



Mizoram: an Insight

Samarees Kumar Das*

Department of Veterinary and Animal Husbandry Extension, College of Veterinary Sciences and Animal Husbandry, Central Agricultural University, Selesih, Aizawl, Mizoram (796 014), India

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Correspondence to

*E-mail: samcau.d1@gmail.com

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Abstract

Mizoram, the abode of Mizo tribe, is one of the seven states (Seven Sisters) in north-east India. Until the beginning of twentieth century Mizos were living a primitive life completely isolated and unknown to the rest of the world. It is only after the British intervention that the Mizos became known to the outside world. Since then they have adopted Christianity as their religion. This paper provides a glimpse of Mizoram from historical, geographical, agro-ecological and socio-economic perspectives.

1. Introduction

Nestled in the steep hill folds, Mizoram, one of the fabled 'seven sisters' (Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Tripura) of the north-east India covers an overall area of 21, 087 km², situated between 21.58° N to 24.35° N latitude and 92.15° E to 93.29° E longitude, Mizoram is shaped like a narrow triangle. The Tropic of Cancer passes through the middle of the state just south of capital city Aizawl. The state is divided into eight districts- Aizawl, Champhai, Mamit, Lunglei, Saiha, Lawngtlai, Serchhip and Kolasib. Mizoram shares its borders with three states- Assam, Tripura and Manipur. The state has also common borders with two foreign countries- Myanmar and Bangladesh. The total length of Mizoram's international border adds up to 722 km. Thus Mizoram is surrounded by Myanmar in the east, Manipur and Cachar district of Assam in the north, Tripura and Bangladesh in the west and again Myanmar in the south. Geographically it is 277 km from north to south, and 121 km from east to west.

2. Origin and History

The inhabitants of Mizoram are known as Mizos. There is no common consensus about the origin of Mizos like many other

tribes in north-eastern India. The generally accepted idea is that they came to Burma (now Myanmar) as a part of the greater Mongoloid wave of migration from China. The exodus of the Mizos from Myanmar in the eighteenth century is an epic, replete with fierce struggles and heroic deeds.

The system of 'Chieftainship' was developed in late fifteenth century. The Chief was assisted by a council of elders known as *Upa*. The other village functionaries were the crier (*Tlangau*), the blacksmith (*Thirdeng*) and the priest (*Puithiam*) all appointed by the Chief and was paid remuneration in the form of rice, harvest, meat, etc. The Chieftainship was hereditary passed on to the eldest son.

The Mizos of the olden days recognized one supreme-being called *Pathian*, though most of their religious rites and offerings were directed towards evil spirits or *Ramhuai* who were believed to dwell in streams, hills, trees or anything out of the ordinary. They also believed that the souls went to either *Pialral* (paradise or heaven) or *Mitthi Khua* (hell or the abode of the dead). *Pialral* was open only to those who had killed a specified number of wild animals or hosted some ceremonial public feasts. Festivals were observed regularly, accompanied by rituals and dances, during which *Zu* (rice-beer) was consumed abundantly.



3. British Intervention

Around the middle of the nineteenth century the Mizos began to play havoc within the adjacent British-Indian territories of Cachar, Sylhet and the Chittagong hill tracts. The tea gardens in the Cachar plains, in particular, were an eyesore to them, for they encroached upon their hunting grounds and thus became the target of daring raids. It was when these bold escapades culminated in the murder of a white tea-gardener and the capture of his little daughter that the British Government was provoked into sending expeditionary forces to punish the aggressive Mizo Chiefs. After a number of expeditions British Government was able to bring the Mizos under their control virtually leaving the internal administration in the hands of Mizo Chiefs.

The British did not take initiative to bring them into the mainstream of national life. Rather by their attitude and approach they encouraged differences among the hill people and the plains by creating an artificial barrier under the cover of Inner Line. The declaration of hill areas as Excluded Areas tended in the long run to insulate the aspirations of the inhabitants of the hill districts from sharing common perspective with rest of the people of the country.

The British subjects were debarred from going beyond the Inner Line without a permit from the district authority. This was primarily intended to maintain peace and non-interference in tribal affairs and also economic exploitation. But its results were not bright. The tribes lost their contact with the plain people and thus a cleavage between the plain people and the hills was created by the British authority in India.

