



Our Side Of The Story: A Qualitative Study On The Portrayal Of Insurgency In Selected Mizo Films

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Abstract: On February 28, 1966, the Mizo National Front (MNF) revolted against India's government, aiming to establish an independent nation-state for the Mizo people. In its initial response to the government's actions to quell the uprising in 1966, the Indian government undertook several counter-insurgencies including deployment of an air strike against Mizoram residents and MNF volunteers. National media coverage of the air attack and the Mizo people's experiences during this difficult period is minimal. Movies about this insurrection may be seen in Mizo regional cinema, although they seldom reach national audiences. Film, as a visual medium, is an effective way to transmit information. Several studies have demonstrated that films have the power to affect people and shift viewers' perspectives. With the help of qualitative textual analysis, this paper study how the insurgency issue has been portrayed in three selected Mizo language films *V battalion* (2006), *Rise of the Heroes* (2023) and *Ambush* (2023). The study examined the impact of insurgency and counter-insurgency activities on people in Mizoram. The findings indicated that citizens are constantly fearful of both militants and security forces, demonstrating how difficult it is for civilians to live a regular life amid the insurgency. The three films under examination present MNF volunteers as Indian army liberators and heroes. The Indian army's members are portrayed as being ungrateful, callous, and degrading, and they frequently hurt civilians. To seize power, they frequently merge settlements, set fire to villages, and subject locals to torture in exchange for information.

Keywords: insurgency, portrayal, regional film, Mizo films, representation study

I. INTRODUCTION

Following India's independence in 1947, the sparsely inhabited Autonomous Hill Districts (AHDs) in Assam's borders were a challenge to the post-colonial government (Holt, 2022). One of the Assam District, Lushai Hills District, and later known as Mizoram demand independence from India and seeking separate administration. The advent of Mautam ((a cyclical bamboo flowering event that leads to famine) in Mizo

District in 1959 caused significant suffering for the Mizo population (Zohmingliani, 2022) and the Mizo National Famine Front (MNFF) was established in 1960 to help those in hardship. On October 22, 1961, the organisation became a political party after dropping the term 'famine'(Lalthakima, 2008). In a speech made as president of the MNFF on August 6, 1961, Laldenga publicly proclaimed that Mizos were "Mongolians" rather than "Indians" and urged to the Mizo people to liberate themselves from "Indian colonialism and achieve complete independence". He had maintained that the British had granted the Mizos their own governance, and that the Mizos had the right to be split from India, especially since the Government of India had entirely ignored them following independence (Lalthakima, 2008). On February 28, 1966, MNF volunteers launched an open armed uprising against the Indian government, calling for Mizo sovereignty and independence (Vanlalmangaihsanga, 2023). The conflict lasted from 1966 until 1986, and both the MNF insurgents and Indian army caused significant suffering for the Mizo people. Houses were burned, people were moved, and local settlements were merged into a single large community and the Indian Air Force carried out air strike in Aizawl, which remains the lone case of India conducting an airstrike in its own civilian region. During the insurgency, Mizo residents were subjected to extensive physical and psychological torture. The insurgency in Mizoram has been the subject of several studies and research articles. However, little research has been done on how Mizoram's insurgency is portrayed in films. There are a few films depicting the Mizo insurgency, but they are usually produced by Mizo filmmakers and are seldom seen outside of Mizoram because they are primarily intended for Mizo viewers. Consequently, this study aims to highlight how insurgents are being portrayed and determine how security forces address insurgent challenges and how civilians are portrayed in the selected Mizo regional film.

The earliest known Mizo film was perhaps the silent film *Land of the Lushai*, which was created by British Missionaries between 1940 and 1950 (Lalmuanpuii, 2017). It would take the Mizos more than 30 years to make their first feature film. The first movie theatre in Mizoram, Krishna Talkies, was owned by Mr. Bomraj and launched silent cinema in 1950, paving the way for cinema in Mizo society. However, Krishna Talkies burned down on March 5 and 6, 1966, as a result of the MNF Political Party's uprising against the Indian government and quest for independence. In addition to Krishna Talkies, the Indian Army, located in Mizoram, introduced cinema. They would show films in fields with a projector and a basic white piece of cloth. The community rapidly accepted this new kind of entertainment since it could be enjoyed by individuals of all ages. People would come together at night to attend movie screenings (Lalmuanpuii, 2017).

