

Chapter - 3

Describing the *Boi* System of Lushai Hills

The *Boi* system in Lushai Hills was one of the most controversial issues on the debate on slavery during the colonial period. Different scholars have understood the system in different ways. Due to the combination of two set of human existence, the love and hatred in its practice, between the oppressed slaves and the beloved children, the *Boi* system was often interpreted in different ways. Those who looked at it from the perspective of love and care eventually found it a charitable practice whereas seeing from the perspective of other extreme, the toils of workload and of the loss of movement, found them to be no better than the slaves. Therefore, the study of *Boi* system depends upon the way a particular scholar looks at it from his own chosen perspective. In this process, no consensus will be possible and in fact it is meaningless to seek for such agreement. But the road less trudging is: *Boi* system was not seen from its own setting as what may be called the middle path to the extremes. Therefore, in spite of a number of works on *boi* system the debate continues unabated. It centers on the issue of slavery and not of the *boi* itself. While some scholars felt that *boi* system is nothing less than slavery others felt otherwise. The latter group of scholars see the system as something akin to ‘domestic servants,’ ‘personal attendants,’ ‘dependents’ and so on. Still there are scholars who came in between the two extremes. They felt that the *boi* system had some ‘tinge’ of slavery or was a ‘mild’ form of slavery but not slavery in its classical sense.

This chapter examines the *Boi* system of the Lushai Hills as it existed during the colonial period. It traces the origin and evolution of the system among the Luseis and look into the system itself from its own setting, its role in the economy of the chief’s house, their status in the chief’s family, in the larger society and within the class of *bois*. The chapter also focuses on the debate on the *boi* system during the colonial period especially between the missionaries and the colonial state in order to see the two extreme cases of *boi* practices as it existed during the period discussed. In doing so, this

chapter also critically examines the system to see whether it fits within the rubric of slavery or not. A brief discussion on the existing literature on the *boi* system would be helpful to begin with.

Origin of the *Boi* System

The origin of *boi* system may be traced to the tradition of debt bondage. Guite felt that the ‘practice seems to have begun with the custom of debt bondage which gradually includes other groups of bonded labourers like war-captives, destitute, criminals and those who were bought.’ He noted that Buchanan was, perhaps, the first colonial notice *boi* system in Lushai Hills in 1798. Buchanan was told by five ‘Lang-ga’ (Maramas term for Kukis) men and two women that ‘they have slaves in the same manner as the Ma-ra-mas’ have. As per the Maramas system, one became ‘slave’ to anyone one was in debt. He remains his slave until the debt was paid off during which he had to provide free labour in the master’s field with some monthly allowance. He could not be sold by his master but he could move to another master if the latter paid his debts. Buchanan also noted that the wife often became slave for her husband’s debts and children for their parents.’¹

If this was the system that prevailed in Lushai Hills earlier then we can see that a bonded debtor was in bondage with his labour for a fixed period of time, the labour being counted corresponds to the debt. This is the principle which still existed during the later period at least in theory but what one finds in the nineteenth century was certainly different. We can see that now the *bois* have to work and work for the master which is not counted as part of the price to buy his freedom. To buy his freedom the *bois* have to procure from other alternative sources which rarely came. Hence, the *bois* remained as *bois* throughout their life and the children of the *bois* now became *bois*.

For instance, Lewin in the 1860s noted that the “residence of a powerful Chief is generally surrounded by the houses of his slaves [*bois*], who marry and cultivate, enjoying undisturbed the fruits of their labour.”² However, it was John Shakespear, the

¹ See Guite, ‘Civilisation and its malcontents: The Politics of Kuki raids in nineteenth century Northeast India,’ *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, <http://ier.sagepub.com/>, 48, (3) (2011): 339-76, pp. 366-69. See also Willem Van Schendal, (ed) *Francis Buchanan in Southeast Bengal (1798): His Journey to Chittagong*, the Chittagong Hill tracts, Noakhali and Comilla, University Press Ltd, 1992, pp. 89-90.

²Lewin, *Wild Races of South Eastern India*, TRI, Aizawl, 1870, p. 132.

first superintendent of Lushai Hills (1898-1905), who recorded the first detailed account of the *boi* system in Lushai Hills. He remarked that they lived in the chief's house:

...ever since they were children and had been fed at his expense till they were able to contribute towards the labor of the household, and Saipuia (the chief) had given the man his wife. This form of *parental slavery* is a Lushai custom that I see no reason to interfere with. They are not captives, but merely people who from one cause or another have sought the shelter of the chief's house; and in return for their keep they work in the chief's jhooms & c.³

We can see that what was considered a 'parental slavery' in the early 1890s was no more slaves in 1912 at the height of *boi* controversy between colonial state and Christian missionaries. In his 1912 monograph, Shakespear categorically wrote:

Among the *Thados* and Chins real slavery used to exist, and men and women were sold like cattle. Among the Lushais this has never been the case, but there is a class of *Boi* who have been miscalled slaves by those ignorant of their real condition.⁴

The coming into prominence of the Lushai *boi* system as we see in the nineteenth century was contingent upon by certain pertaining economic and political situation in the Hills. Jhum cultivation was the mainstay of the Lushai society and was a laborious economy that requires both men and women. There was no other economic option left to orphaned children and widowed mothers. In such cases, they would invariably enter the chief's house or other richer family if there were no male relatives or fathers to look after these destitutes. This type of circumstance became prominent in case of crop failure, warfare and so on. Good harvest depended wholly on nature and the clemency of weather.

A continuous and long period of monsoon may cause great hardship to people in general. However, an occasional visit of bamboo famines in the hills was perhaps most disastrous to this section of the hill population. The first known *mautam* (bamboo famine) occurred in 1861 and again reappeared in 1880. We found from the reports of colonial accounts that they were such a disastrous event in the hills where thousands of people had to temporarily come down to the plains for work and food. During the 1880s famine, the British government sent up large amount of food to the hills which were to

³ MSA, 'Official Tour Diary of John Shakespear': Diary for the week ending 20 June 1891, in Memo of Offg. Commr. Chittagong, 29 June 1891.

⁴ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 45.

be repaid by the hill people later. The worst situation was when there was no centralised authority like state to provide for any relief measures. It was under such circumstances that we have several accounts of parents “selling their children and themselves for a meal or a small coin, and thus famine replenished the slave market.”⁵ The only person who could lend support during such disaster was the chief. Therefore, many of the hapless families entered the chief’s house to survive the disastrous event on condition that they become his *bois*.

This occasional hardship was compounded by the internecine warfare among the several Lusei chieftains throughout the nineteenth century. We have accounts of inter-tribal warfare, first among different chieftains and tribes such as Pois versus Luseis, then between the so-called ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ Luseis, then again between the so-called ‘Northern’ and ‘Southern’ Luseis which finally came to an end with the coming of 1880s bamboo famines. It was under such continuous warfare among the tribes in Lushai Hills that the number of *bois* shot up arithmetically.”⁶ Attacks begot counter attacks and hence the mortality rate among the adult male members eventually increased rendering large number of hapless widows and orphans seeking help at the house of the chiefs.

Women and children were usually the victims of warfare and raids. They were the ones who could not escape the surprised tactic of Lusei warfare, they lost their husbands, sons or fathers in the war, they were the ones who found maximum hardship after their working male members were killed and eventually were the ones who found it most difficult to buy their freedom once they enter *boihood*. Vanchhunga, in his statement before Fraser, noted that the chiefs had “tried their best to make the orphans and destitute slaves for their master, and once taken, some of them continued for three to four generations.”⁷ He noted the pitiful situation of a young man (Chalrianga) who dreaded to become a *boi* but found no other option but to acquiesce. Fraser writes that this young man

While away from the village working for the government work (impressed labour), his father had gone short of food, bound himself and his absent son as slaves to the chief.

⁵ Assam State Archives, (hereafter ASA), Political Department, Political (A), ‘The Anti- Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society to India Office’, 8 July 1913, Letter No. 2138, April 1914.

⁶ See for details of these warfare in Lushai Hills in Mackenzie, *North- East Frontier*, pp. 419-420; Shakespear, *The Lushai-Kuki Clans*, pp. 7-8; *Official Handbook on the Lushais*, pp. 18-29.

