Mizo Studies Vol. 15 No. 03, pp. 193-196
ISSN : 2319-6041
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https://doi.org/10.22232/mizostudies.v15i03.15

Agriculture and Social Transformation: A Historical Analysis of the Mizo in the Colonial Period

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Abstract:

In Mizo, 'land' or 'ram' was a spatial term symbolising identity, culture, traditions and spiritual values. Maintaining a balance in the relationship between man, his village and the spiritual realm was required to maintain their community. The Mizo starting from their primitive stages earned their living by performing agriculture. Society and ethnicity are dependent upon agriculture and are knitted to it. Agriculture has been the backbone of human civilisation, shaping societies, economies and political structures throughout history. As being the primary source of food, it plays a pivotal role in sustaining populations, and its influence extends far beyond simple survival.

The arrival of the British in the Lushai Hills brings various changes. Different methods and tactics were applied to consolidate their power, where agriculture was the main target. The development in agriculture not only affected the food staples and cultivation of crops but also made a broader impact in the formation and development of the society. The introduction of new crops and agricultural system became an important factor to showcase their supremacy. This paper will focus on the changes seen in the agricultural sector and the impact caused due to this.

Keywords: jhuming, society, colonialism, changes, power

The Mizo lives in one of the Northeast states of India, Mizoram. The British started their first expedition in the late 19th century and started to rule the region till India got its independence in 1947. With the intervention of the British, changes were seen in the whole region which effectively made an impact on the structure of polity, economy and society.

Agriculture plays an important role in the life of human beings. According to the region, their methods and ways of practice differ. Shifting cultivation is practiced in tropical areas such as parts of Africa, Southeast Asia, and South America where land is cultivated for a few years and then left to regenerate. Terrace Farming is found in mountainous regions like the Andes in South America and parts of Asia. Industrial agriculture is predominant in North America, Europe and parts of Asia, in which large-scale farming is done with advanced technology and machinery.

The method used by the Mizo was mostly the shifting cultivation. No other type of method was seen in the pre-colonial period and still even after the British intervention, shifting cultivation remains the main practice. The term 'shifting cultivation' is very often used to mean a system which is opposed to settled plough cultivation to bring out the significance of the primitive character of the primitive mode of production, implements used for raising as well as for processing the products and even the way of

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living is primitive, precarious and poor (JB Ganguly, 2). FAO (Food and Agricultural Organisation) says that shifting cultivation is not only a backward type of agriculture practice, it is also a backward culture practice, in general (Orestes Rosanga, 123).

Shifting cultivation was the mainstay of the traditional Mizo economy in which it could be understood that migration was mandatory due to their search for cultivable land (Sailo, 94). As they earn their daily bread through shifting agriculture, they try to perform the method least destructively to avoid unnecessary damage (AG McCall, 167). Lots of social interaction happened with the agricultural method, agriculture has a sort of romantic attachment to every Mizo. Jhuming remains the backbone of the Mizo economy in the colonial period. The British were afraid that the jhuming would destroy the timber areas, so if it did not affect these areas they were done continuously. The rapid regeneration of vegetation prevented the government from being unduly concerned about the environmental implications of the practice (Sailo, 96).

The British intervention had stopped the migration of the Mizo in such a way that there was a fixed area suited for cultivation, these areas were jhummed in a successive cycle. The jhuming areas permitted by the British became very small. The people were restricted from performing jhuming in a given area through a successive cycle. People demanded for more hectares of land as they were short of land, due to the increase in population. The Lushai Hills Chiefs' Conference in 1941 articulated concern on this issue. The resolution of the Conference called for the abolition of riverine reserves, as this land was suited for the cultivation of crops for export such as cotton and also demanded that they should be allowed to clear land adjoining government roads as the people were facing a shortage of jhum land.

Even after the British intervention, shifting cultivation had been practiced for so long and it could not be replaced by any other methods. The British understood that the land would not accommodate them for long if they kept on practicing this method, and even proposed various methods to substitute them. Still, it was not possible and no impacts on a larger scale could be made. Society was very much inclined to agriculture and even made a huge impact on the societal structure and formation. The policy implemented by the British in the agriculture sector could make a huge impression on the functioning of the administration.

Various crops have been introduced to improve the condition of agriculture. Some changes were visible as these crops changed society in different ways. The diet of the people was completely changed along with the way they cooked and vice-versa. This affects the economy of the region where trading of these crops and materials happened, the trading and economy face new challenges. The Lushai hills need to encounter these new changes which shaped the structure of the economy into a different form. The newly cultivated crops at some point strengthened the power of the British as it helped in the consolidation of power. Through these changes, it was possible to show their superiority and advancement. These newly cultivated crops and agricultural systems helped in consolidating their powers.

