

In Conversation with L. Keivom

- Interviewer: C. Lalawmpuia Vanchiau (OP)
Interviewee: L. Keivom

Born on July 15, 1939 at Pherzawl, Churachandpur District, Manipur, L. Keivom completed MA in History from Guwahati University and joined the Indian Foreign Service in the year 1970. He is multi-lingual writer and writes in Hmar, Mizo and English with several poems, critical essays, short stories and translation to his credit. His travel writing Zoram Khawvel series has attracted fame and recognition throughout. He has translated and published the Holy Bible in Hmar and Rabindranath Tagore's widely acclaimed Gitanjali. Presently he resides in New Delhi with his wife Pi Dari.

Here is an excerpt from a conversation with him.

Q. *At the outset can you please tell us where you were born and share to the readers your educational journey.*

A. I was born on July 15, 1939 at Pherzawl in South-west Manipur. I am the last out of thirteen (7 brothers and 6 sisters) born from my mother Khawtinhnieng from the chief's family. My father Hrangthatfieng Keivom, a poet and craftsman who was then suffering from chronic stomach ulcer knew that he would not live long to look after me and therefore committed me to Providential

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care saying God would take care of me and comfort me all my life and that my name would be 'Lalthlamuong' (which in Duhlian Lalthlamuana). I am the only one carrying the prefixed word 'Lal' among my siblings. I never saw even the photograph of my father as he died three months later but his blessings and love follow me all my life. He was buried at Pherzawl and his tombstone is standing alongside Chief Pu Bulhmang, the founder of the village, a heritage site more important for me than any site on this planet. It is here that my root lies.

Pherzawl is no ordinary village. It is the only village founded and ruled by the Hmar Chief in this so-called Hmar Area as the rest villages chose to invite Thado-Kukis to be their chiefs as a safeguard from impending attacks by the Lusei rulers across the border, an ingenious strategic calculation for their ethnic survival. By virtue of the unique position Pherzawl held, it naturally became a core centre for all specific Hmar ethnic plans and activities, a safe haven for the incubation of their political dreams and goals. It was in this area that Hmar identity and language was born and nurtured as an instrument for the spread of the Gospel in and around their ethnic neighbourhood.

The opening of the first ever high school in Manipur Hill at Pherzawl in 1951 was the first giant step taken to emancipate this area from illiterate darkness. More than hundred matriculates came out in a matter of few years. Soon, they took up professional courses in medicine, engineering, teaching, theology and regular government jobs and started building basic structure of our tribal socio-economic foundation.

I studied at the Middle School of Independent Church with two teachers- Class 8 passed as headmaster and Class 2 (Lower Primary) passed as Second Master. The school was a single hall building with no partitions. The roughly hewn-desks were arranged in rows for Class 6-2 and the rest from Class 1 to the bottom classes had no desks. Headmaster took five classes every period and the rest by his deputy. The system we followed was *by-rote* and *by-heart*, a term standard English dictionaries are even shy of inserting it in their dictionaries. We got it by-rote whatever was there in our textbooks except maths of which we had to learn the formula. By the time I reached Class 6 our headmaster left for theological studies and was replaced by a Class-6 passed. Therefore, I along with three other top rankers in our batch decided to skip over Class 6 and joined Class 7 at Pherzawl High School in 1953. I matriculated in 1959 from this school after two frightful fails in mathematics. It was a demeaning but eye-opening experience. On the plus side, I had learnt a life-long lesson: the traumatic experience taught me to never fail again in exams.

From Pherzawl High School, I moved to D.M. College (Imphal) till my graduation in 1963 and then joined Gauhati University for my post-graduate study in History for two years (1964-66). In my first attempt at Civil Services Examination soon after post-graduation, I got Indian Revenue Service (IRS- Customs & Excise) which I joined in 1967 and then further moved to Indian Foreign Service (IFS) in 1970 till my superannuation in 2002 and finally settled in Delhi.

