The term rodent came from the Greek word ‘rodere’, meaning gnaw (Legendre 2003). Rodents are characterised by prominent, continuously growing incisors which are present in both the upper and lower jaw (Waggoner 2000). Rodents fall under the order Rodentia of the class Mammalia. With 35 families comprising more than 534 genera and 2,652 species (Mammal Diversity Database 2023), they constitute 40% of all mammals. Rodents are found native to all continents except Antarctica, New Zealand, and certain other islands (Nowak 1999; Macdonald 2009). They inhabit a wide range of ecological niches, encompassing terrestrial landscapes and human-constructed environments. According to their habitat preferences, species may exhibit arboreal, fossorial (burrowing), saltatorial, or semi-aquatic behaviour. Rodents play important ecological roles like seed dispersal and are an important part of the food chain in maintaining a healthy prey-predator relationship. Apart from being important to the ecosystem rodents are also responsible for various diseases and health problems. Rodents are vectors for many viruses and pathogens. The infamous bubonic plague which claimed 70–200 million human lives was spread through rodents (Glatter & Finkelman 2021).

India is home to 102 rodent species distributed among 47 different genera (Srinivasulu & Srinivasulu 2012). Of these, 19 species are categorized as agricultural and commensal pests (Tripathy et al. 2017). Some species are widely distributed, while some are locally important (Sridhara & Tripathi 2005). It is important to note that India suffers a huge economic loss because of rodents. Different crops like rice, wheat, maize, vegetables, fruits, and poultry farms face a great threat because of different rodent species (Singleton 2003; Tripathi 2014). While there is a prevailing negative perception of rodents, there are also instances of rodents being an inseparable part of cultures and being responsible for some important historical events.

Rodents as a part of culture

From Krauncha to Mushakraj

The oldest mentioned and the most famous rodent which is a part of culture is Mushakraj, the vahana (mount) of Lord Ganesha. As the name suggests Mushakraj was a rat. Legend has it that Krauncha, a
Rodents as a part of Revolution: The Birth of a State

Until 1987, Mizoram was part of the undivided state of Assam. Mizoram is home to a type of bamboo known as Melocanna baccifera, which covers 31% of its total geographical area. This bamboo species blooms every 45–50 years, leading to a sudden increase in the population of Black Rats Rattus rattus. This phenomenon, known as a ‘rat flood’, occurs when the bamboo dies and regrows from seeds, the rats feed on the seeds, which boosts the size of rat litter. This surge in the rat population results in widespread destruction of food sources, leading to large-scale famines. In the Mizo language, this cyclic famine is referred to as ‘mautam’.

In 1958–59, a mautam event resulted in the loss of 100 lives and crop and property damage (Goswami 2008). When the people of Mizoram sought assistance from the Assam and Indian governments, their concerns were not taken seriously. This negligence led to the establishment of the Mizo National Famine Front (MNFF) by Pu Laldenga, which provided relief to the remote famine-affected areas. On 22 October 1961, the famine front evolved into the Mizo National Front (MNF). The armed wing of MNF, known as the Mizo National Army (MNA), demanded the creation of a sovereign state for the Mizo people on 28 February 1966. On 1 March 1966, they declared independence from Assam by launching attacks on government offices and security force posts.

Conclusion

Human civilization is deeply intertwined with myth and history, often influenced by the surrounding environment and cultural elements. In many civilizations, various animals hold significant cultural roles within hierarchical structures. The unique reverence for rodents in Indian mythology and history is particularly intriguing. Nowhere else in the world has there been a revolution resulting in the birth of a new state, with rats playing a central role, as seen in India.

Therefore, it’s evident that beyond their ecological significance, rodents hold immense mythological and historical importance, contributing significantly to the shaping of India’s culture and history.
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Notes


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