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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### BRITISH ADMINISTRATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON MIZORAM FOREST

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#### Abstract

The Colonial history of Mizoram (Lushai Hills district) witnessed a very little state intervention in matters of religion and customs. The advent of Christianity and education was phenomenal in changing the animistic world view and attitude of the people towards natural features and use of resources. The Lushai Hills district being a single political entity with fixed boundaries governed by Inner line Regulation, villages were concentrated in a given domain and the people were forced to rely on the shrinking resources domains to meet basic needs. Though Forest Department was created to enforce the State dominion over forest resources, the degrees of imperial control are different in the hill areas. In Lushai Hills district, concern to maintain public order outweighed the economic interests. The hill forests had less commercial potential in terms of species and their number and poor accessibility tended to restrict timber exploitation to areas on the route of navigable rivers. Small and localized reserves such as, riverine, roadside, and town reserves were created by executive order. Outside the reserves, people were entitled to remove forest produce for consumption. While the people utilized forest and fields as the basic resources for survival, the government utilized it for wealth.

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#### Introduction:-

The story of annexation of the Lushai Hills, later known as Mizoram, by the British began with a series of raids and counter-raids. This eventually led to the loss of Lushai independence and the land was annexed to the British dominion (Dutta, 1992). After the annexation of Cachar, the British took notice of the Lushais who descended to the plains to sell their forests products, like rubber and cane, and also to raid. There were a number of reasons for the raids, but the main one is the steadily expanding tea garden into Lushai-inhabited areas and the dominance of Lushai chiefs. In search of food and heads, they also raided the plains. The practice of the Lushai chiefs of those days to subordinate other weaker chiefs by raiding the latter's villages, causing their migration to the plains under the British territories (Dutta, 1992).

#### British Conquest and Emergence of Lushai Hills District

The first English official who visited and recorded about the tribe in the south Lushai Border was Mr. Renvell, Chief Engineer of Bengal in 1800 (Shakespeare, 1977). The contact of the Lushai by the British was also recorded in the year 1826 (Mackenzie, 1995) when parties of Sylhet wood cutters were massacred by the Kookis. From this instant

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onwards, a number of raids were said to have carried out by the Lushai towards the British subjects and the neighbouring tribes, which purportedly led the British to consolidate their administration in the Lushai Hills in 1890 (Lalthangliana, 2001).

By the year 1869, almost all the north eastern part of India except Lushai hills came under the British Rule (Singh, 1996). At this point, the problem was that the Lushais persistently raided territories, claimed by them as their hunting grounds and occupied by people who were under the British Raj. The introduction of the Lushais to the British was an appalling one, as their chiefs descended on the plains, plundered and raided villages and taking captives before retreating to the hills. Troops were sent to retaliate in 1850, 1860, and 1869 with a little impact (Singh, 1996). These actions against the subject and property of the British prompted what was called “punitive expeditions”, location of outposts along the frontiers, and diplomatic efforts, before an all out onslaught was launched to defeat the Lushais in a series of military operations in which many British officers lost their lives. During 1850-70, certain diplomatic approaches were made to some Lushai chiefs, who in return released captives and participating in exchange of gifts, but these were only isolated accomplishments (Singh, 1992).

Then in 1871 there had been dreadful raids along the frontiers which included the destruction of tea factories, the murder of tea planter and the kidnapping of his five year old daughter in Cachar (The abduction of Mary Winchester created furore in London. The child was rescued unharmed and returned to England). This incident was followed by the British expedition of 1871, which brought relative peace, historically known as ‘Vai-Len hmasa.’ Some chiefs pledged their cooperation with the British rulers. Markets were set up at Changsil, Sonai, and Tipaimukh on the Cachar borders. For a few years after the 1871-72 expedition, peace prevailed and trade flourished (Ray, 1993). During the famine of 1881-82, the Lushais were exempted from duty on the sale of forest produce, while the Forest officer employed some of the Lushais in clearing forest boundaries (Singh, 1996).

