

Bamboo-Flowering in Mizoram

A Historical Review

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An eminent scholar of Mizo studies Dr. Suhas Chatterjee justifies to a certain extent the depiction by the electronic media of Mizo culture as the 'bamboo culture'. According to him from earliest times bamboo has been the 'principal commodity in the practical life of the Mizos'. He says

The houses of the Mizos were constructed with the split bamboos and bamboo poles, the fencing of the house and the villages were made with bamboo only. The bow and the arrow, the javelin and other hunting and jhumming instruments were made up of bamboos. Even the early British cantonments of the armed forces were bamboo constructions. In 1940 Sir R. Reid, Governor of Assam visited the Lushai Hills district and a part of his journey was conducted through the rivers with the help of the bamboo shafts. In the Reports of Pemberton we come to know that both Assam and Bengal Governments imported large quantities of bamboos from the Lushai Hills.¹

While stating the above, the learned scholar has drawn the attention to the periodical/flowering of bamboos in Mizoram which has always been accompanied by famine caused by the multiplication of rate. 'The Great Mizo famines of 1881-82, 1912-13 and 1959', he said 'left indelible social and political scars in the history of the Mizos.'² Of late the bamboo flowering in Mizoram has assumed so much importance within the country and outside, that some popular writers have picked up this phenomenon in entitling their semi-historical and literary works, J.D. Baveja was the first to use *The Land where the Bamboo Flowers* as the title of his work on Mizoram. Nearly two decades after Baveja *When Bamboo Flowers* as the title of his work of Mizoram. Nearly two decades after Baveja *When Bamboo Blossoms* became the title of a small but popular novel written by a prolific Tamil writer Vaasanthi which depicts a 'human

story written on the back-drop of Mizo life The novel which was originally published in Tamil has been translated into English by Gomathi Narayanam.³

In one of its recent Readings entitled the 'Bamboo Famine' in Mizoram, published by the Centre For Science and Environment, 1991, it is stated that there are about 16 species of bamboo, the most abundant are the *Melocanna bambasoides* (called *Mautak* in the Mizo language and the *Bambustalda* (called *Rawthing* in Mizo). The fact that there are relatively few trees and other forms of vegetation makes these species critical to the overall ecology. The bamboo plant flowers cyclically; drops its seeds and then dies out. New plants come up from the seeds and survive for a specific period and then the cycle is repeated. According to their findings in Mizoram, the most significant thing is that

Whenever each of the two common varieties of bamboo flowers there is an accompanying increase in the rat population which in its turn leads to famine; *Thingtam* (caused by the flowering of *Rawthing*) of *Mautam* (caused by the flowering of *Rawthing*) of *Mautam* (caused by the flowering of *Mautak*). The rat attack the standing crops. This results in acute famines.⁴

Mr.S. Barkataki, the first Indian Superintendent also the first Deputy Commissioner of Lushai Hills district (1949-53) in his *Tribes of Assam* says that Mizoland is said to be visited by *Mautam* at regular interval of 50 years. During *Mautam* when rats attack a rice field, he states

They come in thousands and spread themselves to cover so wide an area that they eat up the entire paddy of a *Jhum* overnight. When *Mautam* year approaches, the cultivators take every possible preventive measure in their simple way by setting up traps around the *Jhooms* and keeping watch at night to frighten away or kill rats. But these efforts are not sufficient for saving the crop. During such a famine the people have to depend for their sustenance and survival on wild roots, jungle fruit and anything that is edible. As a result of under-nourishment various epidemics break out causing heavy loss of life.⁵

