To assume that the subject of this article will be considered superficial and inconsequential, if not outright irresponsible, is not ruled out. The pristine simplicity of primitive cultures are assumed impervious to such insidious cynicism as Machiavelli’s ideas, but the present examination is made on the premise that every community or nation suffers from the illusion of a previous golden age or pre-historic utopia. Perhaps such an illusion relieves an innate sense of insecurity, inadequacy and even inferiority and saves them from an unequal comparison with others considered more civilized or stronger. This attitude has the euphemistic name of ‘patriotism’. A patriot therefore is the apex or spearhead of the accumulated ego of a community in a defensive attitude, and ethnic identity appears to survive on the assumption of such a Utopian past. This is indicated by the zeal with which the external trappings of tribal past is preserved even in the 21st century, for no holier virtue than to have the satisfaction of being different.

I. Aims and Objectives
For the educated elitist group of a community, it could be considered naive not to be aware of the fact that men in all ages and places share an identical human nature, that the vision of our glorious past is only a mirage, that men steal, rape, kill and pillage others then as now. It is the aim of this study to attempt to show that our dim past can throw some light to understand human life in general beyond what written documents have revealed so far.

II. Why Machiavelli?
To be ignorant of the name of Niccolò Machiavelli today is to be in danger of self-deception. For, to many in the past, he represented the Devil himself. In fact, the Devil himself has been called Machiavellian. In a corrupt and decadent society in which man’s natural badness and egoism have more or less free scope, where uprightness, devotion to the common good, and the religious spirit are either dead or submerged by license, lawlessness and faithlessness, it is only an absolute ruler who is able to hold together the centrifugal forces and create a strong and unified society. Machiavelli showed his ‘modernity’ in the emphasis he laid on the State as a sovereign body which maintains its vigour and unity by power-politics and an imperialistic policy. He is chiefly known, of course, for his amoral advice to the prince, for his ‘Machiavellianism’.1

Machiavelli was no angel; neither was he a devil. He was a pragmatist who realized the necessity of facing life in its sordid reality for the much needed good, free of moral considerations. For what is moral but the general good? He could be termed a prophet of political necessity in an age when nations committed mutual annihilation. His was the only reasonable answer to the contemporary problem of Italy.

Machiavelli was born in 1469 in Florence, Italy, and died in 1527. During the Renaissance, the Florentines exercised power over a great many other Tuscan cities. During Machiavelli’s lifetime, the chief family menacing the republican institutions of Florence was the Medici. As a loyal supporter of the Medici family, he wrote his famous book, The Prince, an exhortation of Lorenzo de’ Medici to make himself strong to unite Italians against foreign occupation. Machiavelli was commissioned by the ‘Ten of Council’, among other Florentines, as an agent at the courts of various princes. Such a career, conditioned by a strong political ideal, served the fuel for the astute political wisdom of Machiavelli. A sample reading from The Prince will give us sufficient indication as to how people had reacted to this work. The text is the Norton Critical Edition, translated by Robert M. Adams:

Any man who tries to be good all the time is bound to come to ruin among the great number who are not good. Hence a prince who wants to keep his authority must learn how not to be good, and use that knowledge, or refrain from using it, as necessity requires....

I know everyone will agree that among these many qualities a prince certainly ought to have all those that are considered good. But since it is impossible to have and exercise them all, because the conditions of human life simply do not allow it, a prince must be shrewd enough to avoid the public disgrace of those vices that would lose him his state. If he possibly can, he should also guard against vices that will not lose him his state; but if he cannot prevent them, he should not be too worried about indulging them.

...a reputation for liberality is doubtless very fine; but the generosity that earns you that reputation can do you great harm. For if you exercise your generosity in a really virtuous way
as you should, nobody will know of it, ... Hence if you wish to be widely known as a generous man, you must seize every opportunity to make a big display of your giving. ... And there is nothing that wears out faster than generosity; even as you practice it, you lose the means of practicing it, and you become either poor and contemptible or (in the course of escaping poverty) rapacious and hateful.

... if you have to make a choice, to be feared is much safer than to be loved. For it is a good general rule about men, that they are ungrateful, fickle, liars and deceivers, fearful of danger and greedy for gain. While you serve their welfare, they are all yours,... But when the danger is close at hand, they turn against you...People are less concerned with offending a man who makes himself loved than one who makes himself feared: the reason is that love is a link of obligation which men, because they are rotten, will break any time they think doing so serves their advantage; but fear involves dread of punishment from which they can never escape.

... How praiseworthy it is for a prince to keep his word and live with integrity than by craftiness,... yet we see from recent experience that those princes have accomplished most who paid little heed to keeping their promises, but who knew how to manipulate the minds of men craftily. In the end, they won out over those who tried to act honestly. ... Thus a prudent prince cannot and should not keep his word when to do so would go against his interest... Doubtless if all men were good, this rule would be bad; but since they are a sad lot, and keep no faith with you, you in your turn are under no obligation to keep it with them. [p 42-48]

Most utopianists "place man outside history in a social world free of political conflicts and tensions so that he can live in permanent harmony and peace. Machiavelli’s ideal political order was one in which man lives in time and is subject to its ravages."2

Having placed Machiavelli and his principles on the reference table we can now use him as a torch and keep no faith with you, you in your turn

 bearing ripe fruit. As he climbed, the small tree bent lower and lower and would break if he climbed any higher. Chhura got off the tree and fondled the fruits from the ground, mumbling, "If it were Nahaia, he’d just do it this way," and sadly went on his way home empty handed, but not empty-headed.

