

Chapter - 2

Social and Political Background of Lushai Hills

Present Mizoram is the result of long subjugation by the British erstwhile Lushai Hills district of Assam. The primitive ways of life, customary practices and the social conditions of the time had led to the discovery of the people by the British who annexed the territory in 1890 under a Political Officer with its headquarters at Aizawl. “It attained the status of an Autonomous District in 1952 which was renamed Mizo District by a legislation passed in 1954. The North- Eastern Reorganisation Act of 1971 granted the district the status of a Union Territory under the present name.”¹ It remained under the colonial administration for almost a century. The state shares its borders with two foreign countries – the Chin Hills of Burma and the Chittagong Hill areas of Bangladesh. It covers an area of 21,087 sq. km. with a population of 1,091,014 and a density of population of 52 per sq. km. according to the census of 2011. The hill ranges run north to south and are covered with dense jungle. All the rivers in its area are mountain streams navigable for a few kilometres within the state with the exception of the Dhaleswari and Kolodyne. Many ethnic groups such as Takam, Tuikuk, Takoete – names given by the so-called “Mizos”² co-inhabit Mizoram. Of these, the Pawi, Lakher, Chakma, and Riang are concentrated in areas away from the main population. Terms like ‘Lushai’, ‘Kookie’ and Chin had been used to imply inhabitants of the Lushai Hills during colonial era. However, ‘Lusei’ will be strictly used throughout the chapter to mean the erstwhile ‘Luseis,’ the descendants of Zahmuaka in particular.

Geography

The Lushai Hills presently known as Mizoram is a hilly, precipitous, landlocked area where lack of communication has cut it off for a long time. When the world outside was rearing to attain the highest degree of perfection in every aspect of life, our hills was

¹ Sangkima, *Mizos: Society and Social Change*, Spectrum, Guwahati, 1992, p. 4.

² The term ‘Mizo’ is used for the various communities that inhabit Mizoram. It does not stand for any particular tribe or clan.

still clothed in darkness with occasional glimpses of planes flying high up in the skies, and no idea of modernisation. This was due to its physical nature for which it remained disconnected. The state is entirely covered by hill ranges that ran from north to south with a tendency to rise in the east. Their average height is about 900 meters. These hill ranges are separated from each other by ridges and furrows. Of all the hill ranges, the Blue Mountain is the highest with a height of 2,063 meters. Several rivers run through the hills. Of these, the Karnaphuli, *Tuirial*, *Tlawng*, and *Tut* flow in the direction of the north or south and are navigable throughout the year. Other rivers are small and being fed mainly by monsoon rains, they swell during rainy seasons and dry up in winter.

The forest area “covers 7,127.22 sq. km and accounts for 34 per cent of the total area.”³ Three main types of forests like tropical wet evergreen, tropical semi-evergreen and montanne sub-tropical are found in Mizoram. The traditional practice of jhum or slash and burn cultivation had destroyed large areas of the forests, but the Government took care to plant local species of teak, sal, pine, fir, eucalyptus which helped in gradually replenishing the destroyed areas. Sandstone and slabs of tertiary age thrown into long folds compose the soil of the land.

The general climate of the state is pleasant with a cool summer and a temperate winter. Temperature in summer varies from 18°C to 29°C and 11°C to 24°C in winter. Present Mizoram covers an area of 21,087 sq. km lying between 20° 20' North and 20° 27' North latitudes, and 90° 20' East and 90° 29' East longitudes. It is bounded on the north by the district of Cachar in Assam, on the east by the state of Manipur and Burma and to the south by Burma and Bangladesh. The entire area experiences a south-west monsoon from May to September. The average rainfall is thus as high as 254cm. per annum.

The People

The inhabitants of Mizoram are known by the generic name Mizo, which literally means people (*mi*) of the hills (*zo*). There are a number of separate tribes under the general ethnic broad group of Mizo. These primarily include several tribal communities that have inhabited the hilly terrains for several decades. They included the following main tribes: “Lusei, Hmar, Poi/Lai, Lakher/Mara, Chakma, Thadou, Ralte, Gange,

³ Sangkima, *Mizos: Society and Social Change*, p. 5.

Paite, Sukte, Pangkhua, Zahau, Fanai (Muallianpui), Molbem, Darlong, Khuangli, and Falam (Tashons).⁴ Apart from the main tribal groups, the Mizo people are divided into three sub-tribes namely Lakher, Poi and Lusei. The Chakma/Riangare another group which concentrate in the eastern part of the state. The Poi/Shendus were concentrated in the southern part of the country. “The Biate, Hrangkhoh and other cognate clans known as Khawtlang claim the hills round Champhai as their place of origin and the sites are still known by their names.”⁵ Khawtlang is a term used for the various clans belonging to the Hmar tribe. The sites of their settlements were those of Zote, Ngurte, Loitlang, Khawbung, Thiektlang, Ngente, and so on. All these places are clan-names used for their settlements. Biate was the famous village of the clans of that name. “To the north, the country was occupied by the Sukte, Paihte, and Thadou clans. These appear to have been firmly established under regular chiefs.”⁶ Besides, the Chiru, Kom, Aimol also lived in the vicinity of the Luseis but had later moved to Manipur. Shakespear states that:

It seems certain that the former clans lived near the Lusheis when the Thangur commenced their victorious career, and it may well be that it was fear of absorption by their more powerful neighbour that drove these clans northwards, while the Lusheis took a westerly direction.⁷

All these tribes are ethnic groups, native to north eastern India, western Burma and eastern Bangladesh who speak any of the various Mizo languages. Shakespear states that “there is no doubt that the Kukis, Chins, and the Lushais are all of the same race.”⁸ Suhas Chatterjee also states that “all the competent British officers pointed out that the people inhabiting the Chin Hills, Lushai Hills and the Chittagong Hill tracts were of Burmese origin and the geography of these places were akin to Burma.”⁹ All these tribes are known to exist in Mizoram ever since the hills existed. According to historic records, Tibetan, Burmese and Chinese people had a great influence on the lifestyle and behaviour of the core groups of Mizoram, in accordance with their myth of origin.

⁴ S.C. Bhatt and Gopal Bhargava (eds), *Land and People of Indian states and Union Territories: (in 36 volumes)*, 19, Mizoram, Gyan, New Delhi, 2005, p. 15.

