

IMPACT OF THE
INTRODUCTION
OF GROUPING
OF VILLAGES
IN MIZORAM

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C. NUNTHARA

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Impact of the Introduction of Grouping of Villages in Mizoram is an analytical study of Bungtlang grouping centre ; Bilkhawthlir grouping centre ; physical extent of grouping of villages & impact of grouping scheme. The present study tries to highlight some of the consequential effect as seen from the local perspective.

Born on 12th November, 1944 in Mizoram, passed Matriculation and Pre-University from Mizoram under Gauhati University in 1962 and 1963 respectively. Joined St. Anthony's College, Shillong in 1963 and graduated with honours in Economics (Gauhati University) in 1966.

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The present project was carried during 1979-1980 by the author with the help of a project grant received from the Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi.

**IMPACT OF THE INTRODUCTION
OF
GROUPING OF VILLAGES IN MIZORAM**

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C. NUNTHARA



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C. Nunthara

Preface

Insurgency and counter-insurgency have become common phenomenon in most of the Third World Countries. India is no exception. The Naga and Mizo underground movements are example of this. In order to pacify the underground movements, various measures have been taken by the Government and specially trained military personnel were deployed to counter the underground activities.

In the face of all this, widespread misery and agony, cases of arsons, lootings and all kinds of atrocious activities were experienced by the people of Nagaland and Mizoram. In Mizoram, one of the measures taken by the Governement to counter activities of the MNF underground was the introduction of the grouping of villages. The introduction of the grouping scheme, in fact, had a dual purpose in the sense that this was to spread-up developmental works and bring about all-round development in the country-side. The dual nature was overtly expressed in the first phase of grouping which was called "Protected and Progressive villages". The first phase of the scheme was introduced under the provisions of Defence of India Rule, 1962 and subsequent phases were introduced under the provisions of the Assam Maintenance of Public Order Act, 1953 and covered almost the entire Mizoram in four distinct phases. Certain number of villages or clusters of villages were forcibly brought together into a single village unit under the scheme, and the actual operation was carried out by the military personnel.

Thus, the grouping scheme was carried out purely for administrative convenient and military operation without the slithtiest consideration to the social consequences, local sentiments and local economic system. As such, it had far-reaching consequences shaking the very foundation of social and moral harmony of the community. The present study tries to highlight some of the consequential effects as seen from the local perspective.

C. Nunthara

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Introduction

Mizoram, previously known as the Lushai hills or Mizo hills, lies in the southernmost corner of north-east India. It is bounded on the north by the Cachar district of Assam, on the east and south-east by Burma and on the west by Tripura and Bangladesh. In this way, about 70 per cent of its boundaries are bounded by foreign countries. It covers an area of 21,087 square kilometres and has a population of 332,290 (Census 1971). Since the present study concentrates on the impact of the introduction of grouping of villages in Mizoram, it is pertinent to briefly trace the genesis of political development under which the introduction of such order was recommended.

The establishment of Mizo National Front (MNF), with its emphasis on political self-determination, as political party in 1961 had witnessed a turning point in the politics of the hills. The MNF, calling for greater Mizoram and secession from India, and political self-determination as political ideal for Mizoram, found favour with different sections of the population. Thus, in the 1963 by-elections to the two Assam Assembly seats, the MNF contested and won both the seats. At the same time, negotiation for arms supply with Pakistan and training of volunteers were going on since 1962.

In December, 1965, during Christmas, Laimana, supposed to be in the inner circle of the MNF, was executed by an unknown assailant with a foreign weapon. Laimana was believed to be revealing the MNF secret documents and arms stock to the security forces. The death of Laimana had caused great concern among government officials resulting in a series of visits to the hills in the early months of 1966. The Planning Commission Study Team visited the area on January 12-19, 1966; the Governor of Assam visited on February 1-4, 1966, and a one-man Pataskar Commission in the second week of February, 1966. It may be recalled here that Mizoram was a part of Assam, that is, it was one of the districts of Assam till 1972 when it became a Union Territory as a result of North-East Reorganization, and a full state on February 20, 1987 as a result of peace accord between MNF and the Government of India.

Soon after the visits of government officials in the early part of 1966, the Government suddenly intended to move in the 18th Battalion Assam Rifles to help the 1st Assam Rifles to keep law and order. This was a good excuse for the MNF and was thus compelled, as they claimed, to strike before the 18th Assam Rifles reached Aizawl. And on the night of February 28th, 1966, the Aizawl treasury was looted and the telephone exchange put out of action. The MNF meeting scheduled to be held on February 1st was cancelled and the MNF sitting MLA, J. Manliana, was recalled from Shillong and the MNF declared Independence. The MNF attacked at several places throughout Mizoram and took control of almost all the important centres including Aizawl and Lunglei. However, on March 4th and 5th, 1966, some jets strafed MNF positions and dropped rockets and light bombs, and when the advancing Army column reached Aizawl on March 6th, 1966, Aizawl was recaptured from MNF occupation. But Lunglei was recaptured only on March 13th, 1966.

