

Folktales of Mizoram by Laltluangliana Khiangte,
Mizoram: LTL Publications and Art & Culture Department,
1997, pages 218, hardbound, Rs. 150.

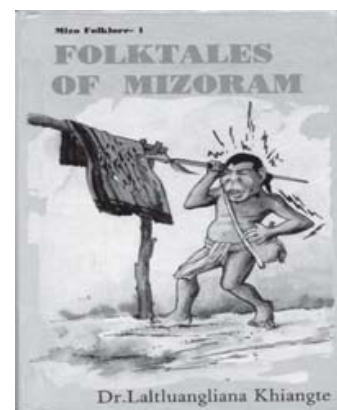
Mizo Songs and Folk Tales edited by Laltluangliana Khiangte,
New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2002, pages 171, paperback, Rs. 180.

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To the passionate collector of folk tales and lore, especially from little known Mizoram, these books proved an irresistible call of the unknown. But reading them tested my skill at puzzles and my staying power, from which it took a while to recover. With Khiangte, the acknowledged expert in this field, many folktales from the 1997 book wind their way, word for word, into the later version. That's made me wish that there had been greater editorial expertise in converting oral traditions into readable fare, as a favour to both the scholar and the interested reader.

Though the tales in the LTL Publications volume were filled with folkloric fantasy and delightful whimsy, the book was traumatic to read because every page was marred by a minimum of four errors — whether grammatical, typographical, syntactical, or related to mere continuity.

At random, let's take the tale, "Liandova and Tuaisiala" (pp. 122–131). I may have stumbled upon its intent through contextual guesswork, but that was a stressful experience most readers would resist. What do the following sentences mean (emphases mine)? "In any case, their mother did not listen and went away with her *new married her husband*" (p. 122). "Unexpectedly, he thought he saw the *long move*, and when he looked at it more closely, he saw the eyes and the mouth" (p. 124). "As soon as people came to see what they exactly played the two brother hurriedly hid their *praises instum ents* in the same place the *unthusias on looker* were rather angry when they saw only those tin and old containers..." (p. 125). And, "That one which cost Tuaisiala very much unhappy" (p. 129).



Isn't that proof enough of how an extraordinarily flexible folktale can be rendered into near-gibberish? If you multiply the experience by 68 tales, you'll have a clue to what a traumatic reading experience it proved to be! Why couldn't the author, the publisher, the editor or the proof-reader have been more conscientious about their respective jobs?

Even the tales of the semi-heroic, semi-comic Chhurbura or Chhura, the most popular of Mizo folk heroes, suffer the same fate. Constantly bested by his brother Nahaia, this quixotic character engages in the most mind-boggling adventures — puncturing his son's fontanel, waiting for the exotic Chengkek fruit to drop into his wide-open mouth, or chased by the residents of Mawngping village after he performs amateur surgery on them!

But even as I wandered through the maze of language on the Chhura trail, I wailed over the loss of continuity between paragraphs 3 and 4 in "Chhura Loses His Delicious Potted Crab Curry" (p. 36). Did the author lose his way? Or, were pertinent passages dropped *en route*? In which case, why didn't the editor question the gap and restore sense to the tale?

While congratulating the author on his pioneering effort in culling these oral tales and translating them for the benefit of non-Mizo readers, I wish more care and thought had gone into the volume. Because few readers will be willing to expend so much energy on puzzling their way through folk tales, no matter how unusual.

In this context, the Sahitya Akademi volume, which contains many of the same tales, is slightly better edited and consequently a fractionally easier read. But even here, the tale of Chhura and the crab curry is rendered in the very same words (p. 100). Didn't the author-turned editor here have the faintest desire to improve on his undramatic, ungrammatical, unsynthesised original rendition when the opportunity arose to do so?

Despite these reservations, it's difficult not to laud the Sahitya Akademi's ongoing project of Indian Literature in Tribal Languages, from which this collection emerged. As G.N. Devy points out in his foreword, "The value of these oral literary works can by no means be undermined. Conventionally, they have been perceived as mere anthropological curiosity, or at best a source for oral history. They have rarely been translated into English or an Indian language as a representation of tribal imagination."

It is this rich imaginative lode that veins the rocky journey through the book, which alternates texts in the Mizo original with English versions. Kiangte's section on folk songs is more engaging, as it traces their evolution from elementary couplets through post-conversion devotional songs to love



songs and contemporary poems. The sheer lyricism and fluid imagery of even the translated songs made me long to hear them in the original language.

Of the stories, a trifle less error-laden than in the first volume, Khiangte explains in his introduction, "The folktales I have collected are very popular among the Mizos till today. Though what I offer is a literal translation, I hope that this will be an introduction to those scholars who would like to do further studies and research into Mizo folk literature."

While allowing for the spoken sound and idiosyncrasies of the oral tradition, if only professional translators and editors had been given their due, the transition from Mizo to English could have been less jagged and nerve-wracking. Had it only been so, these untapped treasures from Mizoram would have been collector's volumes.

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