⁷ Statement of Vanchhunga, dated December 11, 1909, in *Slavery in British Territory, Assam and Burma*.

On his return, Chalrianga did not want to be a slave and wept and wept. He kept away from the chief's house for about fifteen days, but an order from the chief came that whoever would take Chalrianga in would be fined a gayal (40 rupees). The young man went without food for many days as everyone was afraid to incur the chief's anger by disobeying him and did not feed him. Eventually, he was forced to enter the chief's house.⁸

Although Chalrianga's father had agreed to become *tukluh boi* in exchange for food, the chief's instrument of 'force' came as the final blow that reduced the young man to the status of a *boi*.

The 'hospitality' of the chiefs was not so much due to kindness. It was because of their greed in making wealth out of the *bois'* labour that many destitute eventually found their home in the chief's house. Chiefs benefited from the *bois* by adding their income from their labour, marriage price of women *bois*, and price for their freedom. More importantly, a good number of male sections of *inpuichhung bois*, including those *inhrang bois* who formed his immediate retinues in war and peace, lived either in his house or set up their houses around his house as a fort.

We have already noted that Lewin found the residence of a powerful Chief being always "surrounded by the houses of his slaves, who marry and cultivate, enjoying undisturbed the fruits of their labour."⁹ Hence, the chief's power and prestige largely depended on the number of *bois* he could afford. The profitability of holding *bois* was equally attractive to many other people as well. Shakespear remarked that the "chiefs are not the only slave-holders; any man may take a person into his house and feed him in return for his work."¹⁰ Besides, captives of war and raids belonged to the captor who might own, sell, kill or marry off as he pleased. McCulloch also noted that people become *bois* from "sheer laziness."¹¹ Thefts and murderers naturally found their ultimate protection in *boi*hood at the house of the chiefs. Though it seems to be a common practice, *boi* system did not come about easily; it involved a great deal of

⁸ Peter Fraser, *Slavery in British Territory, Assam and Burma*, p. 7.

⁹ Lewin, *Wild Races of South-Eastern India*, p. 132.

¹⁰ West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata, Political Proceedings, August 1893, Nos. 4-6, File No. L/49 (1-3): *Administration Report of South-Lushai Hills*, 1892-93, p. 18.

¹¹ McCulloch, *Accounts of the Valley of Manipore*, Mittal, Calcutta, 1859.

coercion on the part of *boi*-holders and was the last resort on the part of the people who entered *boi*-hood. A brief description of the *boi* system becomes pertinent here.

The *Boi* System

Shakespear classified the *bois* into three categories: *inpuichhung bois*, *chemsen bois*, and *tukluh bois*. *Inpuichhung boi* (*in*-house, *pui*-big, *chhung*-within) refers to those *bois* who lived in the chief's big house. They were also called *lalchhung* or *chhungte bois*. Certain conditions often force persons to seek shelter in the chief's house. Shakespear noted that this category of *bois* 'consist of all those who have been driven by want of food to take refuge in the chief's house':

Widows, orphans, and others who are unable to support themselves and have no relatives willing to do so, form the bulk of this class of *boi* but it is not unusual, if a young widow remarries, for her second husband to insist on his predecessor's children being put into the chief's house, unless any of their father's relatives will take them. The *inpuichhung* are looked on as part of the chief's household and do all the chief's work in return for their food and shelter.¹²

He also specifically noted the works performed by this class of *bois*: "The young men cut and cultivate the chief's jhum and attend to his fish traps. The women fetch up wood and water, clean the daily supply of rice, make cloths and weed the jhum, and look after the chief's children."

Poverty was therefore one main reason that reduced persons to a state of dependence. The hill tribes were dependent solely on their labour for sustenance. This process was sometimes disturbed by certain elements such as war, calamities and crop failure that reduced people to a state of hunger and want. In the course of such hardship, the more poverty-stricken often seek help from the chief where the door of the 'big house' was always open. Illness was another reason that prompts a person to seek aid from people better situated and there was hardly anyone more suitable to turn to than the chief, who was even considered divine. Thus, the sick and ill also sought out the chief's house in their difficulties.

¹² Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 46.

Raids and wars being a common occurrence in the hills, there was no lack of orphans and widows left by fathers, husbands and relatives. Many of these seek refuge with relatives, friends and neighbours, but this was not always the case with everyone. Relatives barely able to support their families sometimes refuse to entertain them. In such cases, their hopes were drawn towards the chief who they knew, would not and was not in a position to refuse anything to his subjects. Further, if a man was too poor to perform his religious obligations he might seek the help of the chief. In doing this however, a ceremony called “*saphun* was performed and the man and his family becomes part of the chief’s household.”¹³ This *boi* then loses his former clan identity and adopts the chief’s clan. Besides, there was a category of *bois* called *Fatum*, meaning the youngest child of a *boi*. Such *bois* “could not purchase their freedom’ and ‘they could not be redeemed.’”¹⁴

Shakespear also noted the rights and privileges of the *inpuichhung bois* in a somehow favourable manner. First, he notes that ‘a boi is at liberty to move from one chief’s house to another’ invariably but not necessarily to the chief’s relations. Second, he also noted that the *bois* ‘can only purchase freedom by paying one mithun or its equivalent in cash or goods signifying the fact that a *boi* can acquire property. He mentioned that the chief buy the male *boi* a wife and after three years in his house (six years if the wife is also a *boi*) the couple can set up their own house as *inhrang boi* (*in*: house, *hrang*: separate) and ‘work for himself, but is still in some respect a *boi*.’ However, this did not imply that he was free from the chief’s service.

Although the *inhrang boi* works for himself and his family, he had to pay many obligations such as ‘the hind leg of every animal he killed, failure to do which, renders him liable to a fine of one *mithun* or its equivalent.’ They run errands for the Chief, and offer help whenever required. He was to help the Chief with rice if he happens to run short of it. The only difference was his living in a separate house and cooking in separate pots. Regarding the children of the *inhrang bois* he found under some chiefs, excepting the youngest son, other children were entirely set free and in some other cases; he found that all the children of *bois* were also *bois*.

¹³ Sangkima, *Essays on the History of the Mizos*, p. 79.

¹⁴ Lalbiakthanga, *The Mizos: A Study in Racial Personality*, United Publishers, University of Michigan, 1978, p. 25; Vanchhunga, *Lusei leh Avela Hnam Dange Chanchin*, Bethesda Printing Press, (1955), Reprint, Art & Culture, Aizawl, 1994, p. 44.

A female *boi* usually married in which the chief received the marriage price. If her marriage was to a non-*boi*, she (and all her children) got liberty from the chief. She may come back to the chief's house as a *boi* or remain in her husband's house, or marry another man, as a free woman after her husband's death. In the latter case, the chief received her marriage price again. Speaking from the point of colonial state, Shakespear concludes that the *Innpuichhung bois* "are by no means badly off, and the custom seems in every way suited to the circumstances of the case' in which many young man had risen to prominence."¹⁵

The second category of *boi* was called *Chemsen bois* (*chem-dao, sen-red*). These mainly include criminals, thieves, murderers, vagabonds and such people who had committed wrongs on other people, had stolen some things, had not been able to repay their loans, those that picked fights and were being chased to exact tooth for a tooth, or eye for an eye. Having known no person more powerful than the chief, flee to his house to escape the vengeance of pursuers. Young and frivolous men often landed themselves in critical situations that forced them to flee from those they had wittingly or unwittingly angered. At such times, they run past their own houses, fathers and families to seek refuge and protection from the chief. On reaching, they usually hold the chief's *sutpui* (the central post inside the chief's house supporting the roof) and beg his protection in exchange of service by becoming his *boi*. The pursuers could do nothing in this case as they could not fight the chief nor create enmity with him.

Shakespear noted:

Murderers closely pursued by the avengers of blood rushed into the chief's presence and saved their lives at the expense of their own or their children's freedom. Debtors unable to pay their creditors sought the chief's protection and released them from their debts on condition that they and their children became *boi*. Thieves and other vagabonds avoided punishment by becoming the chief's *bois*.¹⁶

Shakespear also noted that "*Chemsen bois* do not live in the chief's house or work for him. Their position is similar to that of the *inhrang boi*, but all their children are

¹⁵ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, pp. 46-47.