In 1888, however several incidents broke out anew, calling for the dispatch of more forces; ‘The Chin-Lushai Expedition 1889-90’ which some Mizo historian called ‘Vai Len Vawihnihna’ (Lalthangliana, 2001). In 1890, Mr. Porteous continued his service in the North Lushai Hills as the Political Officer at Aijal (Aizawl) (Chatterjee, 1985) At that time Captain Shakespear was appointed the Superintendent of the South Lushai Hills and the headquarters was Lungleh (Lunglei) (Chatterjee, 1985) The final uprising of several chiefs in the western region was effectively suppressed with the aid of more troops from Cachar. The Lushai Hills were formally included in British India on 6<sup>th</sup> September, 1895 (Ray, 1993). Eventually on 27 January, 1898 the north and south districts were merged as the Lushai Hills district of Assam (Lalthangliana, 2007). The district was placed under the charge of Superintendent with its headquarters at Aizawl.

In 1898, the government declared unification of the North and South Lushai Hills and the tract known as Rutton Puiya’s village, including Demagiri, to be called Lushai Hills (Chakraborty, 1990) The district had an area of 7227 sq. mile (18 733 sq. km) (Singh, 1996). Till 1924, the area in the extreme south-east was yet to be administered. This portion, known as the Zongling area, was notified as a part of the district in 1931 (Chakraborty, 1990). The final boundaries of the district were declared in 1933, and thereafter no further changes were made.

### **Inner Line Regulation**

The compulsion to conquer the Lushai Hills was basically to protect the British subjects and their establishment in the neighbouring plains. The operation of the principle of divide and rule pursued by the British in the form of ‘The Inner Line Regulation’ was an important step in physically isolating the district from the plains, and remains in force to this day (Dutta, 1992). Originally the regulation was introduced in 1875, to check the entry of the Lushai raiders across the common boundary. It was also to prevent adventurous planters, traders, and hunters of the plains from entry into Lushai country which might lead to political complications (Chakraborty, 1990).

When the Lushai Hills became an administered district under the resident of British Officers in 1890, the Lushais soon proved themselves more civilized than any other hill tribes on the North-East Frontiers. The British issued orders in 1895 to relax the restrictions of entry from the plains, though Mizos still needed passes to cross the border. Despite this the Inner Line Regulation was never formally abolished (Chakraborty, 1990). Increasing movement from the plains to the hills led to the realization that the tribal culture, customs, and economy were in danger of being swamped by outsiders. Therefore, in 1930 the Inner Line Regulation was applied to the northern boundary of the district with Cachar, and extended in 1933 to the entire boundary of the district to protect the Mizos against undesirable foreigners (Chakraborty, 1990). There was also an enhanced house tax and the personal surcharge

system to discourage foreign settlers. The exception were Nepali military policemen with long service, milk sellers, traders from Bengal and Assam who had originally been allowed entry, and their respective descendants.

The peculiar status of the Lushai Hills district with respect to the laws introduced by the Government of India and the Assam legislature caused significant confusion. In 1898, all laws then in force ceased to be operative in the Lushai Hills, which was declared a Scheduled District and a Frontier Tract. Then, under the Government of India Act, 1919, the Lushai Hills including other hill district of Assam was declared Backward Tract, by which, central and state laws were held applicable unless specifically repealed. Subsequently, by the Government of India Act, 1935, the district was declared an Excluded Area, once again off limits for the Assam legislature, and existing laws were selectively applied. This had two effects: the Mizos were kept out of the mainstream of the national life, and the funding being from the provincial budget, there were very limited resources available (Ray, 1993).

Mizoram, then came to be administered as an 'Excluded Area' under the charge of an omnipotent Superintendent, aided as he was by a number of 'puppet chiefs' while the people had no representation either in the Central or Provincial legislature. Only selected central and provincial laws were thus introduced to the Lushai Hills (Singh, 1996). These includes:-

1. The Indian Penal Code (1860) with adaptations, in 1898;
2. The Elephants' Preservation Act (1879) in 1898;
3. The Assam Forest Regulation (1891), not substantially applied apart from the rules framed by the Chief Commissioner of Assam, in 1904;
4. Parts of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation (1886) in 1929;
5. The Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation (1873), in 1930. This Regulation is commonly referred to as the Inner Line Regulation.

