Journal of International Academic Research for Multidisciplinary

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‘BAWI’ SYSTEM: INIQUITOUSLY SO CALLED ‘SLAVERY’ IN LUSHAI HILLS

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents part of a still ongoing debate, even among the Mizo scholars themselves, on the issue of a peculiar ‘Bawi’ system. During the second and the third decades of the 20th century the bawi issue had provoked a great deal of controversy between the colonial rulers and the Christian Missionaries who came into the hills on the heels of British conquerors. This is remarkable while the Mizos themselves who practised the system since time immemorial remained silent it were the foreigners who come into conflict over the issue. In olden days bawis could never become free. As regard their general well-beings much, of course, depended on the chiefs, but under no circumstances could freedom be gained and all the bawi’s children became bawis. On the whole, they were considerately and often kindly treated. They formed part of the chief’s household and their bodily wants were always assured and amply provided for. Women were allowed to marry. They could acquire property and there were many who enjoyed their master’s confidence. No steps were taken to guard them. It would have been probably impossible for any outsider to know who was a bawi than except by interrogation. However, with the British rule in these hills, all the most objectionable features of the bawi system have already been modified by the orders of successive Superintendents and under the civilising influence of Christianity and western education. They have been raised from perpetual serfdom to complete freedom subject to a civil liability of Rs 40/- for a whole family whatever may be the number of its member and ample time. In spite of this, one Dr Peter Fraser, a Welsh Calvinistic Presbyterian Missionary, who came to the Lushai Hills in December 1908, who had no previous knowledge of the East, assumed an attitude of active hostility towards this custom and hence provoked a wide range of controversy with the district authority. The issue has set the tone of arguments for almost a couple of decades and is still a topic of debates.

KEYWORDS: Bawi, Slavery, Lushai
In the traditional Lushai society there had been a group of people called bawis. They were of three types as follows:

**Inpuichhung bawi:**

They were those who have been driven by extreme poverty or destitute who seek refuge in the chief’s house.¹ After claiming the protection of the chief, they and their children became a part of their master’s household and worked for him in return for food and shelter.

**Chemsen bawi:**

They were criminals like murderers, debtors, and thieves and so on, who took shelter in the chief’s house as a consequence of their ill deeds.² By seeking cover, the fugitives became the chief’s bawis. Though they lived in separate houses, they had to serve for their master chief and their children were also considered bawis.³

**Tuklut Bawi:**

They were those who left the losing side and joined the victors during the inter-clan or inter-tribal warfare, on condition that they and their descendents shall serve as bawis. They lived separately but had to work for their masters. Apart from the bawis there was another group of people called Sals. They were captives made in war.⁴ They themselves were called sals, while their children became bawi.⁵ The sal may be kept not only by the chief but also by their captors. They constituted a permanent labour force for their owners.

The Lushai custom provided that a fatlum bawi, the youngest son of the out-dwelling bawi, could not be redeemed.⁶ The reason for this was that, all debts were hereditary among the Mizos and descended from father to son. However, the debtors pay no interest. The relation between the chief and his bawi amount to civil contract, pure and simple, and the youngest son who inherited his father’s property retained the liability to perform the bawi contract as he was liable to pay his father’s debt.⁷

There was also a customary provision that the bawis were allowed to change their allegiance to another chief if they were ill-treated. For fear of such desertion many chiefs were compelled to be lenient to them for their prestige and wealth largely depended upon the number of bawis they had possessed.⁸
Descriptions:

The description of the bawi system had been varied, ranging from social charity to that of pure slavery. The word bawi had been translated by F.W. Savidge and J.H. Lorain, the pioneer Christian Missionaries in Lushai Hills, in their Dictionary as ‘slave or retainer’.\(^9\) They themselves later on admitted that the use of the word was unfortunate and that ‘retainer or pauper’ would have been more suitable.\(^10\) Harry Innes Howe (Mary Winchester) in her letter to E.S Montagu, however, states, “In the year 1871-72, I was a captive in that country...That slavery does exist amongst the Lushai tribe is an undoubted fact, and while it is to a certain extent true that under the existing system the Bois are supported by the chiefs, it would be more accurate to say that the reverse is more frequently the case in that the slaves support the chiefs and work hard in order to do so”.\(^11\) A.W. Davis describes it as ‘slaves’.\(^12\) Chapman & Clark, Missionaries at Lunglei, wrote thus: “Those who through handicap or calamity had no family to care for them had the right to live in the chief’s house and receive what they needed. In return, they helped as they were able. There were, therefore, no beggars among them”.\(^13\)

