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Food, Famine and Consolidation of the British Rule in the Lushai Hills

Lalrofel

Department of History & Ethnography, Mizoram University, Aizawl

Email: rofelirfi@gmail.com

Abstract

Food has close ties with natural calamities throughout humankind history. Food and its various aspects is sometimes used as a tool to establish relation, influence and power. The annexation of Lushai Hills (Mizoram) to British Indian territory in 1890 has been studied by a host of indigenous scholars as well as outsiders. Most of these writings focus on the political perspective. In this article an attempt is made to relate food scarcity created by famine in the Lushai hills with the colonial annexation and subjugation of Mizos from foodiel point of view.

Keywords: *Food, Famine, Colonialism, Annexation, Subjugation, Consolidation*

From time immemorial, the human race has explored the world in search of food. The beginning of European colonialism can be said to have begun with the search for food. Recent research shows that with growing prosperity and growth, the dietary habits of the Europeans had also changed in the 11th century, with more meat being consumed. Much of the cattle in Europe had to be killed during winter due to shortage of fodder, and the meat salted away. Oriental spices were even more in demand in order to make the salted meat more palatable (Chandra 2003, p. 194).

Colonialism and food, thus, have a long history of relation.

Food history is a new discipline, considered recently as a fringe discipline. It is a field that examines the history of food, and the cultural, economic, environmental and sociological impacts of food. It is considered distinct from the more traditional field of 'culinary history', which focuses on the origin and re-creation of specific recipes. Food historian looks at food as the most important element of cultures, reflecting the social and economic structure of society. Empires have done battle for food,

civilizations have been built around it, crimes committed, laws made and knowledge exchanged (Samat 2009, p. 14).

Food

Food can be defined as anything solid or liquid which when swallowed, digested and assimilated nourishes the body. Like air and water, food is also basic to our existence. In fact, food is the primary concern of human beings in their physical environment throughout all recorded history. Food or the lack of it has greatly influenced the destinies of human beings. One must eat to live and what one eats affects to a high degree one's ability to keep healthy, to work, to be happy, and to live well (The Educational Planning Group, pp. 4-5). Food can be obtained from the animal as well as the plant kingdom, from organic as well as inorganic sources. The diet and what people consider as 'food' differs from country to country, region to region. For instance, what the Mizos consider as food may not be considered as 'food' by other communities. The choice of food is, thus, a product of culture. Ecological, biological, and economic conditions affect our choice of food as edible or inedible (Chhangte 2009, p. 393)

Like other South Asian and East Asian people, in Mizo culture, rice plays an important role. It is their staple food and other foods (vegetables, green leaves, milk, fruits etc.) are always described simply as 'accompaniments' to it. Although it is a staple, rice is not, unfortunately, a complete food, and the missing elements have to be added to the diet. Yet the appetite of the Mizos cannot be met or quenched until and

unless rice is served. This unique characteristic or attitude of the people distinguish them from others and give them distinctive identity. Lt. Colonel J. Shakespeare (2008) also remarked,

"The Lushai when speaking of food always means rice. Though he is fond of meat and likes vegetables and seasonings, he only considers them as a garnish to his rice. When a mithan is killed to feast the village, the flesh is boiled in earthen pots in the street and the contents emptied out on to plaintain leaves, where the feasters help themselves with their fingers, washing down the savoury morsels with the water in which they have been boiled, but this banquet in no way takes the place of the regular meal of rice".

Food and food security have been universally treated as one of the basic needs of humankind. It is important to note that food security and famine and establishment of control and consolidation of power are different concepts, although they deal with the same, most basic need of life – food. Food security indicates the availability of food while famine and hunger refer to the effects of the non – availability of food. Famine and hunger, in other words, are the result of food insecurity.

To get a clear perspective on the annexation of *Lushai Hills* and establishment of colonial regime in the hills, it is necessary to move one step backwards and look at the situation prevailing in the *Lushai Hills District* at the time of annexation. Mizos knew from their past experience that a famine invariably followed the flowering of bamboos in the hills. Their

experience told them that the flowering of bamboos which occurred in the district at fifty year intervals made rats multiply at a prolific rate. The rodents overran the jungles and the rice fields, devouring all crops and leaving behind a trail of hunger and death (Dasgupta, unpublished article).

