

A Brief Survey of the Administrative Development in Lushai Hills (1890-1947)

Lalrimawia

Every Lushai village was almost an independent entity in earlier times. It had a certain area of land for its use and cultivation. The chief of a village was the owner of the land but not in the sense of land-lordship prevalent in the plains. The occupation of the Lushai Hills by the British in 1890 did not result in any appreciable change in this system, although the British restricted the increasing number of chiefs by assigning definite boundaries to the existing ones. The British also sought to introduce a system of settled rule without disturbing shifting jhum-cultivation. In 1891-92, they began to collect some sort of a land revenue or tribute either in cash or in kind.

The Government of India Acts of 1919 and 1935 declared the Lushai Hills an "excluded area". No political activity was allowed in the said area and, therefore, there was no political party in the Lushai Hills. The public had no voice in the framing of laws and running the administration. The people remained under the personal rule of the British officers and local hereditary chiefs. Before India's Independence, the district had no representation either in the Assam legislative Council or the Central Legislative Council.

Formation of Lushai Hills Districts

The Chin-Lushai Expedition of 1889-90 led to the creation of two districts of the North Lushai Hills and the South Lushai Hills, with headquarters at Aizawl and Lunglei respectively. The North Lushai Hills came under the Chief Commissionership of Assam, while the southern district was attached to Bengal. The two districts had been inaugurated with effect from February 1890 and April 1891 respectively. Captain H. R. Browne, Assistant Commissioner of the first grade, was appointed as the Political Officer at Aizawl, while Mr. C. S. Murray, Assistant Political Officer, Lushai Expeditionary Force, was appointed as the first Superintendent at Lunglei. But it was not until 6 September 1895 that the *defacto* position as regards the administration of the North and South Lushai

Hills districts were regularised by a proclamation (No. 1698-E) issued by the Governor General in Council.¹

Chin-Lushai Conference : Calcutta, 1892

Since British occupation, the Chin-Lushai land was divided into three distinct administrative units. The division was on the basis of the area occupied by each invading column of military forces of Burma, Assam and Chittagong Hill Tract division. Eastern portion, known as Chin Hills and some parts of Arakan came under the chief commissionership of Burma, the southern and western areas came under the administration of the then Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, and the northern territory was put under the Chief Commissioner of Assam. The Governor-General-in-Council was directly responsible for the administration of the three units in his capacity as the Crown Representative. The Government of India and the Secretary of State gradually realised "that this tripartite division of authority was open to objections. A conference was then held at Calcutta on 29 January 1892 "to discuss civil and military affairs connected with the control of the Lushai and Chin Hills." The Conference came to be known as the Chin-Lushai Conference.²

As a matter of fact, even after the expedition of 1871-2, the local authority in the Chittagong Hill Tract was convinced of the inconvenience of controlling the Southern Lushai Hills.³ The main question laid before the Chin-Lushai Conference was, that remedies would be practicable in respect of the tripartite division of Chin-Lushai land. It was strongly felt "that the whole tract of country known as Chin-Lushai Hills should be brought under one administrative head as soon as this can be done".⁴ But the Governor General in Council arrived at the conclusion that "the whole of the Lushai country (excluding Chin Hills) should be under the Chief Commissioner of Assam and the transfer of the Southern Lushais from Bengal to Assam should be made as early as possible". The Northern Arakan Hill Tract was also to be transferred from Burma to Assam, and the Chief Commissioners of Burma and Assam were entrusted to settle the future position of the boundary between their respective administration.⁵

Chin-Lushai Conference : Lunglei 1896

The Chin-Lushai question was reviewed again after four years. The government decided to hold a conference of the Superintendents of the Chin Hills, the North Lushai Hills and the South Lushai Hills. The conference was accordingly held on December 14-18, 1896 at

Lunglei. It considered the transfer of South Lushai Hills to Assam to be desirable which will effect an annual savings of two lakhs of rupees.⁶

North-South amalgamated

The Government of India accepted the proposal of the Lunglei Conference. On 1 April 1898, the North and South Lushai Hills were amalgamated into one administrative unit known as the Lushai Hills District under the Chief Commissioner of Assam.⁷ The administrative head of the new district was the Superintendent who, under the Assam Frontier Tract Regulation, was vested with extra judicial powers to settle disputes between different chiefs, villages and tribes. He was to prevent raidings and public breaches of peace, but not to interfere with the administration of chiefs except in serious cases when called on to interfere. Not only the Superintendent was vested with extra-ordinary judicial powers, but he had the upper hand in the police administration. He enjoyed the privilege to issue orders to the commandant in all matters.⁸ The social condition of Lushai Hills being materially different and the law and order problem of utmost importance, the Superintendent needed such power. The Lushais soon accustomed themselves to this type of executive control. So profound was the effects of this experience that it bore its marks on the Indian Constitution.

The Chief

In the management of his village the chief was given a considerable free hand. The local authority realised that unless the authority of the chiefs was maintained it would be practically impossible to run the district except at a very great expense and with a very much larger staff than at present. Moreover, the rule of the chief was popular among the people.

