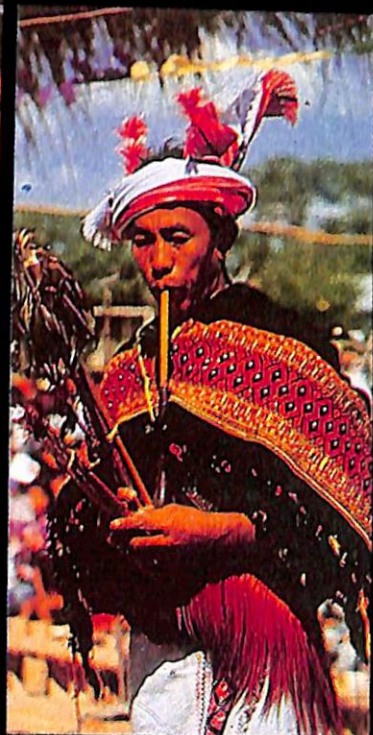
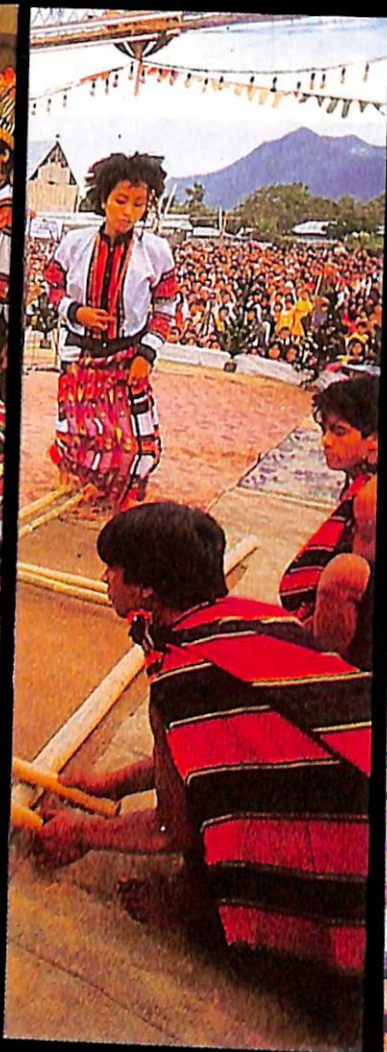


Mizo Chiefs and The Chieftdom

Suhas Chatterjee



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PREFACE

The aim of writing this book is to give the reader a correct picture about the chiefship and also about the Mizo chiefs who lived in India and Burma and also in Bangladesh. Majority of the Mizos, however, live in India and Bangladesh. The Mizos of Manipur and Chin Hills (Burma) prefer the term *Zomi* (*Zoumi*) to identify their ethnicity. To them the word *Mizo* is a grammatically wrong word. They say that *Mi* (man) is the noun and *Zo* (hill) is the adjective. So, how could a noun come before an adjective? Probably, they are right. But naming of individual or tribe does not necessarily follow the rules of grammar. *Mizo* has become a quite familiar name by now and any attempt to change it would lead to confusion. *Mizo* is the generic name of the hill men living in Mizo Hills, Chin Hills (Burma), south-east of Manipur, Jampui Hills in Tripura, Arakan Hills (Burma) and Chittagong Hill Tracts (Bangladesh). Thus the Mizos, a great race of the Tibeto-Burman Mongolian stock, live in the south-eastern range of the great Himalayan region. They have their own distinct ethnic culture. There are different subtribes, clans and subclans amongst them.

Formerly, they were head-hunting savages following animistic rituals. They lived under the gerontocratic order of the society where the chief was all in all. He was the pillar of the society and everything revolved around his personality. In the Mizo pantheon he was the father who regulated the well-being of his *quom*. It is absolutely impossible to know the Mizo gerontocracy without having a clear idea about the chiefship. From the historical point of view it is all the more necessary to know the achievements of all the chiefs, not merely the big ones. An attempt has been made in this work to enlighten the scholars about the activities of the chiefs, big and small.

Mizo society is now a modern society and has very little in common with the Mizo society in the past. Yet to understand the spirit of the Mizo social behaviour one must have a clear idea about the chiefdom. The Mizos, like all other people of the north-east, are very much proud of their ethnic past and their past institutions. In that sense the biography of the chiefs constitutes the national biography of Mizoram.