¹⁶ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, pp. 47-48.

considered *boi* to the same extent as their parents. The chiefs generally take the marriage price of the daughters of such a *boi*.¹⁷

The third category of *bois* were called *Tukluh bois* (*tuk*-promise, *luh*-enter). These *bois* were “those who, in times of war, deserted the losing side and joined the winning chief with a promise of becoming his *bois*. Besides themselves entering *boi*hood, these categories of *bois* also pledge the service of their descendants if they were to receive protection and shelter.”¹⁸ Shakespear again noted of *tukluh bois*:

These are persons who during war have deserted the losing side and joined the victors by promising that they and their descendants will be *boi*. A *tuklut boi* can purchase his freedom for a mithan, and if there are three or four persons in one household one mithan will release them all. As a rule the daughters of the *tuklut bois* are not considered *bois*. A *tuklut boi* does not live in the chief’s house, and is in most respects in the same position as an *inhrang boi*.¹⁹

Of the three types of *bois*, the *Chemsen* and *Tukluh bois* were not recognised by the British administration as there was no legal sanction for such practices and were fast dying out anyway for want of fresh recruits which, with the Colonial administration’s prohibition, raids became difficult and the class mentioned decreased in number. It was therefore, over the *Inpuichhung bois* that a controversy arose between the colonial state and the Christian missionaries.

We have come to know that female *bois* were allowed to marry and the chief takes the marriage price. When such a marriage price was fully paid, the chief no longer had any claims on the female *boi* or her children, who were no longer termed as *bois*. She belongs to her husband and remained so as long as the husband was alive. But it was a sorry day when a female *boi*’s husband dies, for she is sometimes forced to re-enter the chief’s house. If she behaves well enough, she was allowed to remain a widow in her husband’s house and took care of his property on behalf of his children. But should she be found wanting in any degree of behaviour, there was only one solution, and that was retreat to the chief’s house. If and when the widow remarries, the cycle begins again with the chief taking her marriage price once again and so on.

¹⁷ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 48.

¹⁸ Malsawma, *Sociology of the Mizos*, p. 38.

¹⁹ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 48.

The true nature of *bois* was and is still a burning topic of discussion. There is a group of people who consider *bois* to be simply domestic servants and dependents. Some see them as half slaves, and yet, there are a few who see the *boi* system as a mild form of slavery or with a slight tinge of serfdom. Still, there are those who saw them as nothing but real slaves and the system as slavery. All these may be right in their way of looking at the *boi* system. But it is too clear that a final platform of agreement still eludes the bulk of scholarship on the system. However, it is important that we classify the views of the three major groups of experts on the *boi* system.

***Bois* as ‘Domestic Servants’ and ‘Dependents’**

Many scholars see *Bois* as ‘domestic servants’ and ‘dependents’ to the chiefs, but not slaves to the chief. According to C.G. Verghese and R. L. Thanzawna, “a boi was an individual who was *dependent* upon a Lushai chief and was not a slave in the literal sense.” They felt that to the Lusei the word “*bawi*” meant “pauper.” They accepted the view that *Boi* system was a charitable institution in which the chief’s house was the place where all the poor, destitute and hapless sought refuge. They talked about ‘paternal care’ the *bois* received from the chiefs for which they have ‘to work on the same lines as any other Lusei within his or her physical capacity.’ They also said that the *bois* ‘shared various perquisites common to most chiefs’ establishment in the shape of more lavish table, generous supplies of “zu” and meat from the chase or customary sacrifices.’

Beside others, they also felt that ‘in no case there were physical restrictions present on where the “*boi*” lived within village precincts of the chiefs after he has been married for 3 years.’ They went on saying that the *boi* “could anytime leave his chief, provided he joined another chief, as the Lusei chiefs looked upon themselves as one great family.’ But while looking into the charitable side of the *boi* institution the other side of the *boi* system was not taken care of. In fact, they recognized the position of *bois* in the society as someone who is quite different from common people. For instance, they talk about a *mithun* for the price of changing master chief, that the bride price of their daughters is the perquisite of the chiefs, and that children born from them invariably become *bois* on the principle of what they called ‘physical surrender without choice.’

Although they did not recognize the difficulty a *boi* found in getting his liberty, say, payment of one *mithun* for a single *boi*, they implicitly “recognized such difficult situation the *bois* endured under the chiefs so that the British intervention finally rescued the *bois* from such generation of bondage.”²⁰ If the chief lost much of their prestige with the abolition of *boi* system under colonial administration, as claimed by the authors, it makes sense that these chiefs would do anything not to liberate the *bois* once they entered the chief’s house. There lies the problem in *boi* system, otherwise it was a good thing that the poor and destitute found a roof to cleanse their tears.

Similarly, Sangkima writes that “a *boi* may also be called a domestic servant or personal attendant of the Chief. He further states that ‘the system was very similar to that of the custom called ‘bonded labour’- the system commonly found and practiced throughout India.”²¹ He explained the classes of *boi*, wrote that they served as means of increasing the economic status of chiefs. They work in his *jhums*, look after his traps, women *bois* clean the daily supply of rice, fetch wood and water, weaved cloths, weed his *jhum*, looked after his children. When a young male *boi* attains marriageable age, the chief finds a wife for him. In this case, they had to stay in the chief’s house and work for three years, often extended to six years if the bride herself was a *boi*.

Sangkima also writes that *bois* could bring about an economic boom for the chief through marriage prices of the daughters of *bois* which were fixed in terms of *mithuns*. So, whenever one of his female *bois* marry, he became richer by a *mithun* or its equivalent in money. He also wrote that the class of *sal* brought economic betterment to the chief and the common people who owned such captives. Sangkima also wrote about the abolition of the *boi* system. Above all, he says that “the system was sometimes misconceived as *sal* or slave by those who are ignorant of the real condition and status of the *bawi*.”²²

Bois as Pseudo Slaves

According to Mangkhosat, in the absence of any other means of caring for the destitute, the *boi* system had a charitable dimension. He felt that it was usually a “mild form of

²⁰ C.G. Verghese and R.L. Thanzawna, *History of the Mizos*, pp. 39-41.

²¹ Sangkima, *A Modern History of Mizoram*, (ed), Spectrum Publications Guwahati: Delhi, 2004, p. 18.

²² Sangkima, *Essays on the History of the Mizos*, p. 86.

slavery” and that is the reason why the early missionaries did not criticize it.”²³ The Lushai Hills was an isolated tract of land completely cut off from the main stream due to its topographical situation. The only connection it had with the outside world was those with which the inhabitants could carry on trade for the most basic needs like salt with the nearby areas, or, as far as they could travel on foot for a few days. As it was, the inhabitants had completely no idea regarding any better means that could substantiate the poor and needy except the chief’s house. Every new arrival of destitutes was always welcome to the chiefs for whom the increase in such meant more power and prestige. But as time goes on, the willing and kind chiefs usually lose their paternal instincts and the betterment of economic conditions prompt them to make the bois put in more labour. This often took a slavery-like condition on the *bois*.

When the earlier group of missionaries arrived in the hills, they could have been appalled even by the picture presented to them by the landscape itself, leaving alone things like better means of housing the poor and needy. It was no wonder therefore, that the state defended the chief’s house as being “the poor house of the village,”²⁴ on whose subject, the missionaries could say nothing better, and could find no opportunities for criticism of the custom. When one speaks of slavery, the picture of chains, whips, gallows, lynching &c automatically comes to mind, but such was not the case with the *bois*. They “even had the freedom to change and be the *boi* of a chief of their choice,”²⁵ but this does not lessen the burden of their *boi*hood, for, when a *boi* chooses a chief, he had to work double to please his new master who could demand anything of him. However free a *boi* was, he was bonded to a chief wherever he went, and had to do anything asked of him.

H. Vanlaldika describes *boi* as “the under-privileged strata of the society belonging to the lowest strata of the society.”²⁶ Although there was no marked classification of caste system in the hills like other parts of India, the condition of *bois* was, to a large extent, similar to that of the “Sudras”²⁷ in their gradual degradation. It is

²³Mangkhosat Kipgen, *Christianity and Mizo Culture*, (The Mizo Theological Conference, Aizawl, 1997), p. 73.