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Pherzawl to Delhi is physically and mentally a long distance but reachable by God's help, hard work and through painstaking adherence to a resolute aim and constant effort to acquire required knowledge. I am no exception. The fact that from 2016 onwards my beloved village has been bearing the distinction of the administrative entity of the area PHERZAWL DISTRICT is also neither exceptional nor accidental. Heaven is our witness.

Q2. Can you tell us how and when you joined the Indian Foreign Service and in which countries you have been posted?

A. I switched over from IRS to IFS in July 1970. Foreign Service was always my first choice for the simple belief that it would provide the best learning opportunity for me to pursue my interest in literary activities and to fill up the yawning gap existed between my acclaimed degree and my real knowledge. When I looked back our formative years, from primary to high school and even through college and compared with those who grew up in standard schools and colleges, we were miles apart and whatever little knowledge we claimed to possess were haphazard and disjointed. You may not believe me if I tell you my elementary self-schooling really started when we went abroad. In order to fill up the basic knowledge gaps left behind in my school days, I began to study the textbooks of my children seriously and this enabled me to help them too whenever they needed help. I also strongly believed that since I wanted to become a writer of sort, I should acquire basic foundational knowledge on any topic engaging the community. Some stopped reading and studying after they got a degree or a

job. I do the opposite: after joining service, I started my own schooling, read on an average at least 5 standard books a month, added at least new ten vocabularies every day and then concentrated more on research materials on ethnic nation-making, linguistics, theology and translation after retirement.

My postings took me to Nairobi (Kenya), Jeddah (Saudi Arabia), Wellington (New Zealand) with concurrent accreditation to Apia (Western Samoa), Rangoon (Burma-Myanmar), Milan (Italy) and Male (Maldives) in a single record-breaking stretch of 21 years (1976-1997) which produced Hmar Hla Suina, 1-6 Zoram Khawvel serials, Thuthlung Ram, Bawktlang Thawnthu 1-2, Pherzawl Titi and many literary works, essays and seminar papers (published and unpublished) in Mizo and Hmar.

***Q.3. When did you started having an interest in literature?
Did you start writing at an early age?***

A. From the time I could recollect. I used to sit beside the elders and listened to their stories with rapt attention. By the time I could read and write, with pencil and an exercise book in hand, I would note down ancient tales and songs, priestly incantations, hunter's chants and so on. I wrote my first song when I was running 13 in 1952 which is well preserved as well as my first hand-written article on the beauty of the alphabet (Roman Script) in 1957. I lost all my precious notes and collection of Love Songs in the wake of a religious revival in 1953-55 and the misguided instruction that keeping such materials was against Christian teaching! We still have

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this kind of breed of believers in our midst, typical hypocrites who, if asked to remove Song of Solomon from the Bible, will label you as a blasphemer!

Q.4. Are your experiences in various countries an influence in your writings?

A. Yes, indeed, they help. They are helpful in assessing their situation not only from my perspective alone but from them as well so that one does not slip into the pitfall of prejudice. This is amply reflected in my book THUTHLUNG RAM (LAND OF THE COVENANT) which deals with 'People of the Book' (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) along with the Mizo-Jews. All the eight Zoram Khawvel serials as well as other books I had written so far have to do with my experience, a blending of Zo and global view.

Q.5. Can you tell us about the episode in Rangoon when you hosted a literary gathering at your residence, and your guests were arrested by the Burmese Government?

A. I served in Rangoon from April 1986 to January 1990 during which the country went through an intense political turmoil. Gen. Ne Win stepped down and months together the streets of Rangoon witnessed demonstrations demanding restoration of democracy till the army took over the Government on 8.8.88 and suppressed the movement with a strong hand.

Many fled the country and we had to open refugee camps at Champhai (Mizoram) and Chandel in Manipur. I visited the Champhai camps in March/April, 1989 which resulted in my prize-winning Zoram Khawvel-1 and the new political terminology.

