

A Mizo Uprising : A significant event in the history of Chieftainship in Mizoram

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When the advent of the British in the area, now Mizoram, was around the corner, a remarkable event took place. The people revolted against the autocratic and whimsical rule of the Sailo chiefs who became masters of the whole of Mizoram after crushing all their rival chiefs and held undisputed sway over all sorts of clans. The event, locally known as *Lal Sawi*, was a popular uprising against the despotic rules of the chiefs in which almost all the commoners were involved. The movement spread from one village to another like wildfire. The uprising halted the smooth running of the administration of the chiefs. The result of the uprising was, however, short and brief because the unity among the common people could not last long. For this reasons, the chiefs restored themselves to their previous positions without much difficulty. The restoration of the chiefs was immediately followed by the advent of the British. An attempt is made in this paper to give a brief account of the uprising thus highlighting the whole episode.

Causes of the uprising

When the wounds of the war between the eastern and the western chiefs were hardly healed this uprising arose to muddle positions of the chiefs. As the uprising was chiefly directed against the chiefs, the causes are also not far to seek. Though the incident happened in a later period of the reigns of the chiefs the woes of the people were not of recent origin. It may, therefore, be assumed that the oppressive rule of the chiefs was solely responsible for what happened in Mizoram. The causes of the uprising may be briefly described as below.

Nobody can say for certain as to how and when chieftainship originated. Its evolution appears to have grown out of the collective needs of the group life. Inter-clan feuds which were common among the Mizo also appear to have been responsible for the rise of chieftainship. Its origin may be traced as far back as to Burma where the institution of chieftainship became accomplished fact.

Before the emergence of the Sailo clan as a ruling family the chiefs of other clans like Rokhum, Zadeng, Palian and others had emerged as powerful ruling clans and ruled for about 250 Years.¹ During this long period of their reign, these chiefs ruled the people with cruelty. They were harsh even in time of peace. Instead of making efforts to improve the plights of their subjects, Zadeng, Palian and other chiefs adopted aggressive policy towards their men

causing more miseries. Nor did the chiefs care for their subjects. For this reason, the people distanced themselves from their rulers and the passing of their rule was not regretted.² Therefore, they turned towards the Sailo chiefs expecting to get a better deal from them.

Thus, in course of time, the Sailo clan emerged as a ruling family. Their sympathetic attitude towards the people thus attracted the latter to switch over their allegiance to the former. Besides, their prowess in war and wisdom also brought the people to their side. So, within a short period of time the sailo chiefs became the dominant factor in Mizoram.

As a matter of fact, the expectations of the people were still a *Utopia* even under the great Sailo chiefs. Their sufferings and miseries were yet lamentable. Nor did the wretched conditions of the people improve.

Under such precarious circumstances, the fate of the people was still uncertain. The chief enjoyed unlimited power to the extent of death penalty.³ The life of every common man was at a peril. They were in a state of fear. Both the rich and the poor were afraid of the chief for the latter could inflict capital punishment upon them. The life of the wealthy man was neither peaceful nor happy for fear of confiscating his property by the chief. In those days, a man's wealth was measured by the valuable items he possessed. For example, if a man had many *mithuns* he was considered as a wealthy man and respected in the village. Likewise, a man who had a gong, whether big or small, was considered as a wealthy man. Thus the valuable property like silver, beads, gongs *mithun* etc. would always find their way to the chief's house. He seized them for greed.⁴ So, under such prevailing and uncertain situation the people had no choice but to revolt against the chief.

Secondly, the chief had officials to whom the people paid tributes. The officials were the *Upa*, the *Tlangau*, the *Ramhual*, the *Zalen*, the *Puithiam* and the *Thirdeng*. The *Khawchhiar*, a village writer was the creation of the British. These officials helped the chief in his day to day administration. The *Puithiam*, the priest, was concerned only with the religious rites. The people were obliged to pay tributes or dues to them in addition to regular payment to a chief. The dues became heavy and burdensome to a common man. Thus having enjoyed a higher status than the common people in the society the officials sometimes misused their position which embittered the common man. *Upas*, acting as a link between the chief and the ruled always lived a comfortable life. Sometimes they demanded favours from the people even without the chief's knowledge. For this reason, the *Upas* and other officials were the target of attack together with the chiefs when political party was formed in 1946.

