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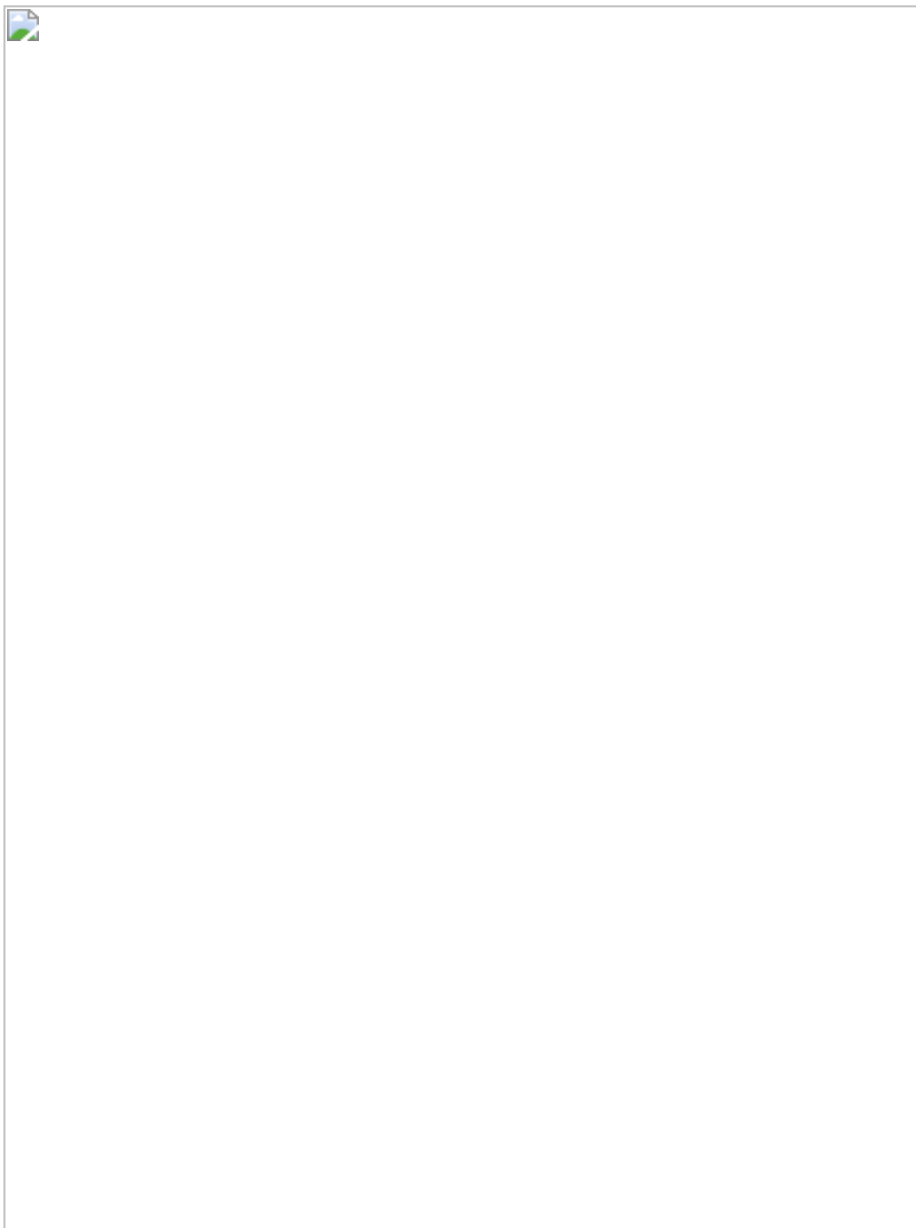
For us to make our choices

In a church in Aizawl, delectable helpings of faith



Swati Sengupta | Published 01.04.18, 12:00 AM





Food being cooked for the community feast in the school run by the Dawrpui Presbyterian Church

It was certainly a wrong time to plan a holiday to Aizawl, or so it seemed at first. Tired of the Christmas madness in Calcutta, we landed in Aizawl on December 25 hoping to see brightly lit streets, shops and fashionable Mizo women and men enjoying themselves. After all, Christians constitute 87.16 per cent of Mizoram's population.

But what was this? The scene before us looked very much like Calcutta, but as the city is on a bandh day.

All the shops were closed, including patisseries and restaurants. We walked nearly three kilometres to buy medicine - the only one open was a store inside a hospital. Tired and dejected, we ate hotel food and hoped to find the city bustling with people the next day. What followed, however, was another bandh-like day.

Wrapped in woollens in the crisp, wintry air, the green mountains at a distance, clouds floating around, we took long walks through the city looking for the people and the bustle, the sights and sounds. And then it came wafting - the smell of pork.