In November, 1989, to review the draft as well as study my short story LALNUNNEM KA NGAI EM CHE (later shortened as LALNUNNEMI), I invited members of Tahan Literary Circle headed by the veteran Rev. L. R. Bawla and some prominent Zo leaders and family friends mostly pastors) from Rangoon led by Dr. Khuanga, Ph.D for a Literary Retreat (November 3-5) at my official residence INDIAHOUSE. We had wonderful time together and greatly benefited from the discourse.

The event was held during a politically very sensitive and difficult time when my every activity as a relentless supporter of the democratic movement was watched with suspicion by the local authorities. One week after our Retreat, all the participants were taken to custody and grilled day and night for a week. Fortunately, they were later released as no evidence was found of any illegal activities to proof their suspicion. The only account the authorities heard from every innocent detainee was the story of LALNUNNEM KA NGAI EM CHE which the interrogators made them translate in Burmese over and over again until the story wore them out. This was the first time my story dragged our people to the interrogation centre of a foreign country. They are our first heroes who lightened up Burma's dreaded camp with the beautiful flame of our tragic love story. It's a landmark happening, worth noting and respect.

Q.6. How many books have you written? Have you written any book in English?

A. I have written many pieces in Hmar, Mizo and English which, if compiled in books contain 300 pages each on an average, they

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may exceed 70. I have not so far published any book in English. English language and literature has contributors all over the world and it is my firm believe that it does not need my help at the expense of ours.

Q.7. When your book *Zoram Khawvel (1991)* received Book of the Year award, awarded by the Mizo Academy of Letters, how did you received it? Were you surprised? You were in Milan at that time if I'm not mistaken...

A. This was a travelogue about my first week-long visit to Mizoram in March 1989 when I was stationed in Rangoon. It was also the first book I ever wrote in Mizo. Surprisingly it bagged MAL's Book of the Year (1991), the first time such an award ever went to a Mizo writer outside Mizoram. It's rather an unusual book in the sense that people travelled abroad especially to the Holy Land and wrote about their observations but I did the opposite: I visited ours and wrote about us in an easy to read style with short paragraphs and separate headings so even a busy housewife could read it in bits and pieces while going through between multiple chores.

The text went through many hands as it was my first attempt to write a book in Lushai and my thought process which was in Hmar tended to produce a mixed construct of Lushai and Hmar which to me seemed like a real Mizo in the making but not quite right for the present.

The last and final editing was done by me and my soul mate in literature Prof. Siamkima Khawlhing at External Hostel in Delhi.

We had hilarious time together. He kept questioning why I used this and not that. One time, he suddenly asked me why I used the word ‘dawnkhawl’ for ‘meditation’ as there was no such word in Mizo dictionary. I told him to go back to Laithangpui’s composition (Tinkim ka dawnkhawlin, Awmkhua in tihar ngei) and be at peace with it! He was a good intellectual teaser and leg puller. There are many such anecdotes worth telling which I will leave behind for paucity of time.

Prof. Siamkima and our close friend M.C. Lalrinthanga are the two who made it possible for Zoram Khawvel to see the light of day and launched me to our exclusive lotus eating world for which I can never thank them enough. THE 1991 Book of the Year award was largely thanks to their contribution.

Q.8. The one who wrote the ‘Introduction’ was Prof. Siamkima Khawlhiring, a pioneer in literary criticism in Mizo Literature. Can you tell us about your friendship with him?

A. I first met Siamkima Khawlhiring when we joined D.M. College in July 1959 in Imphal. We did the same Intermediate of Arts (I.A) course with Alternative English as additional subject for two years followed by B.A Course with English Honours for another two years, sharing the same desk at class and a hostel for four consecutive years (1959-63). He completed the English Honours course whereas I changed my strategy and dropped English Honours six month before the final exam as I decided to pursue history rather than English for my post-graduate studies and later

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take history and political science for Competitive Exam. Accordingly, I took up history for MA and Siamkima who joined Gauhati University one year after me took up English. I left Gauhati University in 1966 and the first time I met him again was at his residence in Venghlui, Aizawl on March 13, 1989 when we renewed our friendship after 23 years. I was present when he passed way on January 13, 1992 and dedicated Zoram Khawwvel-3 to his memory.

