

MIZORAM

Historical

Geographical

Social

Economic

Political and

Administrative

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S N Singh

This book is an enlightened and perceptive study of the geopolitics of northeast, particularly Mizoram, at the micro level. The impact of geography on the recurring ethnic turmoils and intermittent insurgent upheavals in the remote north-eastern rim of the country has been lucidly analysed and elucidated.

The book has highlighted such little discussed matters as localisation of tribes, formation of tribal institutions, the alienation of the tribes from the mainstream and the boundary tangles. This book is a valuable addition of the country's frontier studies at a time when the regional ethos is finding a new mooring among the awakened tribes in the northeast.

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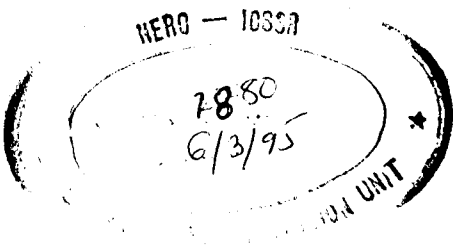
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INTRODUCTION

The entire belt of North-Eastern India is a zone of ethnic and political tension, which in turn, bred political turmoil in the form of armed revolt or insurgency. Mizoram is not an exception. The land, which was a paradise for anthropologists, has become nowadays, a part of local and regional instability. This instability has to be studied and analysed from the geopolitical perspective, as the region has become the focus of attention at national and international scale.¹ The North-East Region represents a melting pot of heterogeneous races, languages and cultures. The migration of races originated from the East or North-East to West. In the process of migration, intermingling of races took place in the region, and then, many of the inhabitants confined themselves to the difficult terrains of the mountainous periphery. The geographical distribution of such phenomena kept them isolated and these phenomena enabled them to retain their traditional characteristics.²

In the North-East Region, identity and individuality (of groups and sub-groups) crisis has assumed serious proportions. Each tribe and sub-tribe of the region is in the race for recognition of its racial identity upon which the demand for regional autonomy in political and economic spheres has been propagated subsequently. This has given way to regionalism* and

*(a) Regionalism or regional consciousness is the expression of the group sentiment of the people inhabiting a geographical area. It represents regional idea in action as an ideology or as a social movement. It is more of a geographical entity and socio-cultural concept. The important criteria for recognising a region, are language (dialect), social composition (community), ethnic region, demographic features, area (geographical contiguity), cultural pattern, economy, historical antecedents, political backgrounds, psychological make-up and rising consciousness of group identity. (Khan Rasheeduddin 'The regional dimension, Seminar, New Delhi No. 164 April 1973, p.39).

irredentism in different forms in different parts of the region. Such claims, based on narrow parochial considerations, fomented tension and crisis which ultimately, encouraged secessionist movement. In fact, the ethnic and linguistic affiliations remained the most powerful elements of regional movements in this region, particularly in Mizoram. The creation of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram had subsequent impact on the minor ethnic groups which were stridently rooting for autonomy, for example, the Hmars, Lakhers and Chakmas.

The Government of India had to compromise with the situation by allowing smaller ethnic groups to have Autonomous District Councils (Chakma, Pawi, Lakher District Council) but not smaller States (may not be economically viable) that may go against the name of national integration.³ But all these changes are the results of power struggle based on intense ethnic chauvinism and irredentism. This ultimately, proved the role of geopolitical undercurrents.*

The colonial policy largely aimed at excluding the area from the remaining part of the region and the country. They initiated specific policy measures that not only permitted the retention of traditional equations in political, economic and social relations, but also enabled the population to come under the limited influence of change. This, then, suggests that the administrator's intention was of maintaining the status-quo, rather than dealing with development and instability. The specific politico-administrative measures aimed at minimum interference, while ensuring maximum mobilisation to the policy measures.⁴ These were followed by the specific financial considerations, relaxation and grants that maintained the status-quo. They also initiated a form of representation, which largely comprised of various chiefs. This reset the role of the population at large.

