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RESEARCH ARTICLE

FOREST AND ITS RESOURCES IN PRE-COLONIAL MIZORAM

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Abstract

Northeastern India's Mizoram state is landlocked and surrounded by Bangladesh on the west and Myanmar on the east and south. It shares boundaries with Manipur and Assam to the north, and with Tripura to some extent to the west. The hill forests are an essential resource that indigenous groups rely on for their way of life. Because of the biomass these trees produced and the occasional removal of those woods for farming, Mizoram's livelihoods were formerly totally depended on those forests. More precisely, jhuming was the only source of income for the pre-colonial Lushai civilization, with some hunting and gathering providing additional support. Thus, forest land is a pivot around which the people's lives revolve; their hunting, festivals, farming, and migration patterns all center on the area they own. People in traditional societies rely heavily on wild plants for sustenance, medicine, and leisure. That was especially true during the pre-colonial era, when the majority of items used were made of vegetative materials that could be found in the nearby forest. The sociocultural resource domain appeared to be limitless to the early inhabitants. There was not much competition for space because of the incredibly low population density.

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Introduction:-

Mizoram is a landlocked state in northeast India, sandwiched between Myanmar, on the east and south, and Bangladesh, on the west. On the north, it is bounded by Assam and Manipur, and in some parts of the west, it borders Tripura. In the absence of historical records, it is difficult to give a correct account of the people. This also applies to the Lushai, latter known as Mizo, in Mizoram. Yet, an attempt is made to determine the historical perspective of the people-forest relationship and its effects pertaining to resources used and related matters before the advent of the British in what is presently called Mizoram. It is also well accepted that the Mizo, or people from Mizoram, are of the Tibeto-Burman stock.

Based on altitude, the geographic configuration of Mizoram can be broadly divided into valley, ridge, and mountainous terrain provinces. There are a lot of broad valleys and ridges in the area, particularly in the west. There are rising hills and deep, narrow valleys throughout the area, with the exception of a few areas where there are sporadic areas of level land. Tertiary rock mountains comprise the majority of the Lushai Hills' topography. The hill ranges are divided from one another by deep, narrow river valleys, and they primarily run parallel to one another from north to south (Thianghlina, 2022). Additionally, the Lushai Hills enjoy a pleasant climate that is neither

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excessively hot in the summer nor too cold in the winter like its neighboring states because of the region's geographic location.

People and the Forest in the Pre-Colonial Mizoram:-

In terms of natural resources, Lushai Hills is known for its immense biodiversity and the prevalence of an ecosystem that is yet comparatively unspoiled. The hill forests are a crucial resource on which the livelihood of tribal communities depends. Traditionally, livelihoods in Mizoram were entirely dependent on forests for the biomass they produced and their periodic clearing for cultivation. More specifically, the pre-colonial Lushai society entirely depended upon **jhuming** for livelihood and was supplemented to a certain extent by hunting and gathering (Sailo, 2002). Forest land is therefore a pivot around which the lives of the people revolve; their system of migrations, cultivations, festivals, and hunting revolve around the land that they command (Jha, 1997).

Forests:

'**Ram**' is the wooded countryside owned by the village and also controlled by a center of power that can be used for cultivation if cut over and cleared. It was the abode of unnamed spirits that controlled the wild game sought in the hunt. In the forest, one treads softly, uses special vocabulary so as not to offend the spirits of the game, and uses euphemisms and circumlocutions for referring to the larger game animals by name (Singh, 1996).

The Lushai clans believed the creator of the universe to be a good spirit called '**Pathian**', a benevolent entity but only vaguely concerned with humanity. The evil spirit called '**Huai**' or '**Ramhuai**' had more to do with the lives of the people, inhabiting every stream, mountain, and forest, and bringing upon men illness and misfortune. Those spirits living in the water were called '**Tui huai**' and those residing on land are known as '**Ram huai**' and so on (Shakespeare, 1975). Plagued by countless fears, they spent their lifetime in constant endeavor to appease these spirits through a plethora of sacrifices conducted by the priest (Lalthlengliana, 2003).

Traditional Value of Forest Produce:-

In traditional society, the people have a close dependence on wild plants for food, medicine, and recreational purposes (Ray, 1993). That was very true in the pre-colonial period, as almost all articles of use were vegetative materials available in the immediate forest surroundings. Bamboo was inextricably linked to the lifestyle of the people and had a wide range of uses: walls of houses, floors, frames of roofs, spears, handles for tools, water containers, mats, baskets, spoons, traps, cups, fuel, as well as edible shoots. Numerous trees, shrubs, climbers, and herbs provided fruits and vegetables, timber, fuel wood, dyes, lacquer, medicine, and fiber. The following were plant species, with their traditional importance, that had been extensively used by the people (Singh, 1996).

