

THE ISRAELI BACKGROUND OF THE MIZOS AND KUKIS



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There are two unresolved mysteries in History. One is the disappearance of the Ten Israelite tribes that the Assyrians had enslaved and transported to their lands and has eventually disappeared from history. The Bible refers them as the "Lost People".

The second unresolved mystery revolves around the Megalithic Dolmens and other burial sites discovered in different parts of Asia, Africa, Europe and the Indian Peninsula. There are no clues to the original owners of these monuments which were obviously burial sites. Remains of bones, implements and utensils used by these people have been found from some of these sites. These magnificent relics of an unknown people from remote past have not been claimed by any surviving people as belonging to their ancestors.

Could they be the remains of the Lost Tribes of Israel? Are there sufficient leads to trace the authors of these unique monuments? Can we locate the survivors...? This paper is a humble step in our effort at solving these mysteries!

The Jews are among the most persecuted and hounded people in history. Yet, they are also among the most successful people, who have made significant contributions to humanity in the socio-economic, scientific and technological fields. Though forced out of their homeland, enslaved and dispersed throughout the world, the Jews boast of an unbroken history of over 4000 years since Abraham the patriarch of the Hebrews, founded their race. The Israelis trace their ancestry to Shem, the first son of Noah, who escaped from the Great Deluge. Stories similar to the great flood in the Bible and the Qur'an figure in the epics and lores of several peoples, such as the Sumerian Gilgamesh, the Hindu 'Matsyaavatar', Babylonian, Egyptian, Chinese, Greek and American Indian.

The Bible records their origin and the trials and tribulations they underwent before entering their Promised Land under Moses. But even after regaining their land, they had to undergo subjugation at the hands of the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians. Ten of the twelve tribes of the Israelis were taken prisoners by Assyrians and enslaved in Media and beyond. They fled to distant lands and never returned to Israel and vanished from history. The Bible describes them as the Lost Tribes.

Those who fled from Assyria apparently emigrated to the Caucasus Mountains and Europe in the north and to the easterly Indian sub-continent. The megalithic burial sites in Europe, the Caucasus and Indian sub-continent bear witness to this migration. They are identical to the burial sites on Golan Heights of Israel and Jordan Valley.

Certain communities in India, including the Pathans, the Patels, the Bhattas, Bhattarais, Bhattacharyas and the Mizos in the north and north-east, the Gowda Saraswat Brahmins in the Konkan and the Deccan, the Raos, Reddys and Coorgies in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka and the Tamil Brahmins (Iyyer and Iyyenkars) are believed to be their descendants. A section of the Tamil Brahmins reached the western coast in Kerala. It is believed that St Thomas the Apostle, had come to the Kerala coast looking for the Jewish converted Hindu Brahmin people. It is to these people the Apostle proclaimed the New Gospel first. They were the first converts to Christianity in India. The Nazrani community in Kerala is the descendants of these Jewish Brahmins.

During the inception of Islam, a section of the Lost Tribes in the North-Western India, became Muslims and the Pathans, Ghans, Afridis, Rabbanis, Ashurians, Lavanis, Usaphais, Ravuthars and a major part of Bahais are Jewish converted Muslims.

Mizos and Kukis

A segment of the Israelite tribes in Afghanistan, comprising mostly of the Manasseh tribe, entered China through the northern trade route, traversing the Himalayan heights and reached the northern border areas of Tibet. They then moved along the Wei River and settled down in the Kaifeng area of central China.

Evidences of an Israelite settlement in Kaifeng town, dating back to 231 BC, have been found. The Chinese apparently treated these refugees without compassion. They were treated as slaves and put to hard labour. Unable to bear the treatment, some of the refugees fled to the Shinlung Mountains and hid themselves in caves. The descendants of these mountainous cave dwellers are known as the Shinlungs.

The Shinlungs, who lived in the mountains for generations, suffering poverty and hunger, however, followed Israelite customs and the Torah (Moses' Law). In their prayers, they revered the patriarch of their tribe, Manasseh, which fact eventually helped establish their Israeli ancestry. Of course, long exposure to the Chinese living close to the Shinlung Mountains did influence them culturally.

They abandoned the cave life and traveled southwest through Thailand and reached the south-eastern Mandalay area of Burma (Myanmar). From there, the Manassehs spread out to the Chittagong, Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland areas. The Mizos, the Kukis and the Hmar Tribes, numbering about 1.5 million, now occupying the confluence of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar are the descendants of the Manasseh Tribe of Israel, who came via China.

They speak dialects that have some affinity to the Chinese languages, but these tribes do not consider themselves to be of Chinese origin. On the contrary, they believe they are descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel, though they bear traces of the cultures of the different lands they traversed to reach their present abode.

They describe themselves as 'Lusi'. 'Lu' means tribe and 'si' means ten, an obvious allusion to their origins in the Lost Ten Tribes. The reference to the immigrant tribes of Afghanistan and Pakistan as 'Pathans' and to the tribes in eastern India and nearby areas as 'Lusi', both terms meaning ten, is clearly aimed at preserving their ancestral affinity. And they nurse this memory in the hope and belief that the Israelite Diaspora would one day be reunited in their homeland and that Jehovah would let them.

Though the Mizo, Kuki and Hmar tribes of north-east India believe themselves to belong to the Lost Tribes, they have no proof with them to establish their Israeli origins. All they have the traditional beliefs and information passed down to them by word of mouth through generations. A definite clue to persisting

Israelite memories of these people may be found in the festival song of the Hmar tribe called 'Sikpuikoot'. The sound 'koot', which means festivity and revelry in the Dravidian languages, may point to the origin of these people in Canaan Country.