The Controversy

The British rule had brought a number of changes in the administration, socio-economic and cultural life of the Lushais. In addition to these, the Christian Missionaries who came to these hills on the heels of colonial conquerors accompanied by a new religion and western system of education have brought a number of new things to these semi-savage hillmen. Closely connected with these changes was the controversy over the Bawi issue. With the British rule in the hills, the end of raids and inter-tribal feuds, establishment of peace and order, the introduction of British judicial system, there, being no new recruits, the Chemsen Bawi, Tuklut Bawi and Sal categories soon ceased to exist. Hence, while discussing the issue of bawi controversy, it is mainly related with the Inpuichhung Bawi (in-dwelling) and Inhrang Bawi (out-dwelling) category, who were in the words of J.M Lloyd, “widowed, orphaned or otherwise impoverished members of the village community” who seek refuge in the chief’s house.\(^14\)

The British administration, which depends largely upon the good will of the chiefs, was reluctant to call it a crude form of slavery and hesitated to interfere with the system. Neville Edward Parry, Superintendent of Lushai Hills during 1924-28,
admitted that “the Lushai Bawi was never a slave, he was only a chief’s dependent, he was never sold and the relationship between him and his chief was one of mutual help”. In the mean time it is to be understood that the Lushai custom did not provide any other means to look after the destitute, as such the system had a charitable dimension. However, while acknowledging that the system presented a crude form of charity, one needs to recognise that if a man becomes bawi, he and his descendants shall remain bawis, though it was provided that one can redeem himself and his family by paying a ransom price of Rs 40/- or a sial (mithan) to his owner chief.

Thus on the surface, the system appeared to be good, while David Edward Jones, a senior Welsh Missionary at Aizawl, admitted that “it was becoming corrupt”. Hence, he, F.W Savidge, J.H Lorrain and other senior missionaries felt that the system should be allowed to wither away with the growth of public moral consciousness.

The controversy began in 1909, when one Khawvelthanga, a young Sailo chief of Maubuang village, had set free all his bawis. On this act he was largely inspired by Doctor Peter Fraser, a Welsh Missionary at Aizawl and one Vanchhunga, a freed ‘Fatlum Bawi’. Major Harry Cole, Superintendent of Lushai Hills during 1905-11, had strongly objected to this drastic reform. To him, ‘it was bound to displease the ruling chiefs’. According to him, Fraser’s propaganda has been productive of the greatest discontent and that his course of action, if persisted in, may either end in his murder or a general rising in the district. He, therefore, contended that all the objectionable features of the bawi system had already been modified by the orders of successive Superintendents and that it was inadvisable to introduce further changes without great risk of provoking disturbances. Fraser, on his part, said that the bawi in a chief’s house was clear instance of slavery within the British Empire, as such it was against the constitution and should be abolished ‘root and branch’. In his eagerness to set things move, Fraser paid the ransom price for about forty bawis from his own pocket, and persuaded the newly converted chiefs to set free their bawis. Under such urge, several chiefs in acknowledging their loyalty to their new faith set free their bawis, who have been in their families for generations. Again, to publicise his actions and to raise money, Fraser had many postcards printed, sold and circulated. Therefore, the search for its abolition and the consequent preservation of the system placed both the missionary and the Superintendent in a conflicting position.
Cole, in an effort to defuse the anticipated problems, had issued an order stating that the Lushai bawi system was not bound slavery, and henceforth declared that the ‘Bawi man’ or ransom price should be called ‘Chawm man’ or boarding fee, and whosoever wanted to redeem himself and his family must pay Rs 40/- or a sial to his owner chief.23 Fraser, on his part, was mobilising support from his fellow missionaries working in the district. He was partly supported by them, all of whom were more experienced and senior to him.24