⁵ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki clans*, p. 6.

⁶ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki clans*, p. 3.

⁷ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki clans*, p. 8.

⁸ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 8.

⁹ Suhas Chatterjee, *Making of Mizoram; Role of Laldenga*, Volume-I, M. D. Publication, Pvt Ltd, 1994, p. 77.

Of the people inhabiting the land, the first group to enter the hills were the Old Kukis, which consisted of Hrangkhawl, Biate, Khawtlang, Langrawng, Pangkhua, Mawk and others. The entry of the second group into the Lushai Hills forced the first group of Old Kukis to flee from the scene and moved towards the Chittagong Hill tracts where they were said to have been “employed by Gobind Chandra, the Raja of Cachar, in his attempt to hunt down Tularam Senapattee (Senapati) in the years 1828 and 1829.”¹⁰ When they have found no safety in the plain areas of Cachar, they migrated from Tipperah during the reign of Krishna Chander of Cachar about the year 1795 and settled in the North Cachar Hills of Assam where they could maintain separate identity even though small in number as they were armed and united.”¹¹

The second group were the New Kukis, composed of Changsan, Thadou, Lhangum etc. These “New Kukis” in course of time, were also driven out by a third group of arrivals known as Luseis. The Luseis began to quarrel and fight with their peaceful neighbours mainly for land. Sometimes, they harassed these clans by creating continuous disturbances. Conditions in the hills came to be so unbearable that the second group also left the Luseis. “This group went directly to the present Tripura towards the close of the first half of the twentieth century but were pushed back by Colonel Lister for creating trouble in the British Frontiers. Some of these submitted to Lister who enlisted them as soldiers and formed a good outpost on the frontiers.”¹² Here, it should be remembered that only a handful left the Lushai Hills while a larger number remained. Thus, the third group now occupied the hills which ultimately came to be called Lushai Hills after the group of Luseis who had been recorded as Lushais by the then British administrators.

Prior to their entry in the hills, the Luseis lived in the Chin Hills. They were forced to migrate to the Lushai Hills for two reasons- “constant pressure of the Pawi tribe was perhaps the main cause. This increasing fear of the Pawis brought the whole group to a place called Selesih,” located to be at present Zawlsei. Legends say that there were at least seven chiefs who ruled jointly over the village. One of them PuKawlha, grandson of Sailova from whom the Sailos claim descent, was recognized by the others as the sole ruler over 7,000 houses. It appears that from this place, each clan with their

¹⁰ John Butler, *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam*, Vikash Publishing Co., Delhi, 1978, Reprint, p.79.

¹¹ A.J. Moffatt Mills; *Report on Assam*, Gian Publications, Delhi, Reprint, 1980.

¹² Edward Balfour, *Encyclopaedia Asiatica*, Vol. IV, New Delhi, 1976.

own chiefs dispersed to different places. Secondly, “the decreasing extent of jhuming land under their control could no longer sustain them. They moved westward to find better place for settlement. On coming to the present habitat, the Sailos fought and defeated the other clans and became virtual rulers over the people.”¹³

“Among these Lusei clans, the most prominent was Sailo, known to be the direct descendants of Thangura, a chief said to have existed in 1580.”¹⁴ This group were said to have come to the present hills at the beginning of the eighteenth century. They acquired the name “Lusei” from their ancestor, Luseia. The Luseis were composed of various clans, among which, the Sailo became a household name. They trace their descent from Thangura, one of the six sons of Zahmuaka. The other five sons were Rokhum, Palian, Thangluah, Rivung and Zadeng. It is in connection to this last group of settlers that the present chapter concerns with.

Origin and Early History of Mizos

The Mizo historians believe that all the Mizo groups of tribes once lived somewhere in erstwhile China. This theory of origin draws support from legends, folktales and oral traditions. One of such is an old song of the Hmars which records:

Kansiengna Sinlung ram hmingthang

Kanu ram ka pa ram ngai.

Chawngzil ang kokir thei changsien

*Kanu ram ka pa ram ngai.*¹⁵

Free translation:

My motherland, famous Sinlung

Home of my ancestors

Could it be called back like Chawngzil?

Home of my own ancestors!

The stanza tells us that *Sinlung* had been their birth place, a home they had loved. The song also tells us that they missed the place to the extent of wanting to call back the

¹³ Sangkima, *Mizos: Society and Social Change*, (1890-1947), p. 20.

¹⁴ McCall, *Lushai Chrysalis*, p. 35.

¹⁵ Rochunga Pudaite, *The Education of the Hmar People*, Indo-Burman Pioneer Mission, Sielmat, 1963, p. 21.

bygone days if possible. The note of the song states that they had not left Sinlung voluntarily. There was a genuine and strong reason that forced them to leave the place even though they loved it and was yearning to rewind the time spent in their beloved motherland. Some conjectures regarding the flight was their inability to repulse their enemies, and cruel treatment of their rulers. The song records again:

*Khaw Sinlung ah kawt Siel ang kazuong suoka,
Mi le nel lo tam e, Hriemi hraiah.*¹⁶

Free translation:-

Out of the city of Sinlung,
I jumped out like a Siel
Innumerable were the encounters
With the children of men!

That they left Sinlung because of several encounters with other men is recorded in the song, but the true nature of such encounters that compelled them to move out in groups from so beloved a place is still an obscure conjecture. The Mizo tribes also believe that from central Southeast Asia they had migrated from one place to another in search of land under some leaders. In this way, the Lusei group also reached reached Khampat near Tiddim – Falam in Burma where they stayed for a few generations and left traces of their settlements. While in the Chin Hills, one historian writes that “they established villages and settled down clan-wise and gave clan names to the villages. Accordingly, Luseis settled at Seipui, Khawkawk and Khawrua; Ralte clans at Suaipui and Saihmun, Hauhnar settled at Hauhnartlang, Chuaungo and Chuauhang also lived with Hauhnar and so on.”¹⁷ But the Luseis and other cognate tribes had to leave the place because of the ruthless Pois who continually made unreasonable demands in the name of tributes. Regarding their migration however, there are differences of opinion. B.B. Goswami writes:

The data regarding migration of people from southwest China and south-east Asia to Burma are debatable. Luce puts the entry of the Chin in Burma somewhere between 4th and the middle of 8th century AD. Lehman states that the Chin history begins ‘after AD. 750 with the development of Burman civilization, and of Chin interaction with it.’ The

¹⁶ L. Hranglien Songate, *Hmar Chanchin* (Hmar History), L&R Press, Churachandpur, 1977, p. 11.