According to common belief prevailing in many parts of North East India, periodical bamboo-flowering is a indication of impending famine or any other calamity. In Assamese folk-belief the flowering of *Mokal* and *Kotoha* (a thorny type) bamboo is considered as a bad omen. In Dimasa folk-lore we find references that during the reigns of Dimasa rulers ruling from Dimapur *Muli* bamboo flowered nine times. This specie of bamboo blossoms once in every 50 years and on the basis of it a Dimasa scholar believes that the Dimasa rulers rules from Dimapur for about 450 years but we do not know whether these brought famine, pestilence or any other calamity.⁶ However, cyclic flowering of bamboo in Arunachal Pradesh, according to the information of the present writer is known as *Talamlamnam* which causes increase in rat population known as *Buli Jugnam* and this is its turn brings *Duma Mananam* (famine).⁷ Recently in the middle of August this year we had information through the electronic media and news paper reports of the floating of tens of thousands of dead-rodents flowing along the Lower Subansiri river on the flood-affected North Lakhimpur district of Assam creating panic which posed a serious health hazard amongst the local people living on the bank of the river. An expert team which went there and studied this phenomenon has tentatively attributed the cause of the death of rodents to the unusual flowering of *Kako* bamboos since April last. According to local villagers such things happened in 1947 and before the great earthquake of 1950 along the riverside.⁸

Modern findings suggest that the cyclic flowering of bamboos and the increase in population of certain species is not unique to Mizoram alone. In Japan as well as in South Africa there are instances of increase in rodent population along with the flowering of some species of bamboo. However, according to the eco-scientists and environmentalists 'nowhere does the outbreak reach the proportions that it does in Mizoram. This is perhaps due to certain peculiarities of the eco-system.'⁹ Although the *Centre for Science and Environment*, New Delhi and the *Centre for Environment Education, North-East* are grappling with the subject of *Bamboo Famine* in Mizoram, they are not yet in a position to ascertain the causes of the correlation between the flowering of bamboo and the multiplication of rats. This is mainly because according to common belief not only the rats multiply, even jungle-fowls and other varieties of birds, along with certain types of insects increase in number when the bamboo

flowers. Along with this phenomenal increase in the population of birds, insects and rats (there is a local myth that even brinjals turn into rats), there is an increase in rainfall the year before the bamboo flowers. There is also a folk-belief associated with *Thingtam* and *Mautam* till 1976, the year before *Thintam*, that there was appreciably heavier rainfall. Speaking about the aftermath of the flowering of bamboos the organisations mentioned above state

In 1977, subsequent to the flowering of bamboos in Mizoram the rats multiplied in thousands. They moved from village to village from *Jhum* plot to *Jhum*, in groups of thousands. Often in a matter of hours whole areas of standing crops mainly rice would be destroyed. Thought efforts were made at baiting and fumigation traps were laid and pits dug around the *Jhum*, the effect was marginal. The number of rats was so over-whelming that often pits dug would get filled in by bodies of front-line rats while those following behind would walk over these bodies and enter the fields.¹⁰

II

Records of *Mautam* in Mizoram during pre-British days are not available to us. The Mizo people in the past who led a hard life in their hills must have undergone various natural calamities like draught, famine, earthquake, storm, damages of their crops from the avrages of insects and rodents. Oral traditions, folk-lore etc. may help future reasearchers in tracing the original history of Mautum if there was any. Barkataki who was in Mizoram for about four years (1949-53) refers to a *Mautam* which brought havoc in 1862. The famine was of such a magnitude that many died due to starvation and those who were lucky enough to survive became so much lean and thin was beyond description. The severity of the famine was aggravated by the extremely backward, difficult and primitive state of life in those days.¹¹

However, British official records and eye witnesses account of Christian missionaries furnish us with enough informations of *Mautam* which had occured in the hills between the period 1871 to 1911-12 and of the relief measures undertaken by the colonial rulers to alleviate the distress of the hillmen from time to time. In this

connection, it may be pointed out that the British came into contact with the Lushai-Kuki tribes since the annexation of Cachar in 1832. From the forties of the last century there were hostilities between the two and there were raids by the hillmen on the British territories, while the latter replied them by counter-raids. Since the middle of the country with the extension of tea cultivation, opening of vast tracts of forest-lands, prohibition of elephant-catching by the Mizos and encroachment of their hunting-grounds by the *Sahibs* brought them into open conflicts with the British imperialists. This continued till the annexation of the Lushai Hills in 1890 by the British in pursuance of their 'Forward policy'. Although by 1898 the British became the virtual master of Mizo hills, this position was gained not without a challenge by the hillmen led by their valiant chiefs despite their internal feuds and lack of solidarity. There was, however, a silver lining amidst these challenges and counter-challenges; the British also befriended them by undertaking welfare measures.¹²