Edible fruits and plants:

Garcinia cowa (chengkek), *Aralia foliosa* (chimchawk), *Cyathocalyx martabanicus* (hreiawt), *Calamus erectus* (hruipui), *Myrica Farquhariana* (keifang), *Hodgsonia heteroclita* (kha-um), *Momordica mixta* (maitamtawk), *Musa para disiacca* (ram balhla).

Medicines:

Asparagus racemosus (arkebaw), *Swertia pulchella* (khawsikdamdawi), *Lobelia pyramidalis* (chulberaw), *Pogonia plicata* (hnahkiah), *Pieris majavanica* (khawsikdamdawi thing), *Impatiens balsamina* (nuaitang), *Alstonia scholaris* (thuamriat),

Dyes:

Pithecolobium montanum, *Callicarpa arborea* (hnahkiah), *Rubia sikkimensis* (hruisen), *Morinda angustifolia* (lum), *Terminalia chebula* (reraw), *Mallotus philippinensis* (thingkhei)

Rope:

Melopodium bicolor (hruivawm), *Sterculia villosa* (khaupui), *Hibiscus macrophyllus* (vaiza)

Posts:

Lagerstroemia flos-regina (thlado), *Myrtagynadiversifolia* (lungkhup), *Cordia dichotoma* (muk), *Michelia champaca* (ngiau), *Cedrella toona* (tei), *Acer laevigatum* (thingkhim), *Albizia chinensis* (vang), *Gmelina arborea* (thlanvawng).

Firewood:

Quercus spp. (Fah), Castanopsis spp. (thingsia) Schima wallichii (Khiang), Alnus nepalensis (Hriangpui), Engelhardtia spicata (Hnum)

Thatch:

Imperataarundinacea (di), Licuala peltata (laisawral)

Fish stupefier or poison:

Alnizziaprocera (kangtek), Acacia oxyphylla (khangsen), Juglans regia (khawkherh), Milletiapachycarpa (rulei)

Gunpowder manufacture:

Adhatodavasica (kawldai), Rhus semialata (khawmhma), Litsea citrate (sernam)

It is therefore evidence that, apart from sacrifices made to the evil spirits, the Lushai in the pre-colonial period made great use of various medicinal plants that grew wild in the forest in order to alleviate themselves from different ailments (Lalthlengliana, 2003). In fact, hardly until a hundred years ago were the medicaments of the Lushai solely confined to the medicinal plants obtained from the forest (Zothanpuii, 2007). Many jungle creepers and leaves, dried or powdered, were used to cure pain both internally and externally. For instance, in cases of injuries caused by childbirth, various medicinal plants and herbs were concocted to bring relief to the pain. One important remedy that seems to be commonly used is **Elaegnusparriifolia (Sarzuk)**, also called the placental plant. The roots were grounded and boiled with water, which was to be taken in small doses.

Moreover, wild animals also played an important role in healing many ailments in people. The fat of pythons, tigers, bears, gibbon apes (hauhuk), etc. were also used. The galls of pythons and bears served as the best medicines for stomach problems. (Zothanpuii, 2007).

Hunting:-

Besides yielding a variety of useful produce, forests were the setting of the hunt. Lushai loved hunting. They went hunting for two purposes: religious as well as a sport, and also for meat (Sangkima, 1992). The Lushai word for hunting is '**Ramchhuak**' (to go out to the forest). Prowess in hunting commanded deep respect and ensured admission to '**Pialral**,' the paradise after death. The spirit of hunting '**Lasi**' was believed to own and have control over all wild animals in the forest. To bring luck to the venture, a female piglet was offered to the spirit '**Lasi**' before setting off. The intention of the worshiper was to receive blessings so as to become skilled hunters. A successful hunt was followed by a ceremonial sacrifice, giving the ghost of the hunter powers over the ghost of the animal when entering paradise.

Large hunting parties undertook lengthy expeditions in search of elephants, wild bison, 'mithun', and bears. Hunting for the chase of elephants was the most favorite game of the hunters. They used to travel many miles, camping for days and months at times. During the whole period of hunting, the leader of the group secretly observed the young hunters and made assessments of the personalities of each individual. Knowing that he was being watched secretly by his elders, all young men made the utmost efforts to surpass and outdo each other in everything they did (Sangkima, 2002). The best hunter was honored with a special cup of rice beer when the hunting party returned.