I can never forget our reunion that night at Venghlui when we were once filled again with the spirits of William Shakespeare and the Romantic poets after we left D.M. College in 1963. As we did together during our college days, we started reciting their poems again which fell out out from our mouths like Wordsworth's cascading waterfalls. I now really wondered how we could remember all these ethereal lines after 26 years! It's definitely not because of the earthly spirits that we shared with other guests.

Taking advantage of my stay in Milan as Consul-General at the time, Siamkima and I had planned to tour together important sites in Italy and adjacent countries and write a book on the effects of Renaissance and Reformation on Italy and Europe and the rest of the world including our people. Our plan was for me to spend 1991 Christmas at Churachandpur and then leave for Aizawl to pick him up on our way back to Milan. Unexpectedly, I received a call from our friend Lala Khobung on January 9, 1992 that Siamkima was hospitalised. After disposing our two Italian guests who came with me, I left for Aizawl on January 11 and reached the

Civil Hospital at half past midnight. It was a sad reunion. I knew he was only waiting for my arrival before bidding the last goodbye. Our first reunion and our last farewell fell both on the 13th, which is my serial number in my family as well as that of Jesus after his 12th disciples.

Siamkima was a rare breed, a literary giant with an inner eye that could perceive beauty in all its elements. His book ZALENNA RAM (A land of Liberty) is one of the finest prose writings a Zo person ever produced, and has been a constant travel companion for me across the continents. The first line of poetry that always comes to mind whenever I heard Siamkima's name was P.B. Shelley's ADONAI, an elegy on the death of John Keats. Let me recite with all my heart and soul:

*...till the Future dares forget the Past,
His fate and fame shall be
An echo and a light unto eternity!*

Q.9. Can you explain the concept of 'Zoram Khawvel'? It is often interpreted as representing the 'Mizo Diaspora', do you think that it justifies it?

A. I believe I unconsciously conceived the idea of Zoram khawvel at Pherzawl. With the opening of Pherzawl High School in 1951, students from Mizoram, Cachar, Tripura and the southern region of Manipur speaking different Zo dialects came to study with students from Mizoram culturally leading the way. In a congenial atmosphere prepared by the Pherzawl chiefs along our headmaster

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H. Thanglora and his deputy L. Rothanga who were Zo integrationists, a kind of an emotional and cultural blending was gradually taking place. It took almost 40 years to crystallise into a concrete form during my stay in Burma.

I named my first travelogue to Mizoram in 1989 as 'Zoram Khawvel' and this title covers all extent and limit of the world of Zo descents of the past and the present over the globe. It has nothing to do with 'Mizo diaspora' in a particular continent alone as the umbrella of 'Zoram Khawvel' covers all the extent and limits of the Zo world in and out of life.

Zoram khawvel is an antidote for the ethnic survival of Zo people facing extinction in the face of massive population pressure and the major religions of the world enclosing us from all sides. The gradual opening up of the border land and river trade routes in the north and south and the communities who will then take over will decide its future. Can we then all throw away the Pherzawl Survival Kit and slide into Sheol? We will only survive by our will and courage and by no one else's. The maxim of our forefathers which will continue to ring true in times to come for our survival is: '*Sem sem, dam dam; ei bil, thi thi*' and the Spartan-like manifesto '*Dam leh tlâng khatah, thih leh ruam khatah*'.

Q.10. You seem to have a close acquaintance with the early political leaders like R. Vanlawma, Ch. Saprawnga and A. Thanglura. Among them who has a lasting impact on you?