¹⁷ Sangkima, *Mizos: Society and Social Change (1890-1947)*, Spectrum, Guwahati, 1992, p. 18.

war between Burma and Shan in 12th century led to the establishment of the fortress city of Kalemyo, at the Chin foothills. All the Lushai /Mizo agree that they lived at one time in Kabaw valley. Thus the Lushai association with the Shan area, as known from the oral traditions, gets support.¹⁸

The Luseis settled and stayed in the Chin Hills for a few generations. They then migrated from Tiddim-Falam-Haka area to the Lushai Hills. Here, they began to organise themselves according to clan or language groups and formed villages among “many other ethnic groups which came under the Old Kuki group as classified by Grierson.”¹⁹ They created such circumstances which compelled both the Old and New Kukis to be “pushed out from the Chin-Lushai country during the 1700s and 1800s.”²⁰ Formation of social groups which began at this time gradually led to other aspirations resulting in the quarrel for leadership.

Social System

The early Mizo society settled in groups according to clans, communities, language and so on. But these led a fearful life both from enemies and wild animals. Later, each of these groups set up units or villages under a leader of their choice and grew in population. Villages were usually located on the ridge of hills as in the case of Northern Chins. These had very significant purpose. Village sites were chosen after taking war strategy into consideration. They were chosen with the advantages of defence and offence as well as the surrounding terrain. Besides, availability of water was an important consideration.

Regarding laws, there were no proper or rigidly set up rules to be followed in society. However, succession and inheritance was a matter where every Lusei was familiar with. In regard to inheritance, “the fundamental rule is that sons alone had the right to inherit property. If the father had several sons, the *fatum* or the youngest son had the rightful claim to patrimony. But in actual practice, the father divides his property equally amongst his sons. The youngest was treated as the legitimate heir because he was to look after his parents in their old age and had to live with them. But the father had the right to disinherit any son. The *hmeifa* and *sawn* also could have

¹⁸ B.B. Goswami, ‘The Mizos in the Context of State Formation’ in Surajit Sinha’s *Tribal Policies and State Systems in Pre-Colonial Eastern and Northeastern India*, K. P. Bagchi & Company, Calcutta, 1989, p. 311.

¹⁹ B.B. Goswami, ‘The Mizos in the Context of State Formation,’ p. 310.

²⁰ Lehman, *The structure of Chin Society*, p. 25.

shares in the inheritance subject to the absence of rightful heirs. The chance of inheritance for daughters and widows was bleak for this happened only when none was available in the male line.”²¹ Earlier, sons fought among themselves over succession. But with the establishment of the Sailo hegemony, customary law requires the youngest son to inherit his father’s chiefship. But with the annexation of the hills by the British, succession came to be favoured in terms of the eldest son.

Women could not inherit their father’s property. Their condition was most degrading. They had no social standing in the patriarchal set up. They were excluded from all important matters of society. Women occupied such a low status that their words were compared to crab’s meat which cannot be considered as meat. They were compared to fences which could be replaced when useless. Their wisdom was considered unable to go beyond the water-hole where they fetch water, they were considered without religion because they adopt the religion of their husbands. They were also compared to unthreatened creepers which, when allowed to grow, becomes unbearable. Their importance lies only in their ability to procreate and as the labour class of the society.

Earlier, the hill tribes obtained all their needs from their jhums. They manufactured clothes from cotton grown in their jhums, they got salt from salt-wells called *chikhur* over which a lot of quarrels take place. They got meat from their domesticated and wild animals from hunts. They manufactured rough pottery enough to suit their immediate needs, but these were modified later when they began to raid other areas beyond their hills. They also made their own agricultural implements like small hoes, sickles and knives. Their weapons consisted of daos, spears, bows and arrows. All these changed when the hill-tribes came in contact with other tribes and areas. Salt became scarce with the growth in population, and other needs prompted means of procuring items of necessities. At this time, trading centres came up in the Chin Hills like Tidim, Falam and Haka, where materials of most basic nature were purchased by the hill tribes through barter. The basic needs of the inhabitants of Lushai Hills like salt, cloth materials and pottery were later acquired from these and other places. These three places were connected through bridle paths even before the British entered the

²¹ Sangkima, *Mizos: Society and Social Change*, p. 32.

Southeast Asian scene. These bridle paths played very important roles in the socio-economic life of the hill-men.

Social institutions included “*Zawlbuk*, *Boi*, and *Sal* besides chieftainship.”²² Of these, *Zawlbuk* was a place where every young man of the village old enough to leave their parents’ bed comes together and spend the night. It was a place of learning the methods of warfare, good manners and a guest house for travellers. The institution of *Boi* existed where anybody in dire need flock to the chief who offered them sanctuary from enemies, food and lodging to the poor and hungry. These *bois* work for him in exchange for the *lal*’s kindness. *Sal* was another socially recognised institution where captives of raids and remnants of war could be kept by anyone including the chief who kept them along with the *bois*. This class of people work for their masters. They could attain freedom in exchange for payment of ransom according to the demands of the master.

The economy of the hill tribes was dependent on slash and burn method of cultivation, a system that required a large area to be cut down annually. These forests take about seven to ten years to regain their natural state or till they were fit again for the purpose, for, young forests did not bear much fruit due to lack of fertility. Therefore, the forested areas nearest the village sites were exhausted within a short period. This was one main reason therefore, for the cause of feuds that arose in the early 18th century. They grew rice, vegetables, cotton, sugarcane, corn, maize and everything they need for sustenance. Cultivation was a way of life where many traditional practices found connections with it.

Just as agriculture was the mainstay of the people, “hunting was one of the most striking features of the hill people. This had two purposes: to be *a ram lama thangchhuah*, a man needed to have many ferocious animals killed. Secondly, they were carried out for the meat of the animals.”²³ Warfare among the hill men were common occurrences mainly for land. But the earlier wars fought did not include whole villages. Both the parties selected the strongest man from their respective sides to represent the whole village, clan or community. The stronger between the two was proclaimed the winner and the winning man’s side was recognised as the more powerful. However, this

²² Sangkima, *Mizos: Society and Social Change*, p. 38-41

²³ Sangkima, *Mizos: Society and Social Change*, p. 44.

system of representative war of duets was put aside with time and the normal way of war came to be followed. Still, with the arrival of firearms in the hills, traditional weapons of war like bows and arrows, spears, dhas/daos or knives were replaced by guns.