Mizoram witnessed the first Mizo language film, *Phuba*, in 1983(Agarwala, 2018). After 30 years since the first Mizo film, a number of Mizo films have been created by Mizo filmmakers. Mizo filmmakers have experimented with several film genres, such as action, romance, and humour. A few Mizo filmmakers are also making films about the insurgency in Mizoram. However, these films hardly reach national audiences, they are mostly made solely for the Mizo audiences and mostly are made with the filmmakers' own money.

II. PORTRAYALS OF INSURGENCY IN FILMS

The way insurgency is portrayed in cinema has always sparked interest and been the focus of critical analysis. Numerous cinematic contexts have examined insurgency and its complicated and multidimensional

phenomena, each providing distinct viewpoints and insights (Jilani & Mujaddid, 2020). According to Moore (n.d.) an insurgency is a prolonged, violent war in which one or more groups use political activity, social unrest, subversion, and prolonged bloodshed to try to topple or drastically alter the political or social order of a state or territory. Film, as a visual medium, is an effective way to transmit information. Several studies have demonstrated that films have the power to affect people and shift viewers' perspectives. Film is also an effective medium for conveying information. It serves as a medium for documenting the past and portraying what occurred in the past. In addition to serving as a crucial reminder of the human cost of war and the horrific outcomes for those innocent individuals caught in the mayhem, the on-screen portrayal of violence has served to bring attention to lesser-known conflicts, battles, and wars. War films frequently depict some of the most horrific incidents that have ever happened to humanity in a perceptive manner. Given India's history of insurgency, scholars have performed several studies on how insurgencies are depicted in Bollywood films, with a particular emphasis on Kashmir insurgencies. Hussain (2018) states that Bollywood films often stress the beauty of Kashmir and overemphasise Indian soldiers' gallantry, ignoring the core causes of the war. Kashmiris are perceived as passive victims rather than active players in the conflict. Roy (2018) investigates the increasing popularity of Kashmir's representation in Indian cinema. It examines the evolution of Kashmir from an enchanting setting for romantic moments to the focal point of tales reflecting the region's complexity and concerns. According to the article, insurgency and militancy in Kashmir influenced the narratives of films set in the region, resulting in a shift in cinematic portrayals from romanticised representations to more complex explorations of the social and political issues challenges faced by Kashmir and its people. Qasir & Tuz (2013) using content analysis, the article examines three Bollywood films, Mission Kashmir, Fana, and The Hero, to determine how Indian films create distinct views of Kashmiris throughout the world than their actual image. According to the article, Indians are utilising their film industry to build a global narrative in which they are attempting to establish the fact that all peace, law, and order in Kashmir are the result of Indian presence there. All of Kashmir's Islamic groups, which are many, are causing unrest in the region with the assistance of Pakistan and attempting to establish an unlawful takeover of Kashmir. The article goes on to say that this type of representation of Muslims in Indian cinema is dividing Muslims in India and Kashmir, Pakistan, and India from Hindus in India, thus undermining attempts at unity and peace both inside India and over the border in Pakistan and Kashmir. Bhat (2019) conducted a survey and examine how Muslims are depicted as terrorists, cruel people, harsh, and negative people in Indian cinema. Through the survey, the research concluded that Muslims are often stereotyped as terrorists, traitors, disloyal, ruthless, and barbarians. The article states that the number of films depicting and portraying Muslims as ruthless and rogue is more than the number of films presenting and portraying Muslims in a positive light. Nnabuiife et al. (2023) examines the role of the media in expressing insurgency via the lens of the Nollywood film Voiceless. It explores how the media's representation of insurgency in films like Voiceless shapes public perceptions and attitudes toward conflicts, focusing on the effects on awareness, psychological attachment, opinion among the public, and response possibilities. Several regional filmmakers from several North Eastern states have produced films about insurgencies in their own areas but these regional films hardly reached national audiences as these films are mainly for local audiences only and coverage of insurgencies in North East India