²⁴ ASA, “Bawi Custom in the Lushai Hills,” The Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society to India Office, 8th July, 1913, Nos. 16-33, Pol-A, April 1914, Letter No. 2138.

²⁵Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p.46.

²⁶ Andrew H. Vanlaldika, *Social Stratification Among the Mizos*, Ph.D Thesis, North Eastern Hill University, 2003, p. 232.

²⁷Laakshidhar Mishra, *Human Bondage: Tracing its Roots in India*, Sage, Delhi, 2011.

true that the chief's household members and other commoners do the same sort of work in the *jhums*, jungle and in the house, but area of, or kind of work was hardly a substantial evidence to draw conclusion on caste. *Bois* made up the lowest strata of society from the perspective of social and spiritual conditions. They had no homes or property of their own, no identity as they were sometimes incorporated into the chief's family as and when desired. Society looks at them simply as dependents. However high they may climb in the eyes of the chief, they were still *bois* unless they buy their freedom. They could neither take part in important social functions nor play significant roles in religious ceremonies. They had to do things when others were home and so on. All these reduced *bois* of the Lushai Hills to being the lowest strata of society although there was no such classification of work as in the Hindu Varna system.

Bois as Slaves

Lawmsanga, answering the controversial question 'Are the Mizo *bois* really slaves?' quotes J. H. Lorrain's inability to change the meaning of the word to 'pauper' or 'retainer' but maintaining 'slave' in his dictionary, states: "therefore, the answer is 'yes,' the *bawis* are slaves."²⁸ He described the Lusei slave system as having two classes. The first was the captive slaves and the second group consisted of non-captive slaves. From the second category, there were three main divisions which were the *Inpuichhung bois*, the *Chemsen bois* and the *Tukluh bois*.

Fraser's subversive challenges and Khawvelthanga's resistant approach could not change the edifice of the colonial administration at first, but later practically liberated the Mizo *bois*, who were bound by tradition in the hands of the chiefs. Lawmsanga looks at the controversy over the slavery system in connection with the gospel and culture in the Mizo context. He wrote about the contending parties in the *boi* controversy, stated both missionary and colonial views regarding the system of slavery in the Lushai Hills. The two opposing dignitaries Major Cole, Superintendent of Lushai Hills and Peter Fraser contested over the issue. He says that "If the *bawi* controversy is studied from the postcolonial perspective, the Colonial administrators, with good intentions tried to protect the Mizo custom, tradition and culture for administrative purposes. Fraser criticized the unjust

²⁸ Lawmsanga, *A Critical Study on Christian Mission With Special Reference to Presbyterian Church of Mizoram*, Ph.D Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2010, p. 111.

social structure in the light of the Bible and the British Law by pinpointing the slavery system.”²⁹

Bois as Source of Economy

The Lushai system of slavery or bondage occupies a unique and profitable economic place. In regard to this, Suhas Chatterjee states:

The chief was the head with the slaves doing all the work for the community under his authentication. In the fields and jungles or on the dirt tracts the slave labour was utilized by the chiefs. Slave labour was the basis of feudalistic chiefdom.³⁰

The *boi* in the chief’s possession solely belonged to him whether he lived in the chief’s or in a separate house. Sangkima again states that “He was all for the chief and in return, the chief was all for the *boi*.”³¹ They did all the work in return for food and shelter. Like all their subjects, the chiefs had *jhums* where all work from cutting the land till harvest and storage were managed by their *bois*. Besides these, they attended fish-traps (*ngawi*) and animal traps (*mankhawng*) that belonged to the chief. Female *bois* fetched wood and water, cleaned the daily supply of rice, spun and weaved clothes, weeded the chief’s *jhums* and looked after his children besides a number of smaller tasks that gave no rest to the tired feet.

Another instance of *boi* as the chief’s source of economy lies in that he procures a wife for his male *boi*. We have come across the custom that demands the labour of a male *boi* marrying a female *boi* and the number of years he had to work for the chief whose *boi* he had married. This implies the profit of the chief through the labour of his *bois*. Regarding the number of *bois* in a chief’s household, two or three marriages were a common occurrence in a year, and the labour supplied by these was by no means a negligible one. It has been frequently noted that the chief was entitled to the marriage prices of his female *bois*. As money economy was introduced only after the British entered the hills, transactions of any kind were done through barter, the most common and acceptable object being ‘*sial*’ or (*mithun*). Even property among the inhabitants of

²⁹ Lawmsanga, *A Critical Study on Christian Mission With Special Reference to Presbyterian Church of Mizoram*, p. 110 .

³⁰ Suhas Chatterjee; ‘Socio Economic Change in Mizoram,’ in *Essays on the History of the Mizos*, Sangkima (ed), Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 2004, p. 84.

³¹ Sangkima; ‘Bawi and Sal as an Important Economic Factor in Early Mizo Society with Special reference to the Chief,’ in *Essays on the History of the Mizos*, Sangkima (ed), Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 2004, p. 16.

the Lushai Hills was measured in terms of the number of *mithuns* a person possessed. In the same manner, marriage price of female *bois* were also determined in terms of *sial*. Their economic value was stated by Indrani Chatterjee as:

Acquiring female labour through circuits of marriage and birth depended upon the ability to negotiate, and pay, bride-wealth in most such populations. Sometimes such payments were made in kind, in the form of labour by a potential groom on the fields of a potential bride's father for two years. More often than not, however, they were made through transfers of cattle, heavy metal gongs, jewelry, beads, and woven cloth. But war and famine periodically destabilized such payments. As a result, plunder from neighbouring localities or hostile groups remained a viable option.³²

Young *boi*-girls were often reared by chiefs to benefit from their marriage price. Such 'daughters' on reaching marriageable age were more given the status of 'chief's daughter' to increase their price in the marriage market as the bride wealth demanded for the marriage of such girls was much greater than the goods demanded as bride wealth of daughters of common men. These female *bois* never stopped giving, raising, cleaning and carrying grain as children, and generating guns, gongs, goats and mithuns from the prospective grooms. Again, they go on producing *bois* in the form of children, who also automatically become *bois* to the chief their *boi*-parents serve. Shakespear records how much a female *boi* can earn for her chief as:

When a female *boi*'s marriage price is fully paid, a chief has no further claim on the woman or her children as long as her husband lives, but should she be left a widow, she is sometimes forced to re-enter the chief's house; should she remarry, the chief will again receive whatever sum is paid as her marriage price.³³

There were no lack of *boi* widows in the face of incessant wars and raids in the Lushai hills. The number of times a widow marries brought more wealth to the chief. However, when marriage prices were not paid in full, it spelt strife between her family and the chief. Incomplete bride wealth transfer for such daughters continued even after their death as debts between the groom's lineage and the wife's 'pu' or maternal uncles and his descendants."³⁴ In this case, it was between the chief and the bride's relatives. Sadly,

³² Indrani Chatterjee, 'Slavery, Semantics and the Sound of Silence' in *Slavery and South Asian History*, Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton (eds), Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 2006, p. 292

³³ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p.47

³⁴ Indrani Chatterjee, 'Slaves, Souls, and Subjects in a South Asian Borderland,' Rutgers University, pp. 9-10.

this custom is continued even today among the various tribes of Mizo. However, this has in no way, any connection with *boi*hood now. Thus, the chief gained a lot from the marriage price of his female *bois* and added to his economic affluence.

Laying more stress on the economic value of female *bois* does not exclude that of the male *bois*. In fact, we have seen that male *bois* helped in cutting the *jhums*, building the houses of chiefs, hunting, fishing, trapping and working in the *jhums*. In war, they were important assets to the king. They carried messages, fought enemies along with the heroes of the Luseis, and ran miles to do a chief's bidding. They looked after his livestock, carry crops, wood and bamboos, built forts, dug trenches and raised fences to fortify the village of their chiefs. All labour that requires the strength of men were therefore, done by *bois* in the hills.

Children *bois* assisted their parents in their own capacity. Girls helped to carry water, look after their siblings as well as the chief's children while the younger male *bois* ran small errands wherever necessary, keep guard on the chief's and their *jhums* from wild animals and birds.

