

Forced Migration, Social Conflict and Adjustment among the Mizos of Mizoram, India

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Introduction:

Migrations took place even during the ancient and medieval times. Some people migrated in search of fertile land for agriculture, whereas some were forced to migrate from their habitats. In Mizoram, migration took place under duress during village grouping in the wake of insurgency.

In the Third World countries, especially after the Second World War, insurgency and counter-insurgency have become a common phenomenon. India is no exception to such phenomenon. To tackle the increasing insurgency in the country, various measures have been taken by the states. In Mizoram, one of the important measures taken to check insurgency was grouping of many small villages into a larger unit.

In the North-East, village grouping was introduced in Nagaland and Mizoram. But it was soon discontinued in Nagaland due to various reasons. Re-grouping of villages into larger units as a counter-insurgency measure as done in Mizoram during 1967-70 was modelled after the 1958 regrouping launched by the British Chief against the Chinese squatters in Malaya after the Second World War. It was also linked with the tragic and ill-fated experiment of agro-villas in South Vietnam, which was aimed against the Vietcong, and was later modified by the USA

in 1962 into various workable units and ultimately proved successful. The authorities responsible for grouping exercises in the past were foreign powers, viz., the British in Malaya and the USA in South Vietnam, both aimed against Communist insurgents. Hence, its application in India is to some extent a deviation.

The tribal population of India living in inhospitable and hostile environment and without much exogenous impact have traditionally adjusted and adapted to their habitats very amicably with a symbiotic relationship with their environment. There has always been a precarious balance between the tribal population and their environment. Such a relationship expresses itself in their economy, settlement structure and population distribution. However, any change — be it climatic or technological — changes this symbiotic relationship, which has its impact on the tribal communities. It is in this context that a forced migration to group the villages of the tribal communities living in Mizo Hills can be properly understood. It goes without saying that the change through migration and grouping has had tremendous impact on the tribal economy, society and culture in Mizoram.

Objectives:

The main objectives of the present study are:

1. to examine the social and political compulsions of forced migration and relocating them in a new area, and
2. to analyse the environmental, social, economic and demographic consequences of the grouping.

Data Base:

To obtain various data, censuses and statistical handbooks of Mizoram and published books are consulted and extensive fieldwork was carried out in order to bring out the impact of forced migration on the people in the newly grouped locations. Information was collected through questionnaires and personal

interviews at household level from unaffected villages as well as grouped villages.

Methodology:

1. The present study is based on extensive fieldwork conducted in the selected villages.
2. One set of sample villages was from the villages unaffected by the grouping and another set of villages was from the grouped ones.
3. Changes/implications are studied by comparing the two sets of villages with their social, economic, demographic and environmental conditions.

Study Area:

The state of Mizoram is located on the Indo-Myanmar borderland on the eastern offshoots of the Himalayas. It lies between 21 56'N-24 31'N latitudes and 92 16'E-93 26'E longitudes standing like a lone sentinel in the eastern corner of India. It is bounded in the North by Cachar district of Assam and the state of Manipur, in the East and South by the Chin Hills of Myanmar and in the West by Chittagong Hills Tract of Bangladesh and the state of Tripura. The geographical area of the state is 21,087 sq.kms., which is 0.63 per cent of India's total geographical area. The state occupies a great strategic importance in the North-Eastern corner of India, as it has a total length of 585 kms of international boundary with Myanmar and Bangladesh. The North-South dimension is 285 kms and from East to West, it is about 115 kms in length.

Its physiography is characterised by parallel longitudinal valleys and ridges containing small, dispersed settlements.

Its population consists almost entirely of Mizos, belonging to the Mongoloid stock. The total population of Mizoram according to 1991 Census was 6,87,217 persons, consisting of 3,56,672 males and 3,29,545 females. Population growth rate in Mizoram was 38.98 per cent during 1981-91. The density of population in 1991

was only 33 persons per square kilometre and ranked one of the lowest density areas in India.

Anthropological evidences show that the Mizos migrated to the present habitat from somewhere in China. Legends, folk tales and folk songs also augment this perception. The Mizo language belongs to the Tibeto-Burmese family.

Great social, economic and cultural homogeneity exists among them. They entered Mizoram at different stages and settled in separate settlements, having their own village jurisdiction in respect to distribution of jhum lands. Later, disputes arose due to infringement of one village by the other. The desire for supremacy and territorial possession culminated in raids by a larger village on a smaller village. Thus the need to have a powerful person to regulate the domestic and political affairs of the villages became very important. Thus, chieftainship was born and the Mizo society became a Chief-centred society where the Chief or *Lal* was highly esteemed. Each village was considered as a separate state ruled by its own chief. There was a shift in the character of chiefs after the independence of India. And this age-old institution of chieftainship in Mizoram came to an end under Assam Lushai Hills District Acquisition of Chief Rights Act in 1954.

Grouping Exercise:

Political disturbance broke out in Mizoram on 1st March 1966, consequent upon the formation of Mizo National Front (MNF), which turned rebellious due to misunderstanding over the political domination of the erstwhile district by the Indian Government. The MNF was declared as unlawful, and the region was categorised as "Disturbed Area".

One of the important measures to check insurgency in Mizoram undertaken by the government was grouping of many small villages into a larger unit. This was done by evacuating the villages located in the far flung areas of the state and rehabilitating

them in some specified areas that were accessible to road communication for easy security checks.

Thus grouping of villages was carried out in Mizoram to safeguard the villagers from the MNF underground activists and to accelerate the progress of developmental works in the 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.