Political System

Pre-British hill society under chieftainship was very different from the early life. A chief was a despot and his words were law in his own territory. Everything in the village belonged to him and he could summon anyone to furnish him with anything he wanted. All cases of disputes were settled by him. He was the lord of the land and his people. But the chief was largely dependent on the loyalty of his subjects for the maintenance of his chiefship. A cruel and non-conformist chief finds himself a 'chief without subjects.' Lewin calls such a government as a "democracy tempered by despotism."²⁴ Therefore, every chief desirous of maintaining their chiefship had to rule according to custom. He was given certain dues by his people and was the supreme commander of his fighting forces that include all the young men of the village. He was assisted by a council of *upas* or elders in matters of government.

As time passed, chiefs came to have more than one village. Other villages than his own were put under a headman. It was a customary practice to set up new villages once a chief's son got married and ready to have his own followers. But, with the coming of the British, this power was curtailed by demarcating the boundary of each chief through a sanad. The power and prestige of a chief was largely dependent upon the number of houses or followers in the village. Large villages had above 1000 houses of which we have accounts of Selesih, Seipui, Dungtlang, Tualte and so on. The chief looks after the judicial and executive matters with his *upas*. Sites for jhum lands were allotted to the villagers by the chief with the advice of his *ramhuals*. Satellite villages were looked after by headmen in consultation with the chief.

The villages were sometimes named after chiefs. The house of the chief was the biggest within his chiefdom and was situated in the centre of the village next to the *Zawlbuk* or young men's dormitory. Houses of common men and subjects of the chief were built round the village surrounding the chief's house like a fort. The *Zawlbuk* was

²⁴T. H. Lewin, *Progressive Colloquial Exercises in the Lushai Dialect of Dzo or Kuki language*, Calcutta, Central Press Company, 1874, p. 79

an important institution that served as a place of training for warfare and a place to learn etiquettes and other norms of society considered necessary in a youth's life. The *Zawlbuk* played a quadruplet role of guest house, a centre for meeting, a place of training, and a house where help was always available to the needy. The chief's house being nearby, he could summon the youth at any time, in all cases of emergency.

Prior to the British annexation of the Lushai Hills, "the Chiefs were materially supported by a recognised measure of tribute in paddy from all the *Hnamchawm* (commoners) who also paid dues to the blacksmith, priest and crier, in addition to the dues involved in the loss of a dispute. The Chief also received the left foreleg of every animal killed in the hunt, and the blacksmith received the spine and three ribs."²⁵ The tribute in paddy was known as '*fathang*' whose amount or quantity was not fixed. Normally they were paid according to the demands of the chief. But in due course it was fixed at 6 tins (one tin roughly contains 12 kilos) of unwinowed paddy. Later, it was reduced to 3 tins & c. Another weight that hangs on a man's shoulder was that when a man cultivates land in two chief's ram or land, he will have to pay *fathang* to both chiefs. Paddy given in payment of *fathang* must be delivered at the chief's house. If a man leaves the village of a particular chief or migrates without paying the *fathang* due to the chief, he must pay Rs.2. Such a migration usually took place after harvest (*pawltlak*), so that the migrant could pay his share of *fathang* before leaving. In case the migrant did not pay this due, the chief was entitled to siege his crop. "In fact, a chief often resorted to accusing a person of being a '*dawithiam*' or wizard if he wanted someone to be removed from the village or to be dispossessed of his properties."²⁶ Lewin states that "each house in the village furnishes its share of any expense incurred in feeding or entertaining the *lal* (chief)'s guests."²⁷ Other forms of taxes included *sachhiah*, the left foreleg of any animal killed. Anyone failing to pay this to his chief for any animal he had shot or trapped is liable to a fine of Rs.40. "Among the Lakhers, this fine was usually Rs.10."²⁸ Salt tax known as *Chikhurchhiah* was another tax a commoner had to pay besides *Khuaichhiah* or tax on honey, *Sanghachhiah* or fish tax.

²⁵ McCall, *Lushai Chrysalis*, p. 98.

²⁶ Chatterji N, *The Earlier Mizo Society*, p. 52-53.

²⁷ Lewin, T.H, *The Hill Tracts of Chittagong and the Dwellers Therein*, p. 141.

²⁸ Thasia T; 'The System of Administration in South Mizoram'; Sangkima (ed) *A Modern History of Mizoram*, Spectrum publications, Guwahati, 2004, p. 120.

The *Thirdengchhiah* was given to the blacksmith as he had little time to go hunting as all his time was concentrated in making or repairing various tools for the whole village. "When a Lakher pig delivers a litter of piglets, one piglet was to be given to the chief as his due."²⁹ The chief collected additional quantities of paddy from *ramhual* and *zalen* (those men of possession in the village, who were exempted from paddy tax). Chiefs also demanded three days' compulsory labour to weed their jhums and the people of the village were obliged to construct his house, collection of building materials such as timber, bamboos, and cane etc., included. Here, it may be mentioned that the *thirdeng*, *ramhual*, *zalen*, *tlangau* were free from the compulsory labour demanded from the people. (They were also free from the Impressed Labour introduced when the land was annexed to the British Empire). After the completion of the house, it became his sole house with no consideration of whose free labour had been manipulated. This was called *Thachhiah* or labour tax.

Zawlbuks in the villages were also constructed by the command of chiefs through the free labour of the villagers, who were required to collect building materials such as bamboo and timber from the forest free of cost."³⁰ This practice was prevalent only among the northern chiefs but among those southern chiefs, it was not done before the 1871-72 expedition."³¹ With the beginning of colonial rule, money economy was introduced and taxes usually paid in kind came to be replaced by cash as far as applicable.

Elementary principle of hierarchy was introduced and the concept of privileged and non-privileged came into existence. But commoners also had kinship links with chiefs. Social demarcation among the chief, *zalen*, and commoners or the privileged and non-privileged was thin. Kinship relationship often filtered down to the commoners."³² However, the purity of chiefly blood was traced by descent. A chief having roots or connections from another prestigious former chief was considered a good enough reason to establish superiority. The privileged *zalens* also tend to draw lines of kinship with the chiefs.