The Dravidian languages are etymologically derived from the Mediterranean area of West Asia. That apart, the 'Sikpuikoot' song itself contains important references to their origin in Canaan. The song has references to the escape of the people through a parting of the Red Sea, their march through desert when columns of rain-bearing clouds gave them cover by day and pillar of fire lighting their way by night, besides the gathering of quails for food and water springing out of rock, etc., all of them strongly recalling the references in the Book of Exodus. The Hmars sing this song at the start of all festivities. This is pointed out as proof of the Israeli connection of the Mizo, Kuki and Hmar Tribes. An English rendering of the 'Sikpuikoot' song reads thus:

While we are preparing for the Sikpui Feast, The big Red Sea becomes divided. As we march along fighting the foes, we are being led by pillar of cloud by day, And pillar of fire by night. Our enemies, O ye folks, are thick with fury Come out with your shields and arrows, Fight our enemy all day long. The big sea swallowed them like wild beast. Collect the quails, and draw the water that springs out of the rock.

Similar to the references recalling Biblical records in 'Sikpuikoot', the Hmar people have other folk songs that recall the Great Flood and the erection of the Tower of Babel. Though they may have been embellished by local incidents, it is obvious that the main influence comes from the Bible. These tribes also follow rituals and sacrifices that strongly recall Biblical and, hence, Israelite links.

The Mizos, who live in the north-eastern hill tracts of India, are a people who strongly believe they belong to the Lost Israeli Tribe of Manasseh. According to their tradition, they had come from the caves in the Shinlung Mountains in China. They came to the hill tracts at the tri-junction of India, Burma (Myanmar) and Bangladesh via Thailand. They believe their tribe's name came from Manasseh. Their belief in the Israelite origins led some Mizos to adopt Judaism as their faith, and a few of those converted have migrated to Israel.

There are several Israeli memorabilia in the Mizoram capital of Aizawl. One hill in the town is named Bethlehem; another as Shalom. One town square is known as Israel Point. Shops and other establishments bearing Jewish names are found all over the town, such as Israel Stores, Zion Tailors, Exodus Press, Nazareth School, etc. Of course, the influence of Christianity also may have contributed to the naming decisions. Yet, their deep attachment to the Old Testament stories is pointed out as an evidence of their Israelite origins. The Mizos believe they are descendants of Abraham, but a large segment prefers to follow Christianity. Since they believe they belong to the Lost Tribes, the Mizos nurse a desire to return to the Promised Land (Israel). Some have acted on the desire. In 1983, a Mizo teacher named ZaithanChhungi, author of 'Israel-Mizo Identity', went to Israel, and with the help of a Jewish priest, Rabbi Eliyahu Avichayil, presented the Mizos' case before the Amishav Association, which arranges the return of the Israelite Diaspora to Israel. In 1994, Rabbi Eliyahu took 400 Mizos to Israel. All of them later formally embraced Judaism, became Israeli citizens and settled down in Israel under the country's 'Right of Return' law. Under the law, every Jew enjoys the 'right of return' or the right to live in Israel.

Their continual contacts with Israel have come to the point that the Mizos call themselves Shinlung-Israel. They called a convention in Aizawl, prepared a report and submitted memoranda to Israel and the United Nations. The report stated that there were 800,000 Shinlungs in Mizoram and 720,000 in Manipur, Assam and Tripura put together. The coordination of the Manasseh tribe and their continual contact with Israel has indeed turned into a headache for the Governments of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. The coming together of the Shinlungs in three countries is developing into a political problem. But the Mizos continue to keep alive the memories of their Israelite ancestry and maintain contacts with Israel. A news item that appeared in The Hindu on March 30, 2003, read thus:

"Are the Mizos a Lost Tribe of Israel?"

"Aizawl, March 29: Are the natives of Mizoram the descendants of a lost tribe of ancient Israel, which was vanished by powerful invaders centuries before Christ was born?"

"The Lost Tribe theory has now found its advocate in the Chief Minister, Zoramthanga, who said he strongly believed that the Mizos were the direct descendants of Manasseh, the ancestor of the Manashe tribe, one of the ten tribes which disappeared from Israel after attacks by the Assyrians, which the Bible later described as the "Lost Tribes of Israel". The Chief Minister's comments came in the wake of rabbinical visit from Israel to Aizawl.

"The rabbis were here to celebrate 'Porim', one of the most important festivals of the Jews.

"They also held a rabbinical court here, at which a number of native Mizo believers were admitted to the Jewish faith, and the new converts were apprised of the various aspects of the religion.-UNI"

After the visit of the Jewish priests to Mizoram in 2003, 71 converted Mizos migrated to Israel. During 1994-2003, over 800 Mizos who adopted Judaism settled down in Israel. Another batch of 53, hailing from 20 families, reached Israel in November 2006. The Israeli Interior Ministry has reported a flood of Mizo applications seeking domicile in Israel, to the extent that the Government has been compelled to restrict the inflow by passing a decree on October 17, 2007. The latest statistics is that 248 Bnei Menashe from India reached Israel on December 17th 2020. More than 20,000 Jews made aliyah from 70 countries in the year 2020 in the midst of the Covid 19 pandemic.

The chariot of memories racing to the Promised Land is visible from anywhere. The Mizo experience reminds us that the story of the Lost Tribes is not only history but also a living experience.