is limited. Bhaumik (2023) says that Bollywood films frequently characterise Northeast India as a "conflict zone" without providing accurate depictions. Stereotypes are reinforced by this representation, which also ignores the region's actual cultural and socioeconomic complexity, especially when it comes to insurgency stories. Phukan (2024) examines the representation of identity and insurgency in Assam through the lens of two films, Haanduk (2016) and Jwlwi: The Seed (2019). The article mentions that the films portray the impact of political turbulence and violence on individuals, with a special emphasis on the experiences of women who have observed and survived trauma as a result of insurgency-related occurrences. The article also discusses the role of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in the region and its implications for the local populace. Sharma & Chirom (2022) conduct a content analysis on Manipuri insurgency film Mami Sami. The study mentions that the film depicts insurgents as organizations that terrorise people. According to the paper, security forces often harm people rather than protect them during counter-terrorism operations. The study mentions the constant effect of insurgency and counter-insurgency activities on people, involving bomb explosions, confrontations, and harassment by insurgents and security personnel. With the help of cultural code Nazzini & Kumat (2020) conduct a content analysis of selected three Tamil films featuring Kamal Haasan in the lead roles. The study finds that Muslims in Tamil movies are frequently stereotyped with cliché imagery, reinforcing misrepresentations in the audience's thoughts. Thakur (2022) Anek (2023) attempts to address challenges face in North East India, which is frequently afflicted by insurgency and racism. According to the report, while Anek (2023) does its best to convey the insurgency in Northeast India and other challenges, it contributes to the general public's preconceptions about the region. In reality, it appears to be an attempt to draw attention and accentuate the saviour complex that 'mainland' Indians feel for 'backward' North easterners. According to the article, the movie undermines the Northeastern states' decade-long fight to establish their own separate linguistic and cultural identities.

III.METHODOLOGY

The study is a qualitative study and employs qualitative textual analysis. According to Mckee (2016) Textual analysis describes and interprets the qualities of visual or recorded communication. Textual analysis characterizes the structure, content, and functions of messages found in texts. The researchers have chosen V Battalion (2006), Ambush (2023), The Rise of the Heroes (2023) - Mizo language film based on the Insurgency issue in India's north-eastern state of Mizoram to be analysed. Here some scenes and dialogue from each film is analysed to find out how insurgency are portrayed in the selected Mizo films.

Sample studied

1. V Battalion (2006)
2. The Rise of the Heroes (2023)
3. Ambush (2023)

V Battalion (2006)

C. Zama's V Battalion (2006) details the MNF volunteer's efforts in liberating Mizoram from the Indian Government and the subsequent roadblocks. Following Ramram-a, the commander of the Teripa section, this film takes place during the 1966 rebellion and provides an interpretive approach with an inclination toward the MNF cause. The film clearly leans in favor of the MNF, showing them as disciplined fighters with the support of the Mizo people, simply fighting for their freedom. On the other hand, the Indian Army is mostly shown in a negative way, with little effort to show their side of the story. The film starts with the MNF fighters in guerrilla training—they are positioned early on as professionally trained with a devotion to purpose and the lives of others for liberation and well-being—they have established goals and military decorum. Furthermore, as they proceed to Darlawn, the squad divides into two factions to approach different terrains strategically, and when one volunteer accidentally discharges his gun, he is firmly chastised by the commander; such a scene effectively sets the tone of urgency and the danger that lies ahead.

The MNF fighters throughout the campaign appear to be reliant upon people support. Civilians are always shown giving meals, drinks, and even accommodation—sometimes at extreme risk to their safety. When Ramram-a arrives at the Lungmuat village, one man advises him, "The enemy is massing close to Darlawn. You have to be careful." But an old woman assures him, "You are the hope of the Mizo people, and we always pray for you." These sentiments reveal the ideological and emotional ties between soldier and supporter. They are not volunteers who are painted as outcasts or insurgents. They're part of a national campaign

The narrative then transitions to a sugarcane mill, where two women warmly welcome the MNF volunteers and offer them freshly made sugarcane juice. However, their conversation soon turns tense. One of the women expresses her frustration, stating, "I'm sick of the Indian Army." The other agrees, adding, "It's true. Your uncle, the Village Council President (VCP) of Bukpui village, was also arrested by the Indian Army and brutally beaten." This exchange not only reveals the anger and trauma experienced by civilians but also further highlights the oppressive role of the Indian Army as portrayed in the film.