²⁹ Thasia T, 'The System of Administration in South Mizoram,' p. 120.

³⁰ Chatterji N, *The Earlier Mizo Society*, p. 49.

³¹ Sangkima, *Mizos: Society and Social Change*, p. 45.

³² N.E. Parry, *The Lakhers*, p. 232.

Compared to the early eighteenth century scene of political instability in the Lushai Hills, the later part of the same century witnessed changes in the establishment of hereditary chieftainship that continued to the nineteenth century. The Sailo chiefly clan became the paramount power. Their position was strengthened through intermarriage, marriage with royal families and so on. The chiefs came to have assistants or council members known as 'Upa' (elders) who were appointed by the chiefs themselves mostly from the Chawngthu clan. *Upas* were also appointed from kith and kin. Another criterion for the appointment of *Upas* was their knowledge of custom and tradition. Village criers (*tlangau*) were appointed to relay messages of importance in the whole village. There were a class of agricultural advisors known as *ramhuals* and another class called *zalen* (kinsmen of the chief). A village blacksmith (*thirdeng*) was another important member who was responsible for the manufacture of daily tools needed in the economic process of the hill men. A priest or *puithiam* occupied a high place of honour. He performs special functions for the chief, and made clay figurines for the *sakhua* sacrificial ceremonies. During village feasts, these priests were first served. Thus, chieftainship became a more well-defined institution in the social life of the hill people.

The chiefly power of the Sailo clan grew with time and by early nineteenth century, their paramount power was unquestioned. B. B. Goswami writes:

The Sailo privilege was so dominant that all the earlier British officers who came in contact with the Mizos suggested the policy of reconciliation with the chiefs. His power for raids and warfare depended upon grain storage, kin relation, strong and brave following, who would abide by his orders even during his absence from his realm.³³

Conditions of society thus forced the Sailo chiefs to place a second man in charge of their *khawpers* or branched villages while they engage themselves in war and raids. While the chiefs were still swathed in their glory and prestige, the British occupation in the hills in 1889-90 spelt the beginning of their loss of power. The British introduced land settlement in 1898-99 which diminished their importance. The introduction of circle administration in 1901-02 was introduced to maintain vigilance in the working of chiefs. This intrusion on the working of the chiefs greatly told on the chiefs. Long years

³³ B.B. Goswami, 'The Mizos in the Context of State Formation,' p. 321.

of discontent among the villagers resulted in complaints to the white administrators who obviously were more powerful than their own chiefs. The government assured and professed their commitment to maintain chiefship while curtailing much of the chiefs' political rights. The British government's plan was to run the administration of the hills through the chiefs. Shakespear, the mastermind behind all these recommended educating the sons of chiefs not so much for their welfare, but to make them educated enough to suit their plans. At the same time, he opposed the chiefs' power regarding creation of new villages (*khawper*) whenever the sons of chiefs were in a position to have or run their own. He writes:

Every chief has his boundaries now and I should not subdivide the land further where a chief had sons, he may, if he likes, give them hamlets within his boundaries, but his responsibility for the collection of house tax and the carrying out of orders should not thereby be diminished.³⁴

Condition of Society in pre-British Lushai Hills

With the establishment of chieftainship, the society changed. "The first chief, Zahmuaka was a great chief who protected and fought for his kinsmen. He had seven sons with his wife Lawileri, who was famous for her beauty. The sons were Zadeng, Palian, Thangluah, Thangura, Rivung and Rokhuma. The seventh died in infancy. Different Mizo tribes originated from the six sons of Zahmuaka. All of them set up villages and had their own followers. Of them, Thangura had two sons-Chawnglule and Thangmanga. The latter begot Sailova, the progenitor of the present Sailos."³⁵

Shakespear traces the movement of the six sons of Zahmuaka within the hills. When there was scarcity of jhumland, each of these sons moved away from their settlements in search of better locations. The northern part of the country being occupied by Sukhte, Paihte and Thado tribes who were firmly established under regular chiefs were no match for the small group of families who were themselves still in the process of settlement. Therefore, the Luseis left them to themselves for the present and moved elsewhere.

The Rokhum, the eldest branch passed through the hills occupied by the Luseis at that time, some of their descendants were said to be found in the Tipperah-Sylhet

³⁴ Shakespear in Reids' *The Structure of Chin Society*, p. 43.

³⁵ Sangkima, *Mizos: Society and Social Change*, p. 35.

border. The Zadeng followed the Rokhum and passing through Champhai, moved westwards and about 1830 ruled some 1,000 houses divided into four villages situated near the banks of the Tlawng and Dallesari river, round the Darlung peak. In alliance with Sailo chiefs of Lallul's family, they attacked and defeated successively the Hualngo (a Lushei family settled between Tyao and Manipur rivers) and the Palians, who were their allies against the Hualngo. Subsequently, the Zadeng quarrelled with Mangpura, then the most powerful Sailo chief, who, dying about that time, bequeathed the feud to his relatives, one of whom, Vutaia, prosecuted with such vigour that the Zadeng, in spite of an alliance with the Manipuri rajah who, however, proved but a broken reed-had to flee southwards, and their last independent village, numbering only 100 houses, broke up on the death of the chief, which occurred at Chengpui, near Lungleh, about 1857. The Zadeng chiefs were reported to have been cruel and arbitrary rulers, whose defeat was not regretted even by their own followers. Their descendants have retained these qualities, and in spite of much assistance, have failed to regain their position in the world.

“The Thangluah and Rivung took a more southerly course. The latter penetrated into what was then the Chittagong Hill tracts, where the chief named Vanhnuaithanga had a very large village on the Longteroi Hill, between the Chengri and Kassalong rivers. He died about 1850, and shortly after his death the village was destroyed by Vutaia. The remnant of the Rivungs fled to Hill Tipperah where Liantlura, a great grandson of Vanhnuaithanga, had a village up till a few years before the British occupied the hills.”³⁶ Shakespear records that there was one small hamlet under a Rivung chief in the Aizawl sub-division of the Lushai Hills by the time the British overtook the area.