Many writers, colonial, indigenous and non-indigenous, have written the establishment of colonial rule in Mizoram. Most of these works more or less deal with the political, economic and religious factors that contributed to the annexation of *Lushai Hills* to the British Indian territory. In this paper an attempt is made to study the annexation of *Lushai Hills* as a result of food shortage and famine from 'foodie' point of view as it is observed that besides many other factors the British government of India seemed to annex the *Lushai Hills* by taking advantage of the problem faced by the Mizos as Sajal Nag (2008) in '*Pied Pipers of North East India*' writes,

"Calamities have been used by men to acquire colonies, subdue people, annex territories, secure power, induce culture and instigate rebellion. Calamities have thus had an all-pervading presence in modern history"(p.18).

Famine

Famine, deriving from the Latin word '*fames*' (*Oxford English Dictionary Thesaurus, 2005, p. 321*), simply means hunger or extreme scarcity of food. The shortage/ scarcity could be due to natural or artificial causes. Among the natural causes, shortage caused by infestation of vermin has been listed as one. But such famines were

'*minor and localised*'. Rats have been also listed as one of the vermin who through depredation cause food shortage. Rats eat almost anything that humans eat. They cause the most serious damage to the seeds of grain both before and after harvesting. Mizo Hills experienced the first *Mautam* (the flowering of *melocannabaccifera* species of bamboo) famine in 1861 which was followed by the *Thingtam* (the flowering of *Bambusa Tulda* species of bamboo) famine in 1880.

Mizoram is prone to natural calamities particularly famine due to its geographical location in the tropical area. It is blessed with rich forests. But the plentiful bamboos often created problems to the people as the seeds of bamboos helps in the reproduction of rats in large number. It is said that famines of two kinds – *mautam* and *thingtam* have created immense problems in the hills. The periodical flowering, seeding and dying down of certain species of bamboo all over *Mizo hills* was followed by an enormous number of jungle rats. This does not happen to all the species simultaneously. The *mautam* group flowers and dies down after 50 years and the *thingtam* group flowers and dies down after every 30 years. The connection between flowering bamboos and the invasion of rats is a disputed point but the theory which seems to be most satisfactory is that the bamboo fruit has the property of making the rats which eat it extraordinarily prolific (*The Annual Report of BMS on Mizoram, 1993, pp. 85-86*) and helps in the reproduction in a prolific rate. People in North East India (Nag 2001, pp. 1650 – 1652) and elsewhere in the world (Unwin, 1927, p.77) believe that

bamboo flowering is the harbinger of famine. Scientifically the bamboo flowering phenomenon is called ‘synchronic masting’ (Vishwanathan 1997, pp. 204 - 205). This term is used by scientists to describe the ‘synchronized production of seeds at long intervals by a population of plants. Masting is the accurate term but flowering was the word coined by the colonial authorities, which gained acceptance in common vocabulary (Unwin 1927). Famines caused by such masting of flowers are common in some East Asian countries like Myanmar and Japan, and also southern Africa, in the Indo – Myanmar frontier tract, especially in Mizoram, they cause much devastation (Unwin 1927). The two famines had considerable impacts in the process of annexation of *Lushai* Hills to British India.

Food Scarcity- A Tool of Annexation and Consolidation

The British colonizers were the first to record the bamboo related famine in 1860-61 when ‘many died due to starvation and those who were bulky enough to survive became lean and thin beyond description’. Oral testimonies proved that the coping mechanism of the Mizos against the recurring famines was quite effective and even though 1861 – 62 were crucial years in their struggle against the British, they not only continued their resistance but at the same time fought and survived natural calamity as well (Nag 2008, p.25).

The *Lushai* Hills remained unexplored for many years after the British perpetrated into the North Eastern part of India. The task of exploration was first taken up from Chittagong. However, in 1777

under the command of Captain Ellester, a detachment of military explored the Chittagong Hill Tracts up to the border of the *Lushai* Hills. On the eve of the British contact with the Lushais, almost the whole of the area presently known as Mizoram was under the supremacy of Sailo Chiefs. Initially the British government followed a policy of non- interference towards Mizos while keeping a strict vigil on their activities along the frontiers. With Assam increasingly falling under the East India Company’s rule from 1826, Mizo raids on the plantations to the north, particularly from the 1830’s became a problem for the British authorities.