The chief, assisted by his council of elders or *Upas*, decided all matters of internal village government. All cases between his villages except certain grave cases such as murder and rape, which have to be reported to the Superintendent, were dealt by him. In dealing with cases he and the *Upas* were guided entirely by established customs.

Though the government owned all the land yet the chiefs were allowed to hold their respective possessions. The boundaries were laid down for all chiefs and every chief held a *Ramri-lekha* or boundary paper. Their lands were hereditary and subject to the confirmation of the Superintendent, when a chief died his son succeeded to his land.

Circle Officers

The whole district was divided into eighteen circles, twelve in Aizawl and six in Lunglei.⁹ A Circle Interpreter was appointed in each circle as a channel of communication between the Subdivisional Officers and the chief and their people. These officials had the duties of assessment of house taxes, preparation of vital statistics and maintenance of circle books, both permanent and temporary. He was aided in his duties by the village writer or *Khawchhiar*.

Besides the Circle Interpreter there existed the Lushai clerk who was usually filled from the ranks of the Circle Interpreters. He was responsible for the smooth working of the administration of impressment and supplies. He was an *ex-officio* president or member of the Panchayat and exercised the functions of chief. The clerk was to issue routine *parwanas* and make arrangements for rice when its supply was required. These officials were really the link between the chiefs, the people and the Superintendent.

Conference of Circle Chiefs

The Conference of all administrative units developed a sense of unity among the Lushai tribes. In 1935 the system of chiefs' conference began. Three such meetings were held in the winter of that year, which were attended by several chiefs to discuss various subjects of general interest. Before long, the conference of circle chiefs became a regular feature. This provided a machinery by which the chiefs could be consulted on important matters. It also could mitigate the problem of isolation which was inherent in administration of Lushai Hills.¹⁰

Hill Durbar

The success of the Circle Chiefs' Conference encouraged the local authorities to proceed a step further. The Commissioner of Division was strongly in favour of introducing a Lushai Durbar through which the Lushais could have a say in the administration of their hills. This would rule out the need for calling outside pleaders and any one aggrieved by the orders of the Superintendent could refer the case to the Durbar.¹¹

In March 1940, A. G. McCall, the Superintendent of Lushai Hills, submitted a detailed scheme in this respect to the Government of Assam. As regards the composition of the Durbar, he suggested that the Superintendent and the Sub-divisional Officer of Lunglei should be the President and the Vice-President; the Civil Surgeon of Lushai Hills and the Lushai clerks of Aizawl and Lunglei would

be ex-officio members. Inclusive of the Lushai Chiefs, clerks and one member from the Zongling area, the Durbar would have a strength of twenty eight membes. The chief functions of the Durbar would be to consider and discuss all administrative matters which involved any changes in the Lushai Hills District.¹²

The Durbar raised the status of the chiefs as heads of rural administration. Although it could never constitute a means of interference in the Superintendent's day to day executive functions, it supported the principle of rule of the people by the chiefs. It afforded a safety valve to any Lushai who had a sense of grievance against the actions of the Superintendent. The chiefs came closer to each other and realized the advantage of union and co-operative action. They gained experience in the working of representative government. The chiefs, who were so long obsessed with narrow local interests, began to think in terms of whole Lushai Hills. This was indeed a new development which trained the chiefs in leadership.

District Conference

The Chiefs' Conference paved the way for the District Conference which consisted of twenty representatives elected by the chiefs and another twenty commoners elected by an electorate college. Macdonald (1943-7) constituted the District Conference in the same manner as the Chiefs' Conference. But the trouble started from the beginning. The first District Conference decided to curtail the chiefs' power by laying down that no one could be expelled from the village by the chiefs. The power was now vested in the District Conference. Again in 1947, the basis of election was changed and joint electorate was introduced, though twenty seats were reserved for the chiefs. The commoners, under the leadership of the newly formed political party, the Mizo Union, opposed the move as the Conference was bound to be a "chiefs dominated body".¹³ The two groups had since then taken different lines of approach in making demand for their future positions.

Eventually the Government of India accepted a new scheme of administration for the hill districts based on the recommendations of the North East Frontier Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub-Committee of the Constituent Assembly, known as the Bardoloi Committee. Thus was formed a District Council under the Sixth Schedule in all the districts of Assam. In 1952 the District Council was constituted in the Lushai Hills and the first general election was held in the same year. The Mizo Union captured most of the twenty seats in the Council and thereby commanded absolute majority. The District Council abolished the chiefship along with its special

privileges in 1953. However, the position of the chiefs continued to be unaltered till the enactment of the Assam Lushai Hills District (Acquisition of Chiefs' Rights) Act, 1954. Under this Act, the rights and interests of all the existing 259 chiefs, excluding the Pawi-Lakher region, were acquired by the Government of Assam. On 1 April 1958, these were handed over to the Mizo District Council. Similarly, the rights and interests of 50 Pawi-Lakher chiefs were handed over to the Pawi-Lakher Regional Council.¹⁴

References

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13. C. Pahlira, 'Mizo Hills in the Indian Union', *Tribal Mirror*, VI, No. 1.
14. *Aoram Hriathirma*, I & II, Aizawl 1964, pp. 15, 173-740. The Lushai Hills Chiefship Abolition Act 1952 became effective from 1 January 1953.