“The Thangluah penetrated as far as Demagiri and Barkhul, where Rothangpuia became known to the British first as a foe, and then as a faithful ally. His son Lalhheva, who did not want to be under the control of the British, moved his village beyond the British territory in spite of the warning that government could on no account protect him if he did so. His adamant action got him an attack by Hausata, a Chin chief, where his village was totally destroyed by the Chins, many persons killed and more taken captive. All the mithan were driven off and the chief escaped with little more than

³⁶ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 3.

the one cloth he was wearing. Thus the once prosperous Thangluah clan was represented by only a few poverty-stricken hamlets round Demagiri.”

Shakespear continues that “the Palian family followed the same route as the Zadeng among whom the best known chiefs were Sibuta and Lalsuktla. Sibuta was said to have thrown off the Tipperah yoke with 25,000 houses. He died close to izawl, and his memorial stone is at the first stage on the Aizawl-Lunglei road. It is extremely doubtful whether he ever was really subject to Tipperah, though it is certain that all these Lushai clans had dealing with the Tiperrah Rajahs and feared them greatly.”

“In 1841, Captain Blackwood captured Lalsuktla, a great grand-son of Sibuta. Purbura is said to have been a powerful Pallian chief and at one time to have received tribute from almost all his contemporary Thangur chiefs. He had a large village, said to contain 3,000 houses, on the Dunglei, whence he moved as far westwards as Pukzing, where his village was destroyed by a combined force of Zadeng, Sailo and Chuckmas. This attack took place somewhere about 1830. Purbura rebuilt his village, but died soon after, and his descendants were attacked frequently by the chiefs of the Rolura branch of the Sailo family, and now only two small hamlets, close to Aizawl, remain to remind us of this once powerful clan.”³⁷

“The Thangur moved to the western part of the district where the hills “appeared to have been inhabited by small communities formed largely of blood relations and probably each at feud with its neighbours.”³⁸ Their movement into that part of the hills might have been prompted by the thought of establishing control of those feuding tribes. This gave birth to endless feuds resulting in war. Smaller tribes within the hills were thus attacked, raided and forced to feel the power of the Sailo strength. Thus, the Raltes, the Hmars, the Chhakchhuaks, the Hualngos, Hualhangs, Ngentes, Vaiphei, the Khiangtes, a few Thadous were defeated and subjugated. Besides conquering weaker communities, their own neighbours and subjugating them, the Luseis fought among themselves. McCall states that “the pressure on the eastern Mizo chiefs was severe from the Chin Hills chiefs such as the Suktes. This continuous pressure resulted in incessant hostilities among the Mizo chiefs, killing their own

³⁷Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 5.

³⁸ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 3.

people.”³⁹ They fought with the Palians, the Rokhum and defeated them. The Rivung chief was given shelter in Tipperah. “In 1830, a Zadeng chief got support of the Chakmas of Chittagong hills as well as Sailos to defeat Hualngo tribe of Burma.”⁴⁰ But later, the Zadeng chiefs were defeated by the Sailo chief Mangpura in 1857. McCall notes, “The Sailos to gain unchallenged paramouncy in the north Lushai hills they ultimately have to vanquish in battle, their remaining kinsmen.”⁴¹

“Having vanquished all the tribes who had no power of cohesion, the Sailos absorbed the greater part of these who later formed the majority of their subjects. But some of them fled north and west into Manipur, Silchar, Sylhet and Tipperah where they were known as Kukis and where their appearance caused much trouble, as, from the very nature of the cause of their migration, much ill-feeling existed between them and the triumphant Lushais. When the Thangur had firmly established themselves, and the capable Sailo chiefs have come to the front, they felt equal to fighting the Thado clans, which were as highly organised as themselves. The Sailo chiefs triumphed, and hence the eruption of the New Kukis, alias Thados, and cognate clans, into Silchar about 1848, “the Sailo paramouncy henceforth, became unchallenged.”⁴²

With the assumption of leadership by Lallula in about 1810, the Sailo hegemony grew. Their importance increased with the number of villages they could control. Historians mention extraordinary villages like “Dungtlang with three thousand houses, Selesih with seven thousand houses with its seven chiefs, and Tualte with one thousand houses.”⁴³ By and by, chieftainship was made hereditary. The Sailo clan now adopted an air of superiority as a family of chiefs. Marriages took place only with families with royal or blue blood to keep themselves pure. The Sailo chiefs also set up marriage alliances with other villages than their own, to create influence in their places and make their influence felt in others.

The Sailo incursions began in 1780, and by 1810, they had strongly consolidated their position. They had become so powerful that one of their descendants went as far as

³⁹ B.B. Goswami, ‘The Mizos in the Context of State Formation,’ p. 317.

⁴⁰ McCall, *Lushai Chrysalis*, p. 37.

⁴¹ McCall, *Lushai Chrysalis*, p. 36.

⁴² Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 4-5.

⁴³ B. Lalthangliana, *A Brief History and Culture of Mizo*, Gilsom Offset Press, Aizawl, 2013, pp. 35-38.

making territorial claims even up to the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Another chief also openly tried to lay claims on the Chengri Valley. Reid writes:

While Zarok ruled a separate village, he laid claim to the land of Chengri Valley people, and informed them that in as much as they were not tributary either to the British Government or to the Maharaja of Tipperah, he intended to assert his rights to their lands as an elephant hunting ground.⁴⁴

There were also other chiefs not of the Sailo bloodline, but these were hardly visible in the face of the already well-recognised chiefly clan. Very few *hnamchawm* or common men became chiefs or headmen. But chiefs other than Sailos were often in control of smaller communities who were considered of no great importance. They were also merely headmen acting on behalf of the Sailo chiefs and had no authority of their own. Sometimes, these petty chieftains fall back in the face of the strong and well-organised Sailos due to difference of opinion among them. For instance, among colonial Lakhers, “commoner chiefs who have been given certain villages in the hills by the Government never command the same respect as a hereditary chief, as in their case, the essentials of the relationship between chief and people is lacking.”⁴⁵ Traditional Sailo chiefs had become the greatest influence of the time.

Conquered communities were brought and made to settle in their villages of theirs conquerors to add to their population and strength. Besides subjugation and making subjects of conquered tribes, the Sailo chiefs also absorbed the weaker clans and those who could not stand being subjected to, escaped from the hills and migrated to other places. Thus we find a number of them in the plains of Cachar, Manipur, the North Cachar Hills and Tripura. The larger number forcefully absorbed remained and added to the Sailo power and prestige. They were incorporated into the Lusei, lost their clan identity, language, religion, customary rituals and culture. They adopted the culture of their conquerors and forgot their own. Besides the clans they absorbed, the Luseis influenced many others. Shakespear and the 1901 census showed that most of the people have forgotten their clan and lineage ancestry.