4. Birth of Mizoram State

Today's Mizoram was a part of Assam known as Lushai Hills District which was one of the districts of Assam in the extreme southern fringe of north-east India. In 1954, the Lushai Hills District was renamed as Mizo Hills District by the act of Parliament. And the next year was marked by the abolition of the traditional Chieftainship by the Village Council.

The great suffering of *Mautam* (Bamboo Famine) in 1959 left a deep scar in the heart of the Mizos. And in 1961, one of the voluntary organizations MNFF (Mizo National Famine Front) which played a crucial role during *Mautam* Famine purposively deleted the word 'Famine' from its name with an avowed aim of attaining independence and sovereignty for the Mizo. Steadily the movement gained strength and eventually took the form of a revolution when they took up arms on February 28, 1966. The Mizo hill was immediately declared a disturbed area and security forces were inducted to maintain law and order. The state of disturbance lasted for two decades. With the implementation of the North-Eastern Reorganization Act,

1971, the Mizo Hills District was conferred the status of Union Territory and renamed as Mizoram in 1972.

At last the two-decade old disturbance came to a peaceful end on June 30, 1986 with the signing of an epoch-making Memorandum of Settlement between the Government of India and the MNF (Mizo National Front). The Inner Line Permit (ILP), already in force in Mizoram, would not be amended or repealed without consulting the State Government. Consequent upon the passage of the 53rd Constitution Amendment Bill and the State of Mizoram Bill by the Parliament on August 7, 1986, Mizoram became a State of Indian Federation on February 20, 1987. The first election was held on February 16, 1987 which led to the formation of the MNF Ministry.

5. Topography

Mizoram is a mountainous region ranging from high hills in the east to small ridges and conical hills here and there in the western and central Mizoram. The average height of the hills in the west of the state is about 1,000 msl which gently rises to 1,300 msl to the east. Some areas, however, have higher ranges which go up to a height of over 2,000 msl. The difference of elevation between valley floor and hill tops greatly varies from west to east, the range being 200-600 m. The Blue Mountain (*Phawngpui*), situated in the south-eastern part of the state is the highest peak in Mizoram which is about 2,210 msl.

The flat land in western part of the south-west Mizoram is really an oasis in whole mountainous region. The rocks are young and devoid of economic values. Availability of plain land is limited in Mizoram. As such the settlement of population is scattered and more concentrated in hamlet like town area which are generally grown on hill top or slope (Plate 1). The sparse population and limited agricultural activities are the sign of its backwardness. The inhabitants live on the hill tops or on the spur of the ridges. In view of general topographic arrangement of Mizoram, the whole area is divided into the following natural regions. Average height is around 900 msl.

- a. Mountainous region: 1000-2000 msl
- b. Ridges and high land regions: 250-1000 msl
- c. Plain land or flat land (low land areas): Low land areas in Mizoram are rare except in small patches here and there in between the mountain ranges.

6. River

There are plenty of rivers in Mizoram which make the difficult hilly terrain of the state more inaccessible during the rains. The Tlawng, which is considered the most important river in northern Mizoram, flows north to join the Barak in Assam's Cachar district (Plate 2).

7. Weather and Season



Plate 1: A small town near Aizawl (Durtlang)

The upper parts of the hills remain cool during summer while the lower parts are relatively warm and humid. Storms break out during March-April, just before or during the summer. The maximum average temperature in the summer is 30°C while in the winter minimum average is around 11°C. The four months between November and February are winter in Mizoram followed by the spring. The storms come in the middle of April to herald the beginning of the summer. The three months from June to August are the rainy season. The weather is at its moderate best in the two autumnal months of September and October when temperature ranges between 19°C to 25°C.

Broadly three seasons are noticed in Mizoram: cold season or winter (November to February), warm season or spring (March to May) and rainy season or summer (June to September). Rainy season lasts longer and the heavy rainfall occurs during June to August which covers 89% of the total annual rainfall.