Although some clans observed certain taboos on hunting, there was no evidence of restraint on hunting of any kind, either in species or their number hunted, methods employed, number killed, or frequency and timing of the hunt. There was, however, a set of rules governing the rights to the kills. Irrespective of where the hunt took place, **sachhiah** (meat tax) was paid to the chief on animals killed (Parry, 1976). In the case of hunting by groups, the claims of the various members were specified. A person who lent his gun to a hunter was entitled to a certain portion of meat. According to customary law, different parts of the animals hunted were earmarked for family members.

The importance of meat in the diet was evident in the expertise in trapping game. Long lines of fencing were erected in the jungle, with snares set at intervals. Game thus caught commonly included pheasants, jungle fowl, deer, wildcats, etc. Intricate traps were set for tigers, elephants, and monkeys. In the latter half of the century, shooting was very popular.

In those days of 'survival of the fittest' when people were victims of the ecological balance, good hunters and war heroes were fondly called '**Pasaltha**.' The people inhabit a wild and jungly country where, for ages, a man has to struggle with the beast to gain his livelihood and has afterwards to defend from his own species what he has gained. Hunting, feuds, raids, etc. were exalted by the chief as heroic deeds, which were profusely reflected in their songs and folklore. Wild animals were hunted not only for their meat but, most importantly, for their skulls to be proudly displayed on the hunter's front porch. Hunting, wars, and raids were committed and connected with their mysticism and economic consideration. The raids were not made to get heads but to loot and to get slaves. Their desire for cultivable land, food, and to protect forests as their economic resources (hunting grounds, timber, and firewood) often led them to go in for raids.

Fishing:-

Fishing was conducted with casting nets (which were made from cotton), spears, or **daos**, but mostly through weirs of timber and bamboo reinforced with stone, laid across rivers or streams, an activity in which the entire village participated. The Lushai developed several indigenous fishing methods to suit the unique riverine system. These traditional fishing methods are found to be applicable only during the dry season (from October to May). Some of the fishing methods that were used by the Lushai were **Sangha-tlang-vuak** (community herbal fishing), which involves members of the whole village community as they collect materials that can be used as bait or toxic for fish. **Ngawidawh** (arial trap) is the largest animal trap made by the Lushai that is meant for fishing. Using this technique, migratory fish are captured during both their spawning and feeding migrations. Next, we have **Len Den** (cast net). This method is the main tool for catching fish in rivers and streams by the Lushai. There are two types of fishing nets: called **len-pui and len-fang**. (Lalthanzara & Lalthanpuui, 2010) As many streams were located on village boundaries, there was competition between neighboring villages to stake claim over sites suitable for fish weirs. Customarily, the first village to lay its weirs earned a right to the fish, and violation of this led to serious quarrels.

Trade and Commercial Forest Produce:

Right before the annexation of the British, there existed some trade connection with the Lushai (Chatterjee, 1985). However, the Bengali or Manipuri traders do business with them. The Lushai chief used to purchase sulfur, guns, and flint glass from the traders. They met the traders as acquaintances because they got sulfur and guns from them, which had a very significant place in their armament.

Salt was also an important article of Lushai commerce, as they were accustomed to it and could hardly produce it within their territory. The Lushai used to get their salt from the salt springs in the Lushai Hills. Those salt springs were considered to be very valuable national property, and they witnessed many scenes of inter-tribal disputes as the springs could supply only a small amount of salt at hard labor (Chatterjee, 1985). The traders from the border areas could not enter deep into the Lushai Hills. They used to sell their commodities at the foothills of the Lushai country. Because of the heavy demand for common salt, the traders brought with them a huge quantity of salt. But the cost of transport in the hills was very high. The greedy traders sometimes charged exorbitant prices for salt. It became difficult for a chief to purchase a sufficient amount of salt, and this led many hostile chiefs to plunder the plains occasionally. The Lushai purchased salt in exchange for elephant tusks, rubber, and other items from the traders (Chatterjee, 1985).

Elephant tusks were an important medium of exchange in the economy of the Lushai in the pre-British period; the bones and skins of the tigers and other animals were valuable articles of commerce which were disposed in the markets of the neighboring plains. Some adventurous tradesmen who were familiarized with the Lushai Hills and their language rendered valuable service in making the British tie closer with the Lushai (Chatterjee, 1985).

The main commercial forest products were rubber, timber, bamboo, etc. Among these, crude Indian rubber was the chief commercial commodity in the past. Lushai Hills was blessed with wild rubber trees growing luxuriantly as virgin soil; the climate and heavy rainfall were favorable (Chatterjee, 1985). It became a lucrative commercial commodity for the Lushai, as there was a good demand from the traders.