⁴⁴ B.R. Ambedkar, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam 1883-1941*, Assam Government Press, 1942, p. 8.

⁴⁵ N.E. Parry, *The Lakhers*, Tribal Institute Research Institute, Aizawl, 1976, p. 250.

Some clans although much influenced but not fully absorbed tried to maintain their identity in the midst of absorption. The inclination to become chiefs was visible in other areas. Some of these were the Fanai and Ralte. Of the Fanai, Shakespear writes:

The chiefs trace their pedigree back six generations, to a man called Fanai, who lived among the Zahaos, to the east of the Tyao. His great grandson Roreiluova, was a slave, or at least a dependent, of a Zahao chief, and was sent with 70 households to form a village at Bawlte, near Champhai, in Lushai territory, with the intention no doubt, of enlarging the Zahao borders, but Roreiluova entered into peaceful relations with the Lushai chiefs, and gradually severed his connection with the Zahaos, and moving southwest occupied successively various sites to the west and northwest of Lunglei, between the Lushai and Chin villages, maintaining his position with considerable diplomatic skill, often acting as intermediary between his powerful neighbours. He died at Konglung early in the nineteenth century, having attained such a position that his sons were at once recognised as chief.⁴⁶

About the Ralte clan, Shakespear gives an account of how two clans named after two brothers came into prominence as chiefs and the most powerful among their descendant Mangkhaia managed to rule up to early 19th century till he was killed by a Lusei chief. They had to remain vassals of the Sailo chiefs till British occupation of the hills. Yet some clans desirous of attaining leadership joined hands with others but for some reasons they detach themselves and maintained the spirit to fight their oppressors and continued to do so. For instance, Lehman writes:

The first Vuite village is said to have been at Chimnuai, near Tiddim....Being attacked by the Sokte and Falam clans, they joined the Thangur chiefs, but were ill-treated and fled to the neighbourhood and waged war with their oppressors till the establishment of our rule.⁴⁷

Thus the Sailo authority grew and spread. By the time the British occupied the area, the Sailo influence came to be evident from the areas under their control. Their domain spread all over the Lushai Hills except in the south where the Poi/Shendu tribe were unconquerable. They were divided into:

Western Sailo chiefs- the villages ruled by the descendants of Suakpuilal who came to terms with the British.

⁴⁶ Shakespear, *The Lushei-Kuki Clans*, p. 133.

⁴⁷ Lehman, *The Structure of Chin Society*, p. 143.

Eastern Sailo chiefs- the villages, ruled by the descendants of Vanhnuailiana who were paying tributes to the British and supplying impressed labour when called for.

Howlong chiefs- the villages in South-west of Mizoram who came to terms with the British for having no problem of boundary (hills and plains).

The Kairuma Sailo chief of villages ruled by the descendants of Vuta who were more united and stable.⁴⁸

Colonial penetration into the Lushai Hills was an event heralded by the Sailo incursions into British territories which began from 1780. After plundering, raiding, and ravaging their neighbours within the country, the Luseis turned their attention towards British territories where they ravaged lands and people, took loots and captives to work in their jhums. In a way, their political aspirations turned to economic utility when they began to substitute labour created by excessive raids and thereby death in large numbers.

The Lusei economy was based on slash and burn method of cultivation that required a lot of labour. But the social background of the eighteenth century did not help jhum cultivation; rather, it diminished the human resource. In the process of inter-tribal and inter-clan warfare brought about by many factors, the major population of males engaged in warfare and raids lost their lives. Raids and wars resulted in the loss of working members like fathers, uncles, husbands, brothers, and sons. Works done side by side with the male folk were now left to the women folk alone. Jhum products diminished due to lack of labour. Large families with a good number of members found it more difficult when a single woman had to labour to feed the lot. Even the remaining male members had to act as sentries while women worked in the jhums to protect them from sudden attacks by enemies and raiders.

Autumn and winter were the peak seasons of the year when labour in the jhums were most required in gathering harvest, storage and so on. But this same period was also given to raiding expeditions which sometimes led on to spring. Spring spells the beginning of the agricultural activities like cutting jhum fields, clearing and preparing the ground for sowing. But in the event of these raids and forays of the men folk, women were left alone to fend for their families. The need for labour became very pronounced during these seasons with the men folk unavailable.

⁴⁸ B.B. Goswami, 'The Mizos in the Context of State Formation', p. 320.

At this juncture, the possibility of labour substitution was discovered in the form of captives taken in the various raids. Raids for revenge or other political reasons now took a new turn—the hunt for captives to fill up the gaps created by loss of labour. With this new discovery, raids and plunder became more pronounced and frequent. Women and children came to be the main targets of capture. All captives captured were each given a share of work in accordance with their capacity. Certain reasons such as: “adaptability to new environment, less likely attempts of escape, children’s inclination to settle down wherever they were taken, the more obedient disposition of women and children were taken into consideration when capturing them.”⁴⁹ The captives were found so handy in their jhums that Lusei incursions became very frequent. Besides the labour acquired from the captives of plain areas, the Luseis also benefitted from them in other ways. They learnt certain things like making pottery, iron work and manufacture of gun-powder.

When the Luseis have exhausted the areas immediately around them, they turned their attention to the foothills of their lands under the jurisdiction of the British government. Historians offer many reasons for the Lusei attention towards the plain areas. The British introduction of tea-plantation at the immediate foothills of their land was one reason that prompted their incursion as it destroyed their hunting grounds. Secondly, the Luseis have come in contact with merchants/businessmen of the plain areas who often cheated them in the course of their exchanges. These incensed the simple hill folk and attacked their settlements to take revenge. This may offer a good explanation for the attacks on the tea-estates like Monierkhal, Darniarkhal, Chundraipara, Adumpore and so on. But captives taken during the raids give an entirely different story regarding the raids. During all these raiding expeditions, the Luseis fought with traditional weapons. Lewin states that “the Luseis did not possess firearms at that time.”⁵⁰ Their weapons were daos, spears, bows and arrows. But these frequent incursions so unnerved their victims that Mackenzie reports: “In the year 1777 the ‘chief of Chittagong’ whose area was ceded to the British by Mir Kasim in 1760 applied for a detachment of sepoy to protect the inhabitants against the incursions of the

⁴⁹ See Guite, ‘Civilisation and its malcontents: The Politics of Kuki raids in nineteenth century Northeast India,’ *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, <http://ier.sagepub.com/>, 48, (3) (2011): 339-76, pp. 366-69.