2. Chhura and Sekibuhchhuak 5
Chhura made a swing in his thlam which was very much coveted by a Phung living in a hollow tree beside his jhoom. Having missed his lunchpack for some days, Chhura decided to teach this Phung a lesson. One day, he made a hole in the roof exactly above the swing and pretended to go home. Returning secretly, he hid it on the roof. Thinking Chhura had left, the Phung stole up and started swinging, singing gleefully, "Chhura is away!" only to be caught by her tangled hair from above. Threatened direly to be made the children’s plaything, the Phung offered for her ransom a magic axe. Chhura asked if the axe required effort, and was told that it did. After some bargaining, Chhura agreed on the treasured Sekibuhchhuak, took it home, hid it safely and used it sparingly. Now Chhura had an elder brother named Nahaia who came to learn about the Sekibuhchhuak and what it could do. Nahaia was not a bad character at all. In fact, he had a good head upon his shoulders to keep him and his family alive without much exertion. He advised Chhura to change the logs on his porch with a vaiza. As soon as it was done, Nahaia raised a frightful cry, "Fire! Fire! Chhura! Your Sekibuhchhuak must be saved at all cost!" Out came the Phung-catcher with his famed Sekibuhchhuak, and the vaiza logs did their job. The Sekibuhchhuak flew and landed smartly on the waiting hands of Nahaia, who coolly departed saying, “Nahaia will have what Chhura rejected.”

3. Chhura at Mawngping village
In his heroic and adventurous quest, Chhura came to a certain village, and it being late, decided to stay the night. After a heavy dinner he went out, and to the villagers’ shock and wonder, passed stool! The whole village surrounded Chhura like St Paul in Lystra. Too late Chhura realized he must play god, and started creating anuses on the children with the help of a heated skewer and put them inside a large recovery basket. The drama ended with Chhura hanging inside a basket over a deep pool.

4. The death of Chhura
A hero’s life must end in a tragedy, and Chhura must not be an exception, or we are deprived of a hero. Fately he came to a village where
a strange game was being performed. People young and old, men and women, sat in a row swaying left and right, and chanting, "Ngheng tawlhah, ngheng tawlhah, a ruh no no chhuakah." It was a push-out game in which any who could not bear the pressure was pushed off the seat, and another enters the fray. Chhura joined in and truly proved his mettle by retaining his place but alas, for too long! While others took turns to have meal, Chhura carried on till the legend ended with a soft thud of falling body, and Chhura was, by a technical knock-out, out cold!

IV. Critical observation

Look at simple Chhura. He is within reach of what he wants. He is alone. He knows what Nahaia would have done in that situation. But he would rather go home empty-handed than be like Nahaia. Why? Do you call him stupid? Hamlet could kill Claudius when the latter was praying, but he didn’t. Why? Thomas Becket could seek safety from King Henry V’s goons by closing the door of the Cathedral, but forbids it and dies a martyr. Why? What holds back these people from their desires and safety? A principle, a conscience, a moral scruple.

What would Machiavelli have done in such situations? For Nahaia or Chhura or anybody, the end was the possession of the object of desire. Nahaia would care only for the fruit, but Chhura weighs the means, the how, the motive, and refuses to compromise his way with another. Nahaia, to this day, has the fruit Chhura left.

We do not know if Nahaia ever worked hard to have enough food. But we know the little coward exchanged jhoom with Chhura because of the Phung that lived there. Fortune, that favours the bold, awarded Chhura the famed Sekibuhchhuak. With plenty of hard-earned food, (mautam was not recorded), the Sekibuhchhuak was lying idle. This was impossible to resist for an inveterate mautam-loving Nahaia. (Mautam can happen any time to anybody who wants it for an excuse to have Sekibuhchhuak). The little Machiavellian was not slow in forming a plan. And why vaiza, of all the trees on the wooded slopes of Mizoram? The wood is not good even for fuel. But it is good for making people with Sekibuhchhuak slip on it and throw the precious weight, so the fruit is plucked from the ground.

There are some children born requiring surgical operation for anal opening. But an entire village Pu Vana knows since when! It should be interesting to conjecture how life used to be in Mawngping. The citizens had intake only; they didn’t give out. The corrupt gene must have traveled across centuries to us today, who, like Mawngpingians, only receive but do not give, and live a parasitic life in a land full of promises and possibilities.

What Darwin’s theory of survival of the fittest and Machiavelli’s theory of political survival have in common is that the ‘fight’ is ultimate. Even a friendly game of cards, if not played to win, yields no pleasure. If Chhura died playing a game, so would you if you don’t watch and learn how people do. The game of ‘Nghengtawlhah’, like so many games children play, dramatizes down-to-earth social and economic life.

Then, as now, life was hard, unfeeling, cruel, hopeless and morally unrewarding. The world then, as now, had no soft corner for people with soft constitutions and impractical ideals. Machiavelli in Mizo folklores is only the tip of his cold nose. He is with us, in all of us. Let us admit it and make a virtue of our imperfections by being honest with ourselves.

Endnotes

3 The tales are branded by the author.
4 Chengkek—a fruit having very sour edible rind and a sweet kernel wrapping the seeds. The fruit is bright red when ripe, and very attractive and decorative. The tree is rarely strong enough to support a man’s weight, so the fruit is plucked from the ground.
5 Sekibuhchhuak—Mizo version of Cornucopia (Horn of Plenty), with the difference that it dispenses rice from one end and meat from the other when the magic word is spoken.
6 Thlam—“a jhoom-house.” Lorrain, J.H. Dictionary of the Lushai Language, 1940
7 Phung—a sub-human (female) being, distinguished from a spirit or demon,
9 Vaiza—a tree whose bark is used for making ropes; and the peeled wood becomes quite slippery.
10 Meaning: ‘Push, push and push, weakest out and out.’
11 mautam—famine coinciding with cyclical flowering of bamboo, when rats multiply exceedingly.