



Research Paper

“The Impact of Colonial Administration on the Political Culture of the Mizo community in Mizoram”

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ABSTRACT

Mizoram is one of the states in North-eastern India. The people of the state are called Mizo, they are a small tribal group of Tibeto-Burman - Mongoloid stock. As a tribe, Mizos have gone through several transitions; culturally and politically such as the transition from traditional chieftainship to the British Colonial Administration and from there to the Democratic Republic of India. By observing the behaviour of the people, one could identify that those changes and transitions left deep traces and impact on the political culture of the Mizos even till today. The current condition of the Political Culture of the Mizos seems to be somewhat of a 'subject' political culture, which is believed to be the influence of the doubled subjection of the people to British colonial Administration and the traditional chieftainship. The influence and impact of which could be seen even after the abolition of the Chieftainship and up-to this present time. This paper brings into focus a study on the historical basis of the Political Culture of the Mizos. It attempts to provide useful insight for reorienting and restructuring the socio-political aspects of the Mizo people.

KEYWORDS: Mizo, Chieftainship, Political-culture, Pre-colonial era, Subjugation.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Among the learned people and political leaders of the Mizos, there is an unending argument and discussion regarding the British Colonial rule and its impact on the political development of the Mizos. In order to analyse the arguments on this topic it is necessary to look back at the history of the tribe from the perspective of its political venture. The study of the historical settings of the tribal culture helps in gaining insight and knowledge about the current condition of the same.

The Mizos are one of the ethnic groups belonging to the Mongoloid race. From the linguistic characteristics of their language, they can be classified as part of the Tibeto-Burman group (Lalthangliana, India, Burma leh Bangladesh a Mizo Chanchin (Revised & Enlarged), 2014). With the absence of recorded history of the past, the early history of the Mizos remains obscure. However, the Mizos and all the related tribes claim to have originated from what they call 'Sinlung' or 'Chhinlung'. All the writers on the subject and the traditional history of the Mizos, handed verbally down through several decades, agree that the term 'Chhinlung', whether a place or a person's name, originated from China and that the Mizos and all the related tribes claim to have originated from there (Nunthara, 1996). According to Prof. G.H. Luce, the ancestors of the Mizos entered Hukaung Valley, in Burma, during the 4th century A.D. and during the 8th and 9th century they became one of the great and strong tribes in upper Burma. They then settled in Kabaw valley for around 300 years between the 9th and 11th centuries. From there they were forced and chased out by the Shans and were scattered to various places towards the mountainous regions. The majority of the Mizo tribes settled at Khampat area in Chin hills during the 12th to the 14th century A.D.; they then slowly moved towards the west and entered the present Mizoram state during the 16th century (Lalthangliana, India, Burma leh Bangladesh a Mizo Chanchin (Revised & Enlarged), 2014).

The term 'Mizo' is often used as a nomenclature to include an overall ethnicity; it is an umbrella terminology to denote the various clans of the Mizos; such as the Hmar, Lai, Lusei/Lushai, Ralte, Mara/Lakher, Paite and many more. In fact, the Mizos are broadly divided into two major sub-groups, the Luseis and non-Luseis or Awzia. Awzia simply means those who speak dialect other than Lusei or Duhlian dialect. The Luseis, as a group, became a powerful force over the smaller groups; their formidable position was said to be due to

their having daring leaders. The less formidable groups were soon subdued and dominated and the Luseis became a privileged group. Due to the dominant position of the Luseis in Mizoram, the British even named Mizoram the Lushai hills (Nunthara, 1996). Lushai is the incorrect anglicised transliteration of the term ‘Lusei’.

The Mizos encounter with other people especially with the non-tribals and the western civilization was only around 150 years or so. Meanwhile, within this few span of years the Mizos have gone through several significant changes and transitions in cultural and societal behaviour through the transformation of religion, political, and economic. Those changes and transitions could be attributed to the colonial expansion and subjugation. Such phenomenal experiences brought about remarkable changes in various aspects, such as, socio-cultural, socio-economic, socio-political, and so on. This paper attempts to construct a viewpoint from which the interconnectedness of traditional political institution and the political culture of the modern era with special focus on the impact of colonial administration on political culture of the Mizos.

II. A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF CHIEFTAINSHIP IN THE PRE-COLONIAL ERA

The settlement of the Mizo tribes, in the earlier periods, seems to be based on clan, which means each clan lived in their own village. The Chiefship or Chieftainship with a particular chief’s clan was not practiced during this period. Every clan chose their own leader within the group based on physical strength and bravery to protect and safeguard the clan in their constant feuds against one another (Dokhuma, 2008). This leadership of a clan is not inherited, it is based instead on individual capabilities.