A. Yes, I met all of them a few times: Saprawnga at Delhi, Thanglura at Shillong and Vanlawma at Aizawl. I read their works

thoroughly- Vanlawma's '*Ka Ram leh Kei*' (My Country and I), Aizawl, 1952; Thanglura's '*Zoram Politic Lumlet Dan* (Bel Keh Phuar Khawm Tui Pai Thei Lo), Shillong, 1988; and Ch. Saprawnga's, '*Ka Zin Kawng*', Aizawl, 1990. These chinks formed chapter 5 (93 pages) of my portrayal of our pristine political travellers, KHUALZIN PATHUM TITI in Zoram Khawvel-2. Perhaps, this cranky chapter is the most read of all my writings in Zoram Khawvel series. No wonder a friend of mine whispered to me one day to tell me that someone was thinking of dragging me to court for defamation! I told him: MOST WELCOME. If I quoted lines from your book bought openly from the market, will any magistrate come out to protect your honour or dishonour? On what basis?

Of the three, I came closest to Vanlawma. In a matter of a few years, we wrote to each other many long long letters exchanging our ideas and visions freely and frankly. Vanlawma considered himself as the guardian angel of Mizoram and its people and he really felt that they were not safe in his absence. One fat file in my Delhi library containing our correspondences will in future reveal the many yet unknown Vanlawma's dreams and vision. He was a class of himself.

Q.11. Thanglura was a Cabinet Minister under the Assam Government. What are your thoughts on him?

A. He did well. Why should the Assam Congress favoured him over the many equally ambitious ethnics Congress members unless

he was endowed with many plus points over them? He was deputed as peace emissary in 1960 to Churachandpur during the Kuki-Hmar conflict. I listened to his speech at Lamka Football Ground with rapt attention. His command and control of the explosive situation was impressive, leaving an essence of brotherliness amongst the conflicting groups.

Q.12. You have made a niche in the world of Mizo Literature and in your 'Zoram Khawvel' we see history intertwined with literature. Can you tell us the relation between history and literature?

A. History and literature are the two disciplines that I pursue all my awakened journey. History as we all know is all that has happened in the past, known and recorded. It is the record of human journey on earth and their environment. Life and all activities, see-able and unseen-able, come within the gamut of history. In order to understand the basic working knowledge of any branch of knowledge, you have no alternative but to know its particular history. You cannot know who you are unless you know the history of your family and of your community.

Literature is a collection of collective human thoughts and voices, hopes and dreams, successes and failures, various facets of human relations with natural forces which allowed people to progressively go beyond one stage of thought or development and build further on and on until they meet the very image they were made after. This process may take forever.

Leaving aside those conjectural tangibles, let me go back to history and literature. I love the two subjects during school and college days. I used to score more marks and picked up more vocabularies and better writing style in historical writings than in English subjects. Earlier, in this interview, I had mentioned that I had dropped English Honours sixth months before final exam as I then decided to opt history for my post-graduate studies and then offer later as main subject for Civil Services Competitive Exam which I did. It ultimately paid handsomely in 1969-70 when I scored (if I remember correctly) as high as 178 of 200 marks in Modern Europe which catapulted me to IFS/IAS.

Q.13. In your writings you often highlighted your dissatisfaction with the writers of Mizo history. Can you elaborate the reasons for this?

A. Whether true or false, it's been an universally accepted maxim that the writers of war history are usually the victors or those who survived from the conflict. The outside forces who came to occupy our lands were led by the British forces and most of the earlier accounts left behind them were personal observations of civil as well as military officers on the spot and therefore fairly independent and reliable. The next generation of Mizo historians belonged to the newly born Christian community who were closed to the ruling Sailo Clan by marriage, sharing their limelight and privileges. To please their masters, many of their accounts were biased and untrue, creating avoidable hindrances on the road to Zo integration. One writer from the ruling clan even named the colonised Sailo rule under the British dispensation as GOLDEN

HISTORY OF LUSHAI HILLS (Zoram-Chin-Lushai-Kuki Country, 2010)! Thankfully, B. Lalthangliana's MIZO HISTORY has somewhat rectified some of the imbalances.