The controversy engendered a great deal of disagreement both in Wales as well as in Assam. Out of the dispute, the Directors of the Welsh Presbyterian Mission advised their missionaries that, “peculiar circumstances in different parts of the British Empire led local authorities to act differently out of respect for local custom”, and cautioned Fraser “not to press too rigidly principles which are admitted in other parts of the British Empire”.25 They had further stated that Fraser may be mistaken as to the true character of the bawi system and may have taken an exaggerated view of it, and his method of procedure, both as regard to the native and the government, have been unfortunate.26 Hence, the Directors proposed a meeting of the missionaries working in the district and to jointly submit their proposal, if any, to the Superintendent. But, in spite of this, Fraser, acting independently of his fellow missionaries, submitted a memorandum to His Majesty King George and sent letters to the Members of British Parliament and released a Press Statement.27 But the matter was referred back to the Government of India and thence to the Assam Government.28 This act of Fraser had further twisted the controversy and the Senior Missionaries and the Mission Directors disapproved of his action.

The hardened attitude of Fraser compelled the Superintendent to restrict his movement in certain villages and pressure was put on him to leave the district or to concentrate himself entirely to his missionary works. On this, Fraser’s stand was that it would mean the surrender of his personal liberty and freedom of conscience. Cole, therefore, recommended his expulsion from the district. Even then, the District Conference held at Shillong during 27-28 June 1911 failed to pursue Fraser to come to an agreement. At this point, the government felt compelled to order the removal of Fraser from the Lushai Hills. Fraser left on 26th October 1912 and Cole was also transferred to Manipur.29
The Compromise

Before Fraser’s departure, the Missionaries met in Assembly on 11 October 1911 at Aizawl, to once again consider the issue. The meeting was attended among others by J.E Evans of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, D.E Jones of the North Lushai Hills and J.H Lorrain of the South Lushai Hills. The Conference considered the policies on the subject enunciated by Cole and other Superintendent to bring about modification in the Bawi System.

In 1914 a compromise was arrived at by which the use of the term bawi was to be discontinued and that bawiman, or the ransom price was changed to that of chawmman or boarding fees. The bawi could now leave their masters at will but the chiefs could sue for the ransom price. This was greeted by many with joy. The settlement was in no way revolutionary. It did not do away with Bawiman or ransom price, but simply changed the name to Chawmman or boarding fees, the validity of which no one questioned. The only alteration is that the bawi could now leave his master without fear, but he had to pay for his freedom.

The Government of India was cautious not to strike a blow at the position of the chiefs. Sir Archdale Earle, Chief Commissioner of Assam, had observed with regret that there was an apparent tendency to belittle the position of the chiefs, who were “clothed with authority by the Government”. Further that:

The chiefs in the Lushai Hills are hereditary rulers, and unless a chief can show his capacity to rule according to Lushai custom, he will soon be left without a village. The policy has been to uphold the authority of the chiefs in all legitimate directions, leaving petty disputes to be decided by them and the village council of elders, to administer the district with their assistance, while at the same time restraining them from exercising their authority in improper and undesirable ways. In 1915, the Government of Assam proposed to buy out the bawis. The total cost was estimated at Rs.45,960/- and that a date should be fixed after which no more bawi contract should be entered into. Otherwise, the chiefs might go on creating bawi indefinitely and the government would have to go on paying for them. But the move was postponed until the World War was over. In 1921, the Secretary of State for India had asked the Assam Government that whether the time was favourable for the implementation of the measures contemplated in 1915. The Assam Government, in reply, proposed the postponement of the question until there was improvement in the financial position.
In 1923, the Governor General-in-Council had issued instructions for the implementation of the Bawi Census, and on the receipt of the complete information, would consider the feasibility of carrying out the reforms. In compliance with this, W.L. Scott, then Superintendent of Lushai Hills had completed the Bawi Census by which the number of ‘In-dwelling Bawis’ was 316 families, comprising 476 members of whom 119 were males between the age of 16 and 60, and 357 were women and children. The number of ‘Out-dwelling Bawis’ was 1110 families.