The system of chieftainship which was inherited as family heirship started from the Luseis when they captured a Paite, named Sihsinga, in the war with the Paites. The son (great grandson) of Sihsinga, Zahmuaka and his six sons, were forced to accept chieftainship since no Lusei would accept chieftainship as there was no material reward attached to the position at that time. Instead, one had to devote his full time to village security and administration endangering his very life by leading out in wars. At first, there was no remuneration, reward or tribute paid to the Chief. But as time went on, people began to contribute a portion of their annual harvest for the Chief. This became, in short, the origin of chieftainship among the Mizos in the known history (Nunthara, 1996). Most of the Mizo historians and writers accept 1500 to 1625 AD as the beginning of chieftainship from Zahmuaka and the rise of his grandson Sailova who is the ancestor of the Sailo clans, the biggest and the strongest chief clan of the Luseis (Mizo).

2.1 Powers and Position of the Chief

Before the annexation of Mizoram by the British, in the late 19th century, each village was an independent unit of administration, under a chief called “Lal” who played the role of a dictator. A Chief’s power was measured by the number of his followers. The Chiefs, in fact, were the head of the villages, the leaders in war, owners of the village land, protectors and guardians of their subjects. They were the executive authority and the dispensers of justice (Singh, 1994). The Chiefs were all in all to their subjects. They were supreme authority with regards to war, peace treaties, jhuming, religious activities and festivals. They even had the authority to sanction the death penalty or to save the lives of criminals (Lalthangliana, A Short Account of Mizo History, 2016).

Even though the chiefs were supreme in authority, they, in all matters, administered the villages with the help of Upas or elders appointed by them. They settled all village disputes, distributed land for Jhum cultivation, collected taxes. The Upas or the council of the elders were nominated by the chiefs at their discretion. They were rich, well-informed, broad minded and experienced wise men in their respective fields (Singh, 1994). They even dared to correct and admonish the chief as and when needed.

2.2 Relationship between the Chiefs and their Subjects

The Mizos have a special term for mentioning people under the rule of a chief or subjects of a chief, they call it ‘Khua leh Tui’ which literally means ‘village or settlement and water’. For the Mizos, people and their settlements are almost inseparable. The aim and goal of every chief was to multiply his territory and his subjects as it determines strength, greatness and power. They needed vast areas of land for jhum cultivation and also for hunting. They, therefore, migrated from place to place in search of such suitable land. During their migration as well as process of re-settlement the geographical factors like climate, soil, and water resources played a pivotal role (Singh, 1994).

The Mizos, not only migrated as group or as a whole village, they also migrated as an individual or as a family. There was no restriction for such individual migration from one village to another. They were accustomed to migrate freely, and this custom afforded a very salutary check on too much arbitrary use of power (Bimal J. Dev; Dilip Kumar Lahiri, 1983). If the people or citizens of the village did not like their Chief, they could migrate to another village and leave the chief as a *despot without subjects*. A wise and noble Chief understood all these circumstances, and hence, they dealt with their people with care and benevolence

(Dokhuma, 2008). In short one can say that the relationship between the Chief and his subjects depended on mutual trust and understanding.

The chief would often act as a redeemer for the poor and for the destitute. His house is the poorhouse of the village, and all who have no means of support are received there and get food in return for their labour. Even a person who had committed some serious crime could enter the chief's house and thus escape vengeance (Sailo, 2010). The door of a chief's house is always open for widows, orphans, and others who are unable to support themselves and have no relatives. Once they entered, they were regarded as 'Boi' or 'Bawih' and were treated as part of the chief's household and do all the chief's work in return for their food and shelter (Shakespeare, 2008).

The provision of security from both enemies and wild animals was one of the major role of the Chiefs (status of a Chief was discussed in the previous section) towards their subjects. As discussed above, the chiefs were all in all to their subjects; they were expected to deliver a fair and proper distribution of shares and justice to the people. They were the protector of the entire village and its jurisdiction; and for deliverance of such providence, every household paid taxes in return, such as; Fathang – food grains/paddy (2 or 3 loads), Sachhiah – meat taxes (animals' left foreleg) and Khuaichhiah – bee and honey tax.