Q.14. Among your Zoram Khawvel (1-8) which of these do you give the highest rank?

A. This is a very difficult question. Every of my Zoram Khawvel series dealing varied topics, is running on a similar vein: Zo integration vein. The only book dealing with a single theme covering almost all the continents is Zoram Khawvel-4 on national Identity and nationalism with special reference to Zo integration. You may not come across a single book like this anywhere on this planet dealing an encompassing and perennial topic like this and giving justice somewhat under one cover. Therefore, I will place it number one without hesitation.

Q.15. In your book 'Thuthlung Ram' (1997) you wrote that the Mizos who had migrated to Israel, otherwise 'Mizo Israel' are doubly lost. Can you elaborate on this?

A. When they left their religion Christianity and accepted Judaism as their new religion and performed circumcision that is Lost No. 1. Next, they denied their ethnic origin, changed their Mizo name, adopted Jewish name and identity and migrated to Israel. That is Lost No. 2. After their initial induction for settlement in Israel and into compulsory military services and their subsequent absorption and citizenship, they will be much more than "bo dawbola bo". By committing apostasy, they also are supposed to

have lost salvation gained through belief in Jesus of Nazarene, as proudly claimed by us Onward Christian Zo Soldiers.

Q.16. In 'Zoram Khawvel 4' (1997) you wrote about a place in China called Sinlung which is situated in the North of the Yunan Province between Chamdo and Sechuan by the banks of the river Yalung. Do you think this is the place where the Mizo forefathers originated from? What are your thoughts on this?

A. It is important to understand the difference between emotional history and actual physical history and what we presumed we were and what we actually are. Every community or tribe tended to claim preponderance over the others in one way or the other and concocted presumed origin like our misty and noisy Sinlung (Chhinlung) with Manmasipa as our progenitor, a name which sounded close to Manasseh in the Holy Book. If one tries to dig a little deeper into it, it does not take even a bat of an eyelid to find that it is baseless than asserting that our forefathers came from a cave. Our Kabaw Valley settlement itself being very recent in historical terms, peeping beyond the Shan trail and the Yunan settlement and fixing our Sinlung at the present Xinlong on Yalung river in Sechwan Province is something like a man catching dragon to save himself from drowning. It all appears to me the result of an intellectual corruption played upon our unsuspecting simpleton by some prankster who told them that Sinlung was clearly shown at page 69 of The Reader's Digest GREAT WORLD ATLAS, the copy of which has been in my library since long. A misguided clergyman even took the joke further by making a quick trip to this concocted site from Mizoram by road and wrote a book on it!

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Believe it or not, we have in our midst some intellectual delinquents who not only hailed him to the rank of Christopher Columbus but shamed themselves and their organisations in public by extolling and honouring him as a hero. What Romila Thapar said in her book, *THE PAST AS PRESENT, FORGING CONTEMPORARY IDENTITIES THROUGH HISTORY* (2014) is what we should heed instead: “Nations need identities. These are created from perceptions of how societies have evolved. In this, history plays a central role. Insisting on a reliable history is therefore crucial”.

History has become important in our country more than ever before because of intense pressure to rewrite the history of the country as per the ruling dispensation. History and myth should not be clubbed together. We should treat our mythical Sinlung at heart with awe and respect like the Garden of Eden and not reduce it to a historical site with heat and dust.

As a student of history, I have always been trying to treat differently the successes and failures of the national movements and struggles in the 60s and 70s and the march of our history in general and how Indianized we have become through systematic temperance of the warmth of corruption without our realizing it. Sinlung’s attraction is becoming less and less as we have grown more and more cosy with Delhi.

Q.17. You seem to have an interest on ‘Cultural Mapping’. How is this progressing?