Alexander Mackenzie (2011) in his famous *The North – East Frontier of India* discussed the annexation of the *Lushai* hills in detail. To him, the basic cause of British attitude towards Mizos was the latter frequent raids on their neighbouring areas since 1826. In 1871 the British government of India decided that an armed expedition should be made into the *Lushai* country to punish the tribes for their atrocious raids, to recover British subjects who were captives in their hands, and to prevent, in the most effectual manner, a repetition of their incursions for the future. Mackenzie stated that the *Lushais* had given no serious trouble since this expedition. However, our available sources proved the fact the British were always looking for an opportunity to ‘completely subjugating the *Lushais*’ which tells that *Lushais* were still ‘a trouble’.

Official records documented that ‘punitive military expeditions and increasing contact with imperial officials had brought the area under control by the 1870’s’. More

importantly, visiting restrictions not applying to missionaries, the conversion of many Mizo to Christianity helped the process and spread education. In the 1890s, the *Lushai* area was formally annexed to the British Indian Empire, the northern hills falling under the jurisdiction of Assam and the southern hills Bengal. The district was united as *Lushai Hills*, and awarded to Assam, in 1898. Since then Mizos came to have long term contact and interaction with the 'white people'. They did not have any idea that their lives would turn upside down politically, economically, religiously, socially and culturally.

However, it had to be noted here that in India's north east tribal area, particularly in Mizoram, food factors prompted the tribal to invade their neighbouring areas many times. The British authorities did not know how to handle the situation till the 1880's when the situation turned out in their favour. The famine arose, according to the concurrent testimony of all persons concerned, from the depredation of rats. In the previous season the bamboos had seeded, and the supply of food thus provided caused an immense multiplication in the number of rats, who, when exhausted the bamboo – seed, fell upon the rice crops and devoured them. During the cold weather of 1874- 75, large number of *Lushais* came down to cut rubber on both banks of the Barak. In January 1875, Suakpuilala's agent reported a great scarcity of rice in that chief's country. The *Mizo* hills were struck by *Mautam* Famine creating food scarcity, distress and havoc in the hills resulting in the submission of Mizos to alien rule. In 1879 the *Lushais* came down from Senong

Punji (a village 14 miles south – east of Tipaimukh), presented an elephant tusk to the Deputy Commissioner, and represented that their community was in great distress for want of food. It was reported that,

The Chiefs sold out their ivory jewellery and other valuables for the sake of food. They exchanged their guns and other arms for food. Their jhooms were exhausted and even rubber, which offered ample means of subsistence, was failing. They had no means to purchase articles such as salt, tobacco, etc. In short they were reduced to a state of destitution (Nag 2008, p.101).

The first news regarding scarcity of food was received in October 1881. On 17 October, some eighty households of the Rangte clan, all subjects of *Kalkhama* migrated to Cachar and settled near Dharmakal Tea Estate. They stated that they had been impelled by want of food and other causes to leave their homes. This was followed by large scale migration of Mizos to neighbouring areas (Tipaimukh, Jalnacherra, Barak and Hailakandi). The cause of this large scale migration was reported to be 'destruction of food crops by rats'.

The British seemed to be very curious when Mizo chiefs surrendered themselves due to lack of food in the hills. It was unthinkable. In an unexpected turn of events a formidable enemy was willing to make an abject capitulation. They were ready to exchange their only weapon for food. The British had once concluded that the only way to subdue the Mizos was to starve them to submission by destroying

their harvest and blocking their supply (McCall 2003, pp.59-60).

Before the government initiate their action programme or retaliatory programme to the *Lushai* hills, J. Knox Wright, the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar, expressed his opinion that it would be difficult to completely subjugate the 'head hunters'. He knew that unless these 'head hunting tribals' were appeased, the tea gardens at the foothills of the tribal habitat were not secure. Captain Lister (one of the earliest British officers to deal with the *Lushais*) also stated that the "*Lushais* were a virile race, possessed a clear cut culture pattern and capable of giving endless trouble at any time anywhere along the British Indian settlements bordering *Lushai*, unless subjugated once and for all" (Nag 2008, p.108). The British authorities were finally convinced to follow a policy of conciliation to the Mizos and accordingly provided assistance to the Mizos during their times of distress to develop friendly relationship for future benefits.