In the book I have portrayed the character of the chiefs according to their activities in public life and for this I had to depend mainly upon the government records. The chiefs frequently came in contact with the British subjects or sometimes with the British officers. The officers recorded the events in their official files. They alone, are the only authentic sources. There are other accounts, the legends, folklores and the stories narrated by the village bards. There are also literary sources. But all other sources, other than the government records, are not at all dependable. I have consulted them also, and in the light of all these materials attempted to interpret the various aspects of the chiefdom. In a tribal society the chiefs and the chiefdom are closely interrelated. That is why I have taken the pains to analyse in detail the different aspects of the chieftainship. From the view of a social scientist that is very important as that leads us to construct the socio-economic history of the Mizos of the past century and also of the first half of the present century.

Anybody, scholar or otherwise, interested in the social history of Mizoram will find in this handbook valuable information.

Suhas Chatterjee

1

THE STATUS AND ECONOMY OF THE CHIEFS

*The glories of our blood and state
Are shadows, not substantial things.
There is no armour against fate.
Death lays his icy hand on kings.
Sceptre and crown
Must tumble down
And in the dust be equal made
With the poor crooked scythe and spade.*

—James Shirly

The Mizos lived under the gerontocracy where chiefs had a pre-eminent position. The chief was the father and protector of the Mizo society. The Mizos were a migratory tribe and the various clans and subclans moved from one place to another in search of subsistence, that is, Jhum land, along with the chiefs. They got settled in places which were selected by the chiefs. The chiefs created the boundary pillars to enforce their jurisdictions. The land (*ram*) belonged to the chief who was the absolute ruler of his *ram*. He was, however, under the nominal political jurisdiction of the bigger chiefs. The Rajas of Manipur, Tripura and Burma were such very big chiefs. After the annexation of the 'Chin Lushai Country' (Mizoram and Chin Hills) into the British dominion, the Superintendents of Lushai Hills and Chin Hills were the supreme chiefs in the chieftdom. According to the provision of the Assam Chiefship Act, the chiefs derived their authority from the Superintendent. He could make and unmake the chiefs. When the Lushai Hills were incorporated into British dominion there were only 60 chiefs and of them about a dozen were very powerful, and the first British Superintendent, Captain J. Shakespear devised a new system of decentralization of political power. So, he created more and more chiefs with the aim of reducing the influence of the powerful chiefs. The number of chiefs gradually got increased to about 200 when the English left the country. The Mizo chiefs who rose up in rebellion again and again in the 19th century were

subsequently tamed as their wings were clipped. They realized that their prosperous existence depended upon their loyalty to the Superintendent. So, they became very loyal to the British Raj.

The chiefs before and after the annexation had been supreme in the gerontocratic social order of the Mizo society. They ruled their chieftaindoms with the aid and advice of certain customary officials. As the Lushai Hills and Chin Hills were excluded from the Assam and Burma legislatures, the effective law that regulated the governance of the Mizo-Chin tribes had been the Mizo-Chin customary law. The chiefs very effectively handled the customary law of the country and rarely the Superintendent had to interfere in the affairs of the administration. The Superintendent was, however, a military officer, always had the halo of power and the Mizos knew very well how dangerous it was to go against him. The chiefs, whenever in difficulty, sought the help of the Superintendent.

During the first three decades of the present century the chiefs in Lushai Hills did not face any challenge to their authority. During the early part of the war years (1941-43) the chiefs were supreme in the domain of administration but the chieftaindom received a severe jolt at the close of the war years. The missionary education which so long had its use only in the church and her fraternity now found larger scope of employment in the war efforts and in the changes of economy in consequence of the war. The new elites who had cash in their hands to purchase the comforts of life and who had the education but not the pedigree, rose in revolt against the chieftaindom. The aim of the Mizo Union, the first political party in Mizoram, was the abolition of the chieftainship. The Chins of Chin Hills (Burma) and Kukies (Manipur) and Mizos of Tripura were, however, less assertive. The Assam Lushai Hills District (Acquisition of Chief's Right) Act, 1954 took away all the rights of the 259 chiefs of Mizoram. Their powers were handed over to the District Council. Next year 50 chiefs of Pawi Lakher region surrendered their rights to the Pawi Lakher Regional Council.