A. As you know, Linguistic Survey of India was conducted under the supervision of G.A. Grierson which came out in 1904. It

was a mammoth survey the like of which India have not witnessed again despite several attempts including the latest planned 50 volume of the People's Linguistic Survey of India by men of straw as seen from some of the published volumes. My idea of cultural mapping is much more encompassing than the linguistic survey involving serious research and heavy technical and financial investment. My first idea was to start with two Old Kuki tribes- Koms of Manipur valley and the Darlongs of Tripura- by taking some of my trusted lieutenants to the spot and experimented in the simplest and most effective way to conduct the mapping. Unfortunately, none of us could devote more time for it and it remained in cold storage since 2012.

Q. 18 Amitav Ghosh wrote of Bahadur Shah, the last Mughal Emperor's tomb in The Imam and the India Prose Pieces (2002) as : "I learnt that the current Indian Ambassador to Burma, a Christian career diplomat from the north-eastern state of Mizoram, had taken the initiative to restore and refurbish Bahadur Shah's modest burial-place. I can think of no more appropriate tribute to the imaginative power of the Mughal order." Are you aware of this?

A. I left Rangoon on January 26, 1990. In 1991 Bahadur Shah Zafar's burial place was relocated where they found his skeleton. A mausoleum was constructed on this new spot and was inaugurated in 1994. My colleague Lalthanzaua Pudaite from Mizoram was Indian Ambassador in Rangoon from 1995-96. Much

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earlier we had Maj. Khathing, a Christian Tangkhul from Manipur followed later by a Khasi Christian Prof. G.G. Swell but none of the information you have quoted agree with my record.

Q.19. What are your thoughts on Zikpuii Pa and Lalhmingliana Saiawi as writers?

A. They all were few years senior to me in age. Zikpuii Pa and Lalhmingliana Saiawi had already become popular writers in our world much before I even tempted to scratch an article. Thankfully, God ordained that we all landed together in Delhi in no time to start not only our respective careers but also inaugurate the basic foundation of our society which has been expanding beyond recognition. We were then very small in number and lived very close together as a family, and everyone knew each other by name, even the names of the new-born babies. Listening to the many stories of Zikpuii Pa which formed the background material of many of his writings, was a rare treat. So also was Hming Saiawia's hilarious anecdote. I learnt lots of things from their rich experiences and missed them all. All of us worked hard in our respective endeavours and had little time to share our works. To explain it, I hope it may not be odd to add my story though out of the range of your question.

The five year period (1970-75) we lived together in Delhi with some breaks in between was the most fertile period of my literary exploration. This was the time I devoted myself wholeheartedly to build up a base for standard writing in Hmar literature. Except the sub-standard Bible (BSI) translation in poor

Hmar construction and some hymnal compilations and a few Beginner's textbooks, no standard reading material was available in Hmar. My first reading lesson in fact was Gospel John 1:1 in Lushai from our family Bible. The first hymn I learnt to sing was a Lushai translation. I passed Matriculation with Lushai as a vernacular subject. There's hardly standard reading material to choose from Hmar even to-day.

As soon as I settled in Delhi in 1970, I decided to take Hmar writing to a reasonable level by producing as much articles, essays, short stories, novels, key reference books as possible with standard Bible translation as the last target. With this target in mind, I devoted all off-office hours to literary works and produced 38 popular songs, 12 short stories, 2 novels, several quality essays and articles, book reviews and criticisms, a reference book on Hmar history, culture & literature, and several other projects in five years and raised Hmar writing at a level never heard before. The truth is, one can take a camel to the well but cannot make it drink. I however firmly believe that whatever literary work I produce in my mother tongue is for Zoram khawvel and the linguistic treasures I could be able to create and preserve are for the healthier and richer survival of the Zo literature and the eventual evolution of a rich and vibrant Zo language.

Q.20. Do you think that without them Mizo Literature would have been a lonely place?