The famine of 1881-82 was of great significance to the British since the famine broke the back of the Mizo resistance and brought them within the ambit of British. It was a widespread famine in which an estimated 15,000 Mizos died. In fact, it is said that the Mizos had resisted the British for about 40 years. The 1881 famine had devastated and incapacitated them so much that they easily surrendered to colonial subjugation and colonial subordination.

Thus, it can be stated, from the available sources, that the annexation of the *Lushai* hills (Mizoram) to the British Indian

territory and the subsequent establishment of colonial regime over Mizo was obviously the outcome of food shortage caused by the two famines, *mautam* and *thingtam* that ravaged the hills in the middle of the nineteenth century, as these two famines broke the back of Mizo since the middle of the 19th century. When their last asylum was destroyed by natural calamity Mizo had nothing to fight back the 'alien invaders' but to submit and surrender themselves to these invaders.

After the establishment of colonial rule in the *Lushai* hills the famines once again struck the whole of Mizoram in 1911 – 1912. The Christian missionaries called this disastrous calamity the means to extend the 'Saviour's Kingdom' as J.H. Lorrain and F.W. Savidge had reported in 1912,

"The gaunt spectre of famine has been spreading distress and sorrow all over this fair land, but we have been spared the still more terrible experience of pestilence which at one time seemed to seep the country, and the trying times through which we have been passing have strengthened our faith and have been the means of extending the Saviour's Kingdom" (The Annual Report of B.M.S. 1993,p.81).

The famine of 1911 – 12 was the first famine experienced by Mizos under the British rule. The missionaries had written that some Mizos were still nursing the feelings of resentment against those who have occupied their country. Instead, food scarcity caused by the famine made many Mizos turned to the missionaries for food and support. As Mizos were used to having plenty to eat, the scarcity caused by the

ravages of the rats has been felt very acutely. The Government provided some relief work which was co-operated by the missionaries. The relief work done by the missionaries and its result is described by J.H. Lorrain and F.W. Savidge,

“In many ways we have been able to alleviate the want and distress around us, and the gratitude of the poor has most pleasing to witness. Scores of men and women who had no food to have been enabled to down to Demagiri to a fresh supply of food by the loan of a few pounds of rice apiece. Many others have been kept from want by being employed in building, road making, jungle cutting, gardening and other works about the compound. While not a few who have been unable to work have been assisted with gifts of rice. It has been a peculiar privilege to be living in the Lushai hills this year and thus be able to help the people in their hour of need. They have always looked upon us as their friends, and at such a time as this the poor especially find our presence a source of real comfort and strength, for they feel that they can come to us in their extremity and be sure of a helping hand” (The Annual Report of B.M.S on Mizoram, pp.87-91).

Another report of the missionaries also testifies that Mizos struggled hard during the famine of 1911 -12. Many children, women, decrepit, blind and paralyzed, had went to the Mission Compound in search of help. Some came from a great distance. The missionaries claimed that they tried to help as many as possible of those poor people as they hoped that by rendering help to Mizos in their time

of distress there would be greater possibilities for the extension of Christ’s Kingdom (*Reports of the Foreign Mission of the Presbyterian Church of Wales on Mizoram, 1894- 1947, 1997, pp.48-49*).

In the Baptist Missionary report, it is mentioned that the Mizos consumed the meat of rats since earlier times - captured rats would be used as food. But during the *mautam*, there was an abundant supply of rats. Such an abundance, perhaps, diminished the utility. Moreover, the dried rats would hardly make up for the loss of rice, which was the staple food of the Mizos. Thus, they began to search the forests for roots, jungle yams and other wild produce. They depended on wild sago palm, wild yam (Nag, 2008) and other jungle products. There is one writing that poses a somewhat different point towards the eating of dog meat amongst Mizos. Mr. *Laithangpuia* had written that in pre-colonial Mizoram dog meat was hardly consumed because of its unpleasant proclivities / smell. It was only after the *mautam* Famine of 1911 that they began to take it as a part of their dish on a large scale (Thanga 1993, p.121). But oral as well as most available data informs that dog meat was one delicacy of Mizos even before the establishment of British rule in Mizo hills. However, this point proves the fact that food shortage during the famine was quite acute so much so that dog meat like any other source of food was taken on a large scale.