The MNF was declared unlawful by an Extraordinary Gazette Notification of the Government of India published on March 6th, 1966, which reads that the MNF activities were "prejudicial to the security of the Mizo District in the state of Assam and adjoining parts of the territory of India. The central government, by affecting necessary amendment, has

ordered that Rule 32 of the Defence of India Rule, 1962 shall be applicable to the MNF....” The MNF was thus forced to go underground, and formed the underground government called the ‘Mizoram Government’. Some of the important centres were freed of MNF occupations during 1966, but many of the interior villages were still under the control of the MNF, and the MNF personnel could always find food and shelter from these interior villages.

During the following months after the outbreak of violence in February, 1966, the law and order situation in Mizoram was extremely critical and to cope with the situation, various orders were passed by the Government like declaration of Mizoram as disturbed area, promulgation of Armed Forces (Special Power) Act, declaration of all offences under sections 188 and 505 of IPC as cognizable, prohibitory orders on Arms, ban on wearing uniforms resembling Army/Police uniforms, ban on articles such as torchlights, jungle boots etc. However, in spite of all these orders, the underground MNF still controlled many interior villages. In order to put an end to this, the scheme of grouping of villages was recommended and introduced in 1967.

The main object of the scheme was thus to facilitate the effective operation of the security forces against the MNF which had taken control of the interior villages spread out in far-flung areas. It was not possible for the administration to provide adequate security measures to all the outlying villages. It was, nevertheless, necessary to prevent extortion of food and money from villagers by the MNF undergrounds. The villagers were thus confused and helpless as to whom they will render their political loyalty. Under the circumstances, grouping of villages into larger units as counter-insurgency tool was extended throughout Mizoram except the extreme southern portion of Pawi-Lakher region as this region was not affected by the MNF activities. There was considerable opposition to the grouping scheme from the villagers. The MNF also tried to foil the shifting operation especially the first category by organizing ambushes on security forces engaged in the grouping operations. However, despite the attempts made by the MNF to foil it and considerable amount of opposition

from the villagers, the security forces, with weapons at their disposal, were able to compel the villagers to come to the grouping centres. The villagers could not be expected to be enthusiastic about leaving their own villages by force. With the grouping of villages, the MNF was thus forced to shift its headquarters from Mizoram to East Pakistan, now Bangladesh.

The second objective of grouping of villages was to accelerate the progress of developmental works and to bring home immediately impact of developmental programmes hitherto almost impossible owing to the scattered nature of villages coupled with extremely inadequate communication facilities. This was recommended by the Planning Commission Study Team headed by Shri Tarlok Singh which visited the area in the early part of 1966. This was also specified in the first category of grouping carried out in 1967 called 'Protected and Progressive Village'.

However, the economic factor of the impact of grouping was given a much less concern as no tangible programme for the improvement of jhumming or for the amelioration of poverty in the grouping centres except temporary provisions and later on relief measures by way of Test Relief and Employment Generation Scheme, was made for the villagers. The economic hardship was so great that a near-famine situation was a common phenomenon in all the grouping centres.

On the other hand, the military attempt at foiling MNF movement and of reducing physical contact with the villagers were successful to the extent that all the grouping centres were guarded like fortress, and a security checking for all the villagers early in the morning before going to the jhum fields and in the evening while entering the villages. Nevertheless, occasional ambushes which sometimes paralysed normal administrative functioning were still common throughout 1967, 1968 and 1969.

Thus, grouping of villages into larger units carried out in Mizoram during 1967-70 was modelled to safeguard the villagers from the MNF undergrounds and to accelerate the progress of developmental works in internal villages. As such, the scheme, which had four distinct stages or categories of grouping of villages, was introduced under the provisions of

the Defence of India Rule, 1962 and the Assam Maintenance of Public Order Act, 1953.

The first category of grouping called 'Protected and Progressive Villages' recommended under the provisions of the Defence of India Rule, 1962, was introduced on the 4th of January, 1967, within ten miles radius on the main line of Silchar-Kolasib-Aizawl-Serchhip-Lunglei road, and the operation was completed in ten weeks. It involved 106 villages grouped together into eighteen grouping centres involving a total population of 52,210. By the end of February, 1967, all the centres were taken over by the civil administration while the actual operation of the grouping scheme and the actual day to day security arrangements were undertaken by the military personnel. The administration of a grouping centre in this category was normally manned by member of the Assam Civil Service designated as Administrative Officer or Area Administrative Officer.