There was a board with Dawrpui Presbyterian Church written on it. Some women, dressed in the ethnic *puan*, a woven wraparound Mizo skirt, colourful pullovers and scarves, were drinking tea. No sooner did we step into the church premises than we were immediately welcomed by smiling faces and offered tea and biscuits.



Food served to the writer

The smell of pork had by then grown stronger and the cold air had made us ravenous. The place was filled with the chatter of people and children playing football. We saw an elderly woman grinding rock salt with a mortar and pestle, some others chopping ginger and garlic.

They were all preparing for a community feast adjoining the 99-year-old church. Zosang Zuali, chairperson of the Dawrpui Local Council under the Aizawl Municipal Corporation, took us to the kitchen where food was being cooked by 300 people for the community of 1,800.

The mezzanine space - which is actually a school that the church runs - had been converted into a kitchen, where about 15 enormous aluminium pans sat on gas ovens, each being supervised by five to six persons. And what was being cooked? Four pigs and two cows, those in the kitchen told us.

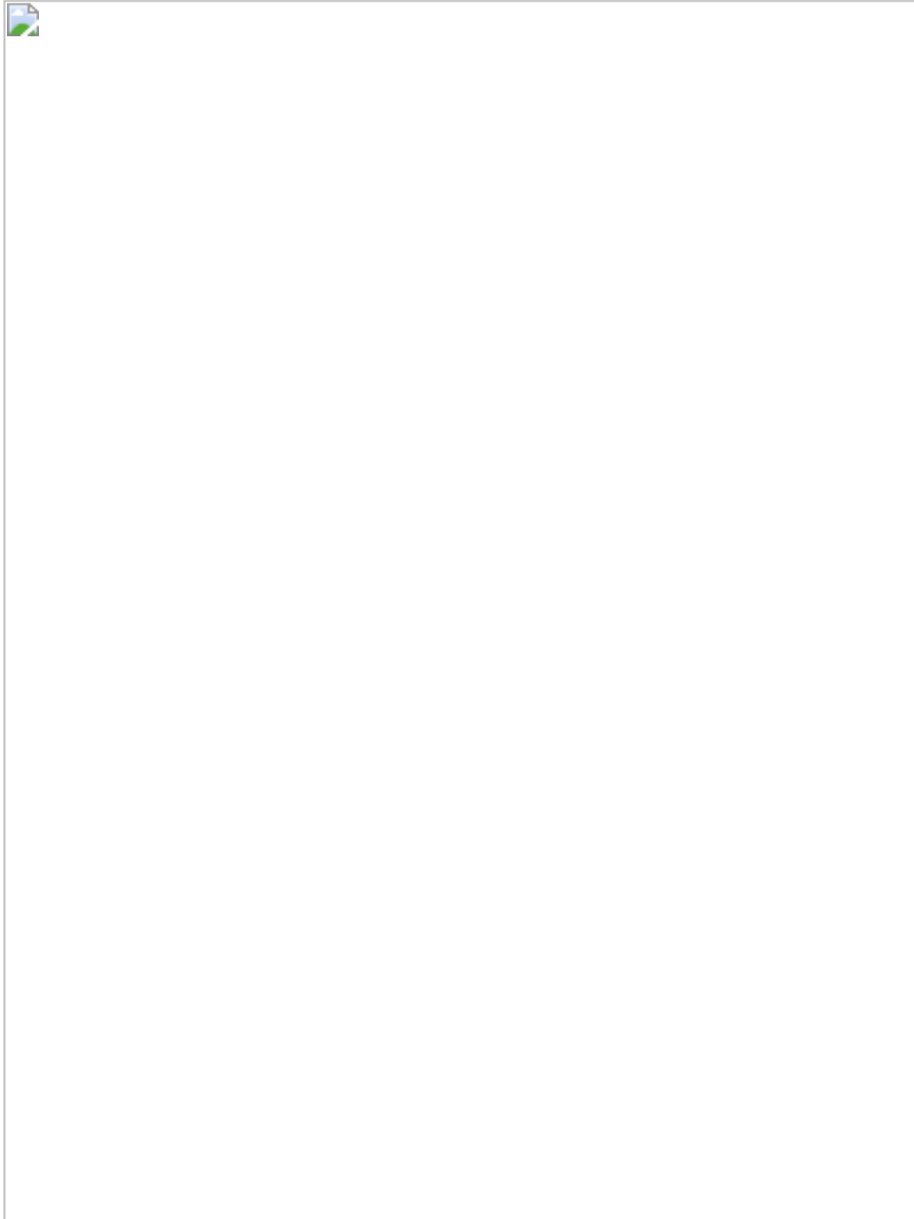


The streets of Aizwal on December 26

There was a relaxed air about the place - some of the food had already been cooked and many had started helping themselves to it. John Rotluangliana, minister of transport in the Congress government in the state, was cooking the pork. "We'll add ginger, garlic, onion paste to the boiled pork cut into small squares, and eat it like a salad," said Rotluangliana. He picked up a piece of boiled pork, rubbed some salt on it and popped it into his mouth.

