of

Mizoram was completed. This geographical isolation provides a favorable position to maintain their distinct language and culture on the part of the Mara, only a tiny section of them does not speak Mara language

The main discourse on Mara identity revolves around MADC area and politics. The issue of Mara identity vis-a-vis Mizo identity is not largely debated as the contestation was mainly with the nearest neighbour Lai tribe, with whom they contested for power during the PLRC era. In spite of the social closeness of the two tribes, in the sense of the presence of common clans among the two, at the political level the common clans also took the position that they are under different political set up of their own. As the Mara tribes are compact tribe having autonomy of their own, the issue of Mara identity protection is more of a political rhetoric than real social and cultural concerns.

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