8. Festivals

Almost all the Mizo festivals revolve round the agriculture. *Mim Kut*, *Chapchar Kut* and *Pawl Kut* are the three major festivals in Mizoram all of which are in some way or the other related with agricultural activities. *Mim Kut* is celebrated in August-September in the wake of the harvesting of maize crop. *Chapchar Kut* which is celebrated during the spring season in the month of March after the *Jhum* cutting is over is perhaps the most joyous of the Mizo festivals. *Pawl Kut*, a post-harvesting festival, is celebrated during December-January.

9. Caste and Religion

Mizoram is the cradle of diverse communities like the Lusei (wrongly spelt as Lushai), Ralte, Paite, Bete, Powi, Lakher, Hmar, Riang, Tlanglau, Pangs, Bawm, Chakma and so on. They are mostly of Mongoloid stock that migrated to the



Plate 2: Tlawng longest river in Mizoram

present location from the southern and western parts of China through upper Burma. Various tribes such as Lushai, Mara, Hmar, Paite, Ralte and others who are collectively known as Mizos are Christian by religion. Besides, a few Hindu, Muslim, Jain, Sikh and Buddhist reside in the state.

10. Social Customs

Although Christianity brought about a total transformation in the Mizo lifestyle and outlook, some customary laws have stayed on. The efforts of the Missionaries were not directed at changing the basic customs of the Mizo society. However, tea has replaced *Zu* (rice-beer or country liquor), *Zawlbuk* (bachelors' dormitory) has been abolished, and animal sacrifices on ceremonial occasions are now considered as anathema. But some other customs and community traditions like payment of bride-price (not sale price or dowry) are still practised.

11. Tourist Places

There are number of tourist attractions in Mizoram like the hilly scenic landscapes, hill ranges, mountain streams and rivulets, number of silvery cascades like Vantawng, Khawiva, Maicham and placid lake like Tamdil, Palakdil, Rungdil, etc. Phawngpui (Blue Mountain) is the highest peak of the state. Tourism Department runs chain of tourist lodges and cottages. Additional attractions are festivals like Anthurium festival, Grape festival, etc. organized by the Directorate of Tourism, Government of Mizoram.

12. Population

The first complete census in the Mizo (Lushai) Hills conducted by the British in 1901 recorded a population of 82, 434. The Mizoram population stood at 6, 89, 756 in 1991 census. According to the 2001 census, population of Mizoram has risen to 8, 91, 058 out of which 4, 59, 783 are males and 4, 31, 275 are females. The district-wise population of Mizoram

(2001 census) are: Aizawl (3, 39, 812), Champhai (1, 01, 389), Mamit (62, 313), Lunglei (1, 37, 155), Lawngtlai (73, 050), Saiha (60, 823), Kolasib (60, 977), and Serchhip (55, 539). Around one-third of the population of Mizoram resides in Aizawl district. Wine is banned in the state. However, smoking, consumption of alcohol, chewing of betel leaf and arecanut (*Kuba*) and different forms of tobacco are widespread among both the male and female population. Besides, the state is cursed with drug addiction, AIDS and malaria.

13. Education

Before the arrival of Christian Missionaries there was no formal education among Mizos. The main institution of learning was the *Zawlbuk* (bachelors' dormitory) exclusively meant for the male members of the community. The first primary school was opened on April 2, 1894 by Rev. J. H. Lorrain and Rev. F. W. Savidge who were the first Missionaries to Mizoram. On August 21, 1897 a government school was established for Mizo boys in Bengali language. By an Act of Parliament in 2000 Mizoram University was established which started functioning from January 2, 2001. At present Mizoram has a very high percentage of literacy (88.49%) and stands second in the whole country next only to Kerala. However, there is no record of Mizo script. The people of Mizoram speak in Mizo language and write in English script.

14. Cottage Industries

Handloom and handicrafts are most important and popular cottage industries of Mizoram. To promote and operate scheme for the development of handloom and handicraft Mizoram Handloom and Handicrafts Development was established in 1988 and the Tribal Handloom Development Project was started in 1992.

15. Transportation and Communication

The landlocked region surrounded by mountains with steep ridges and dense forest has made communication bottleneck in Mizoram. Free access to other parts of the country by other means of communication is also restricted. Thus different tribes have been localized in the isolated pockets of Mizoram. The internal rivalry among the tribes leading to inter-tribal warfare was due to natural constraints and communication gap among them. Due to inaccessibility each village was an independent state like small Greek State which maintained independent entity.

