

Mizo urbanity, media infrastructure and the state

I look here at the existing infrastructure that supports the proliferation of Aizawl-based newspapers in contemporary Mizoram and argue that government institutional structures, once intended to suppress and censor the print media, have become an integral part of the creation of content for the pan-Mizo media, while a diffuse network of private transporters, agents, and subscribers bring news from the capital to the far reaches of the state. An attempt is made to examine the complex links between the state and newspapers, thereby highlighting the significant role of the state in the making of Aizawl-centered Mizo newspapers, which serve to produce an image of Aizawl as the center of the transnational Mizo world.

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Locating Aizawl

Aizawl is the capital of Mizoram, a Northeast Indian state bordering Myanmar in the east and south and Bangladesh in the west. A young city, Aizawl was built as a colonial military outpost in the late 19th century, and was at that time inaccessible to the locals. However, like other cities of Northeast India, Aizawl has seen rapid transformations in colonial and post-colonial times, including two decades of armed struggle (1966 to 1986) fought between the Government of India and the Mizo Nationalist Front (MNF), which altered the city's demographics. Mass in-migration, including the forced regrouping of people into camps during the conflict,¹ those seeking refuge, a large population of armed forces, and later, bureaucrats, have expanded the city dramatically.

Since the creation of the Mizoram state in 1986, Aizawl has been the seat of government and has gradually assumed the role of a cultural capital for Mizos living in the state, and for related communities across internal and international borders. What is striking is that the local population reclaimed the former colonized and militarized space as their own. In fact, migration into Aizawl is continuing and the city is being reconfigured from one with distinct neighborhoods into a crowded urban sprawl. Currently, a little less than 50% of Mizoram's population of 1.1 million lives in Aizawl.² This aligns with Duncan McDuie-Ra's argument that borderland cities challenge the notion of a backward and remote frontier.³ Redefined as the focal point of Mizo communities, the city is now an important space for the exploration and expression of urban modernity, of which local newspapers – a medium that informs and connects the people – are a part.⁴ Aizawl is the production hub of modern Mizo culture; a culture that is circulated within and beyond the city – and even beyond Mizoram into Myanmar and other Northeast states – through media.

Reliance on government: revenues and news

Early February this year, I tagged along with a reporter from the local newspaper *Vanglaini*, to attend a get-together of members of the Mizoram Journalists Association (MJA), a welfare body for working journalists in Mizoram. The meeting was held at MJA headquarters in Aizawl and was attended by more than 50 city-based journalists of print and broadcast news media. It included a discussion about a proposed donation of ten lakh rupees (\$15,000 USD) by the government to the MJA Welfare Fund. This grabbed the attention of the journalists, who are mostly uninsured by the news organizations they work for. These funds have been handy in times of crises and they felt reassured that some additional money would come in from the government. The discussion also turned to how MJA would keenly observe the publicity budget allocations of various governmental departments in the coming fiscal year. As estimated by one member, the various government departments spend about 1.5 crore rupees (\$229,000 USD) on advertising each year. In the absence of big corporate media or capitalist industries, governmental advertisements are a crucial means of income for most Mizo newspapers.

In Mizoram, the government-sponsored advertisements are distributed by the Directorate of Information and Public Relations (DI&PR) across broadcast and print media. DI&PR was established in 1972 during the first decade of the armed conflict, at a time when mobility was controlled, media was silenced, news and views were censored, dissenters were arrested and people were terrorized by the armed forces. Even in 'post-conflict' Mizoram, this state structure (DI&PR) continues to exert influence on news media, particularly smaller newspapers. For instance, at this particular MJA meeting, a journalist and owner of a lesser-known daily, shared anecdotes of how he and his colleagues had received advertisements from friends at DI&PR as a means to pay their children's educational fees. He encouraged his colleagues to cement friendships with state actors who liaise with the

media. One way of doing so is to give government departments extensive media coverage, especially when the press are invited for worksite visits. Aizawl is the hub where these relationships are initiated and nurtured; making it the center of the Mizo media landscape.

As per DI&PR guidelines, 102 newspapers of different periodicity qualify as recipients of governmental advertisements. Of these, there are 34 Mizo dailies from Aizawl, followed by ten newspapers in Lunglei district, and eight in both Champhai and Mamit districts. Eligibility for DI&PR funds is dependent on (1) non-stop publication for at least one year, (2) sending a copy of the newspaper to the DI&PR every day, and (3) a minimum circulation of 500 (even though accurate circulation numbers are difficult to ascertain, as monitoring mechanisms are unheard of in Mizoram). Observations from the field have shown that recipients do not always fulfill the above criteria, and that favoritism plays a big role. In fact, most advertising is done in Aizawl newspapers, while only a marginal number of adverts are allocated to publications in other districts. This may suggest that a proximity to the seat of administration results in better financing opportunities for newspaper organizations.

Dependence on the government extends to news sources and content as well. In Aizawl, journalists are not limited to a specific beat. Rather, they cover all relevant news in the city, and very rarely outside the city. For example, during my fieldwork I attended events ranging from students protests in Aizawl, press conferences by opposition parties in Aizawl, a press conference by the Chief Minister (CM), a polio drive, voluntary donation drives, road safety campaigns and more. The everyday practices of local news gathering and coverage are concerned with local issues only and are embedded in the culture of press conferences in Aizawl; reporting clearly favors government spokespersons, who are, in the words of the *Vanglaini* editor, "important sources of news. More than two-thirds of local news consists of news by and from the government usually involving activities of the Chief Minister, the Cabinet Ministers, or bureaucrats of different governmental departments."