Apparently grouping of villages in Mizoram brought many unintended changes. Since many villagers were forced to migrate to one place, there was a total dislocation of cultivation areas in the grouped villages. This led to widespread famine conditions among the migrated villagers. Due to high concentration of agricultural workers in the grouped villages, the available cultivable lands were exhausted and the already rather short cycle of jhumming (shifting cultivation) had to be further shortened. This reduced the agricultural yield incredibly and only a few families in such locations were able to harvest enough paddy to sustain them for the whole year. Such a situation created further social and political tension and misunderstanding among the Mizos living in such centres. But slowly they adjusted among themselves and started living peacefully. Due to such a situation many of them have shifted to other occupations for better living. Scarcity of cultivable land in grouping centres also forced many people to go back to their original villages and some shifted to new sites in search of fertile land for jhumming.

Before the introduction of grouping of villages, excluding the two towns Aizawl and Lunglei, there were as many as 764 villages in Mizoram. The distribution of villages and their population in different sub-divisions or districts before the introduction of village grouping in 1967 was as follows:

Table 1: Number of Villages and Population in Mizoram, 1966

District	No. of Villages	Population
Aizawl	456	199354
Lunglei	169	41563
Chhimtuipui	139	38539
Total	764	279456

Source: Fieldwork.

Table-2: Number of Evacuated Villages and Grouping (New) Centres, 1967-70

District	No. of Villages Evacuated	No. of Ungrouped	Grouping Centres	Population in the New Centres
Aizaw	344	32	80	56721
Lunglei	127	20	22	11312
Chhimtuipui	42	86	8	6136
Total	516	138	110	74,169

Insurgency in Mizoram, which is the sole cause of grouping of villages, was not accidental but the outcome of a long planning and preparations clandestinely made by the dissident groups. It was deeply rooted in the social, geographical, economic and political milieu of the society. The economic interest and psychological needs created major political and social forces that accelerated the movement with definite direction and goals. Consequently, the inter-group and ethnic tension intensified and led, at times, to direct violence in the form of insurgency.

Highlights of the Study:

Relocating the people in a new centre by uprooting them from their natural locations brought about significant changes in their solidarity, their values, their ways of life and their social practices.

In the traditional setting, the village harmony was largely based on agricultural works, which bound the villagers together. Agricultural practices were characterised by slash and burn cultivation, locally called 'jhum'. The practice of jhum cultivation did not permit permanent landholding, although any individual villager considered the village land as his or her own. The jhum cultivation cycle was usually eight to nine years. It appears that solidarity of the villagers was the effect of the system of agriculture they practised. Any dislocation in traditional agricultural system would thus result in disharmony in the village solidarity.

Village relocation or grouping into centres destroyed the traditional village economy based on work-partnership, which was a common customary practice throughout Mizoram. The sudden and forced relocation of villages without proper planning had far reaching consequences on the traditional social organisation as well. The emergence of new occupations with greater emphasis on monetary value created economic and social differentiation among the village communities in the grouping centres. Jhum cultivation lost its traditional significance as a source of village harmony. Thus, a new value system based on monetised economy has emerged. Greater emphasis on the monetised economy gave rise to the immediate monetary profits to some, which resulted in widespread misappropriation of developmental funds at all levels. The quick transformations forced many people in difficult situations and are unable to adjust themselves. This resulted in anxiety and tension among the people.

Capital crimes like murder and theft, which were almost unknown to the Mizo society before village grouping, have become

a common phenomenon in the grouping centres. The Village Council Courts have become less important and act only as nominal bodies. This has also resulted in ethnocentrism, group identity and sub-nationalism mainly due to many hardships faced by the people consequent upon the introduction of grouping scheme. The ethnocentric attitude was so strong at times that a strong feeling of ethnicity prevailed, which called for group cohesion. This kind of group sentiment could be observed elsewhere whenever there was a high degree of group homogeneity.

The atrocious activities of the security personnel on duty in the grouping centres aroused suspicions. These feelings have drawn them together with an increasing enmity against the non-tribal as most such personnel belonged to that category. This increased the in-group cohesiveness and made them hostile to the non-tribal people.

The sudden and forced nature of changes in the traditional system caused difficulties to many families. They could not adjust themselves properly in the grouping centres, which resulted in tension, anxiety, inter-village feuds and insecurity among themselves. All this led to emergence of different kinds of social mal-adjustments, which were earlier unknown to Mizo society.

Development through Test Relief (TR) programme in the grouping centres motivated the Mizo people to participate in many developmental activities like construction of road, building, playground etc. Availability of wage-linked employment opportunities discouraged the traditional Mizo tendency to offer free service.

Emergence of grouping centres has led to further diversification in religious denomination among the Mizos. The isolated religious leaders adhering to their own denominations activated themselves for re-establishing their status in the new society with a new group of followers. As a result of this re-configuration of the society there were many religious

denominations. This is evident in the following empirical findings. In both grouping centres, we found as many as four denominations. On the other hand, we found only one denomination in the ungrouped villages. Although there is only one religion prevalent among the Mizos in Mizoram, i.e., Christianity, there are several denominations.

Although economic opportunities dissuaded the individual Mizos from offering voluntary services, the society did not ignore the importance of the traditional community life sustained through collective endeavour. The urge to get back the benefits of their old community life, the youths are motivated to revive the old practice of voluntary service, but in an institutional manner following the modern organisational techniques. As a result, social and voluntary organisations like the Young Mizo Association (YMA), Mizo Hmeichhe Insuih-khawm Pawl (MHIP), Village Defence Party (VDP), etc. are successfully operating in the contemporary Mizo society. Thus the contemporary Mizo society too has adjusted themselves in peace and harmony with the changing World.

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