A. Yes, indeed, very lonesome. But you can always find us in our treasure cove whenever you open our page- Zikpuii Pa, a

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congenial colonial worshipper and a great enchanter whose page you cannot leave once you opened it; Lalhmingliana Saiawi, creator of Lungrang Laiawrha, who, like a humorous drunken driver, would break abruptly at intervals and make you laugh and dizzy all the way; and the interviewee who will always be happy whenever you mention Zoram Khawvel and sing its melodious songs.

Q.21. What are your thoughts on JF Laldailova?

A. I never had an opportunity to meet JF in real life but had read every piece of his works I came across. His dictionary is a constant companion. His Shakespearian translations in Mizo are unique and class by itself. His BIBLE THLIRNA, an entertaining and witty diatribe on Mizo translation of BSI Bible Version and SSS hymnals is perhaps the highest standard level of writing I have come across in Mizo on translation and correct usage of words. I always wonder how he managed to gain such deep knowledge in Mizo given his modest educational background outside Mizoram. I am always amazed every time I read his analysis. He is a genius; a favourite child of Muse.

Q.22. In your book 'Bawktlang Thawnthu' (1992) you wrote of the tragic story of 'Riangpuii'. Did you base this story from a real incident or is it fictional?

A. Riangpuii is purely a fictional character created to depict the level to which hypocrisy has taken deep roots in our community. But reality and fiction can sometimes be a two-faced coin. A good number of people confidentially thank me for writing their story.

Q. 23. What about your interest in composing songs?

A. Yes, I started with song writing. My first composition came when I was running thirteen for anthem of our Pherzawl Young Athletic Union (PYAU) in 1951. I had composed, may be about 150, but only about 100 have survived. Curiously, I constructed, if not composed, more poems through the Bible and various other translations, for example, Rabindranath Tagore's 'Gitanjali' (1973-74). Each Psalm in my translation has equal syllables which may not only be rare but not available on earth. Psalm number 23 has 7 syllables each whereas 24 has 8. Each has its diction and correct reading adds to the flavour. Composition in this restricted format is much more difficult than composing normal song especially when one tries to maintain internal rhyming intact.

Q. 24. Do you think that Mizo Literature has a bright future?

A. My association with Aizawl has become less frequent in this regard and is limited to buying a few good books that came up sporadically. It appears to me that as Aizawl has reached a saturation point, more and more self-analytical writings from thinkers living in Vairampur have appeared, bravely highlighting the entrenched corruption and the rot in the society. This to me is an encouraging sign to shake up Aizawl from slumbering. Apart from theological publications, we have a long way to go. We do not know yet how badly literature in our mobile-hijacked world will be impacted by the invader. One thing is very clear: we are no longer of our own and that we are not in control. It may bring down the whole

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civilization and another one may grow from the ashes. We should however not forget that whatever happens as nature rebuked, a nation's literature cannot go beyond its own height.

Q.25. What are your plans/project for the future?

A. I am now running 81 but still working 12 hours a day on my computer as well as looking after my bed-ridden and dementia wife. I try to compile and publish at least one book a year from my earlier writings, write weekly article for DELHI THURAWN and special articles for Zoram Khawvel Journals and Magazines, helping people in editing, re-writing and translation, feeding to inquirers of specific information not commonly available, render many other philanthropic services and carry on my flagship Bible project.

I have an excellent collection of books and valuable materials which form my ZORAM KHAWVEL LIBRARY. Systematic cataloguing, indexing and recording and their preservation which all demand not only expert and professional care but also heavy financial investment, have yet to be worked out. But the most engaging work is my Bible translation and publication called DELHI VERSION which has already gone through not only three publications in 2004, 2007 and 2015 with latest WhatsApp backup facilities but also demands constant revision and improvement as perfection in this venture is only in the hands of the Eternal Revealer of TRUTH and MEANING.

Delhi

October 12, 2019.

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