In spite of the economic profits the chief gained from his *boi* entourage, they often suffered untold misery and hunger when scarcity prevails. Their condition was described by one of them as:

even though we raise much rice, we cannot spend any as we like, it belongs to the chief. The chief has spent very little on us excepting the rice which we have eaten when we were young...when the rice is scarce the chief does not like to buy from other villages, we sometimes fast, even when we live in the chief's house, but the chief has food for himself.³⁵

Thus we see that although *bois* were the main source of increasing the economic position of the chiefs and responsible for bringing about the prestige and influence of their masters, they often face starvation from such a 'kind, generous, fatherly chief' who was projected as 'benevolent and charitable'.

³⁵ Statement of Khawtawpa, dated October 8, 1910 in Peter Fraser, *Slavery on British Territory: Assam and Burma*, (Carnarvon, Australia: W. Gwenlyn Evans and Son, 1913), p. 55

The *Boi* Controversy: State vs. Missionary

The *Boi* system generated a lot of controversy due to its peculiar nature. With the arrival of missionaries in the hills, there was a marked difference in the way the system came to be seen.

The heated controversy over the question of *boi* now centred around the issue of slavery: whether *Boi* system was slavery or not. The point was that if *Boi* system was a slavery system, it should be invariably abolished as slavery was banned in British Empire. Two groups of people therefore emerged, both reading the nature of *boi* system from their own perspective and deriving different conclusions. The first view, represented by the Christian missionaries and Anti-Slavery lobbies, felt that *bois* were slaves and *boi* system was but a system of slavery. The second view, represented by the colonial state, felt that it was just a social custom and not slavery in its essence and contents.

The colonial state's standpoint was extended by the Superintendent of Lushai Hills, Maj. H.W.G. Cole. Maj. Cole, extended seven points to refute the missionary's argument that *bois* are slaves:

1. He contended that Messrs. Savidge and Lorrain admitted that the use of the word 'slave' against *boi* was 'unfortunate,' and 'pauper' might have been a more suitable term.
2. *Bois* are persons who 'agrees to serve a chief for consideration or because he or she is unable to support himself.'
3. Any *bois* can discharge his obligations for a sum of Rs. 40/- or equivalent, for one individual, and this sum covers all the members of the same family.
4. The service rendered by the *bois* are 'practically identical with the ordinary every day work of a Lusei i.e. the *bawis* cultivate *jhums* and perform household duties and the chief in return provides them with necessities of life.'
5. 'There is no restraint' against the *bois*. '*Bawis* have the same freedom as anyone else in the village.'

6. 'They are never confined;' they go to the fields, visit the bazaars and are according to Lushai custom permitted to transfer their obligations to another chief.
7. It is impossible for a Lushai to tell who is a *boi* and who is not except by asking him or her.

With these seven points Cole argued in clear terms that *bois* are not 'slaves' nor was it a 'wrongful restraint' and 'wrongful confinement' under Indian Penal Code. Hence, instead of being an illegal practice, he contended that it was recognized by the Government of India as a lawful and "a well-established Lushai custom."³⁶ Thus in the name of 'custom' the *boi* system was exonerated from its association with slavery.

To Shakespear, the first Superintendent of Lushai Hills and who lived in the Hills for fifteen years, and who had earlier called the system as 'parental slavery,' the missionaries argument that *bois* were slaves was now considered by him as 'nonsense' and 'rubbish,' and the abolition of *boi* system would be a 'height of folly' and 'unwise from every point of view.' He extended this observation during the height of the controversy, and later in his monograph. After briefly describing the *boi* system in detail, he comes to conclude that:

To call this system slavery is simply nonsense. It is a most sensible way of providing for the destitute of the community, orphans, widows, and those who are in great want are provided with shelter, food and clothing and initiated into work as if they were the chief's children and in return they give their labour, doing no more than if they were living in their parent's house and at any time they can terminate the engagement by a not-exorbitant payment. When further you consider that it is open to any *bawi* who quarrels with his chief to remove himself to any other chief's house, you see at once that the ill treatment of a *bawi* is extremely likely to occur and that the bargain is not at all unfavourable to the *bawi*.³⁷

³⁶ ASA, 'Note' by HWG Cole, Superintendent of Lushai Hills, 31 Jan. 1910, Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam (hereafter GEBA) Political Department, Confidential (A), March 1911, Nos. 1-21, pp. 2-3.

³⁷ ASA, GEBA, 'Note on the Lushai Custom regarding *Bawi*', by John Shakespear, 12 Dec. 1910. Political Department, Confidential (A), March 1911, Nos. 1-21, pp. 36-37

To substantiate his argument he boasted that he was perhaps the oldest European inhabitant in Lushai Hills then and hence his knowledge about the *boi* was most authoritative:

I spent 15 years among the Lushais, I began my acquaintance with them as independent tribes in Lungleh. I ended it when they had become the most peaceful hill tribe in the whole province. In Aijal I have lived in their houses and spent many hours in familiar conversation with Lushais of all grades of society and since I left Lushai hills I have seen most of the hill people of Manipur and some of those in Naga Hills, so that I think without being accused of being boasting, I may lay claim to knowing what I am talking about and I unhesitatingly say that it is simple rubbish to speak of the [*boi*] system as slavery.³⁸

He ridiculed the idea of interfering in the working of the system and questioned that ‘if this system is interfered with, how are destitutes to be supported?’ He had ‘seen many old and decrepit women living on for years in a chief’s house, doing absolutely no work,’ and warned that such sterile population would become ‘a burden on the State’ if the system is interfered with. Besides, he also noted that he ‘met many bawis who have risen to be the most important persons in the village after the chief and I have no hesitation in saying that the system is well adapted to the people.’

On the question of abolition of the *boi* system, he remarked in an authoritative manner, and noted, that:

It would be most unwise to abolish it—unwise from every point of view, unwise for the people especially, and unwise for the Government. Every act which lowers the prestige of the chiefs is harmful. We must govern through the chiefs, and in order that the Lushais may live happily, strong chiefs looked up to by their people are all important. The superintendent and his assistants can supervise the chiefs and control them and prevent them from oppressing their people, but cannot govern the hills without the chiefs. In this connection you must remember that every Lushai can move from an unpopular chief to that of some more benign ruler, so that an unwise ruler soon has no subjects. If you meddle with the system on which Lushai society has been built up and

³⁸ ASA, GEBA, ‘Note on the Lushai Custom regarding Bawi’, by John Shakespear, 12 Dec. 1910. Political, Confidential (A), March 1911, Nos. 1-21, p. 37.

bring the chief into disrepute and reduce them to mere headmen, you lay up for yourselves and for the Lushais a terrible amount of trouble.³⁹

On the other side, the anti-*boi* system lobby's viewpoints were extended by a radical missionary Dr. Fraser who worked among the Luseis as the mission's doctor for the promotion of Christian ministry among the 'heathens' and 'demon' worshippers. His main argument against the *boi* system was later clearly stated in his book *Slavery on British Territory*.⁴⁰

That this custom is really a system of slavery is evident from the following features: the slaves are bound to serve the chiefs for life unless ransomed by the payment of ransom money, generally forty rupees per family (£2 13s.4d). Children of slaves are bound to serve for life, also their descendants, generation after generation.

When a slave moves from one village to another they are still slaves for life to the new chief on whose land they settle. By a new rule recently laid down by Colonel Cole then superintendent of Lushai Hills, the new chief is at once liable to the old chief for the ransom money. This is more clearly buying and selling of slaves than the old Lushai custom, under which the new chief was not liable to the old chief, but the slave changed his master without money being due from the new chief.

The *bawi* system is a system under which British subjects in Lushai are deprived of their right to liberty and justice is evident from a perusal of the following statements of slaves, evangelists, chiefs, missionaries and others.

Besides bondage for life other evil features are seen:

- 1) The inhumane separation of mother from her child.
- 2) The separation of husband and wife.
- 3) The separation of relatives.
- 4) Intimidation, bodily hurt.
- 5) Temptation to immorality and sin.
- 6) Opposition to slaves becoming Christians.

³⁹ASA, GEBA, 'Note on the Lushai Custom regarding *Bawi*' by John Shakespear, 12 Dec. 1910. Political, Confidential (A), March 1911, Nos. 1-21, p. 37.

⁴⁰Fraser, *Slavery on British Territory*, p. 5.

7) The selling and buying of people.