Meanwhile, a peculiar bawi customs prevalent amongst the Chins and the Lakhers in one area of the Lunglei Sub-Division will also make it necessary to pay the redemption price in respect of individuals and not in respect of families. Consequently, the total number of cases in which the redemption price estimated was 1626 families. Hence, the initial expenditure in redeeming the bawis would be Rupees 65,000/-, which was a huge amount which the government was reluctant to spend. In course of time, the character of the bawi system was materially changed, in particular by the liberty given to any man to convert his status as a bawi into a civil liability of Rupees 40/-. The system was also progressively modified under the civilising influence of Christianity and education, which has spread with great rapidity during the last ten years. Under such circumstances, the Government of India finally decided in 1923, with the approval of the Secretary of State, that there was no necessity for any further changes. In this the Governor General declared that:

It would be wiser, apart altogether from financial consideration, to allow the process of modifications to continue until all objectionable features in the system have disappeared, than to risk the serious disorganisation which might result from the attempt to uproot the system entirely.

Moreover, the abolition of bawi status would not dispose of civil claims to maintenance, which have always been recognised among the Lushais. Liability in the case of chawmman was precisely the same as in the case of bawiman that was Rupees 40/-. In the event of a freed bawi, who had returned to his owner chief for maintenance, again leaving his master’s protection, the liability would inevitably enforced, whereas, bawi man cannot be claimed if a bawi goes from one chief to another. The social objection taken to the fact that the children of bawi were also bawis was true that the children of the in-dwelling bawis were bawis. But when the whole family leaves, all he can do is to claim the usual sum of Rupees 40/-.
case of out-dwelling bawis, it was only the youngest son who was regarded as a bawi and over the other children the chief has no claim whatever.\textsuperscript{40}

**CONCLUSION**

The settlement on the bawi question was achieved not by sudden abolition as advocated by Fraser, but by gradual process implemented by the successive Superintendents and the Missionaries, allowing it to wither away. By 1927, the system was almost completely disappeared in the Lushai Hills.\textsuperscript{41} However, this may have not been happened without Fraser’s agitation. Under the new arrangement, the chiefs lost much in prestige as well as in materials, for it was by such dependents that they had increased their wealth.\textsuperscript{42}

A careful study, however, reveals that Fraser’s approach to the bawi system was rather biased. He did not realise that the system served an useful purpose in the past and that it could be maintained in a modified form. He had, without making for any substitution, simply moved for its total abolition. He had no reason to admit that in a society where there is no other means to look after the destitute, the bawi system served a useful purpose.\textsuperscript{43} Therefore, any reasonable person has to admit that the time was not yet ripe for abrupt change and that the system as was existed has been robbed off its oppressive features with the civilising influences of British rule and the introduction of Christianity and western education.

To further examine this iniquitous so called ‘slavery’ as advocated by Fraser no one sees men caught and chained or sold in the market place, but those who are in despair as to a means of livelihood, putting themselves voluntarily under contract to work for the chief in return for which they would get the latter’s protection. It was not a final contract such as signified among the Hebrews by the boring of the ears. But, when a bawi wished to become free again he could do so by paying a ransom price of Rupees 40/- or a sial to his owner chief. Hence, Reverend F.J Sandy, a senior missionary at Aizawl, in his letter had indicated that the local missionaries opinions as a whole, has not generally demanded drastic action for the out and out abolition of the system.\textsuperscript{44}

On the issue, the British official attitude was considerate from the very beginning. They met Fraser in presence of his own Missionary Council, but he was impervious to their joint representation. Fraser said that his conscience forced him to antagonise the Government on the issue. In this W.E White remarks, “It was right to
allow due weight to his opinion and most right to respect his conscience. But it is equally important to consider the official notion, who have been chastened by a longer experience of the problem”. Therefore, one can understand how the picture of a missionary fighting alone ‘for poor slaves against the callous government’, would appeal to good men of England, who had got hold of the wrong standpoint. For, Fraser had appealed past those who know to those who do not know. Again, his independent action had stultified all missionary organisations and he misrepresents the mass missionaries in India who have confidence and gratitude towards the government. It is well to remember that the perpetual gap between the ideal and possible, there should be at least a certain compromise. Fraser failed to realise this and agitated for a speedy reform thereby upsetting the whole order.