### **The Colonial System of Administration**

The British administered the Lushai Hills, in view of its concern with maintenance of law and order (McCall, 2003) almost nominally and no attempt was made for all round development of the hills. They have curtailed the administrative measures in Lushai Hills to the barest essentials. Certain forest areas were declared prohibited for the people; however there was no attempt to interfere with the indigenous land use pattern. Powers of the chiefs were suitably amended, and customary laws were retained.

The civil administration had only a few staff under the Superintendent at Aizawl and the Sub-Divisional Officer at Lunglei. The entire region was divided into 13 circles, each with a Circle Interpreter plus a Chaprasi. In each village, a writer *Khawchhiar*, was appointed. He maintained village's vital statistics and records all the tried cases by the chief. For the services rendered, the village writer received remuneration: mostly in kind directly from the villagers, and he was exempted from coolie works, fathang and house tax (Prasad, 1987). The Civil Police force was stationed at Aizawl, Lunglei, Kolasib, Sairang, and Demagiri, with primary duty of controlling all non-Mizos, the Mizos themselves being suitably kept in check by their own chiefs.

The basic pattern of land use was not changed. Certain tree species were reserved, as were forest tracts along the Inner Line, navigable rivers, and government roads. Jhumming was tolerated, though alternatives such as paddy cultivation in valleys and horticulture were encouraged on a small scale. Shop sprung up in regulated markets at Aizawl, Lunglei, Sairang, and Demagiri where salt, cloth, brass pots, umbrellas, and ornaments were bought. In 1903, the price of rice and salt at Aizawl was double that in Cachar and Sylhet markets. As currency replaced barter, people in vicinity of these few locations soon came to sell their surplus at the bazaars and to supply items such as paddy and ginger to the military posts. Customary fines in kind, now had equivalents in rupees.

Education was left in the hands of the Christian missionaries (Lalrimawia, 2004) to whom the government made small annual grants. In 1902 there were seven dispensaries in the district. The best roads were no more than bridle paths, and in 1939 the entire district had a single cartable road which was merely a 13 miles long. Motor-able roads were to wait till 1942 when Japanese aggression was feared in the Second World War, prompting construction of an arterial road from Silchar to Aizawl to allow deployment of military personnel and equipment.

### **Lushai Chief under the Colonial System of Administration**

The British rulers after annexation thought it fit to continue the chieftainship for village administration. By the year 1901, each chief had territorial jurisdiction of his own, consisting one or more villages, defined by natural

boundaries and officially entered in a boundary paper or *Ramri Lehkha* (Thanhranga, 2007). However, setting up hamlets was subject to approval of the Superintendent, which was generally not given. The village habitation could be relocated with permission, but not within one mile of the boundary, as these created problems. If however permitted, the families were exempted from coolie labour for three to four months to rebuild houses. The Lushais were finally bound to permanent settlements, and the same land had to be jhumed in successive cycles.

The chief continued to appoint some village officials to assist him as well as to carry out the village administration smoothly for the welfare of the villagers. The officials usually comprised the *Upa* (Elder), the *Ramhual*, the *Zalen*, the *Puithiam* (priest), the *Tlangau* (Village crier), and the *Thirdeng* (Blacksmith) (Sangkima, 2004), but to be added by the *Khawchhiar* (Village writer), a very important official under colonial system of administration. The *Khawchhiar* was the village writer who was an important link between the chief and the Superintendent, and between the chief on the one hand and the villagers on the other hand (Prasad, 1987).

The government has taken over defense; the days of raids were over. Villages were no longer fortified, and their size was reduced. The allegiance of young chiefs to their fathers weakened, to be replaced by loyalty to government. Only the eldest son could succeed his father, subject to official approval and rules regarding succession. In some cases, the Superintendent promoted men who had served him loyally, but had no pretence to chieftainship under indigenous conditions, as village chiefs (McCall, 2003). The position of the chief was shorn of its past glory. It was however, government policy to safeguard what remained of the chief's authority, for his services were indispensable. Since non-interference in the internal administration of the chief was general policy of the British Superintendent, and although villagers could appeal against his judgment, his decision was normally respected. The administration did not interfere in village matters, and all dealings with the people were through the chief and his officials. The position of chief was transformed from that of sovereign lord to that of an agent of the government. These changes ultimately prepared the ground for the post-independence abolition of the institution of chieftainship.