Since the British success in the Expedition of 1871-2 against the Lushais, they gave little trouble to the authorities of Cachar and several of their powerful chiefs visited and Deputy Commissioner of Cachar and some sent their *Mantries*. In 1875 many hillmen came down to the plains to buy cattle and other commodities. The Government established three *bazars* at Changsil, Sonai and Tipaimukh. About this time Suakpuilala, the most powerful chief came to meet the D.C. of Cachar for relief due to a serious shortage of food in the hills. Supplies were not only rushed in but the traders were also asked to pour in the required commodities into these markets. Meanwhile in the hills there was restlessness from the movement of tribes due to pressure from behind by the aggressive tribes. There had also taken place bloody-feuds between the Eastern Lushais led by Lalbura, Chunglen and Bungte; the western Lushais were led by Suakpuilala, Khalkhama, Lienphunga and some others.¹³

Meanwhile two important events which occurred in quick succession changed the situation - the death of Suakpuilala (January 1881) and widespread *Mautam* (1881-82). While the death of Suakpuilala was immediately followed by the recurrence of worst possible feuds between the Eastern and Western Lushai chiefs, the widespread famine which is the theme of our present paper ravaged Mizo-hills so terribly upsetting the socio-political life of the hillmen

which may be better described in the words of Suhas Chatterjee who was constrained to state.

The chiefs sold out their ivory, jewellery and other valuables for the sake of food; they exchanged their guns and other arms for food. They lost half their numbers by plague, pestilence and descriptions. Their jhooms were exhausted and even rubber which offered ample means of subsistence was falling. They had no means to purchase articles... such as salt, tobacco, cloth etc. In short they were reduced to a state of desultation. This acute depression precipitated the idea of plunder as the only means of effective survival. The older generation, who had in their mind the sad memory of the British expedition afresh, advised their younger friends not to take the war-path but their wise counsel failed to convince the younger generation. Restiveness, thus, became the dominant note of the political life of the Lushais.¹⁴

Detailed account of the *Mautam* of 1881-82 and the measures undertaken by the British authorities are available in the official accounts of the D.C. of Cachar who deputed Mr. Place, the S.D.O. of Hailakandi and Special Extra Assistant Commissioner Rai Haricharan Sarmah Bahadur to undertake relief measures. The last named officer was specially sent to the famine-stricken areas because of his local knowledge of the hillmen and their ways of life. According to the concurrent testimony of the officers, the famine occurred from the depredation of rats. After exhausting the bamboo-seeds, the rats had fallen upon the rice-crops and devoured all these. The earliest indication of the acute distress was available from the village of Khalkhama (the eldest surviving son of Suakpuilala), followed by subjects of the other Eastern and Western chiefs whose people suffered the most.¹⁵

The sufferings of the villagers became so acute that they came to take shelter in Cachar and earn their livelihood either by manual labour or by other means. Although in the beginning their presence created considerable alarm among the tea-garden labourers and Managers, it was soon realised that they were peaceably inclined and were only anxious to earn their means of subsistence either by labour or by begging. In the wake of such famine conditions, the prominent Mizo chiefs decided to cease their internal feuds and remain in good terms with the British authorities. The latter in their turn abolished

the duties at the forest-toll stations on foreign timber and other forest products. Moreover employment was given by Forest officers for clearing forest-boundaries and by several garden managers for cutting down jungles on their grants. Besides such form of relief, food supplies were rushed in to those who were unable or willing to migrate. At the same time traders were encouraged to sent up rise to the- markets of Tipaimukh in the east and Changil in the west assuring them adequate security by posting a body of Frontier Police and opening two government store-houses at Tipaimukh and Guturmukh respectively. These store houses were to act as reserves in case the traders store fell short and from where loans were to be given to the chiefs or to the people for whom the chiefs would guarantee the formers inability to buy from the traders.¹⁶