The film's focus on the volunteers' struggles is among its most striking features. The scene where MNF fighters steal supplies and shoes from Indian soldiers because they are short on resources is a striking illustration. The Indian Army, on the other hand, is constantly portrayed as being both well-equipped and vicious. Their brutal retaliation against villagers who were thought to be assisting the MNF, which included sexual assault, public beatings, and executions, presents an image of institutional brutality. In one terrifying scene, women are tortured by smoke while confined inside a house, signifying the oppressive and suffocating conditions of oppression and war.

The involvement of young people is another topic covered in the movie. Though some are rejected because of their age, young boys are depicted as being eager to enlist, motivated by patriotism and a desire to contribute. This instance demonstrates the movement's profound resonance with Mizo society across time.

The distinction between civilian and combatant is increasingly blurred as the narrative progresses, especially in villages like Bukpui and Vaitin where locals are subjected to severe reprisals for aiding the

volunteers. These incidents show how costly insurgency is for entire communities as well as for combatants. The movie retains an underlying tone of resiliency and shared struggle in spite of the devastation and suffering.

V Battalion (2006) serves as a cinematic tribute to remembrance and the affirmation of identity, transcending its narrative as merely a war story. It portrays the Indian Army as an oppressive force and the MNF movement as a morally righteous form of resistance backed by a cohesive community. The film provides important insight into how the insurgency is remembered and retold within Mizo cultural discourse, despite its obvious bias. It depicts the emotional and spiritual stakes that characterised this era of Mizo history in addition to the physical conflict.

Ambush (2023)

Ambush (2023) directed by Mapuia Chawngthu revolves around a revered Mizo National Army Major who is seized by Indian security forces in an ambush near the Indo-East Pakistan border. The film also highlights the hardships that ordinary people faced at the hands of Indian security forces and the MNF on both sides.

Ambush (2023) opens with Major Lalngura and a group of MNF volunteers (insurgents) making their way toward Mizoram. The film focuses on both the story of the insurgents on their mission to liberate Mizoram from the Indian Army and civilians who never signed up or participated in the Movement or the strict counter-measures, but who were reluctant and miserable victims of the sufferings created by the Independence Movement and the counter-measures imposed by the Indian army. As the title suggests, the film is about how Mizo National Front (MNF) volunteers ambush security personnel, as well as the sacrifices made by MNF volunteers and civilians to save Mizo National Army Major, Major Lalngura. Although the film is based on the Mizo Independence Movement, it is viewed from the perspective of ordinary people, rather than those who fight for the cause or those who strive to repress it. Ambush tells the stories of ordinary men and women and depicts the role, importance, influence, and helplessness of the VCP (village council president), who is caught between the insurgents and the Vai Sipai (Indian Security Forces) during the tumultuous, bloody years of the Mizo National Front's (MNF) armed rebellion. The movie depicts the conflict that the VCP faces as they must decide whether to aid the MNF insurgents or face the consequences of not doing so. In a certain point in the movie, we witness the security forces killing the VCP for simply helping the MNF volunteers.

The visuals shift to a depiction of the events following February 28, 1966, presented through a brief montage illustrating the violence inflicted by the Indian Army on Mizo civilians. The following scene shifts to Bungpui village, where villagers are forced to flee from their village as they are grouped with Zopui village, in Mizoram context the villages were grouped into bigger groups with the stated goal of protecting the people from the MNF and accelerating development activities in interior communities (Nunthara, 1981). The Indian army implemented village groupings in response to the emergence of MNF insurgents. The primary goal is to facilitate the security forces' efficient operation against the MNF. While the locals were departing from their houses, we witnessed the Indian troops burning down their houses and people screaming in the background. This section of the scenario highlights the Indian Army's ruthlessness and the suffering of