Later, after the first military expedition of 1871–72, bazaars were established within the border area of Lushai Hills and supplied native Bengali traders, much to the convenience of the Lushai. Hence, the idea of trade came into the minds of Lushai even before the establishment of the bazaars in the border areas. The medium of exchange was still, by then, the 'barter system'. Later on, rubber was sold at a rate ranging from twenty to forty rupees per maund, according to the demand of the market.

As rubber was a good source to generate income during the famine in 1881, they exhausted their rubber resources by overtapping. Since then, its production has been declining. As no care was taken by the Lushai and no measures were taken for systematic rubber cultivation by the British after their occupation in 1890, Mizoram became completely excluded from Indian rubber-growing areas.

The other commercial forest commodities were timber and bamboo. From these commodities, the Lushai derived a fair amount of income. A large number of Mizo migrated down the valley of the river Tlawng (**Dhaleshwari**) and Jhalnacherra nearer to the border to earn a livelihood by the sale of bamboo, timber, and other forest products (Mackenzie, 1995).

Conclusion:-

In pre-colonial times, most of the bonds between tribes were those of kinship. For the early settlers, the societal resource domain was notionally infinite. Given the extremely low density of population, there was no real competition for space. The resource boundaries of Lushai villages were temporarily determined as the settlement shifted periodically. This distributed the impact of resource use over large areas. The chief owned and controlled all the land in the village. He, however, permitted his subjects to enjoy the collective, non-exclusive privilege of access to and use of all resources, and for this he received a specified tribute.

Further, there was a singular unifying institution among the Lushai tribes till the late 19th century, as villages and clans were linked by kinship bonds alone. Within the village, the social structure consisted of a very basic form of stratification, which vested the chief with decision-making powers, guided by village elders and officials, and exercised in accordance with customary law. These powers extended to the appropriation of resources, defining their boundaries, and allocating the privilege of resource use among families. The actual procedure for resource use was shaped by the unstructured but highly organized system of collective community activity. As no other social or economic distinction was recognized, families had equal access to resources. Due to a lack of occupational specialization, the division of labor was simply on the basis of age and gender.

The 1901 census of the Lushai Hills reported a population of 82,434 people in 239 villages and a density of 11 people per square kilometer. From this, it is easy to imagine how sparse the population was in the preceding 200 years. There had been large tracts and dispersed pockets, such as low hills and banks of rivers that would never be inhabited. The chief usually maintains a reasonable distance from his neighboring village. Then such a vast forest had been left untouched, the vegetation growing undisturbed. The entire land area was covered with a great tangle of tropical evergreen forests. It was considered to be inaccessible and impenetrable. The forests were flourishing; all types of trees grew in profusion. Monkeys could travel from hill to hill, swinging by their arms from branch to branch without having to touch the ground at all. Man had to struggle to clear comparatively hospitable highlands for habitation (Lalkhama, 2006).

Wild animals are breeding unhindered, and though occasional hunting parties must have invaded their habitat, this could not have lasting damage. Hunting was not only for sport but rather to keep ecological balance and to protect crops from destruction by animals (Lalkhama, 2006).

The 18th and 19th centuries were times of plenty. There were enough trees for all. Each family lived by virtue of its own labor, producing and gathering all it needed from nearby forests (Singh, 1996). These subsistence needs were modest and, in view of the extremely low density of population, placed no strain on natural resources. Further, the spatial and temporal pattern of village settlement dissipated the pressure on the human population, allowing the recovery of the natural ecosystem. In a society that survived solely by hunting, gathering, and **jhuming** in the forests, these features suggest that human activities had a minimal impact on the environment.

Thus, it may be reiterated and concluded that the Lushais lived in splendid isolation before they came into contact with the English. Hunting, gathering, and **jhuming** remained the solitary means of resource use, relying entirely on human energy and employing simple tools using local material and indigenous knowledge, completely free from external influences. An appealing feature of the prevailing technological know-how was its total uniformity within the village and near uniformity across villages and people (Singh, 1996). Very rarely did they come into contact with the people of the plains. They were happy and content with their own social and political organizations (Chatterjee, 1985). Central to their contentment was the self-contained nature of their social and political structures. The Lushai found satisfaction in their established organizational systems, free from external interference. Despite

occasional inter-tribal rivalries, these conflicts did not indicate any notable intrusion into their political life from external forces. In essence, the Lushai pre-contact era was marked by a serene and self-sufficient existence, shaped by the tranquility of their isolated surroundings and the preservation of their unique way of life.

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