Mr. Place and Rai Bahadur Haricharan Surmah who visited Guturmakh found out that the eastern part of the hills did not suffer most partly no doubt from natural causes, and partly because, being stronger and more warlike, the chiefs had stores of plunder to fall back upon. On the western side, the chiefs and their people are poorer, and therefore, they suffered the most and expressed their gratefulness to the Government for the assistance given to them. The quantity of rise and paddy exported to Lushai Hills was about 18000 maunds and 2000 respectively, while nearly 1000 maunds of rubber and 420,000 bamboos were brought down. Besides these, the Government purchased and sent up about 2500 maunds of paddy which was either sold to traders or advanced to the chiefs and the persons vouched by them. Because of the offer of such relief measures and the advancement of the rainy season all signs of distress have eased and it was expected that if the plague of rate does not recur, there is no fear of any re-appearance of famine.¹⁷

It may be recalled that due to the famine many families of Lushai tribes migrated to Cachar and some to Manipur. This did not affect Cachar, neither increasing the number of fugitives into it, nor preventing the return of the famine-strickem-immigrants into their own territories. It was estimated that about 1000 of these remained in Cachar. Sir Charles Elliott, the Chief Commissioner of Assam (1881-85), did not see danger in allowing them to settle in Cachar; to provide them with the means of subsistence some other measures were adopted. To facilitate purchase of bamboos from the Mizo

traders, the Government royalty of bamboo was also remitted. The Mizos also brought rubber to the plains to exchange it for rice in Cachar which was always full of it.¹⁸

T.R. Sareen in his paper published on the occasion of the *International Seminar* held at Aizawl in April 1992 stated that the British gradually started having a control of the Lushais especially after the famines. 'The Chain-Lushai Expedition of 1889-90', he said 'led to the occupation of Lushai Hills by the British'.¹⁹ 'For the first time the independent chiefs realised', he added 'they were no longer the, master of their land'. How the British first came into contact with the Mizo tribes, how they gradually annexed their country and became their virtual masters is known to every one interested in Mizo history. It must be borne in mind, however that after the final annexation of Lushai Hills (now Mizoram) on 1 April 1898, it was placed in charge of a British Officer designated as Superintendent with head quarters at Aizawl.²⁰

Despite the consolidation of British rule and different benefits given by the Government 'famine was a frequent feature in the Lushai Hills as people clung to the less productive *jhum* system of cultivation and the authorities had to organise supply from Cachar. During the period of scarcity to tide over the distress of the hillmen, the Superintendent and the Director of Agriculture made efforts to induce the tribes to adopt settled methods of cultivation and to a certain extent experiments in terraced rice cultivation met with success. But due to their poor economic condition, they did not have the necessary capital for intensive cultivation. On several occasions Government granted loans and such loans were advanced on the analogy of Agricultural Loans and not Agriculturists loans proper.²¹ However, all these failed to rescue the poor hillmen from exploitation of the money-lenders and contractors. Notwithstanding all these, one redeeming feature which was noticeable during such distress that the Mizo chiefs despite their internal-feuds and rivalries ceased their hostilities and did whatever was possible to help the sufferers by supplying them food and shelter. In such a situation, the relation between a chief and his subjects becomes so much informal that the latter could go to the former for his needs. If a chief could give his subjects food and protection, he had the opportunity of attracting more and more people; even smaller chiefs would like to come under him.

III

The last *Mautam* to occur in Mizoram during British rule was in 1911, when two of the many varieties of bamboo flowered and seeded which had created a great shortage of food in the Lushai Hills. This time the destruction of the crop was so much extensive that the tribes of the southern fringes of Cachar and in Manipur as well as in the Chittagong Hill Tracts became the worst sufferers. In connection with the flowering of bamboo reported from Sylhet the extract of which was published in a news paper from a letter (received by a correspondent) Rev. J.H. Lorrain, dated Lungleh, 19 March 1912, it was stated

We are in the midst of famine up here. From Chittagong Hill Tracts right away into Burma the whole country has been overrun by myriads of jungle rats, and nearly all the crops which should have been reaped last November and December were devoured. Since October I have been travelling all over the South Lushai Hills helping the Government to relieve the distress. Statistics have been collected showing the needs of every family and as far as possible these have been met by having a supply of rice brought upto Demagiri. The people who are able-bodied have to go to fetch it up, often many days' journey across the mountains.