At the beginning of chieftainship, the Chiefs never received any material rewards. The taxes given to the Chiefs were also not imposed by the Chief; rather they started as wilful benevolence from the people. At a universal level, when it comes to taxes, the taxes that the Mizos gave to their Chiefs might be one of the lightest. Therefore, the Mizo Chiefs were not burdensome to their subjects (Lalthangliana, Pi Pu Zunleng, 2007).

III. AN ACCOUNT OF POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE COLONIAL ERA

All the available histories written by Mizo writers relating to the institution of the Lushai chieftainship are more or less with one accord. As stated earlier, the dominion of the Chiefs in the Lushai land or country lasted around 450 years till abolition of the chieftainship in 1955 (Sailo, 2010). The chieftainship could be divided into two epochs – **the Pre-colonial Era** from 1500 upto 1895 AD when the country was officially put under the British Administration; and the **Colonial Era** from 1895 to 1947. Even though chieftainship was continued in the post-colonial era, till abolition of chieftainship in 1955, due to political upheavals among the Mizos at the time of India's Independence, the rule of the Chiefs had no significant impact anymore.

3.1 The Mizo and British Encounter

The British launched a number of expeditions before they subdued the Mizo country. According to foreign writers, expeditions were launched due to a number of raids and invasions of the Mizos against their neighbours living in the plains. But many of the so-called raids and invasions were border disputes between them (Sailo, 2010). According to Mizo oral traditions and some historians, the main reasons for the Mizo raids against the Cachar Tea-gardens and Chittagong are protection of their hunting grounds and forest resources.

For the Mizos, hunting for wild animals is one of the most significant activities for both religious and social mobility. By hunting and collecting the heads of wild animals, one can accomplish the status of "*Thangchhuah*" which is the highest achievable degree of social status, it also has significance in their religious belief. For this reason, it was a vital necessity for the Mizos to protect their lands and their hunting grounds, which they claimed as their own from their fore-fathers. When they saw the Britishers extending the tea gardens by clearing their hunting grounds in the Cachar borders, they could not tolerate and sit idly (Lalthangliana, India, Burma leh Bangladesh a Mizo Chanchin (Revised & Enlarged), 2014).

In the southern side, from the Chittagong Hills tract, the tribals who settled at the foot of the hills entered their lands and destroyed their forests by collecting timber and bamboos. These tribals were taxed by some of the Mizo Chiefs for the wood and timber but many times the tribals failed to pay the taxes and in many cases, they deliberately evaded paying the taxes, because of which some chiefs like Lalrihua and Rothangpuia raided the Chittagong settlers occasionally. It is undeniable that the Mizos sometimes required enemies' heads to be buried with a deceased Chief to fulfil and complete their traditional and religious belief and ceremonies. They also raided and invaded to collect spoils or pillage from their enemies as it was one of their main sources of collecting tools and implements.

Meanwhile, the then Political Officer of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Lt. Col. T.H. Lewin (Thangliana) in his book, *A Fly on the Wheel*, mentioned the minutes of Lord Mayo regarding the Lushai expedition as follows:

“It is with great reluctance that I have to express the opinion that it will be necessary to send, in the ensuing cold weather, an armed force into the country of the Lushais. The cruel raids that have been made for some years past upon various parts of our territory, more especially on the tea-gardens in the Cachar district, and the very unsuccessful and inefficient means which have hitherto been taken for the protection of our frontiers, together with the partial mismanagement and want of success which has attended almost everything we have

done, doubtless imparted to these savages the impression that we are either unable or unwilling to take active measures and to punish the perpetrators of such crimes.” (Lewin, 2005)

From the above quotation, it is seen that all the blame and responsibilities were fixed upon the Lushais without elaborating why the tea-gardeners were punished by the Lushais (Sailo, 2010). Let the cause for the Lushai expeditions be whatever it was, the most significant part is how the British ruled and transformed the political culture of the Lushais.

3.2 The Lushai Chiefs under the British Administration

The British subdued and put the entire Lushai country under British administration after the subjugation of the Chiefs in 1895. Since then the entire Lushai country was under the rule of the British Administration. They were bound by strict rules laid down by the government. At first the Lushai country was divided into two Divisions: the Northern Division, centred at Aizawl and the Southern Division, centred at Lunglei. On 1st April, 1898, Southern Lushai Hills Division was merged with the Northern officially by putting it under one Administrator, called “Superintendent.” Lunglei was, therefore, put under one Sub-Divisional Officer within the Lushai Hills (McCall, The Lushai Hill District Cover, 2008).