By the later part of the Colonization, whereas the British traditionally supported the chieftainship, the first Political party – Mizo Union urged the people not to obey the government and instigated the common people to stone the chiefs (Prasad, 1987). The party even directed the common masses not to pay their dues and tributes. This situation lent support to the common people in their struggle against the chiefs. This movement eventually led to enactment of the Assam Lushai Hills District (Acquisition of chiefs' Rights) Act, 1954 and abolished the chieftainship in the area covered by the Mizo District Council.

### **Socio-Religious Order**

Rev. William Williams, who had been working in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, was the first Christian Missionary to visit the Lushai Hills in 1891. Next to him, the missionaries to work in the Lushai Hills were Rev JH Lorrain and FW Savidge who arrived from Britain in 1893, under Arthington Mission (Ray, 1993). In the short span of three years, they made amazing progress. They learnt the language, transcribed it into the Roman script with some variation, and opened a small school in Aizawl (Lalrinmawia, 1995). Although the government consciously refrained from all matters related to the political, social, and economic advancement of the area, it licenses the Church and the Christian Mission to live and work closely with people. Evangelism and education led to the propagation and spread of Christianity at the speed that had no parallel in the experience of Missions abroad.

By 1931, nearly half the population professed Christianity. In 1951, 80 per cent of the people were Christians, representing the highest strength in the entire north-eastern region at the time. In course of time, the church and school education became inseparable. Mass conversion into Christianity affected all aspects of indigenous custom and values: dress, hair, names, songs, dances, ornaments, marriage, burial, feasts, festivals, and so on. The Church was particularly intolerant of consumption of alcohol and what was held to be permissive behavior (Sangkima, 2005). Prayer, confession, and grace replaced sacrifice and superstition. People willingly contribute money and labour to build school and church buildings. The people took keenly to education, and literacy spread very rapidly. Village teachers became respected figures; many were leaders in the community (Lalrinmawia, 1995). The church brought in the first form of democratic process, the election of elders by the local congregation through secret ballot, to be later approved and ordained by the Presbytery. This was bound to challenge and erode the traditional authority and status of the village chief.

The most important impact of Christianity was on the religious beliefs, customs and usages of the people. With the spread in Christianity, beliefs in all multifarious spirits and in the efficacy of appeasement through sacrifices and

rituals were replaced by the new faith (Singh, 1996). But belief in Pathian continued with a new connotation as God of Christianity. The old animistic rituals are nowhere to be in Mizoram as the transformation was completed (Ray, 1993).

### **Ecological Implications of Colonization**

As the government distanced itself from matters of religion and custom, the colonial history of the Lushai Hills witnessed very less state intervention. However, with the coming of a new religion that followed the colonial power, notions of evil spirits dispelled, as such, mountains, forests and streams lost their supernatural powers. Freedom from fear brought man and nature on an equal footing as creation of God. Appreciation of dynamic linkages between various resources such as rainfall, terrain, soil, trees, crops etc. was being brought and this affects the activity of human on these resources. The individuals and the society got education which enables them to rationalize natural processes and became receptive to alternative technique of resource use. This possibly is the most significant consequence conversion to Christianity made on the use of resources.

After including the Lushai Hills district in the British Empire, it became a single political entity with fixed boundaries. The boundaries were controlled by the government by prevailing Inner line Regulation, and the increase in population acquired significance only after this event. Village boundaries were delimited and frequent shifting of village site was ended. This brings about concentration of population in a given domain, rather than being distributed over a large area over time. The villages now had defined boundaries, and have to contend with the modified terms of accessing resources needs within those boundaries. Vesting of all lands in the State and dispossessing village chiefs made a significant change in property rights. Certain areas were reserved for State interests within the district and the rights of the people were restricted in these areas. Community rights of cultivation and use of forest produce for consumption were though, upheld. The people continued to rely on the shrinking resources domains to meet basic needs as it was not offset by increased flows of primary goods. The new centre of administration provided just a test of markets to the few who were not hampered by the poor communication net work.