Mizoram came to be connected by meter-gauge railways only in 1998 at Bairabi which is solely used for cargo transportation. It was connected to the outside of the state by the National Highway 54 via Guwahati in Assam. And only in 1998 a standard airport was constructed at Lengpui (around 40 km

away from the capital city of Aizawl).

16. Drinking Water

There is no underground water table hence acute water problem exists. With most of the settlements situated on the hill-tops where there is great shortage of drinking water, roof-top rainwater harvesting has been a traditional practice of the Mizo community since ages. Having an average annual rainfall of 250 cm much of the valuable and chemical-free rainwater gets drained-off and wasted annually which if properly harvested would be sufficient for the people of the state. However, rural water supply program of the Government is yet to cover all the villages of the state.

17. Soil

The soil of Mizoram can be grouped into high-hill soil, mid-hill soil, low-hill soil and valley soil. Soil has developed from parent rocks as shale, sandstone and mudstone. The lateritic soil with high percentage of acidity is the common characteristic of the soil in Mizoram. The soil is poor in potash and phosphorus. Due to heavy rainfall soil is mostly weathered and leached. They are known as laterites which consist of silicate, aluminum oxide and iron oxide. Being low in humous content their color is yellow, reddish and extremely porous.

18. Agriculture

Agriculture is the mainstay of livelihood which is subsistence in nature less affected by the effect of Green Revolution. In certain communities, the surplus food grain in some households is voluntarily transferred to the deficit farm houses under the customary system of *Tlawmngaihana*. The cereals produced here can hardly meet the requirements for a few months, and for the rest of the year the state needs to depend on imports from the other states. In order to become self-sufficient in food production the State Government has launched a scheme called Mizoram Intodelh Project, meaning Mizoram Self-sufficiency Project by transforming traditional method of shifting cultivation (*jhuming*) into better and more modern ways of farming (contour farming, terrace farming) or some other forms of trade.

18.1. Shifting cultivation (*jhuming*)

Agriculture in Mizoram is still dominated by shifting cultivation. This is the primitive system of land-use on hill slopes of the mountains region in which the hill slopes are cleared of grasses, vines and small bushes during the dry season. The felled plants are left to dry for a month or so and burnt thereafter. This system is also known as 'slash and burn' system of farming. The chief characteristics of shifting cultivation are—rotation of fields, slash and burn of vegetation, keeping the land fallow

for a number of years for regeneration of forests, use of human labor as cheap input, non-employment of drought animal, and use of simple age-old implements.

In *jhuming*, no permanent tenancy system is possible as the *jhum* land changes from year to year. The size of *jhum* land (*Lo* in Mizo language) allotted to a family (*Ramtheh*) depends on its resourcefulness in terms of man power and seeds available.

18.2. Agricultural tools and implements

The method of cultivation is almost primitive. Agricultural tools and implements like *Dao*, *Kodali*, shawl, sickle and axe are age-old. It is not possible to introduce mechanization of agriculture in Mizoram on account of its physiography and economic compulsions. The modern scientific methods of cultivation are almost impossible under the prevailing geographical constraints.

18.3. Forestry

Forestry is also a major economic enterprise which increases the state revenue. In Mizoram, out of total geographical area of 21,087 sq km, 15,935 sq km come under different categories of forests. It is mainly tropical wet ever-green, tropical semi-ever-green and mountain sub-tropical forest. Thick bamboos of different varieties and wild grasses are found everywhere in the state.

18.4. Bamboo flowering

Bamboo is the most important floral group in Mizoram. The abundance of bamboo growing luxuriantly in the western and southern parts of the hills in particular have made Mizoram known as the 'Land where bamboo flowers'. For this reason Mizoram is also famously known for its bamboo crafts. Bamboo also brought *Mautam*—a devastating famine caused due to flowering of bamboo which ravaged the entire state (the erstwhile Lushai Hills District of Assam) in 1959. A phenomenon happens in an around fifty years interval *Mautam* has peculiar symptoms of widespread flowering of bamboo

trees accompanied by an incredibly high proliferation of rats which come in hordes, first feeding on bamboo flowers, then swarming over the paddy fields devouring all the crops (Plate 3). The Government relief was delayed and inadequate leading to the formation of a number of voluntary organisations to come to the rescue of distressed villagers in the far-flung areas. Recently, in the year 2007, the incidence of bamboo flowering happened again throughout the state.