Because of the poor economic condition of the land, the British administrators were concerned with the most convenient way to rule the land without incurring heavy expenditure. As such, the British administration gave back all the powers of the Chiefs except the judicial administration of justice in line with the Scheduled District Act 1874 adopted in 1890. A minimum interference on the local matters and respect for tribal laws and customs, support of tribal chiefs’ authority as long as it did not conflict their interest. One of the British government’s main interests in governing was, to disarm the Mizos, and put a stop to their constant attack on the British territory, and to maintain peace in the area. The British officers did so by investing their authority more on the state administrations and keeping the civil matters to the village chiefs (Sawmveli, 2012) Therefore, the Chiefs retained their traditional rights including their customary laws; tributes were collected by the Chiefs from their respective subjects and handed over to the Superintendent as demanded by the British Administration (Sailo, 2010).

In the subjugation of Lushai Chiefs, the British Administration, under the authority of the Superintendent organised the Lushai Hills District Durbar, the Welfare Committee System, and the Ten Point Code (McCall, Lushai Crysalis (Reprinted), 2010). On appointment to the Durbar, each Chief would have to sign a document which he should hand to the Superintendent. Subsequently, the **Lushai Hills District Cover**, which is the overall detailed rules and regulation for administering the Lushai Hills District, was prepared and adopted.

3.3 The Lushai Hills District Cover

According to the District Cover under section ‘C’ of clause ‘c’ **Chiefs**, the “Chiefs are appointed by the Government for the good government of the people in return for which they enjoy the privilege of chieftainship.” Here it is mentioned that the Superintendent and his Assistants will uphold the authority of the chiefs to the best of their ability. And in the subsequent clauses standing orders and duties of chiefs, succession and appointment of chiefs are given (McCall, The Lushai Hill District Cover, 2008). Since the adoption of the District Cover the status and the rulership of the chiefs are somewhat more firm, fixed and permanent compared to the pre-colonial era where their authority had no supporting basis, a situation that could have led to arbitrary rule and extreme exercise of their powers in suppressing their subjects.

Under the section of *Succession and Appointment*, the Superintendent had the authority, in consultation with the chiefs of the same clan, to disinherit or change the succession line of the chief (McCall, The Lushai Hill District Cover, 2008). This clause seems to have originated out of the good intention of controlling some disobedient chiefs and their successors. On the other hand, it gives some room for conspirators to conspire against the chief and take away their rulership. It may also promote the tendency to appease and to bribe the authority including the Chiefs of the same clan so that inheritance and succession may go in favour of a particular individual.

Another significant point given in the District Cover is the Taxes and Impressed Labour which is shown in section “H”. Under this section, several taxes, other than the traditional customs, were added such as land revenue tax, house tax, shop tax and grazing tax. The sum total of these taxes together with the traditional taxes became a heavy burden for the poor tribals.

According to the *Impressed Labour* rule, every Chief and Headman shall be bound to supply labour on requisition of the Superintendent or his Assistants. Apart from impressed labour, another impressment is still there, which is for the purpose of transport facilities. So, for all these taxes and impressments for labour or for porters, the Chiefs were responsible. It was their duty to provide all these to the Government otherwise they themselves were liable to be punished.

IV. CONSEQUENCES OF THE BRITISH RULE ON MIZO POLITICAL CULTURE

It is imperative to understand the concept of societal culture and political culture in order to see impact of British rule on Mizo's political culture. The term 'culture' in general refers to "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, as cited in, Singer, 1968, p 527). It is a shared way of life of an organised set of individuals, and it shapes the pattern of their social relationships (Firth, 1961). This shared societal life facilitates the formation of perceptions and orientations in the people toward societal objects such as the various social, economic and political systems and institutions of the society, and also the varieties of roles that they are required to perform as members of these systems and institutions.

In fact, political culture is one of the components of the societal culture. It refers to the pattern of psychological orientations of the people of the society toward 'Politics' and 'political systems.' Gabriel A. Almond defined political culture as "a particular pattern of orientations to political actions." He further says that "it is a set of attitudes – cognitions, value-standard, and feelings – towards the political system, its various roles and role-incumbents. It also includes knowledge of, values affecting, and feelings toward the inputs of demands and claims into the political system, and its authoritative outputs" (Almond, as cited in, Guru, 2015, p 76). While keeping these concepts in mind, and observing the changes and transformation of the Mizo culture, political culture in particular, it is clearly visible that the colonial administration has left significant changes and impact among the Mizos.