The second category of grouping of villages called 'New Grouping Centres' was ordered in August, 1969, under the provisions of the Assam Maintenance of Public Order Act, 1953. It covered five sectors of the population viz. (a) erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) border, (b) Tripura border, (c) Lunglei-Lawngtlei road, (d) Dargawn (Khowzawl)-Bungzung-North Vanlaiphai-Serchhip road, and (e) Seling-Champhai road. It involved 184 villages grouped together into 40 grouping centres with a total population of 97,339. The actual operation of shifting of population had already started from 1967 onwards while the 1969 Order regularised the movement. As in the case of the first category, the civil administration in the grouping centres were left to Administrative Officers who may be in the Assam Civil Service or senior government employees. Military posts were created in each of the grouping centres to carry out security arrangements.

The third category of grouping called 'Voluntary Grouping Centres' was ordered in August, 1970, again under the provisions of the Assam Maintenance of Public Order Act, 1953. It covered the population from different parts of Mizoram, involving 110 villages grouped into 26 grouping

centres with a total population involvement of 47,156. Although the name denotes voluntary shifting, movement in all cases was done under compulsion and movement of some villages into the new centres had already started since 1968 and the 1970 Order completed it in August, 1970.

The fourth and last category of grouping called 'Extended Loop Areas' ordered in 1970 was again under the provisions of the Assam Maintenance of Public Order Act, 1953. It involved the shifting of 63 villages into 17 grouping centres and a total population involvement of 34,219. The actual operation of movement was again initiated during 1968-69 and was completed in 1970.

Besides grouping centres which fall under the above distinct categories, there were three grouping centres—Mamit, Tuipang, and Sangau—in which actual shifting was carried out independently of the other categories. The three villages together had a total population of 4,938. Thus, grouping of villages in Mizoram during 1967-70 involved a total population of 2,36,162. All the 104 grouping centres were provided with Army posts and civil administration. As the number of grouping centres increased, the civil administration in some of the grouping centres were left under senior clerks or even gram sevaks who were upgraded to the rank of Administrative Officers.

There were, of course, some villages in different parts of Mizoram which were excluded from the grouping scheme and shifting operation. In all cases, the excluded villages were found in those areas where the MNF movement was normally less active. Districtwise population of such ungrouped villages were as follows:

Aizawl District	10,431
Lunglei District	2,000
Chhimituipui District	24,000

Thus, the total population of ungrouped villages in Mizoram at the completion of grouping scheme was 36,431, and besides these ungrouped villages, district headquarters of Aizawl, Lunglei and Saiha each had a population of 32,000, 12,000, 1,500 respectively. Thus, the total population not directly affected by the grouping scheme was 81,931 while 2,36,162 population was directly involved in the grouping operation.

Thus, out of a total population of 3,18,093 in 1970, 2,36,162 or 82 per cent of the total population were directly affected by the introduction of the scheme of grouping of villages in Mizoram.

The immediate effect of grouping of villages in Mizoram was the total dislocation of jhumming as villagers had to leave the year's jhum cultivation and were unable to make fresh start in the grouping centres, which they were forced to do, because of the seasonal character of jhum cultivation depending purely on the monsoon rain. Moreover, the original inhabitants of the regrouped villages were unable to work full time in the jhum fields due to constant supervision and harassment by the military personnel. Those who came home late in the evening were accosted with the charge of supporting and helping the underground MNF movement causing great hardship to agricultural workers. Thus, widespread famine condition naturally followed the introduction of the scheme. In later years, the concentration of agricultural workers in the grouping centres soon exhausted the available land, and the already short cycle of jhumming had to be further shortened. This had been reducing agricultural yields incredibly, and only few families in most of the grouping centres were able to harvest paddy large enough to sustain themselves for the whole year. Others had to virtually supplement agricultural works with other subsidiary works, usually of daily wage labour in the village itself or in towns. At present, the opening of government ration shops in all the grouping centres and the supply of essential commodities through these shops relieved the food situation to some extent. But the non-availability of subsidiary works posed problem for the villagers posing a very low purchasing power even to buy essential commodities from the ration shops.