One important example could be the introduction of Wet Rice Cultivation (hereafter, its short form WRC will be used). The WRC led to the introduction of private ownership of land and this happened for the first time in the region (K. Lalzuimawia, 205). Wet Rice Cultivation had been successful in Nagaland and in some parts of the highlands of Burma, the Superintendent of the hills took a party of Mizo chiefs to Naga Hills to show an example and the benefit of this method (Orestes Rosanga, 126). Immediately afterwards it was introduced in the hills. This was the only scientific method of cultivation ever introduced in Mizoram. In the beginning, due to the irregularity and steepness of the hills, it faced many difficulties and not the least was the apathy of the Mizo themselves (Orestes Rosanga, 126).

The wet rice cultivation led to the private ownership of land. In 1909, Major H.W.G. Cole, the then Superintendent of the Lushai Hills issued an order declaring that the land under cultivation should be the property of the cultivator and that the chief or Head-man should not have the power to confiscate or annex any individuals' land (MSA, CB-1, Agri-14). The cultivators had the freedom to reside

or break land wherever they liked for cultivation but with the permission of the Chiefs or Headmen. However, every cultivator had to pay 'fathang' at the rate of two baskets of rice per annum to each chief within whose village he resided.

Through WRC, various villages were clubbed together and this made the administration easier and more convenient for the British. They no longer need to import rice from outside, which in the other way also helps in maintaining the economy (Orestes Rosanga, 281-290). WRC led to the formation of new towns and places, regions where WRC started were immensely growing and some later even developed into a district capital. The places where WRC was implemented by Shakespeare ie., Champhai, North Vanlaiphai and Thenzawl became the Rice Bowl till now (K.Lalzuimawi, 207).

Many new crops were being introduced and experimented. Many projects were being undergone in the British times which in various ways caused the changes and had an impact in a longer phase. There were some crops which were successful and have had an impact seen till now, while some were not successful and were not implemented any further.

Potato was introduced in 1907 and it was a new colonial food hitherto unknown in the hills. The cultivation of potatoes was first started by Major Cole in 1907 before that Mizo never cultivated the plant. Initially, Mizo called potatoes as 'the white men's arum bulb' (SapBal). With the passage of time they took its Indian version and called it Alu till date, they have not yet given it any Mizo name (Liangkhaia, 106). In the 'Mizo leh Vai Chanchinbu' Cole had written that Mizo did not like the taste of potato in the beginning because they did know how to cook it but with time, he believed, they would start liking it. Though potatoes and attempts for its inclusion in the Mizo diet failed to impress the Mizo in the initial years, after India's independence potatoes became part and parcel of their everyday diet (Lalrofeli, 77).

Fruit cultivation also flourished as fruits like mangoes, guava and other fruits were immensely grown. There are plenty of orange trees bearing fruit and pineapples all over the district and the people are taking a keen interest in fruit cultivation. In the year 1921, 56500 oranges were exported from Sairang to the plains (MSA, CB-3, Agri-32). Trials have shown the suitabilities of crops like coffee, cashew nut and pare-rubber. Other crops like cocoa, black pepper and cardamom have given indications that they are likely to be suitable for the region. Half of the total culturable land of the district is fit for the cultivation of coffee (MSA, CB-1, Agri-17). The manurial crops experimented with are mostly black pepper, arrowroot, Gassava (Topiaca) plant, Coffee, Artichoke, groundnut etc. Tea cultivation too was making some progress. The cultivation of sugarcane was reported to be spreading rapidly (Orestes Rosanga, 127).

The cultivation of tea made a huge impact on the transformation of the society and brought up a new culture, which was the 'tea culture'. In Mizo, *Zu* is an important figure and was used on different occasions. Their hospitality to their guests was shown through serving *Zu*. It was brewed in all the houses and played an important role in the Mizo society. Then the coming of Christianity changed the perspectives of *Zu*, and at the same time, the cultivation of tea started. Within a short period, *Zu* was replaced by tea and was served as hospitality. Then, this changed the whole societal norms where tea became the main icon and was used on every occasion. It was not only the intervention of Christianity, but the plantation of tea in the region became an important factor in the popularity of tea in the Mizo culture.

The continuous migration system which had been happening in the Mizo society also stopped along with the British intervention. Each village under its chief was now requested to settle in one place and have their territory, this shows the new system in the hills which had never happened before. The permanent settlement existed in the region where they could not migrate to other new places like before, they were not entitled to move to different new places as they like. The power of the chief was eliminated and became more like a zamindar, the intermediary between the people and the British. Their power was being cut off, the real administrator and the head were the British. The power and

functions of the chief were eliminated in every direction, in some cases even though they enjoyed privileges over the common people, they were barely a chief.

No territorial expansion was ever granted to the chief anymore as they needed to have a permanent settlement of their village. The whole land now belonged to the British, the chief and the people were not obliged to say anything on the land use system. Whatever the British said and commanded should be obeyed by the people and the chiefs, even though suggestions were taken from them oftenly, the conclusion and decision were made by the British themselves. The changes in the agriculture system reflects the changes in the society as well. The whole region was submerged into the British authority and the control of their agriculture system was an important factor for this.

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