Privileging the government is not new. Relations between the state and media are longstanding and complex; in fact, colonial bureaucracy initiated the first Mizo newspaper *Mizo Chanchin Laishuih* in the late 19th century, though it was short-lived.⁵ Newspaper publishing in Mizoram was originally the product of the colonial state and the Christian missions who had their base in Aizawl. Even in a changing political climate, especially during the armed struggles (1966 to 1986) between MNF and the Government of India in post-colonial Mizoram, the state initiated institutions such as the All India Radio (AIR), DI&PR, Doordarshan (DDK) national television, and the Directorate of Printing & Stationary in Aizawl. All these institutions have persisted. The DI&PR in particular is an important influencer of the news media, through its trained and fulltime-employed public relations specialists (Mizoram Information Services).

Sending the news from Aizawl

Aizawl is well connected by road to major parts of Mizoram. This connectivity works well for city-based newspapers like *Vanglaini*, with its (reported) circulation of 40,000. Unlike in other parts of India where road transport services are monopolistic and centralized, in Mizoram public transport is decentralized – no big travel or transport company dominates. Instead, most transport facilities are individually owned and continuously ply between Aizawl and other parts of Mizoram. *Vanglaini* relies heavily on such commercial transport services, such as Sumo services (shared taxis/utility vans), to expand its circulation and readership. This paper is currently delivered to 128 towns and villages in the eight districts of Mizoram. Within Aizawl district there are more than 25 thousand (27,859) subscribers in 37 villages. Villages in close proximity

to the city and with reliable vehicular services receive their newspapers in the morning; others obtain their daily edition around midday.

Lunglei is the second largest district in Mizoram in terms of population (after Aizawl) and has its own center of newspaper publishing. Nevertheless, *Vanglaini*, with 3906 subscriptions covering 21 villages, is the highest circulated newspaper in Lunglei district. Infiltration by an Aizawl-based newspaper is significant considering that each district has its own publications and that alternative sources of media (such as mobile phone ownership) are very high. None of the other district-based newspapers have a notable circulation in Aizawl, or in fact beyond their own district. Yet news from the capital is sought after and eagerly awaited every day in every corner of the state.

The editor of *Vanglaini* explained that there are subscription requests from villages that cannot be honored due to a lack of reliable transport services. His aim is to circulate the newspaper in every village with over 100 homes. He likes to see it as a "social service and less of economic motives." What needs to be considered is the social side of infrastructure. In Mizoram, daily newspapers are not sold by street vendors; circulation is based only on fixed home based subscriptions, and deliveries across the state require linking up with transport providers and networks of people who literally deliver the paper to the doorsteps. In the case of *Vanglaini*, over 250 people are involved as delivery agents. Losing or gaining readership is also largely dependent on retaining and recruiting such agents.

According to the Department of Printing & Stationary, there are 56 printing presses in Mizoram, of which 50 are based in Aizawl. These printing presses have switched to offset machines allowing smaller newspapers to forego heavy investments in printing machinery. For newspaper entrepreneurs with deep pockets, investing in technologies is attractive. *Vanglaini* is one of the few newspapers that can afford and that uses technological development to boost its circulation. It is now printing from its own press using web offset. It is one of the few newspapers that is printed (partially) in color. Each time the paper adopts a new printing technology it experiences tremendous growth in circulation. Between 2001 and 2016, circulation increased from 7000 to 40,000.

While globally the circulation of printed newspapers declines and digital media ascends, Mizoram is bucking the trend. News from the capital city is sought after, challenging the dual – and contradictory – stereotypes of the remote frontier on the one hand and the savvy consumerist Northeast tribal on the other. News in (or from) Aizawl is fed by the government to the media, printed, and then physically taken to all corners of the state through a web of mountain roads. Indeed, roads are really the only limitation to ever-greater circulation. This situation would be unthinkable without locating the city – Aizawl, the Mizo metropolis – at the center of the production of information and the desire for vernacular media produced close to the corridors of power.

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References

- 1 See Barbora, S. 2006. 'Rethinking India's Counter-Insurgency in North-East', *Economic and Political Weekly* 41(35):3805-3812
- 2 National Census Survey. 2011. <https://tinyurl.com/aizawlcc2011>
- 3 McDuie-Ra, D. 2016. *Borderland City in New India: Frontier to Gateway*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- 4 At present there are 34 daily newspapers, two local cable networks and a government-owned TV and radio station producing news in Mizo, a pan-ethnic language of communities subsumed under the larger Mizo, Zo, Kuki, and Chin ethnic groups living in Mizoram and other Northeast states such as Manipur, Tripura, Assam and Nagaland, metropolitan cities like Delhi, Chennai and Bangalore, and across the international border in the Chin state of Myanmar and farther afield. The production of news is centred on Aizawl, the state capital of Mizoram.
- 5 Pachuau, J.L. & W. van Schendel. 2015. *The Camera as Witness: A Social History of Mizoram, Northeast India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.69.