Upon the present the wild yams and sago palms in the jungle have helped the people to keep themselves alive but the yams will have begun to sprout and will then be of no use for food until next cold season and the sago palms only grow in certain localities. During the next few months we anticipate a time of great anxiety. If the people can only manage to tide over the rains, there is every hope that all will be well. The great fear is that an epidemic may break out, we trust, however, that we may be spared such a calamity.

The rats having eaten up all the crops and every other thing available are now themselves dying out apparently of starvation. There is, therefore every reason to hope that there will not be enough left to devour the next harvests.²²

From the above eye-witnesses account of the missionary, it was evident that the *Mautam* of 1911-2 brought immense misery to the Mizos, but the local administration adopted measures to save them from starvation by providing them with rice. By June 1912, the quantity of rice and paddy exported to Lushai land was about 18000 maunds. The policy of giving grain only in the form of a loan and on the guarantee of a chief was adhered to, not so much in the hope that much money would be received back. Moreover, sufficient stock of rice was maintained to prevent traders from making too much profit at the cost of the sufferers.²³ Speaking about the devastations of 1911, A.G. McCall states.

In 1991, the rats came as a plague with the seeding of the bamboos and it cost the Government no less a sum than 20,000 to help to keep the people going, six times the total annual yield from the tax on houses. Before British rule was established vast numbers of Lushais died from starvation in the eighteen sixties and eighties. In 1929, however, the danger was anticipated, and the ultimate loss to the Government did not exceed one thousand pounds due to the co-operation and industry of the people in repaying loans taken in their distress.²⁴

It appears that to ameliorate the distress of the Mizo hillmen the British Government undertook measures to improve their livelihood by the establishment of trading centres, construction of towns and supply of rice which were all intended to promote the welfare of the tribes. The Christian Missionaries also worked hand in hand by giving medical aid and popularising the modern health measures undertaken by the Government. The Government which opened the centres for distribution of rice were visited by villagers to collect rice. These centres or camps became the places for Mizo Christian to hold congregations singing and dancing in which non-Christian friends also joined. This created a fervour in the non-Christian Mizos to become Christians.²⁵ All these created a feeling of understanding and friendship between the Mizos and the British which led them to render immense help in siding with the Allies during the World War I(1914-19).

At the end of the war Lushai Hills was declared as a Backward Area by the Government of India Act of 1919 and this status

continued till 1935. Until the attainment of Independence of India, the Mizos were kept under the direct administrative responsibility of the Governor-General of India through the Governor of Assam.²⁶ Thus the Mizos were cut off from the mainstream of Indian National politics although the World War I made them conscious of their nationality. Situation, however, altered and assumed a new character with the Transfer of Power in August 1947. In the meanwhile, a new political party was formed by the Mizo elites known as the Mizo Union with political overtone.²⁷ Immediately before independence and after, events moved both in Mizoram and the country in quick succession till the devastating *Mautam* of 1956-60 which brought about a sea-change in the political scenario which is known to all and sundry and not within the preview of the present paper.

The *Mautam* of 1959-60 is said to be the first to take place in Mizoram in independent India. S. Barkataki who by that time vacated the post of Deputy Commissionership of the Lushai Hills District stated in his *Tribes of Assam* that people in Mizoram was aware that the periodical *Mautam* would take place in 1959 with its attendant distress, geared up their loins years ahead by adopting anti-famine measure to combat the impending disaster by encouraging the people to grow more grain, tapioca and other edible plants so that even in the case of rice-crop failing they would not starve. Despite the local leader's; appeal the Government and public leaders outside... did not take notice of the warnings, dismissing the whole matter as more superstition. In fact, when the 1959 notorious famine took place in Mizoram with the flowering and seeding of bamboo with tremendous increase in rat population with their concomitant acts of destruction the entire population was hard hit by misery and starvation.²⁸ People died in large numbers despite all out effort made by the Government to save the situation due to poor communications and lac of honest and efficient distribution system. As a result relief itekms did not reach the famished people for whom these were intended.