Therefore, it would be a doubtful procedure for a religious teacher to interfere in politics. If one may do so without irreverence, the attitude of Christ may be referred. Again, David Livingstone deplored slave trade more effectively by his Christian teachings and personal character than by directly antagonising the local authorities with an inflammatory propaganda of his own. There was what one might call compromising attitude in the face of difference. The acts of Fraser had created an imbalance in the wheel of change. Therefore, Major Anthony Gilchrist McCall, Superintendent of Lushai Hills during 1931-1943, later remarked that:

If changes come and come they must, let them come from within, not without, and let provision for the effects be made and let it be assured that this provision will dovetail into the general framework and will not foul the wheels or upset the balances.
2 C.L.Hminga, *The Life and Witness of the Churches in Mizoram* (Serkan: BCM Press, 1987). p.28. He said, “Even the avengers of blood pursuing a murderer absconded red-handed were not allowed to pass beyond the threshold with weapons in their hands”.
3 Mangkhosat Kipgen, *Christianity and Mizo Culture* (Jorhat: 1996). p.74
5 Mangkhosat Kipgen, *op.cit.*
6 Vanchhunga, *Lusei leh a vela Hnamdangte Chanchin* (Aizawl: Reprint, 1994). p.176. But it so happened that one Vanchhunga, a ‘Fatlum Bawi’ was released by his owner chief Lalthawngliana Sailo, chief of Sialsuk in 1898 and appointed him as one of his ‘Upas’ or Council of Elders.
8 NAI. Foreign External A. Proceedings (hereafter FEAP). September 1911. Nos.5-21. It is natural that when the most powerful chiefs were the legislators that custom should always be in favour of the strong man. Hence a bawi was free to run away from one chief as long as he took service with another chief. A useful rule which enabled a big chief to recover anyone he wanted from a weaker one and at the same time to keep all the bawis of lesser luminaries.
10 NAI. FEAP. September 1911. Nos.5-21
11 Ibid. FEAP. March 1914. Nos. 11-17. Harry Innes Howe (Mary Winchester) to E.S Montagu, Under Secretary of State for India. Dated 14th July 1913.
15 NE Parry, *op. cit.* p.227
16 NAI. FEAP. September 1911. BC Allen, Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India. Forein. No.335A, Dacca, dated 4th February 1991. Sial or Mithan was a large bovine family domesticated by the Lushais.
17 JM Lloyd, *op. cit.* p.161
19 NAI. FEAP. September 1911. Nos.5-21.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
23 NAI. FEAP. September 1911. Nos.5-21.
24 JM Lloyd, *op. cit.* p.155
25 Mangkhosat Kipgen, *op. cit.* p.161
26 NAI. FEAP. September 1991. Nos.5-21. Secretary, Welsh Calvinistic Mission to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal (E) and Assam. Dated 16th March 1911.
27 Mangkhosat Kipgen, *op. cit.*

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28 JM Lloyd, *op. cit.* p.155
29 *Ibid.* p.156
30 NAI. FEAP. March 1914. Nos.11-17
31 NAI. FEAP. July 1915. Nos.3-8. B.C Allen, Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary, Government of India, Foreign Department. No.5028P Dated 23rd June 1915. Forwarding the Chief Commissioner’s view on the Bawi issue in the Lushai Hills.
33 NAI. FPAP. July 1915. Nos,3-8.
38 *Ibid.*, Nearly 30% of the total population including 52 chiefs were now Christians and the tendency of the Christian chiefs was either to release their bawis altogether or treat them on entirely different footing.
43 NAI. FEAP. September 1911. Nos.5-21. To reveal the fact, two families of ten members of bawi, who were ransomed by Fraser had voluntarily returned to their owner-chiefs within a few months after obtaining their freedom.
47 AG McCall, *op.cit.*p.131