Therefore, he insisted that the *boi* system should be abolished once and for all. For this he appealed to the district administration of Lushai Hills, then to Assam Government under which Lushai Hills came, to Government of India, to other missionaries in Northeast, its mother organization in England, to Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society, to His Majesty of England, and so on. For his radical stance against the *boi* system and against administration for not abolishing it, Dr. Fraser earned the contempt of the administration for going beyond his ‘calling.’ In the name of public ‘peace’ and ‘tranquility’ Dr. Fraser was forced to confine his mission’s works within the radius of Aizawl and its surroundings west of Sonai river and compelled to serve the people *only* on those activities he was called for, to treat the sick and diseased for God’s ministry. He was strictly warned not to interfere in any subject related to administration, including the custom and traditions of the local people such as *boi* system. Despite several representations made against his confinement, no relief came forth so that he had to finally leave the Lushai Hills, dejected as he was, but only to launch another battle that later compelled the government to change its mind.⁴¹ *Boi* system was finally abolished in 1927.

The straight question to be dealt with here is why the colonial state had to take a sort of u-turn on the question of *boi* at this point of time. We know that most of the earlier British officers, including Lewin, Edgar, McCabe, Shakespear and so on took the view that there was slavery system in Lushai Hills in which they accepted that *bois* were one of them. They were described in different ways such as ‘slave,’ ‘paternal slavery,’ ‘serf’ and so on. When Messrs. Savidge and Lorrain translated the word *boi* as ‘slave or retainer,’ no one complained noting the fact that the system was accepted as slavery. Perhaps Dr. Fraser’s appearance on the scene was an odd moment when the colonial state was fast busying over different projects in the hills such as the construction of roads, bridges and other government establishments. Large labour forces were required for all these projects. For instance, from 1898-1906 the total labour forces employed for

⁴¹ For details of what actually conspired between Dr. Fraser and the Government, see ASA, GEBA, Political, Confidential (A), Proceedings of March 1911, Nos. 1-21; Sept. 1911, Nos. 34-37; and June 1912, Nos. 3-18.

the construction of various government projects were given as 6.5 lakhs (6,55,564 labour).⁴²

Since *bois* were the major chunk of these labour forces that were most willing to work for the government for the petty wages, it became obvious that the administration wanted to continue the practices. Besides, we have already seen that most district officers shared the view of Major John Shakespear who had served in the Hills for the longest period of time in which the reputation of the chiefs - power and wealth lies in the number of *bois* he possessed. They were reminded time and again that every act which lowers the prestige of the chiefs was harmful. They must govern through the chiefs and in order that the Lushais may live happily, strong chiefs looked up to by their people are all important.

The Superintendent and his Assistants could supervise the chiefs and control them and prevent them from oppressing their people, but could not govern the hills without the chiefs. The abolition of *boi* system would be detrimental to the chief's power and authority which would be in turn harmful to the colonial state's administration. He openly warned that any act that lowers the prestige of the chiefs would be 'harmful' and since they ruled 'through the chiefs' their reputation should be always kept alive. "If you meddle with the system on which Lushai society has been built up and bring the chief into disrepute and reduce them to mere headmen," he warned, 'you lay up for yourselves and for the Lushais a terrible amount of trouble.'⁴³ This was the zest on which the colonial state defended the *boi* system, which they eventually abolished when the pressure was insurmountable.

Postcolonial Debate on *Boi* System

It was within the context of the colonial *boi* controversy that the trends of writing in post-colonial period have been continued and the debate on the subject went on without any tangible solution. The legacy of the two dominant views prevails even today without having any other option to add. The first group, taking the view of the missionary dispositions, see the *boi* system not as a slave system but something akin to 'domestic servants,' 'personal attendants,' 'dependents' and so on. They felt that to the

⁴² MSA, GEBA, Judicial Department, Pol-A, July 1907, Carton Box (CB)-27, General Department, No.335, 1907.

⁴³ ASA, GEBA, Note on the Lushai Custom regarding *Bawi*', by John Shakespear, 12 Dec. 1910. Political, Confidential (A), March 1911, Nos. 1-21, p. 37.

Lushais the term ‘*boi*’ or ‘*bawi*’ means ‘pauper’ or destitutes which connotes the altruistic nature of *boi* system. They found that the chief’s house was instead of being the hall of bondage the ‘house of charity’ where all the poor, destitute and hapless sought refuge.

It was under the ‘paternal care’ of the chiefs that this class of *bois* received all they wanted for in life as a regular and common member of the society. They work on the same lines as any other people within their physical capacity, shared various perquisites common to most chiefs’ establishment, and got married as others.”⁴⁴ This is the view shared by British colonial state and its successive officers in the region during the colonial period causing major controversy across the colonial world. However, there are some problems in the argument given by this group of writers. *First*, while looking into the charitable side of the *boi* institution the other side of the system was either deliberately ignored or considered insignificant. *Second*, most of these scholars see the system taking the reference point in the classical practice of slavery of the western world, hence *boi* system would obviously not fit into the system.

Third, despite emphasizing on the charitable side of the institution they also invariably recognized the fact that the position of *bois* in the society was different from other people in a big way. For instance, Varghese and Thanzawna talks about a *mithun* for the price of freedom or changing master chief, that the bride price of their daughters is the perquisite of the chiefs, and that children born from them invariably become *boi* on the principle of what they called ‘physical surrender without choice.’⁴⁵ A part from bringing out this fact in clear terms they refuse to talk about the *difficulties* the *bois* had found in getting their liberty, say, payment of one *mithun* for a *boi*.

When the fruits of all his labour was reaped by the chiefs, from what extra source of income would the *boi* buy his freedom? Hence, the *bois* continue to be *bois* and worst their children continue to remain as *bois* til they were emancipated during the colonial period. In fact, they recognized that the advent of British colonialism heralded the emancipation of generation of *bois*’ bondage, causing great hardship to the chiefs. In fact, logic applies that if the chiefs lost much of their prestige with the abolition of *boi* system, as all of them clearly recognized, it makes sense that these chiefs would do

⁴⁴ See for instance, Varghese and Thanzawna, *History of the Mizos*, pp. 39-41; Sangkima, *A Modern History of Mizoram*, p. 18.

⁴⁵ Varghese and Thanzawna, *History of the Mizos*, pp. 39-41.

anything not to liberate the *bois* once they entered the chief's house. In this context, the wide doors of the chiefs were but the gateway to the hell of bondage and servitude.

It was from the critical argument given against the notion of altruism in *boyhood* that some scholars went to the extent of calling the *boi* system as 'slavery' system. They felt that the *bois* were but 'slaves' and the *boi* institution as institution of slavery. No doubt, the *bois* were treated well by the chiefs as part of his extended family but they argued what the beauty of *boyhood* was when one lost his freedom of movement and of choices as common man, lost his family, kinship and society, of customs, rituals and ceremony as a member of his community, lost the freedom to reap the fruits of his hard labour, and lost the opportunity to earn for their liberty.⁴⁶

The *boi* system certainly substantially shows that the *bois* were bound to the soil just as we see the European serfs of the High Middle Ages. They lost their family and kinship, and community; they were bound to the chiefs and were invariably absorbed within that chief's family as part of his extended family. A part from what he needs for his subsistence survival all his earnings belong to the so-called 'paternal' chiefs whose wealth and prestige much depended on the labour and support of these *bois*. Under such situation there was no chance for the *bois* to buy their freedom. We have evidences to show that even if the *bois* got sufficient amount to purchase their freedom during the early colonial period (which was fixed at one *mithun* or forty rupees) it was the chiefs who engineered several means to refuse them any freedom.

Besides, *bois* made up the 'lowest strata' of society from the social and spiritual perspectives. They had no homes or property of their own, no identity, as they were often considered as part of the chief's family although they did not truly form a part of the latter's family. Society looks at them simply as dependents even if they become influential as the chief's aide. They remained *bois* unless they were officially liberated. They could neither take part in important social functions as ordinary persons nor play significant roles in religious ceremonies. They had to do things when others were home and so on. All these reduced the *bois* to the lowest strata of society.⁴⁷ S/he got married, no doubt. S/he lived in separate house with his family, again no argument. He may work independently, still no controversy. But the fact is that he continues to remain *aboi*

⁴⁶ See for instance, Chatterjee, 'Slaves, Souls and Subjects;' Lawmsanga, 'A Critical Study on Christian Mission.'