Mizo food is mostly boiled, with very little oil and spices. There is more use of local herbs and greens in slow-cooked meat that create a distinct taste. Even a bowl of stewed vegetables, called *bai*, tastes heavenly due to the addition of herbs.

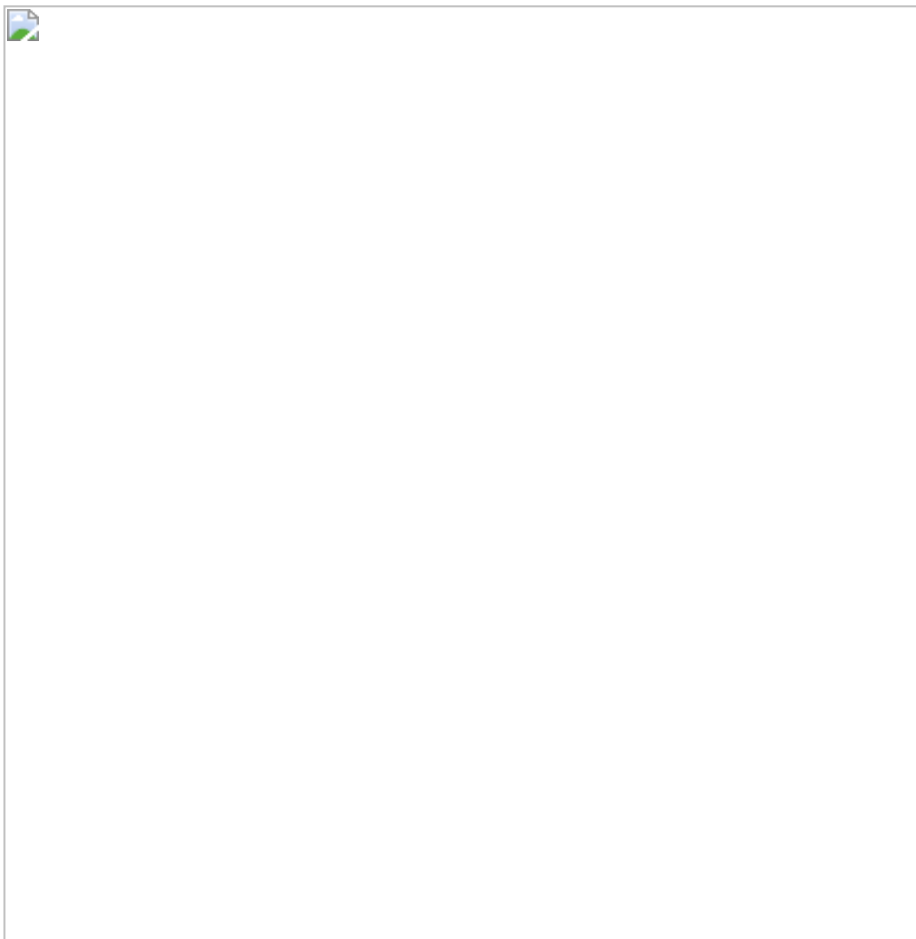
"We cannot make such elaborate cooking arrangements on Christmas Day because on that day we attend church services, so the following day we organise this community feast," Zuali said. The Mizos pool in the money for the feast, but even those who cannot contribute aren't left out. We, too, received a dinner invitation.



Zosang Zuali, chairperson, Dawrpui Local Council, is herself involved in cooking and serving

It was six in the evening, when we reached the church. People were playing the guitar and singing as they sat around a fire. The food was waiting for us in steaming cauldrons, and what followed was a gorgeous meal.

There was the tastiest beef we'd ever eaten, cooked in three steps - boiled, fried and curried - it just melted in the mouth. The pork came in various forms, boiled and served with boiled mustard leaves, meat from the pig heads chopped and mixed with ginger, onion, garlic paste and pork fat. There was also dal (lentils) and beef soup. All of it was served with steaming hot rice along with a local vegetable *samtawk*, slightly bitter and closest in taste to brinjal. There was also paneer cooked with peas, potato curry and salad.



No one at the church asked us our religion, not when they invited us, nor when we hugged the hosts thanking them for the sumptuous meal before leaving.

In a country where politics is currently centred on the kind of meat the electorate consumes, religion causes strife and pogroms, the very sight of pork and beef together on our plates made me happy.

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