(b) Regionalism involves such diverse problems as those of minorities, administration, decentralization, local self-government and autonomy, cult of homeland, local patriotism which often lead to separatism. (*Encyclopedia of Social Science*, Vol. XIII, N.Y. Mcmillan, 1924, pp. 208-18)

* Creation of District Council and Regional Council has been done more with geopolitical consideration than any genuine respect for racial identity of the Hill tribes inhabiting along the border area of North-East India. (Dilip Hiro, *Inside India Today*, Longman, London, 1976.)

It was out of strategic necessity that a loose system of political administration was established in these frontier areas. Communication remained meagre, if not non-existent. The contact with outside world was tenuous, which suited their geopolitical interest. But, in the process, British failed to perceive and appreciate the economic and political requirements of the area and consequently, neglected them. This policy, in fact, continued up to the 1940's and 1950's.

These aspects alongwith traditional aloofness, led to the conceptualisation that incorporated a conservative political establishment allied to, and providing justification for the tribal resistance. Political perception of the mountainous inhabitants was, that the centralization of power would deprive them of their legitimate authority. This, to some extent, still pervades their attitude.

The systematisation of the administration, therefore, was made intentionally different. The tribal societies found it difficult to perceive this distinction. To them, these efforts were only means of bringing them under political subordination. This suggests that the legal instruments were not implemented effectively to introduce political changes unless the tribal political culture was predisposed (to which the tribal society was not attuned).

The British kept the inhabitants, particularly the tribals of eastern frontier of the region, as a 'museum piece' by inventing an "exotic barb" around them through the introduction of various Rules and Regulations. The British subjects were debarred from going beyond the 'Inner line' without a permit from the District authority. This was primarily intended to maintain peace and non-interference in tribal affairs and also economic exploitation. But its results were not bright. The tribals lost their contact with the plain people and thus a cleavage between the plain people and the Hills was created by the British authority in India.

Based on the recommendations of the Bordoloi Sub-Committee of the Constituent Assembly, the Constitution of India incorporated the provision in the 'Sixth Schedule' for the social and economic development of the Hill Districts of the North-East India. These districts came under the category of 'Excluded

Area' or 'Partially Excluded Area'. Lushai Hills Districts (now Mizoram) came under the 'Excluded Area'.⁵ This arrangement was a sequence to the colonial policy and was continued in order the safeguard interest of the tribal people after Independence.⁶ It is said that this policy had to do more with geopolitical considerations that took into the account of different racial and cultural identity as well as politico-economic consideration of the Hill tribes, inhabiting North-East India.

At the fag end of the British Raj in India, a plan was proposed by a British constitutional expert, R. Coupland to create a buffer state comprising of the 'Excluded' and 'Partially Excluded areas' in the eastern most part of the country.⁷ This plan was, however, not acceptable and consequently, shelved and discarded.

The colonial administrators annexed, expanded and integrated different tribal districts with the mainland for their own imperial interests. But they did not interfere in the internal affairs of the tribals, and left them to manage their affairs according to their own traditions. The British did not take initiative to bring them into the mainstream of national life⁸. Rather by their attitude and approach they encouraged differences among the Hill people and the plains by creating an artificial barrier under the cover of 'Inner line'. The declaration of Hill areas as 'Excluded Areas' tended in the long run to insulate the aspirations of the inhabitants of the Hill districts from sharing common perspective with the rest of the people of as the country.

India forms an integral part of Mackinder's 'World Island' (i.e., Europe-Africa-Asiatic Landmass) the most important geographic unit of the world.⁹ Her relative location with reference to other political areas holds immense geopolitical significance. Within the Indian context, after partition, the North-East Region became from anthropological paradise to a hot bed of politics. It is geo-strategically most vulnerable and sensitive. Geopolitically, it has become the cockpit of international intrigues.