Thirdly, in fact, the people were the life line of the chief. They were the tax payers. Every family was bound to pay *Fathang* or paddy tax after harvesting was over and the amount of which varied from time to time depending, however, on an individual chief. Generally, every resident paid the same quantity. The chief was

also entitled to receive *sachhiah* or meat tax. Whenever wild animal was shot or trapped the chief shared its hind leg. In case a villager failed to pay this due he was liable to a rigorous punishment to the extent of being expelled from the village or death penalty. But after circulation of money the chief, if he chose, could impose a fine of Rs. 40/-. He also received *Chi chhiah* or salt tax. When a salt well was found in a village a party had to pay to the chief a share. In addition to this share, each member of the party must pay a certain quantity out of his own share. The chief then got the biggest share. The village chief also received a share out of wild honey collected by villagers. This was called *Khuai chhiah* or bee tax. Anyone who collected wild honey without prior permission from the chief was liable to a fine of Rs. 40/-. If a *mithun* was sold to a person belonging to another village the man had to give Rs. 2/- more as a due payable to the chief. This was called *Sekawt hawn man*. Again, the villagers had to construct or repair the chief's house, free of cost. With this, the people did not pay anything in kind or cash but they spent, sometimes, many days for the chief. This in turn affected the economic life of the villagers. This was called *Lal in sak chhiah*. Besides these taxes, the chief sometimes realised taxes from the people on certain items. The taxes imposed upon the common people became unbearable and failure of payment could lead to a serious action upon the concerned person. Thus the people looked for a chance to do away with these abnoxious taxes.

Fourthly, the chief's action which the people most hated was locally known as *ram*.⁵ By it, the chief used to seize the property of a man who disobeyed his orders. The victim was also liable to an expulsion from the village. The chief could send any of his subjects away from his village without any reason thereof. At the same time, every family had a right to leave a chief to another village. In normal situation, the chief was obliged to accept the migration of his subject. But before he left he should clear his dues. But in certain cases, the chief was not bound to oblige it. Sometimes a villager did try to escape from a village for fear of the chief. In that case he risked his own life. In case, if the other chief would not accept him his life was completely in danger. Every chief, in fact required more houses for his strength was measured by the number of houses he possessed.

Fifthly, the chief sometimes showed partiality to his subjects. This policy badly affected the general life of the people. In theory, the chief was the custodian of every citizen. All men were equal before him. But in real practice, he was fully partial. There was a big gap between the rich and the poor. In time of danger he would employ the services of those whom he did not favour. However, in certain occasions where the chief's favour could be earned he would select only whom he favoured most. There was distinction between the rich and the poor, the brave and the coward etc. He did not welcome a family that could not cultivate enough paddy for a year. Nor was there a place for a lazy man. If a grown up man was found loitering in day time he would enquire as to why he stayed at home. Thus, for all the reasons mentioned above the hatred

against the chief got momentum when the Sailo chief became masters of the whole Mizoram in a later period of their rule. Thus, the Sailo chief did not show any sign that they were better than those of their predecessors.

Outbreak of the Uprising

The commoners wanted to liberate themselves from the yoke of the chief since a long time ago. They failed to achieve it because unity among them could not become an entity. Now being united they had to resort to the course of uprising. The uprising first broke out in Lalkhuma's village at Lungchhuan⁶ and spread soon to the villages of his brother Langliana and Lalvunga the descendants of Vuta. The uprising was plotted by Lalkhuma's subjects who stayed over night in the river in making for a fish trap.⁷ There they drew up the plan for the attack. The movement soon spread to the chiefs of South Mizoram, descendants of Rolura. Almost all the chiefs were attacked and subdued. It also affected Bengkhuaia who captured Mary Winchester. The chiefs belonging to the descendants of Manga also experienced the outrage of the uprising. Fortunately, however, the villages of Lalsavunga's descendants did not rise up. It is not known why those people did not revolt. It is believed, however, that the chief did not rule excessively or perhaps the people lacked courage to stand up. Whatever might be the reason the fact is that the chiefs and their subjects lived together peacefully while the other parts of the hills were burning.