⁵⁰ Lewin, *Wild Races of Southeast Asia*, W. H. Allen, London, 1870, p. 56.

Mizos.”⁵¹ The raids and forages were usually conducted to take captives for reasons stated above.

During the nineteenth century, the tribal warfare of the Sailo clans continued unabated and brought them in contact with the British. The Indian native feudatory states like the Chakma raj or Rangamati were useful instruments that helped the British to punish the Luseis by acting as a buffer state sometimes and as an intermediary. For instance, the Raja of Tipperah was asked to help the British in capturing Lalchokla who had recently raided Sylhet and carried 20 heads and 6 captives that led to the expedition of Blackwood in 1844. Sylhet, Cachar, Manipur, and Chittagong areas became infested with the continuous raids of the Luseis which necessitated more expeditions like - Lister’s expedition of 1949/50, Nuthall’s expedition of 1869, two column expeditions of 1871-72, Chin-Lushai Expedition of 1889-90, and expedition against the chief Kairuma in 1895-96. Thus every winter saw the Luseis carrying away a good number of captives, and every summer resulted in British expeditions into the hills until they occupied the hills for good.

The condition of society in pre-colonial Lushai Hills and the circumstances leading to the final annexation of the district is explained by B. B. Goswami who states that:

The Mizos cared little about their promises to the British after a punitive expedition. They persisted in their interest in extending their territorial authority.

The Mizo chiefs needed slaves to work for them and the slaves could be procured from the territory of another chief or from the area controlled by the British. So, they even attacked the plains area and took captives. Lister’s expedition could release 400 captives as slaves. But as many chiefs treated captives well, the British found difficulty in returning them. There used to be a gap between a Mizo raid and the British expedition. And when the British used to reach the chief’s village they observe that the slaves were well-settled and even got married. The captives themselves were reluctant to leave the Mizo village. This was true even when Mary Winchester, daughter of a British tea planter who was captured by Mizo raiders on 23rd January 1871, was released after two column expedition of 1871-72 organised in collaboration with the Manipur raja’s contingent.

⁵¹ Mackenzie, *The Northeast Frontier*, 1979, Mittal, Delhi, p. 332.

The Mizo chiefs' sense of boundary was not fixed. It was in a state of flux and every chief used to divide his loosely defended area of control among his sons.

The chiefs themselves used to fight against each other and raids were organised for they were not very clear about their own 'realm'. Mackenzie lucidly gives out the picture of the pre-British time. He writes: "Even the chiefs claim no property in the land or in the forests. Each claims the men of his tribe wherever they wander, or in whatever part of the country they may settle for the time to jhoom. Generally speaking, the Jhoomeas of each clan confine themselves within certain rough limits, but there is no real local jurisdiction vesting in any of the chiefs. Selection of new swidden plots and claims for them were disputed. Thus fighting among the Mizo chiefs were common. In January 1892 the political officials even sat together to settle territorial quarrels relating to jhumland between Sailo and Howlong chiefs. The territories were in Assam and erstwhile Bengal. In 1876-77 Mackenzie writes, 'news was received that fighting has broken out between Khalgom, and the eastern Lushais under Poiboi. The quarrel is said to have originated through Khalgom having joomed land to which Poiboi laid claim. Moreover, shifting cultivation required fertile land. The British knowing this economic weakness, whenever they occupied and attacked a Mizo village, invariably burnt the stores of grain.

Raids and war made by the chiefs were also a part of retaliation against their enemies. They regarded plunder as lawful and commendable. For that matter, the British were also considered as white chiefs having more land and weapons. Edgar in 1871 could not foresee that for Sukpilal and for other chiefs of boundary from the borders of Manipur to Hill Tipperah were 'incomprehensible.

Records also show that raids by Mizo chiefs were caused because of harassment and cheating by traders through the practise of barter for salt. Cutting of forest products and clearing of jungles also created disputes.⁵²

Conclusion

Mizos (Mi-people, Zo-hills) traced their origin to central Southeast Asia from where they migrated to the Chin Hills in Burma due to encounters with other tribes. They set up units or villages and lived in groups according to their clans under the leadership of able persons. They lived in the Chin Hills for a few centuries but had to move to the Lushai Hills mainly due to pressure from the *Pois*. They also fought with the *Suktes*

⁵² B.B. Goswami, 'The Mizos in the Context of State Formation', pp. 316-317.

who gave them a hard time. However, the main cause of migration was the occurrence of a great famine in Shan. Coming to the Lushai Hills, the Lusei clans under the six sons of Zahmuaka sought their respective settlements. They fought against the weaker communities in the hills and set up strong locations. Among them, the Sailo clan emerged the most successful. Under the leadership of Lallula and sons, almost the entire hills came to be ruled by the Sailos. Satellite villages came into existence where chiefs appointed headmen to keep a watch on them on their behalf. Social hierarchy took birth. The office of chiefs came to be more well-defined with his advisors and other important offices in the village.

Village planning in the Lushai Hills came to be specific. *Zawlbuks* were built in the centre of the village with the chief's house near it. The subjects of the chief, commoners and his *bois* built their houses around the village like a fort. The concept of privileged and non-privileged took birth. The chief was bestowed with many rights and privileges. Customary dues to chiefs were more pronounced failing which a law-breaker had to pay fixed amount of fines. Bestowed with much power, the Sailo chiefs held supreme power.

During the latter part of the 18th and early 19th centuries, the Luseis attacked, raided and plundered British territories from where they took captives back to their land to work for them. These captives were used to substitute the loss of labour incurred in inter-tribal wars. They were made to work in the jhum fields while they engaged themselves in raids and hunts. Social factors in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries transformed the Lusei communities from jhumeas to raiders. Further, economic needs acted as a catalyst in bringing about political change as the excessive raids brought them in contact with the British which sent many expeditions to subdue the Luseis and free the captives they had carried off. Thus, the British occupied the Lushai Hills in 1871-72 and changed the face of the hills.