It was almost impossible to do wage labour outside the village during the peak season of weed-out work as the villagers cannot afford to spend many days away from daily agricultural work during the peak season. This restricts them to seek employment outside their own villages. Some of the wealthier families in the village make use of this opportunity by clearing large jhum land counting upon the extra labour

which they could always call upon from the fellow villagers. The introduction of Employment Generation Scheme (EGS) and the Test Relief (TR) after speedy induction of administration and after Mizoram attained the status of Union Territory also provided employment in manual labour for the villagers. The EGS and TR had been introduced to meet the immediate needs of the people by providing wage labour for the construction of jeep roads, playground, community hall and so on for the benefits of the village people. The schemes were thus purely an interim arrangement, and in many cases, the schemes normally did not provide adequate wage labour for all the needy villagers.

Thus, in spite of the emotional and sentimental attachment that they have for the village land, the villagers realized the low economic yields of agricultural work under jhum cultivation. As such, they were willing to shift to other occupations whenever they could find them. One important effect of the village grouping has been the loosening of village solidarity. The people of villages may still be bound together by sentimental attachment to village land, but villagers, especially those who came from other villages, lost loyalty and found it hard to identify themselves as true members of the hitherto neighbouring village which in some instances turn out to be traditional village rival.

The settlement pattern in the grouping centres which followed the method of concentration of members of any particular village in one block or street also help deteriorating village solidarity. Thus, the settlement pattern in the grouping centres upset village solidarity while retaining original village loyalty and identity. Thus, people in many instances, still retain the sentimental bond of the old village which may cut across familial ties. Members of village councils in the grouping centres virtually complain the existence of village subgroup rivalry within the grouping centres in matters connected with the administration of the Church, Politics, School management and so on. In this way, villagers in the grouping centres gradually lost village solidarity based on tribal setting. As a result, people feel less attached to the village resulting in the consequent migratory flow of population to towns in search of

commercial openings. Thus, during the decade 1961-71, the population of Aizawl town increased from 14,257 in 1961 to over 40,000 in 1971.

Grouping of villages in Mizoram was carried out with the basic object of eliminating the underground MNF, as stated earlier, as interior villages were under the control of the MNF. However, soon after the implementation of the grouping scheme, the MNF shifted its headquarters to East Pakistan in foreign country and carried out its military operation from there. As such, the immediate object of eliminating or weakening the underground movement was not quite successful. Moreover, military harassment and suppression in the grouping centres gave rise to a negative attitude towards India in general as security forces personnel were, to the villagers, representatives or agents of national society. This and the depressing condition in the grouping centres as a result of perpetual famine situation due to the dislocation of jhumming pattern resulted in an upward surge of MNF support. Thus, increased negative attitude towards the dominant group results in increasing stress on tribal identity which, in the case of the Mizos, is symbolized in the MNF movement. This is because any integration process in a multi-ethnic relationship usually follows the pattern in which, what Karl Izikowitz (1969:147) has pointed out 'friendship and enmity alternates'.

Thus, the grouping of villages in Mizoram failed to affect physical elimination of the underground movement. On the contrary, it gave rise to its increasing support among the people. Before grouping scheme was introduced, the villagers outwardly supported the MNF for fear of physical reprisal as they were under its clutches. Some Mizos even overtly expressed their dislike for it. The Mizo Union leaders even went to the extent of forming their own armed wing to counter the underground movement. However, the introduction of grouping scheme, even the Mizo Union leaders did not outwardly criticize MNF movement for fear of losing people's support. This is understandable as the grouping scheme covered 2,36,162 of the 2,72,593 rural population of Mizoram. It is because of this that after normal political activities were resumed since 1970, all the political parties and all the political leaders professed

themselves to have an understanding with the underground MNF.

The extent of physical changes brought about by grouping of villages could easily be discernible from the consequent dislocation of jhumming. Scarcity of land for jhumming in the grouping centres forced many people to go back to their original villages after a relaxation of compulsory occupation in the grouping centres since 1972. This is mainly because of the social and physical hardship experienced by the people in the grouping centres. Many villages covered by the first category of grouping scheme along the Silchar-Aizawl road and Aizawl-Lunglei road had been re-established after 1972, and after 1980 most of the villages covered under the other categories have also been re-established. The kind of help rendered by the government was not simply adequate to alleviate their difficulties. The rehabilitation grants given to them at a rate of Rs. 16.6 lakhs a year for a population of 2,36,162 could not be considered adequate to help the people in the situation. As such, the people were simply forced to go back to their original villages or else build a new village site in search of fertile land for jhumming. However, these new ungrouped villages called 'thlawhbawks' were deprived of the usual benefits of a proper village in the form of village council for village administration, school and medical facilities in the initial stages. It was precisely because of this that competition for giving recognition to these villages among different political parties occupied one of the major issues during the 1978 Assembly elections. Thus, people in the thlawhbawks were being deprived of the usual benefits of the process of modernization. An attempt at giving recognition to these villages by the People's Conference (Party) Ministry headed by Brigadier T. Sailo was turned down by the Lieutenant Governor in 1978. However, many of these villages have now been recognized by the present Mizoram government and usual amenities extended to them.