18.5. Major crops

The main food crops are rice and maize. Cash crops such as ginger, coffee, arecanut, squash, pepper and tea are being undertaken on a large scale. The local markets are now flooded with homegrown vegetables (pumpkin, cucumber, brinjal, chili, etc.) throughout the year (Plate 4). The main horticultural produce includes passion fruit, banana, orange, pineapple. Under Horticulture Technology Mission cultivation of passion fruit and grapes are being carried out in Champhai district on a large scale.

Floriculture is a growing occupation in Mizoram. For the first time in 2002, cultivation of anthurium was introduced in Mizoram under Technology Mission Program. Mizoram anthurium flowers are being exported to the UAE, UK, etc. Commercial cultivation of rose under hi-tech green house has been introduced since 2006 by the Horticulture Department.

18.6. Cropping pattern

There are two principal cropping seasons in Mizoram—*kharif* (*Fur*) and *rabi* (*Thal*). The *kharif* season starts from the beginning of the pre-monsoon rain (late March) and sowing is done by the end of May. In the wet rice cultivation, transplantation is done in late June or early July. Weeding starts only in late May which lasts till September followed by the harvest of the *kharif* crops from August to December. The *rabi* season starts from the early part of September and sowing is completed by the end of October.

18.7. Mixed cropping



Plate 3: Bamboo flower and fruit



Plate 4: Local market

Mixed cropping is a very common practice with *jhum* cultivation in Mizoram. A variety of mixed crops like paddy, pumpkin, maize, cotton, yam, cucumber, water melon and other vegetables are widely grown in *jhum* field. During the *rabi* season beans, cabbage, and mustard seeds are grown in the same plot of land.

18.8. Crop rotation

Crop rotation is an important aspect of agriculture in order to preserve soil fertility. In the early part of April, the farmers begin with vegetables and maize. Cultivation begins with the onset of the monsoon. For the cultivation of cash crop like sesame, tobacco and ginger, the farmers select fertile plots of land and these crops are not mixed up with the vegetable and other crops. With paddy seedlings, the seeds of cucumber and pumpkin are mixed together, and not sown separately. Nearly 75% of the cultivable land is utilized under *kharif* crop which includes rice, maize, sesame, yam, ginger, sugarcane, etc.

18.9. Rice

Rice is the staple food crop in Mizoram which is grown throughout the state (either through wet cultivation or terrace cultivation). The wet rice cultivation is practised in plain areas near Champhai, north Vonlaiphai and near Thenzol (Mat river basin). There are two varieties of rice grown in Mizoram. The early variety is sown in April and is harvested in the middle of May. The late variety is sown in May and harvested in the middle of November.

19. Animal Husbandry

Essential requirement of an ordinary farmer includes a pair of bullock or buffalo for plowing or drawing carts and a cow to propagate the species and to produce milk. But this is quite uncommon in Mizoram. Due to difficult terrain farmers in Mizoram do not keep these animals except in wet rice cultivation areas. Also sheep, goat and pony are rarely found. But poultry and piggery in courtyard are common in Mizoram which are the important source of food and subsidiary income.

Recently, dairy development programs around Aizawl city have been taken up under Integrated Dairy Development Program. Consequently MULCO (Mizoram Multi-commodity Producers' Cooperative Union Ltd) was started in the year 1985 on the pattern of Anand pattern dairy cooperative.

20. Conclusion

Being rich in biodiversity and located in remote inaccessible hilly terrain of the Himalayan mountainous range Mizoram is considered as one of the peaceful states in India. Unlike most of the other states in India Mizoram has never experienced the incidence of rape, murder, kidnapping, political strike, etc. Over the years Mizoram has progressed a lot, yet a lot more to be developed. Development of communication and transportation facility must be the top in the development agenda of the state and central Government.

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