Mizo residents. Throughout the video, we observe villagers fearful of both MNF volunteers and security troops. The civilians are torn between supporting the MNF volunteers and suffering the repercussions of not helping them, or if the security forces noticed that if they supported the MNF volunteers, they would face the same punishments. Though the civilians do not often join physically or with guns, the general people, who are otherwise non-participants in the uprising, lends different forms of support to the MNF cause. Throughout the film, the MNF volunteers (insurgents) repeatedly use the slogan 'Pathian leh kan Ram tan', which roughly translates to 'For God and Country' or 'For God and our Land/Nation'. This suggests that the Mizo National Front thought that what they were doing was right in the eyes of God, and that the purpose of their conflict was honorable.

Amid the film, we observe one soldier rape a disable girl, emphasizing the atrocities done by the Indian army against civilians. The middle part of the film focuses on the MNF volunteers trying to rescue Major Lalngura, who was captured by the security forces.

The film employs a flashback where the security forces forced all the villagers in the field as they suspect someone of helping the MNF. The Commanding Officer (CO) asked the person however help the MNF to surrender himself but no one come forward and the CO ordered the security forces to beat all the civilians as a result. After a few investigations, Thartea's father was suspected of aiding MNF and was beaten in front of all the civilians just to set an example. The situation demonstrates the brutality of the Indian army, their willingness to use any means necessary to achieve their goals, and the hidden aspects of a country rife with insurrection.

The movie also depicts the difficult choice parents must make when they send their sons to transport supplies for the Indian security forces, knowing that the MNF insurgents will be waiting to ambush them in an attempt to save Major Lalngura. The last scene shows the security forces using Mizo men as a human shield where the MNF volunteers ambush them at Dizawlhmun where the final battle took place. Ambush (2023) portrays the narrative of armed rebels who had to kill their own brothers to achieve their aim and vision.

Rise of the Heroes (2023)

Rise of the Heroes (2023) follows the underground life experiences and operations of CH Battalion – a branch of the Mizo National Army, which picked up arms against the government of India. The movie depicts a glimpse of what life was about for civilians, the Mizo National Army (MNA), and the Indian Army during the 'darkest period in the history of Mizoram', also known as the period of insurgency which lasted for 20 longest years (1966 to 1986). During this period, the Mizo National Front (or Mizo National Army), led by its leader Laldenga, fought for independence from the State of India. As the name of the movie connotes, this particular piece is an indigenous and sided attempt to reveal a particular perspective of the insurgency i.e., the Mizo perspective.

Like mentioned above, this particular piece of cinema follows the activities of CH Battalion, a branch of the MNA led by Commanding Officer (CO) Lianhnuna. However, the plot mainly revolves around the military conquest and maneuvers of Captain Sangliana and his men, including the romantic encounters they experienced behind enemy lines and between the flying bullets. As symbolized in the title of the film, the

insurgents (as called by the Government of India) are hailed as heroes of the land, defenders of the nation (of Mizoram), and soldiers of God. Throughout the film, there are multiple instances where the MNF volunteers (insurgents) uttered the phrase 'Pathian leh kan Ram tan', which roughly translates to 'For God and Country', or 'For God and our Land/Nation'. Subsequently, we saw numerous Bible references, Bible reading, reciting of prayers and the singing of gospel songs by the insurgents or protagonists. In other words, this film portrays the insurgency as deeply embedded in religious roots; the volunteers of the Mizo National Army strongly believed that what they were doing was justified in the eyes of God and that the cause of their fight was a noble pursuit. In one of the scenes where Capt. Sangliana delivered words of inspiration to his men, he said, "...the Indian army may have better weapons and machinery, but we have what they do not – God". One other common phrase used by the insurgents was 'Ram leh Hnam tan...' which basically means 'For our land and our nation'. In these phrases alone, we can decipher the nature and mindset of the Mizo national army in particular and perhaps the conscience of the Mizo population in general. It is clear that they whole heartedly believe in the cause of their arm rebellion to be a noble endeavor, even if it was to cost their life. One other important takeaway from this movie is the indestructible mind-set of men in those era; when one of the insurgents was shot and on his last breaths, he uttered, "it's only a minor wound" and said to his comrades, in a regretful tone, "sorry I am not fierce enough" indicating his desire to serve a little more alongside his fellow members of the battalion.

