

## Mizos in bid to save ancient heritage tree in Myanmar

Historians and scholars in Mizoram are campaigning to save a dying banyan tree planted by Mizos between 750 A.D and 1150 A.D in neighbouring Myanmar. Campaigners say the tree, threatened by river waters, is an outstanding symbol of ancient Mizo history and migration.

It is a cause that has captured the imagination of Mizos, who have been discussing the fate of the tree on the internet and other forums, and has even brought together musicians and artistes to give a concert.

The tree, known as 'Khampat Bungpui' - or the Khampat Big Banyan - stands on the banks of the river Khampat and is believed to have been planted there by early Mizos as they were settling in the Kabo valley in Myanmar. Khampat is also the name of the town the river runs through.

'There is no historical proof as such but according to known records the tree was planted by our forefathers during 750-1150 A.D,' Mizo historian B. Lalthangliana said.

As with many other societies around the world, there is very little written historical record in Mizoram. Instead, historians draw upon an abundant and rich tradition of oral history that is passed down generations by word of mouth.

P.C. Biaksiana, a Mizo scholar who has visited the Khampat Bungpui, said the survival of the tree was at stake. 'During the monsoon now, the Khampat river is flowing quite close to the tree. Another monsoon will wreak havoc on our heritage tree,' he said.

Now concerned citizens in the Mizo capital of Aizawl and Khampat village have formed a body called the 'Khampat Bungpui Humhalhtu Committee' (Khampat Bungpui Preservation Committee).

A number of other Mizo associations have also stepped up to help the cause. The Mizo Zaimi Inzawmkhawm, an association of Mizoram singers, organised a concert in June in the cause of preserving the tree.

Campaigners are also gearing up to negotiate with the Myanmar government, with the help of the Mizoram government.

'Since the tree is not on our territory we will find a way to negotiate with the Myanmar government through the state government,' Biaksiana said.

'It is by using this tree that we are able to trace our history - it is a heritage for us, and no boundaries should prevent us from preserving it,' he added.

Botanists in Mizoram say the Khampat banyan is an offshoot of the original one that has now developed into a fully-grown tree. A banyan tree has prop roots, which usually develop into trees that continue to grow even after the mother tree has died.

'There's a high chance that Khampat Bungpui still lives on. The parent tree might have died long back but sure enough the aerial roots will still be there,' said Laltlanhlua, a Mizoram forest department official.

The preservation committee takes its inspiration from previous successes with the Rih Dil, a lake of equal importance to the Mizos that is also situated in Myanmar. A link road for Mizo tourists is now in place and a special permit to visit the lake is recognised by the Myanmar authorities.

As with the tree, the Rih Dil too occupies a special place in Mizo mythology - ancient Mizos believed there is a paradise under the lake's bed. And many Mizos still believe that departed souls go the Rih Dil, their eternal resting place.

'The Rih Lake is also preserved by the people of Mizoram. In the same way, we can preserve the tree. It will be much easier since Khampat village has a majority Mizo population,' Biaksiana said.

But Mizos living in Khampat are mostly poor farmers who can do little to help save the tree. There are also reports that the military government in Myanmar discriminates against the Khampat Mizos.

Mizos are believed to have originally come from China in around 700 A.D. They reached Myanmar's Hu Kaung valley and eventually the Kabo valley around 750 A.D. The valley is a strip of land extending from the present eastern border of Manipur to the river Irawadi in Myanmar.

When they first reached Khampat village, the more dominant Shan tribe drove them out, forcing the Mizos to move further west and settle down in what is now Mizoram. But a significant population returned to Khampat in 1914 and settled there.

Equally, many descendants of the original Khampat Mizos have chosen to settle down in Aizawl - a symbol of cultural continuity where international borders count for little.

*Sangzuala Hmar* ( © IANS / India eNews)