It is indeed a matter of shame and utter neglect in independent India both the Union and the State Government could not effectively combat the situation caused by the *Mautam* and as a result Mizos had their axe to grind and they became the worst sufferers and the backbone of their economy was crushed. Suhas Chatterjee was constrained

to observe that the famine caused by the *Mautam* 'shattered the agricultural production and also the fringe areas of food-production. Mizoram which was self-sufficient in food production became 'a deficit area, and the 'scar of the famine is writ large on the face of the body politic of Mizoram.'²⁹ Inadequate and half-hearted relief measures undertaken by the Assam Government led to the formation of the Mizo National Famine Front (MNFF) under the leadership of charismatic Laldenga for organising famine relief work whose sincerity and devotion in times of people's distress enable him to win the hearts of the people old and young. Before long Laldenga's popularity brought him to the political limelight and he converted the MNFF into Mizo National Front (MNF) with political overtone.³⁰ Thus extremism caught the imagination of the Mizos which had opened a new chapter in Mizo history of our own times. Among other things Prof. H.K. Barpujari says that

The official language issue and the inefficient, if not indifferent relief measures of the Assam Government to combat the Lusaii famine in 1959-60 opened the breach between the Union (Mizo) and the Assam Government and brought into the forefront the Mizo National Front (MNF) as extremism in Mizo politics.³¹

Foot Notes

1. Chatterjee, S; *Mizo Chiefs and Chiefdom*, New Delhi, 1995, pp 56-59.
2. *Ibid*
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4. Agarwal, Anil, Ravi Chopra, Kalpana Sharma (Eds); 'The Bamboo Famine in Mizoram in *The State of India's Environment*, 1982, A Citizen's Report, New Delhi : *Centre for Science and Environment*, 1982.
5. Barkataki, S; *Tribes of Assam*, New Delhi, 1969, p. 95
6. Bhattacharyya, P. *Asom Janajati* (Assamese) Gauhati, 1962, see

- 'Dimasa Kachari' by Sonaram Thaosen, p. 47
7. Interview by the writer with Dr. Tai Nyori at Guwahati, 15 June, 1996.
 8. News item by staff reporter, *The Assam Tribune*, 20 August, 1996, *Pratidin* (Assamese Daily), 17, August, 1996, *Clippings in The Sentinel*, 15 August, 1996.
 9. Agarwal, Anil, Ravi Chopra, Kalpana Sfarma (ds); Op cit.
 10. *Ibid*
 11. Barkataki, S.; Op. cit p 94.
 12. Barpujari, S.K; See 'Mizoram's Freedom Fighters' etc. In *International Seminar Papers*, April 7-9, 1992, p. 96.
 13. Chakravarty, B.C. *British Relations with the Hill Tribes of Assam*, Calcutta, 1964, p. 60.
 14. Chatterjee, S.; *Mizoram Under British Rule*, Delhi, 1985, p. 96
 15. Foreign Political Proceedings, August 1882, No. 89
 16. *Ibid*
 17. *Ibid*
 18. A.S.R. Foreign Deptt. Proceedings, March 1874 (Circular No. 28)
 19. Sareen, T.rr See 'Documentary Sources on Mizoram Mizoram's Materials in the National Archives' in *International Seminar's Papers*, Aizawl, April 7-9, p. 148
 20. Reid, R.N.; *History of the Frontier Areas*, etc, Shillong, 1942, p. 43.
 21. A.S.R. (Revenue), No. 2862, 19 October 1909.
 22. *Ibid* January 1913, Nos. 20-71.
 23. *Ibid* July 1912.
 24. Mc Call, A.G.; *Lushai Chrysallis*, 1977, New Sehi, pp 169-9
 25. Nath, K.P.; 'Christianity Among the Mizos (NEIHA, Jagiroad Session 1991, p. 405.

26. Ray, Animesh, *Mizoram : Dynamics of Change*, Calcutta, 1982, pp. 44-50
27. Chaube, S.K., *Hill Politics in North East India*. Calcutta, 1977, pp. 160-66
28. Barkataki, S.: Op cit p 195
29. Chatterjee, S. *Mizo Chiefs and the Chieftdom*, New Delhi, 1995, p. 27.
30. Ibid p. 38.
31. Barpujari, H.K. *Problem of the Hill Tribes of the N.E.F.* vol. III, Gauhati, 1982, p. 339