Hope of gaining access to new ideas, knowledge and methods was very little for the Mizos even though the unfolding of rational thought and education prepared them to be receptive to new resource use technology due to political and economic insulation. The traditional modes of hunting, gathering, and jhumming continued in the newly defined domains, retraining their uniform dependence on human energy, simple tools, local material, and indigenous techniques. The absence of specialization of either product processes precluded opportunities for exchange of primary goods within and between villages. No significant changes in the practice of resource use are attributed to the period of colonial rule in Mizoram.

To summarize the changes mentioned above, it can be said that political processes in British Mizoram steered environmental events in multiple dimensions. A direct influence on resource domains and social institutions was there. Indirectly, influence in resource domains via administrative policies and in social institutions via administrative measures and support of the Church also happened during the British rule. This was, however, a period of stagnation of resource use technology.

### **Colonial Administration and Forest in Mizoram**

During the British period, the government although it was in command of resources, tended to refrain from using its power in the interests of maintaining public order and minimizing spending in the Lushai District (Singh, 1996). While the people utilized forest and fields as the basic resources for survival, the government utilized it for wealth.

The forest department of British India was created in 1864 to enforce the State dominion over forest resources, with a view to achieve systematic economic returns. It followed a general policy of establishing jurisdiction over valuable forests. Those of immediate worth were declared as reserved, while others were designated as protected forests to await their turn for exploitation. However, the degrees of imperial control are different in the hill areas. One major factor was the varying political status of these areas. In the case of the Lushai Hills district (Mizoram), concern to maintain public order outweighed the economic interests and the hill forests had less commercial potential in terms of species and their number. Further, accessibility was a serious constraint, which tended to restrict timber exploitation to areas on the route of navigable rivers. Nevertheless, the hills did yield revenue – in some cases more from unclassified than reserved forests (Singh, 1996).

In colonial Mizoram, the presence of the forest department was not considered necessary. The Cachar forest division supervised operation in forests on the shared border, while the Superintendent, Lushai Hills managed other forests. A fairly large area was reserved, but extraction was confined to river banks. Organizing trade in forest produce was almost the sole activity, in which the poorly staffed district administration made little contribution. In 1877, the only constituted reserve, the Inner Line Reserved Forests was created. This reserve covers a huge tract of about 509 square miles or 1318.31 Square Kilometers on the northern boundary with Cachar (Ray, 1993) and though territorially transferred from Cachar district to the Lushai Hills district in 1904, the Cachar forest division continued to manage it. The area of 570 square miles being treated as the Inner Line Reserved Forests has never been effectively protected (Report of the Expert Committee on Identification of Forest areas: Vide No. C. 18014/21/96-FST dt. 21.1.1997, Govt. of Mizoram). Unrestricted jhumming in these hills was regarded as detrimental to cultivation in the plains. Forests on the bank of navigable rivers provided the only scope for revenue generation, as extraction in less accessible stretches was economically unviable. Sections of the boundary of the Inner Line Reserve were cut annually, providing employment to needy families. The few villages located within and on the boundary of this reserve were subject to restriction on habitation, cultivation, hunting, and fishing.

There were only six villages within the reserve – Saipum, Mauchar, Tinghmun, Sakawrdai, Bilkhawthlir, and Vairengte – each of which was permitted a certain number of houses. In 1947-48 there had been a total of only 325 households in the Reserve. Residents were not allowed to cut tree for jhumming and had to obtain permission to clear bamboo jungle for cultivation. They also had to obtain permits for collection of forest produce. The inhabitants of the villages on the boundary of the Inner Line Reserve (Palsang, Khawdungsei, Zohmun, Khawruhlian, Vaitin, Khawpuar, Dairep, and Bairabi) were prohibited from jhumming in the reserve.