The second objective of accelerating progress of developmental works, thus, also failed to have the desired result. On the contrary, it resulted in dislocation of jhumming pattern without providing alternative means and dislodged social harmony within the villages. This naturally gave rise to social

apathy in which the immediate emphasis has been individual progress. As such, grouping of villages resulted in the loss of much of the homogeneous nature and shows the emergence of relatively differentiated village communities. In the circumstances, leadership structure closely follows the pattern we find in towns. Leaders in the grouping centres are those who can successfully manipulate the fruits of modernization. The acquired power is used to further manipulate the benefits of progress like elsewhere while at the same time the masses of the village community remain poor. In this way, the benefits of whatever developmental measures undertaken in the grouping centres have been accrued by a small section of the village population. Grouping of villages, thus, resulted in a change-over from relatively undifferentiated, homogeneous village communities to relatively differentiated, heterogeneous village communities in terms of wealth and prestige. It is true, of course, that the change was brought about by the general process of modernization, but that the introduction of grouping scheme quickened the pace. Village communities in the grouping centres are also occupationally diversified as a result of the opening of different levels of schools, establishment of government offices and emergence of petty trade and business. In the circumstances, grouping centres now have a wider network of social and commercial relationships with the outside world. This has been facilitated by the opening of wider network of road communication linking many of these interior villages with towns.

The structural consequences of grouping of villages has, thus, been tremendous. Hitherto remote villages were brought into larger units. This naturally disturbed the traditional village harmony based on homogeneity and attachment to village land. Both these bases of traditional village structure had been shattered and a new structure based on occupational differentiation and heterogeneous character emerged. Thus, the masses of the village communities who were left to fight their survival with the traditional system of jhum cultivation became poorer. The immediate effect of grouping of villages on the political front was the gradual shift in political loyalty towards the MNF movement. Military occupation of the grouping

centres and physical harassment to the people reinforced the already existing negative evaluation of the dominant group and consequently on an increasing stress on tribal identity. In the early stages of MNF uprising, mistakes and deplorable activities of the MNF had resulted in internal conflict and enmity between the Mizos culminating in the dwindling popularity of the MNF among the people. However, the atrocious activities of the security forces like the burning of houses, forcible taking of properties, large-scale killing and harassment of innocent people, rape and other tragic occurrences acted as stimulant to group cohesion and minimized MNF mistakes.

The fieldwork was conducted during 1979-80. As the University could not grant duty leave to me during academic session, fieldwork had to be carried out during University vacation period only. Thus, with the limited time available for fieldwork, the original plan of having a comparative picture of grouping centre and ungrouped village so as to arrive at the extent of the impact of grouping of villages and traditional social organization and traditional pattern of jhumming, had to be changed. As such, two grouping centres covered by the first category of grouping scheme, Bilkhawthlir and Bungtlang, on the Silchar-Aizawl road and Aizawl-Lunglei road respectively, were selected for systematic field enquiry.

The initial period of fieldwork was spent on extensive travel to different interior villages to get general information and to identify the selected villages. The inhabitants of Bungtlang grouping centre more or less experienced the social and physical hardship as a result of grouping of villages and may be construed as representatives of the other grouping centres of like order in which the main occupation continued to be based on jhum cultivation. Bilkhawthlir, on the other hand, was on the border area bordering Cachar district of Assam. As such, there is ample opportunity for wet rice cultivation in the valleys connecting to Cachar plains. Mainly as a result of this, Bilkhawthlir grouping centres did not experience the normal physical hardship commonly faced and experienced by the majority of the grouping centres, and may, thus, be taken as example of a few other centres like Champhai, Thenzawl, and North Vanlaiphai, in which the villagers more

or less subsist themselves on wet rice cultivation.

During the second period, intensive fieldwork and investigation were done in the two selected villages for a period of one month duration each, employing local talents, using informal discussions, formal interviewing and observation. It was found that informal interview and discussion were more fruitful, and the bulk of the information were collected by employing this technique and observation.

In order to bring out the general condition at the grouping centres, a separate descriptive analysis of the two selected grouping centres will be made in two separate sections. Considering these two selected villages as representatives of the other grouping centres, an attempt will be made, in a separate section, the extent of the impact of the grouping scheme on jhumming and village economy, traditional social organization and village harmony and the general process of change.

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