The weapons used

During this uprising, gun and other lathal weapons were not used except that only two shots were fired. These were also done under compulsion. They used a 'pledge' as a useful weapon. Unity was also an important weapon. Physical assault to the chief was not known. Instead he was asked to take pledge. However, before the chief was asked to do so the people came together and took pledge themselves to unit together for their cause. They collected water in a basin and everyone present there was given a firewood with one end burnt. Putting the fire into the water one said, *Lallama ka tan leh chuan he mei anghian ka thing*, meaning, 'I will die like the fire if at all I support the chief again'.⁸ Everyone took the oath. This was done so that they could stand united.

After taking the pledge the commoners turned towards the chief. The chief was called upon to take the pledge promising never to behave to the people as before. As his subjects did, water was collected in a container and the chief was given a firewood with one end burnt and dipped it into the water and said, *Ka lalna hi he thingthu ang hian mit rawh se*, meaning "Let my chieftainship be extinguished like this fire."⁹ All the chief's officials and their supporters were also asked to do the same.¹⁰ However, in some villages, the chiefs were asked only to reorganise his administrative set up so as to make tangible atmosphere for the commoners. Yet in some

places the commoners after removing the chief, made their own choice as chief.

Resurgence

After this event, there were some villages without chiefs. But the gap period was not long. Two factors were responsible for the resurgence of the chiefs. In the first place, unity of the people could not remain in tact for long. Unity, the mainstay, was lacked. In the second place these was the tussle amongst the various clans over the question of chieftainship. They could not remain without chief nor could they choose man among them. Therefore, the people had no option but to restore the chieftainship to the rightful chiefs.

Now, the situation became again favourable to the chiefs for unity among the people was breaking. To worsen the fragile situation, the incident took place in Lungliana's village at Hmawngkawn. A Paihte girl was maltreated by another tribe. As a result, a clan-feuds began to erupt making the commoners a divided house. Hence the Paihte clan reversed their stand and sided the chief.¹¹ There upon, the chief, Lungliana, without any delay, reacted with attempt to revive his position. He was aware that he alone could not do anything at the moment. He therefore sent secret message to Lianphunga informing him to come over and loot his subjects. Lianphunga, taking Lalhluma along with him, proceeded to Lungliana's village. When the villagers knew that Lianphunga and his party came over to the village to help the chief they gathered together to stop him and they put up bamboo barricade. When the party arrived at the barricade they informed them not to proceed beyond it. They also warned him that crossing of which would mean death to him and to his party. At this juncture, having found no alternative Lalhluma jumped over the crowd and said, "*Keimah Lalhluma, Lallula tupa, sarthi rualak ni lo e*, meaning "I, Lalhluma, grandson of Lallula, will not die of unnatural death, shoot me"¹². Two shots were fired at him but luckily both the shots failed to explode. Luahmanga, who fired one of the shots and having found his position hazardous, jumped out of the crowd and said, "*Lal lam ka pawm leh ta. Ka mei thawlh a nung leh ta e*" meaning "I do accept the chief and my fire is also lit again"¹³. When he declared this, all the others who were armed with the guns also withdrew their guns. There began a complete break down of unity among the commoners. Now the chiefs at different places declared, "*Kan mei thawlh unung leh ta*" meaning "our dead fire are lit again"¹⁴. The news of Hmawngkawn incident soon spread far and wide. The deposed chiefs then restored themselves in their own places. Having consolidated their positions the chiefs began to take action against the ringleaders. But before the chiefs could fully recover themselves from the shocks the whole situation took a new turn. The advent of the British and their subsequent administrative interference into the affairs of the chiefs reduced the latter to merely depend on the mercy of the British.

Notes & References

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