Legend and History

Thomas Herbert Lewin, an authority on the Lushais has stated in his work, *A Fly On The Wheel*, that original chief of the Sailo clan was Tlandrokpa. He married the *Pathian's* (God's) daughter. He was very brave and just. He even dared to fight against *Pathian* for justice.

Notwithstanding the legend, it must be admitted that the

chieftainship is a very old institution which regulated the mode of Mizo life till the other day. The Mizos entered India through Burma. They are latecomers compared to Kukies. The Kukies also came from Burma. The Kuki-Mizo chieftainships contain many things in common. The Mizo chieftainship has the basic elements of the prevalent chieftainship of the allied clans in Burma. The chief is the head of the society and all in all in matters of tribal administration and economy. Whatever might be the legendary implications of the divinity of the first chief's wife (daughter of God) the chiefs in Chin Hills and Mizoram ruled following the Divine Right theory. The body of the chief including those of his wife and children were sacred and any offence to desecrate their bodies was regarded as high treason. The chief could marry only the chief's daughter. Even in the strict traditional view God was also a chief and the paradise was also a tribal village. The chief's children were entitled to marry only the chief's children. This system was adopted to continue the line of divinity.

According to John Shakespear, (*Lushai Kuki Clan*) Siboota was a very powerful chief who was independent of the political control of the Raja of Tripura. It is very difficult to ascertain the time of Siboota, but Siboota's descendant was Lalchukla, the famous *Paite* chief who had been a member of the Durbar of Tripura Raja. The British authorities of Sylhet came in contact with him for the first time in 1844. Lalchukla was captured by Captain Blackwood and was imprisoned. The trial of Lalchukla evoked keen interest in the Anglo-Bengali societies in Bengal of the time as the prosecution received wide publicity. The marriage relationship of Lalchukla's clan with the veteran Western Lushai chief of Lalulla Sailo (vide the geneology of Lalchukla clearly indicates that the distinctions between the Mizos and Kukies were razor thin.

Sir John Edgar in his famous Report¹ has pointed out that Lalulla was the first Sailo chief to live in Mizoram. He is more or less correct. It is true that the Sailos entered Mizo Hills at least half a century before Lalulla but they became dominant with the rise of Lalul. Lalul assumed his predominance in 1840 according to Edgar. Edgar, whom the Lushais considered to be the most powerful 'white chief' in the world, was the Deputy Commissioner, Cachar. He helped Lalul to rise. As Edgar later on became the Chief Secretary of Bengal and personally regulated the Lushai policy of the British Government, the Sailos of Lalulla's clan became very dominant.

1. A. Mackenzie, *North East Frontier of Bengal*.

The Lushais of Eastern clan considered Sukpial, the grandson of Lalulla as a 'spent' force but Edgar bolstered him up and made treaty with him. Crafty Sukpial, aware of the military power of the English, maintained good relationship with the British authorities of Cachar but his sons had not that far-sightedness. Moreover, the Lushai policy of the government underwent drastic change after the demise of Edgar in service. Annexation of 'Chin Lushai country' became imminent after the annexation of Upper Burma. Major R.B. McCabe, was sent to Aizawl (1891). He forced the disintegration of the house of Sukpial so assiduously built up by Edgar and his Indian assistant Hari Charan Sharma.

With the collapse of the house of Sukpial (most of his sons were killed or deported) the Mizo chieftdom lost its pristine glory and was reduced to a petty Zamindar of Bengal at the hands of John Shakespear, the first Superintendent of Lushai Hills after the annexation of Lushai Hills.

Economy of the Chieftdom

India is one of the Third World countries and its economy under the British rule was characterized by underdevelopment. Mizoram then an integral part of Assam's administration like all other hill districts was an economically backward area. Its backward status was a recognized fact and the Government of India Act 1919, and Government of India Act 1935 accepted it. To the English the Mizos were a savage head-hunting race fighting among themselves for nothing and they needed no economic development except, however, certain subsidies whenever necessary to overcome natural calamities. The economy was allowed to drift. The Mizos had a gerontocratic social order under the chiefs and the chieftdom followed the course of a controlled economy. According to the British officers there was no economics worth the name among the tribals before the annexation of the tribal areas into the British dominion. But this view is not accepted by all. David Scott had praised the economic system of the Ahom rulers and H.N.C. Stevenson laboriously collected data to analyse the economy of the Chin tribe, an analogous Mizo tribe of Upper Burma. Stevenson is clearly of the opinion that the Chins had a clear conception of the basic nature of economics. It was subsistence economy and compensation was the controlling force of the socio-economic activities of the Zo tribes living under the chiefship.