The administration of other forests was left to the Superintendent through executive order under the general supervision of the Conservator of Forests, Assam. In 1898, the Assam Forest Regulations of 1891 was barred in the district, apart from certain sections specifically invoked. The rules by which the forests were controlled were notified by the Chief Commissioner of Assam in 1904. Reserves other than the Inner Line Reserve were created by executive order. These were relatively small and localized, consisting of riverine, roadside, and three town reserves. Apart from reserved areas, there were also reserved tree species (List of species reserved under Section 32(a) of the Assam Forest Regulation, 1891. Adapted by the State of Mizoram, at The Mizoram Forest Act, 1955, p. (S – 41) as Appendix - I) Outside the reserves, people were entitled to remove forest produce for consumption, free of royalty. However sale or export of forest produce was prohibited, except under a trade permit.

An area of one mile along the entire length of both banks of navigable rivers was designated as riverine reserves. Paddy cultivation was not permitted in these areas (Jha, 1997). However, leases or passes, for orange gardens in bamboo areas were issued so long as no trees were cut or land burnt. Passes for cotton cultivation in bamboo jungle were also given, provided no valuable trees were destroyed (Jha, 1997). A strip of land 150 feet in width, on either side of government roads was similarly reserved, and no jhumming was ordinarily permitted in order to prevent land slips and preserve roadside trees as shelter for travelers (Jha, 1997). In exceptional cases, jhumming was allowed, and then the village was responsible for keeping the road clear and repairing any damage caused. The Aizawl town reserve was deemed necessary on environmental grounds and was not therefore open to commercial extraction. A small bamboo reserve in Aizawl was earmarked for use in government construction. The Champhai reserve was to safeguard rice cultivation introduced in the valley. The purpose of the reserved areas in Lunglei was to protect the Theiriat water supply.

Within Aizawl and Lunglei towns, special rules were framed in relations to felling trees. Only the Superintendents could authorize removal of trees within compounds of government buildings or along Public Work Department roads. Conditions under which felling trees was allowed included their being a danger to property, road conditions, or to human life. Permission was also necessary to cut trees standing on proposed house sites. Such trees were either disposed of through auction or by levying royalty (Singh, 1996).

The management of forests in the district was on simple lines, and indeed the Forest Administration Reports of the Lushai Hills are remarkable for their brevity. As late as 1947-48, there was no working plan, preliminary working plan report, annual plan of operations, a forestation, forest roads, bridges, forest buildings, protection from fire, nor any forest surveys to report [Mizoram State Archives (MSA), Collection II, Admin., 1947-48; Forest Admin. Report in the district of Lushai Hills for the year 1947-48]. All these were activities customarily taken up by other divisions. Routine information that was collected from other divisions, such as the seed years of species, works on forest

economics, works on forest botany, standard volume tables, and commercial volume tables all went unfilled from the Lushai Hills district due to lack of trained staff.

Forest department files do however indicate efforts to train local people at its institutions. Few were qualified to enlist for training courses, fewer passed with the required grades. It was only around 1920 that the post of Deputy Ranger was filled by a candidate who had successfully completed a course at the Kurseong Forest School (MSA, 1916 Training Lushai in Forestry). Finally, by 1931, the strength of local permanent employees in the district forest department consisted of one Deputy Ranger and seven Forest Guards (MSA, 1931)

The partition of India in 1947 forced a tiny change, as the neighbouring Chittagong Hill Tracts and the joint revenue station at Barkhal went to Pakistan. The Forest Administration Report, 1948-49, reveals that a building was constructed at Demagiri where two Assistant Foresters, one Deputy Ranger, two Forest Guards, and two boatmen were posted to handle the operations in the south. Aizawl had one Forester and five Forest Guards (MSA, 1949).

### Conclusion:-

In Mizoram, which was called the Lushai Hills, even though the government controlled resources during the British era, it preferred to abstain from exerting its authority in order to preserve public peace and cut down on expenditures. The government exploited the forests and farms for money, while the people used them as their primary means of subsistence.

The forest department was not thought to be required in the early colonial Mizoram. While the Superintendent of Lushai Hills oversaw operations in other forests, the Cachar Forest Division was in charge of those near the common boundary. Although a sizable portion was set aside, only the banks of rivers could be used for extraction. The district administration, with its understaffed workforce, contributed relatively little to the almost solely organised commerce in forest commodities. But the Forest Department began hiring locals in the Lushai Hills around the middle of the colonial era, and this effort was further reinforced during the later colonial period.

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