⁴⁷ On this aspect, see for instance, Vanlaldika, 'Social Stratification among the Mizos.'

unless he could buy the freedom of his family. He might be, after hard work, able to buy his own freedom but all his family members would remain *bois* unless he pay for each of them, a herculean task of impossibility in the situation the *bois* found themselves under bondage.

For all these reason, it was felt that the *boi* system was but a system of slavery, as if it was the only alternative explanation for the *bois*. Indrani Chatterjee, for instance, felt that *boi* system was “a relationship of master and slave.”⁴⁸ She looks at issues such as the feeding techniques of chiefs that transformed *bois* into slaves who later became useful ‘in the conjunction of saviors that later resulted in a peculiar circulation of bodies and cash between local chiefs, Christian missions and colonial public works.’ To her, *bois* were real slaves who had no identity, who lose their clans by adopting the chief’s clan and religion and in doing so, lose even their spirit beings.

Regarding the meaning of the word *boi* and government’s decision of changing its meaning, Chatterjee viewed it as a simple denial of the existence of slavery in the hills or a policy of “not calling a slave a slave.”⁴⁹ She dismissed it as an ‘unsettlement’ of language which was, and had remained, an important historical factor in the politics of dispossession and power. But the original analytic remains not language per se, but the politics that simultaneously weighted languages down and vaporized them. To her, refusal of ‘slavery’ is another way of repeating the acts of dispossession all over again. But the original analytic remains not language per se, but the politics that simultaneously weighted languages down and vaporized them.”⁵⁰

To support her argument, Chatterjee recounts the story of a man in the service of a Lusei. She had come in contact with the man in 2004-5 during the course of her research on the subject of *boi*. This Dohruma Kiangte was an ambulance worker during the second world. Having retired, had engaged a man to look after his vineyards. The man lived among the orchards with a wife (a former domestic servant in the master’s household) and two young children. Dohruma called the latter his *boi*.⁵¹ This man had run away from his village in Burma, crossed the border by road, laboured in the quarries owned by his current employer from where he had been taken into the

⁴⁸ Chatterjee, ‘Slaves, Souls and Subjects in a South Asian Borderland,’ p. 7.

⁴⁹ Chatterjee, ‘Slaves, Souls and Subjects in a South Asian Borderland,’ p. 8.

⁵⁰ Indrani Chatterjee, ‘Slavery, Semantics, and the Sound of Silence’ in *Slavery and South Asian History*, Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton, (eds), p. 307.

⁵¹ Indrani Chatterjee, ‘Slaves, Souls and Subjects in a South Asian Borderland’, p. 26.

house as a servant and then resettled with a household of his own. Indrani Chatterjee also criticizes Cole's conjuring of the *boi* system as having been influenced by political factors. She states:

There were political factors also in Cole's conjuring. Not only did the doctor's willingness to pay release money to the chiefs indicate a certain independence of income, unusual for a missionary, but these payments threatened to destabilize political hierarchies established by force since the 1890s. The danger was that the liquidity of cash could enable lesser chiefs to attract subject-cultivators who were bonded to the greater chiefs. This in turn might turn the ire of the greater men against the colonial regime. Such a danger seemed especially imminent in 1908–1909, when the anti-imperialist struggles against the partition of Bengal took an "extremist" turn. The skill and determination with which Fraser, the educated missionary, joined a transatlantic anti-slavery network of communications on behalf of the *bois* only heightened official fears of Bolshevist internationalism. Thus the superintendent hinted darkly at "outside influences at work" in the flouting of his orders, and warned of "unfortunate political results" of such missionary disobedience.⁵² [Sic]

Lawmsanga also felt that '*bawis* are slaves.' He argues that J. H. Lorrain's inability to reduce the meaning of *boi* to mean 'pauper' or 'retainer' but concluded to the term 'slave' in his first Lushai Dictionary suggest that *bois* are but slaves."⁵³ In this regard, Major Cole submitted a note unofficially in 1910, "abolishing the use of the word *boi*."⁵⁴ The next month, J. Hezlett, the then Superintendent of the hills sent a letter demi-official which stated that "the relations between a chief and his *bawi* as recognized by us is simply an ordinary contract, and can contain no taint of slavery."⁵⁵ Even J. H. Lorrain, the missionary who was compiling a dictionary in the common Duhlian language of the hills was ordered to change the meaning of the word to 'pauper' or 'retainer.' He was the one that studied the language and dealt with its grammar. However, he had to obey orders and tried to change the meaning of the word. But perhaps his knowledge and understanding made him refuse to change the meaning, or, was it his guilty conscience of doing injustice to the language and the people that made

⁵² Chatterjee, '*Slavery, Sementics and the Sound of Silence*,' p. 301.

⁵³ Lawmsanga, 'A Critical Study on Christian Mission,' p. 111.

⁵⁴ Demi Official dated the 25th September, 1913, from J. Hezlett, Esq., I. C. S., to the Hon'ble Mr. J. C. Arbuthnott, C. I. E., ASA, Pol-A, April 1914 Nos. 16-33.

⁵⁵ Copy of demi-official letter No. nil, dated Aijal, Lushai Hills, , the 11th Oct 1913, from J. Hezlett, Esq., I. C. S., Superintendent, Lushai Hills, to the Commissioner, Surma Valley and Hill Districts, ASA, Pol-A, April 1914 Nos. 16-33.

him maintain the meaning? After all, he was the expert in the language and very much present at the scene. Whatever might have prompted this ‘father of *Duhlian* language,’ the original meaning of the word remained and so did the condition of the *bois*.

According to Vanlal Tluonga Bapui, “*Boi* system may be called slavery in so far as the *bois* are the legal property of the chief and were bound to obey his orders. So, they were slaves although their condition may be said to be more mild compared to those of their counterparts elsewhere.”⁵⁶ When he compares the *boi* system of the Lushais with those of the Chins, and the Thadou system of slavery, he finds that it could not even be compared to those, which were “real slavery.” He says that the *boi* system had a class of its own and its nature was a completely different type due to it being comparatively mild. But in any case, they were slaves as they were legally owned by the chiefs until they could produce ransom money.

Yet others like Sajal Nag, have a completely different view on the *boi* system. He analyses the system from the point of view of ‘the prevalence of forms of institutional servitude in a tribal society.’ He comments that “In any manpower-short economy, control of labour was the source of power which the chiefs wanted to command as much as possible either by attachment of free labour to him permanently or procurement of labour through kidnapping of human beings from other tribes or plainsmen, head-hunting and kidnapping. His viewpoint is that “the Lushai society had different kinds of attached labour classed into captive slaves or non-captive slaves. The captives slaves being forcefully taken during inter-tribal wars and the non-captive slaves who had, due to some distress, bonded themselves voluntarily to the chiefs.”⁵⁷ He went on describing the *Chemsen* slaves, *Tukluh* slaves, and *Inpuichhung* slaves, stating their reasons of enslavement. He discussed the discourse of colonial state and missionaries with regard to the *boi* system.

According to him, “the debate on the *boi* system was a conflict over the extent of authority the two agencies exercised over the Mizo communities. Slavery was

⁵⁶ Interview with Vanlal Tluonga Bapui, D. Litt, Senior Citizen and former educationist, Haflong, N.C. Hills, Assam, 22nd February, 2012, See also Sangkima (ed), ‘Boi and Sal As An Important Economic Factor in Early Mizo Society with Special Reference to Chief,’ in *A Modern History of Mizoram*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 2004, p. 18.

⁵⁷ Sajal Nag, ‘Rescuing Imagined Slaves: Colonial State, Missionary and Slavery debate In North East India (1908-1920)’, *Indian Historical Review*, Sage Publication, London: New Delhi, <http://ihr.sagepub.com>, p.62.

represented in two different forms and ways to suit their respective politics. The issue of slavery seemed not of semantics as seen by Indrani Chatterjee, but the acute need for Europeanisation, standardisation and universalization of these categories.”⁵⁸ There are a few more scholars who felt that *boi* system is a ‘mild form of slavery’ or having a ‘tinge of slavery’ but not slavery in itself.”⁵⁹ However, it is not possible to highlight every view on the issue of the *bois* and the system. The question now is, can’t there be other explanations besides the ones already given?