The economy of the Mizo chieftdom can principally be divided

into four periods of historical divisions. First, when they lived under the absolute control of their own chiefs with intermittent contacts with the powerful neighbouring chiefs like Raja of Manipur, Tripura or Cachar. Second, when they came in contact with the British ruler, that is, 1824-73, politically before the extension of the British sphere of influence. The Lushai expedition 1871-72 extended the British sphere of influence into the Lushai Hills (modern Mizoram) but the fringe areas where Mizos lived were incorporated into British dominion earlier. Third period consists of from the time of political sphere of influence to annexation (1874-95). Fourth period is from the time of Shakespear's settlement up to the World War II (1895-1945).

First Phase

The mainstay of the economy in the first period was Jhumming. The Jhumming was dependent on land. According to Sopitt, an authority on the Lushais, the word '*ram*' means land under the control of the chief. Thus the land actually belonged to the chief, that is, to the clan of which the chief was the immediate political head. The land tenure system under the fiefdom of the chief had been peculiar. It was a communal ownership as well as private peasant ownership. The land tenures of the Mizos were not like the land tenure system of the great Mughals where the tenants had a regular *patta* (right of ownership including the right to transfer). In Central Chin Hills there were two types of land, *Bul ram* (private land) and *Kland ram* (community land). In the first category of land the individual had the right to cultivate (see illustration on following page), collect wild fruits, timber, firewood, hunting and finally the most important the right to inherit according to the customary law. The right of inheritance (*Pokhwam*) varied according to the status of the inheritor (son, youngest son, daughter, wife, brother, etc).

The total availability of the land in comparison to the population was not scarce. So, there was an economic balance between the production and distribution of agricultural and forest wealth.

As the chief claimed the land as his own (*Keimahi ram*) he was entitled to certain economic privileges. This was his perpetual right. The bigger the chief, the wider was the scope of privileges. Bigger chiefs used to afford protection to the smaller chiefs, even to the chiefs of other clans. The blacksmiths, the village headmen, the village priests were also entitled to certain economic privileges of the feudal type.



Harvesting of Sugar-cane

The community as a whole living under the chief used to enjoy certain rights. The maintenance of the *jawlbooks* and the community food stores was the duty of the subjects of the chiefs. The individual, under the protection of the chief, had the right to share the food from those stores. In the capitalist economy there is the pride of possession of goods by individuals but in the primitive economy it was the pride of utility of goods. Those primitive people had very little wants and the community could easily provide for their needs except in times of natural calamities or foreign aggression.

The barter system was in existence. For big transactions *mithun* (the tame bison) was the medium of exchange. *Mithun* was, in fact, the Mizo-Chin currency and the wealth of the chief or any other individual could be counted in terms of *mithuns*. In marriage contract the bride-price (*man*) was counted in terms of *mithuns*. Penalties attached to a breach of contract or fines imposed on any one for his or her offences were all in terms of *mithuns*. Even the distribution of the flesh of a *mithun* to the relatives and the village officials followed certain rules which had the sanction of village economy incorporated in the elaborate customary law (Vumson rightly called the Zo culture as the *Mithun* culture). However, with the foreigners it was usually the elephant tusks or in some cases Jhum products or forest products. The Kuki chiefs used to pay *nazar* to the Rajas of Tripura, Manipur or the British officers of Cachar (1830-68) in the form of elephant tusks. But foreign trade was very much limited although Captain Lister, Hunter, etc, had mentioned it.