The film portrays the Indian Army in a rather despicable and contemptible way. Every scene where the members of the Indian army are depicted, they convey a rough, unsympathetic or disgraceful expressions or actions. In most of the scenes where the army officers are playing in, they are either sexually assaulting women or killing Mizo army sympathizers. They are depicted as always using a demanding and fiery tone of voice while speaking to civilians and even among themselves. In one of the scenes where the women of the village were doing their laundry in the river, one of them said expressed her feelings about the presence of the insurgents in their village and said, "...I feel a lot safer with them around". This indicates the kind of atrocities that the women in particular suffered from the Indian Army personnel and how they are continuously feeling unsafe and uncomfortable in their own village.

This film depicts the relationship between the civilians (public) and the Mizo National Army in a rather harmonious way. In most of the scenes, civilians are seen supporting the operations of the insurgents; women are seen washing the clothes of the volunteers or Mizo army, young men are seen working as a messenger for the insurgents, and the Village Council President (VCP) are also shown feeding information to the Mizo army. However, there are some instances where there arises a conflict between the civilian and the Mizo army too. The concept of 'Kawktu' was introduced in this film to imply dissenters among the civilians, who feed information to the Indian Army regarding the whereabouts of the insurgents, their hideouts, and other tactical information. And these individuals are seen terminated by the Mizo army themselves in some cases.

The film reveals the multi-faceted nature of the insurgency, how it affects innocent civilians, how women became one of the primary victims of the atrocities of the Indian Army, how it divided the public regarding the cause of the rebellion, and how, amidst of it all, a love between men and women persists in those difficult times. Even though it may be a one-sided take on the period of insurgency in Mizoram, it still offers a valuable insight into the price our ancestors have to pay for the peace and harmony that we enjoy today.

IV. Conclusion

The representation of insurgency in *V Battalion* (2006), *Ambush* (2023), and *Rise of the Heroes* (2023) provides a multi-faceted and emotive glimpse into one of the most significant and distressing periods in Mizo history. These three films, while supportive of the Mizo National Front and its armed insurrection, are more than just politically-relevant narratives; they are filmic vehicles of collective memory, identity, and traumatic past. The choices made visually and narratively by the filmmakers in each of the films show a conscious and unconscious attempt to reconstruct and narrate the Mizo version of the story, which has often been ignored, misrepresented, or completely absent in the mainstream narrative of India.

These films are rooted in meaningful representations of sacrifice, community solidarity, and spiritual conviction which advance MNF volunteers from insurgents to national heroes. The continuum of religious language, imagery, especially with the recurring slogan of "Pathian leh kan Ram tan" illuminates the intertwining of faith and nationalism present in Mizo resistance. The influence of Indian security forces remaining presented as aggressive and inhumane invoking the pain and resentment in generations impacted by their actions.

Notably, these films do not glorify violence without considering the consequences. They show the quotidian lives of civilians on the periphery of war—parents who have to make dangerous decisions for their survival versus loyalty, women subjected to state violence, children sucked into act of dissidence, and political/community leaders like the VCP while sorting through moral ambiguity. These films illustrate the human cost of wars and rebellions, living with moral ambiguity, and how communities affectively hold, frame and/or remember conflict.

These films serve as a form of resistance against forgetting, obliteration, and silenced historical narration, for when documenting and dramatizing the insurgency, they are resisting forgetting, obliteration and silenced historical narration - collectively. They remind us that Mizo identity is not just articulated through a commonality of culture and faith, but also in the history of struggle, resilience, and sacrifice. While biased, they collectively add, nonetheless, to larger conversations about insurgency and the act of nationalism, and the role of cinema in the invention of historical consciousness.

Ultimately, this study reinforces the importance of indigenous storytelling in postcolonial contexts, where the definition of insurgent and patriot, as well as the definition of villain and victim, can be recreated from the eye of the camera. With these filmic examples of Mizo cinema, the phrase provided an odd counter-narrative, emphasized in full clarity and meaning, that our side of the story needs to be told.

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