The *Boi* Census

Before the First World War, the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society had suggested fixing a period for the redemption of the *bois* and the gradual reduction of the *boi* price. One of the points of suggestion was that “a census should be taken showing the number of *bois* at present under the control of the chiefs.”⁶⁰ Accordingly, it was decided to take census of the *bois* on the following lines-

- (a) those who wish to be released, and
- (b) those who do not.

A condition was also attached that when the above information was collected, persons concerned with the collection should call upon any non-able-bodied persons who wish to be released to explain clearly how they expect to be able to support themselves in the event of their leaving the chief’s house. Further, the list of *boi* families which desire to be released was subdivided into two heads-

- (a) those who can easily be expected to pay the redemption prices,
- (b) those who may have difficulty in doing so.

B.C. Allen further states that if the number of those *bois*, who wish to be released, was not unduly large, there would perhaps be a case for paying the *boi* price themselves and so getting rid of the whole troublesome question. While taking census of the *bois*, it was suggested that local officers need not necessarily make enquiries in the interior. There

⁵⁸ Sajal Nag, ‘Rescuing Imagined Slaves: Colonial State, Missionary and Slavery debate In North East India (1908-1920),’ p. 64.

⁵⁹ Kipgen, *Christianity and Mizo Culture*, 1997, p. 73.

⁶⁰ ASA, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Political A: Excluded Areas Record, August 1915, Nos. 83-105.

may be census or other papers which would give them the necessary information. It was decided that the census need not be very detailed, but one that could show how many bois there were, and of those, how many were males between the ages of 15 and 60, how many were males other than between the ages referred to, and how many were women and children respectively. Therefore, J. Hazlett, the then Superintendent of the Lushai Hills, gave instruction to Assistants about the *boi* enquiry that:

(a) the census should be taken only in a few villages and certain particulars ascertained about them

(b) enquiries would only be made by the gazetted officers of the district,

(c) greatest care must be taken to act cautiously,

(d) not raise any feelings of unrest among the chiefs.

The census was only meant for the information of the Chief Commissioner. At the time, there was no intention of abolishing the system, or in fact, modify it any more than had been done, and where necessary, chiefs could be assured to that effect. Hezlett did not think that there was any danger of trouble if the enquiries were made ‘discreetly.’ The enquiries of course, could not be left to *chaprassies* or other subordinates. It was more important to make as thorough an enquiry in a few villages, as was possible without raising suspicion, than to visit a large number of villages. Following this, the Chief Commissioner ordered the informal census to be undertaken. However, the upcoming World-war of 1914 made it difficult to deal with petty problems such as the discussed topic as “in regard to the question of taking further action, the Government of India was aware the Government of Assam have been compelled to submit a deficit budget to their Legislative Council in spite of retrenchment and of the omission of provision for many schemes which are much more urgently necessary than this reform in the Lushai Hills.”⁶¹ Therefore, it was postponed until the war was over.

When the war finally came to an end, the administration was once again, in a position to concentrate on internal matters. It picked up from where it had left and began to take up the *boi* issue once again. The immediate action was taking census of

⁶¹ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Letter from A. W. Botham, Esq, C I S, I C S, Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam to The Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign and Political Department, No. Pol-813-980 A.P, Dated Shillong, the 26th February, 1923.

the *bois* in accordance with the rules and instructions that had been laid down earlier. W.L Scott, I.C.S the new Superintendent of Lushai Hills conducted the *boi* census in the Aizawl and Lunglei subdivision.

The census result showed that the “number of in-dwelling *bois* recorded was 316; comprising 476 *bois* of whom 119 were males between the ages of 16 and 60, and 357 were women and children. As regards out-dwelling *bois*, the number of houses is 1,110 and the number of heads of families or youngest sons was 1,123, of whom 1,061 were between the ages of 16 and 60. The total number of families or houses was thus 1,426. (See appendix I & II). The figures were only approximate, but are sufficiently accurate to justify an estimate that the initial expenditure in redeeming all the *bois* in the district would be about Rs.65, 000.”⁶²

The *boi* census was one important factor on the *boi* issue which was “pitifully flawed.”⁶³ The census was taken only in the Aizawl and Lungleh sub-divisions of the Lushai Hills district. Areas in the ‘interior’ were left as they were. Prior to the British occupation of the hills, the Luseis had strongly established their areas almost in the whole part of the district. They were branched into western Sailo chiefs under Kairuma, the eastern chiefs-the descendants of Vanhnuailiana, the Howlong chiefs in the south-western part of the hills, and the villages ruled by the descendants of chief Vuta. It is needless to say that wherever there were chiefs, there were *bois*.

The southern Lushai hills had more *bois* than other parts of the district, but the controversy did not in any way affect these areas. The Lakher Pioneer Mission and the missionaries Lorrain and Savidge were in control of the area. Here, it is important to remember that these missionaries had been sponsored by the Arthington Trust at Leeds from 1894, when education was handed over to the Church. The two Baptist missionaries were asked to tend to these newly vanquished people.”⁶⁴ On the other hand, Fraser was an independent missionary willing to sacrifice his own pocket money to free as many *bois* as he could afford to do so, which he had zealously done. If all the *bois* of these parts have been included in the census, the number of them would have been too high which might have resulted in the government’s loss with regard to the

⁶² Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Excluded Areas Records, Pol-A, September 1923, Nos.3-19, p. 4.

⁶³ Indrani Chatterjee ‘Slavery, Semantics and the Sound of Silence,’ in *Slavery and South Asian History*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 2006, p. 305.

⁶⁴ A. M. Chirgwin, *Arthington’s Million: The Romance of the Arthington Trust*, Livingstone Press, London, 1935

amount it would have spent on freeing the *bois*. Of course chiefs were compensated for the loss of their labour forces but if there were any *bois* freed by the government, there had been no records so far. This was perhaps why the census was not taken in the interior places.

The Aizawl and Lunglei sub-divisions alone produced a very small number of *bois* which, otherwise, would have soared very high. The interiors or rural areas were where *bois* were likely to be more when taken into consideration the incessant wars, raids and poverty but these were left intact. The census was therefore a flawed one which served yet one more political object in the Lushai Hills district.

Conclusion

The *boi* custom of the Lushai Hills generated a lot of controversy even among present day scholars, social scientists and historians who are divided in their theories about the system being slavery or otherwise. It had a quality of servitude and the *bois* were bound until they could buy their freedom. This in itself suggests that they were bonded labourers. But *boi*hood was entered voluntarily, they were treated as family members, they had the freedom of choice in changing chiefs. But in the present day Mizoram, *boi* custom is no longer a welcome topic of discussion. Even elderly people are reluctant to discuss anything in connection with the custom. Descendants of *bois* are reluctant to disclose their *boi*hood which shows that it was indeed a shameful past which had nothing glorious about it.

But looking at the system from all sides and taking the fact that there has not been any final argument that could bring the *boi* scholarship on the same platform of agreement, let us ask ourselves these questions. Cannot there be a *boi* in the *boi* system? In other words, can there be a *boi* system without the term *boi*? This is the road less trudged. A *boi* is a *boi* after all; no other foreign term can satisfy the system in totality. The system should be seen from its own setting and the context in which it was founded. This road is not necessarily the middle path to the two extremes.

Boi was a system which had its own tempo, its own rhythm, and its own history. Certainly, it is one form of servitude and this state of bondage is called *boi* and the system as *boi* system. There is no good reason to rationalize it as either charitable institution or slavery. Substantially, it has the elements of both but it can never be

purely anyone of them; it is neither a charitable institution nor a form of slavery. It is something else; it is a *boi* system that does not need any translation or transliteration. For translation of this type of practice into some existing system in a completely different context, would be to do great injustice to the system that flourished at one point of time. This is because the definition of *boi* system with some existing system elsewhere or translation of its meaning into foreign tongue would involve good amounts of commission and omission. Such exercise should be as far as possible avoided. To meet the needs of the *boi* system one must, therefore, necessarily go for the local, the real, the authentic, instead of adopting other terms. To understand the *boi* system from its own setting it is significant that a *boi* should be called a *boi*, nothing more, and nothing less. It is one form of bondage in which both the elements of philanthropy and slavery blended together in a peculiarly Lusei's way.