Hunting: Hunting occupied a prominent place in the economy of the Mizo tribes and allied clans. Hunting was regulated by customary law relating to public safety and trespass to prevent accidents to the individuals and also to the community. The techniques in hunting had been beating the jungle, still hunting and trapping.² The weapons and implements were usually bows and arrows, daggers, guns, traps, nets, etc. There was also the law regulating the share of the game (hunting product). Raids also formed an important part in the economy, especially in the foreign trade and public finance of the community. The raids were organized usually by the bigger chiefs forming coalitions. Usually, they would raid the territory of a prosperous chief, loot the valuables and carry off the chattels including men and women. The booty was the property of the chief; however, he distributed lesser valuables to individuals participating

2. H.N.C. Stevenson, *The Economics of the Central Chin Tribes*, p.64.

in the raid according to their achievements. The human beings became the slaves of the chief. The slaves were sold in return for a high price. Before the British annexation of the Lushai Hills, the rate of a male slave depending upon his physical qualities and age, was usually three *mithuns*, whereas the exchange rate of a female slave depending upon her age, looks and physical fitness was five *mithuns*. The good looking female slaves were usually kept in the household of the chief as concubines. The Lushai society, like the Greek or Roman society, was based on slavery. Majority of the people were slaves and their marriage was the responsibility of the chiefs. Thus the female slaves were in great demand in the chieftdom itself. Moreover, the female slaves were often sold by one chief to another prosperous chief in return for high prices. The female slaves were not necessarily the tribal women but in many cases they were plains women of the foothills, mostly the Bengalees and in later years the Hindustani labour women of the tea estates. The most important target in the raid was, however, the guns which the plains men in big villages used or the managers of the tea estates had in their possession. The guns were the prized possessions of the chiefs or the community as a whole. Hunting and raiding were means to social and economic advancement of the individuals and also satisfied their spiritual needs. Raids were associated with the chief's funeral custom or marriage of his daughters. When a notable chief died or powerful chief's daughter or sister was betrothed, the frontier villages in the plains had to take precautionary measures.

According to Mizo historians the Mizo society before annexation was based on self-sufficient economy, free from the vice of competition, exploitation and dependence on others. But this is not true. Like all other primitive economies, the Mizo-Chin economy also suffered from inherent defects. Regarding the basic needs of food, garments, house, the Mizos had no difficulties in normal times but faced with natural calamities, like *mautum*, earthquake, flood (south Lushai Hills), the society hardly could provide any relief. During the *mautum* (famine) 1880-81, 25 per cent of the total population died of starvation despite the gratuitous relief from the British authorities; in the absence of this aid the casualty rate would have been 50 per cent. The great famine destroyed the indigenous rubber trade for over-tapping. The lesser chiefs were under the heavy pressures by the bigger chiefs for their protection money (not in cash). There was also the fear of invasion by other tribes. The individuals could hardly sleep in peace during the dry season. Security was a problem.

Purchasing of Bride: For the youngsters living in *jawlbook* (dormitory) was the most pleasant phase of the tribal life. But the young man who intended to set up a home with a suitable wife usually met with difficulty. Procuring a wife, at least a good wife, virgin and young, was not easy. The bride-price was high and the man had to work hard usually for two years and sometimes more than that in the *Jhum* of bride's father. It was a slavery within the slavery. The homes were not always ideal homes, let alone the drudgeries of the *Jhum*. The sex life of the Mizos was regulated by the customary law. The customary law of the Mizos according to an English writer was the law of marriage and offences relating to sex. The offences deserved stringent punishment (mostly fine). In a savage society where the refinements were crude, sex occupied prominent place but the sexual enjoyment was, however, costly. Prostitution was absent but sexual lapses and abuses were there. In *Mara* society sex offences were met with severe fine. A young *Mara* was always in great difficulty to get a suitable partner in life as there was the prevalent custom of bride's pedigree. In *Mara* society, like the Hindus, sex rather than love was the rule of the marriage.

Economics of the Household: The household was the basic and most important unit in the Mizo economy. It is essential to drive home the principal difference in function of resources used in this and larger units, and the part played by the reactions within the household in determining the nature and working of these larger units. In the first place the question what one must eat to survive, was to be settled. In the second place the members of the household put forward the diversified claims to participate in the 'existence minimum' of home resources and to specific shares in the available surpluses.

According to Stevenson the nature and quantity of the surpluses available after settlement of the 'existence minimum' formulated subsequent economic choices in the household itself and determined the larger groups which were called in to assist and share in their disposal. The larger groups themselves might increase or shrink.

The most important was an account of the relative position of the individual members within the household, their respective duties and responsibilities and the right that had gone with them. This was followed by a statement which testified how the household acquired its capital — a house, fields, gardens and implements — the organization of productive activity and the storage of the agricultural products which had been the pillar of the local economy.

Trading, Money and Wage: Trading, money and wage earning were



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