When the famine once again struck Mizoram in 1930 the government and the church combined to fight the menace. On the initiative of the administration, Mizos set

and reset rat traps in their fields. Individual farmers could trap as many as 500 rats in a single night. As the agricultural consumables became rare, the community would fall back on their forest resources. By this time, they had not yet developed banana plantation. In the devastating *mautam* famine of 1930, Mizos found themselves helpless. The marginal tribes would be starving from the very beginning of the famine. Such families would be dependent on the community for food and were among the first to surrender to the chief as *inpuichhung bawi* (people who due to poverty, food shortage, sickness or distress surrender as lifelong slaves against food and shelter to the chiefs). These families would also migrate to the plains and beg even before the community had decided in favour of it (Nag, 2008, pp.81-83).

Conclusion

Thus, serious famines were witnessed by the colonialists in the *Lushai* hills who learnt the disastrous consequences of the famines on the Mizos. They had the full opportunity to learn and observe that Mizos had to change their staple food from rice to jungle yams and shoots. When such natural calamity struck Mizo hills they never made an attempt to change the food culture of Mizos by switching the staple food of rice with that of flour or grains like wheat. Instead Mizos were sent to take a long journey to Assam to gather rice.² The attitude of both the administrators and the missionaries give the impression that their indifferent / inaction towards food shortage in the *Lushai* hills was one way of their

attempt to consolidate colonial rule in the *Lushai* hills.

Meanwhile, since the famine of 1911, there was a profound change in the attitude of Mizos towards the colonial administration and the missionaries. The relief measures provided by the administration had a profound effect on the overall image of the British Raj in the minds of the people, who began to look it upon as a kind and merciful system manned by the white – skinned Europeans. Nag says that as the administration was looked up as paternal figure, in a matter of two decades the white men were now addressed as *Sap pa* (white father / white lord / Lord of the *Lushai* slaves) (Nag, 2008, 146). However, it may have been a mistranslation because *Sap* is the word used in Mizo to refer to white people / a sahib or government official while *pa* may be translated as man. So ‘*Sappa*’ simply means white man.

After receiving help from both the administrators and the missionaries Mizo began to rechristen the white officers and missionaries with Mizo name. One British officer, for instance, was so popular among the Mizos that the villagers called him as *Thangliana* – a Mizo name. D.E. Jones the Welsh missionary who pioneered the Presbyterian church in the *Lushai* hills was called *Zosaphluia* and J.M. Lloyd, the late missionary of the Presbyterian mission as *Zohmangaihi Pa*. Similarly, a number of British officers and missionaries were given fond names (Nag 2008, p.146) The missionaries have often been called ‘*Zosap Missionaries*’ till date. This has a great and interesting connotation. *Zo* literally mean

high / remote, it is a shorten form of *Mizo*, and *sap* means white complexioned / westerner. When combining *Zo* with *Sap* (that is *Zosap*), it means the *Sap* who were part of Mizo society, or it can be said that *Zo – sap* means white man for Mizos. The word '*Zosap*' is a term of endearment which depicts that *Zosap* were Mizo-own white men. What is noteworthy is that all such names had paternal implications. This is what the British always tried to achieve- to conquer the Mizos morally so that they were ethically bound to them. This was what they achieved. They wanted to project the British as paternal figures who protected the subjects, secured them from enemies, provided them safety from calamities and the colonial administration as a paternal system. From the results it was obvious that the Raj had been successful in manufacturing the desired consent to their rule and implanting that image. (Nag 2008, p.146)

Food shortage caused by the *mautam* and *thingtam* famine of 1911 and 1930 won the battle for the British and the Christian missionaries who had assumed the status of benevolent rulers as well as friendly helpers of the Mizos. Food scarcity created by the devastating famines helped the British government of India not only in their effort to establish British rule in the *Lushai* hills but also in their effort to consolidate of their rule.

Notes

- ¹ Foodie here means a person with strong interest in food and its various aspects. As the scholar conducts research on food

history of the *Mizos* she uses the word 'foodie' when presenting her interpretation in the article.

- ² Interview with Pu C. Rokhuma on 21 February, 2015.

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