The best possible way to identify and to measure the impact of British rule on the political culture of Mizos may be through the comparison between pre and post-colonial eras. The following points are some of the pointers to measure the impact and the consequences of the British Rule on the Mizos. In the pre-colonial era the following conditions and circumstances were seen among the Chiefs and their subjects:

1. In the earlier period, the Chiefs were chosen and asked to be the Chief. It was a voluntary appointment.
2. There was not much of material rewards for the Chief.
3. People or subjects were not bound by laws or rules to their Chief, as everyone could freely migrate from village to village.
4. The Chiefs understood their situation. They aimed at having more subjects so that they would become more powerful. To achieve this aim, the Chiefs always try to win their subjects over with benevolence and fair dealings.
5. There seems to be no huge difference and gap between the Chiefs and their subjects as the Chiefs administered the village with the help of a council of Upas, whom he selected from among his subjects. These Upas gave admonitions and advices. They even dared to scold the chiefs as and when needed.

In the Colonial and post-colonial eras the following conditions and circumstances were seen among the Chiefs and their subjects:

1. The chiefs were appointed by the Government. The Superintendent and his Assistant upheld the power and authority of the Chiefs. Therefore, the authority of the Chiefs was somewhat permanent and fixed as long as they abide by the order of the British government.
2. The chiefs collected several taxes for themselves and for the Government as well.
3. People were no more as free as before to move and migrate from village to village.
4. The Chiefs, knowing their condition as appointees of and backed-up by the Government, started ruling arbitrarily or autocratically.
5. People felt that they are doubly subjected to the Government as well as to the Chiefs. In other words, people needed to be more submissive to both Government and to their Chiefs.
6. In the post-colonial era, commoners or Hnamchawm (subjects of the chiefs) started protesting and rebelling against their chiefs.
7. At the turn of India's Independence, great turbulence and political upheavals could be observed. It ended up in the fight between the Commoners and the Chiefs and their supporters. This ultimately led to the abolition of chieftainship from the entire Lushai Territory.

V. DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATION UNDER THE BRITISH RULE

It is also noteworthy to give a brief historical background of formal education among the Mizos as education has an immense influence and impact on political socialization which in turn affects the political culture. The contributions of the British for introducing formal education among the Mizos will always be appreciated and remembered; meanwhile, the process of development and the sluggish progress of education was much criticised by many among the Mizos.

The Mizos received their first formal education from the British Christian Missionaries. It was in the year 1894 that the Christian missionaries prepared the Mizo alphabet and started school immediately with only two students and soon the number of students advanced rapidly. Those who received basic education wanted to learn more, they then made persistent request for higher education to the missionaries and even to the

Government. In response to those requests the government established two Middle English Schools, one in Aizawl and the other in Lunglei, but refused to open high school till 1944. Saprawnga said that the British were at crossroads as they were in favour of educating the Mizos for their benefits but were not in favour of imparting higher education as they were afraid that Mizos will attain knowledge and understand the cunning schemes and underlying plots of the British Administration (Saprawnga, 1990).

It was in 1944, after eagerly waiting for fifty years, the colonial government opened the first High School in Aizawl. Shortly after three years from opening the first and only High School, India got Independence in 1947 and the British retreated from India. At this juncture, the Mizos were very ignorant and were novices in various ways such as in education, politics, commercial business, and in economic activity. In short, the Mizos were not ready in various ways to face the new system and new chapter in politics. This lack of proper education caused various loopholes, and led to problems and chaos in their political endeavour.

VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The discussions in this paper gives the historical background of the Mizo's Political culture in chronological order. From the comparison between the pre- and post-colonial era it is seen that the British Colonial rule over the Mizos hugely impacted the political outlook and orientations of the people. In the Post-Independent era, even after several decades of the adoption of democracy, there seems to be among the masses a strong feeling that power and authority belongs to a few political elites as if it is their permanent status and right. Even after 70 years of experience with democratic form of government, the Mizos still recognised their elected representatives like MLAs or members of Village Council or Municipal Councillor as 'Lal' or 'chief', as the common notion says referring to these representatives as "kan thlan lal" meaning "we elected to be king/chief". This perception and notion support a strong assumption that the masses still have a kind of subject political culture in which the masses dare not to raise their voice when political elite and bureaucrats violate the public interest. This kind of political culture and negative orientation can cause further problems and difficulties to the entire community and society as well.

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