The present state of Mizoram was a part of Assam known as Lushai Hills District. It was one of the districts of Assam in the extreme southern fringe of North-East India. In 1954, the

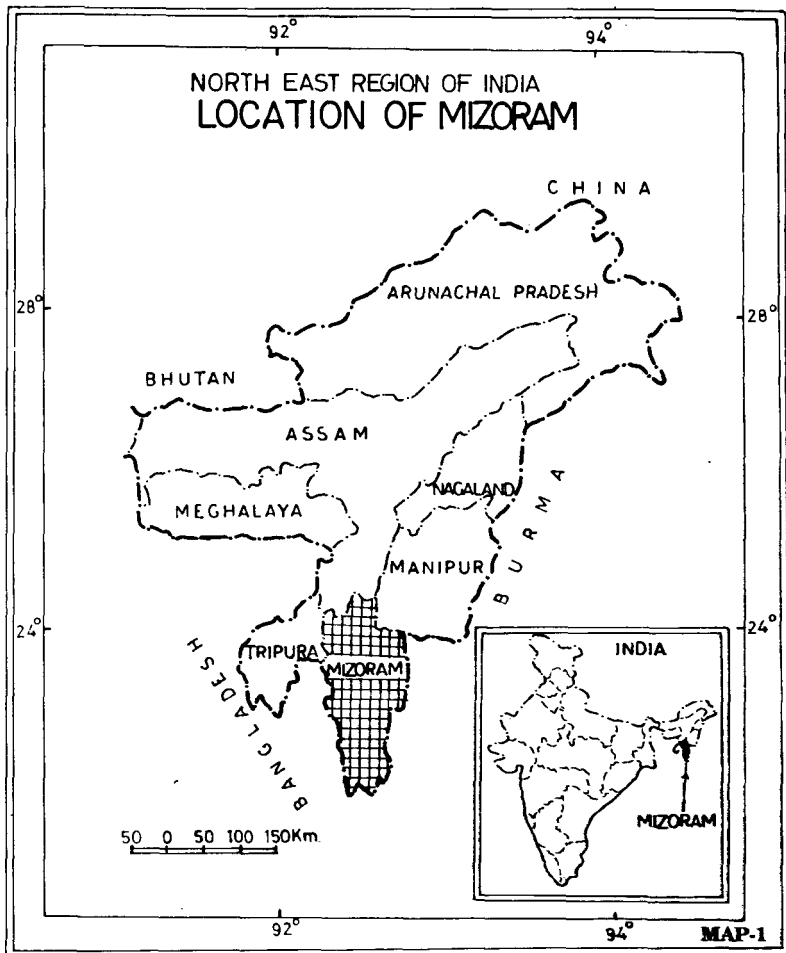
nomenclature of the Lushai Hills District was changed to Mizo Hills District by the act of parliament.¹⁰ The district was elevated to the status of Union Territory - named Mizoram in 1972¹¹ and subsequently, attained Statehood on February 20, 1987.¹²

Mizoram is located between 22° 19' N and 24° 19' N latitude and 92° 16' E and 93° 26' E longitude covering a geographical area of 21087 sq.km. with a population of 4,93,757 (1981 census).¹³ It has an average density of 23 persons per sq. km. The State of Mizoram is surrounded by the Burma in the east, Manipur and Cachar District of Assam in the north, Tripura and Bangladesh in the west and again, Burma in the south. Geographically, it is 277 km. from north to south, and 121 km. from east to west. The Tropic of Cancer passes through the middle of the State (just south of Aizawl town.)

The geographical location of Mizoram is of great significance and forms an ideal field of geopolitical study. It has a long inter-state boundary with Assam (123 km.), Tripura (66 km.), and Manipur (95 km.). Besides, Mizoram shares international borders from three sides, with Burma in the east and south (404 km.) and Bangladesh in the west (306 km.) This has divided the Mizos and their associated clans.¹⁴ It has a complex north-south trending mountainous terrain which is thickly forested. Alongwith its inaccessible and isolated nature, the southern margins and the trijunction points (of Mizoram - Tripura - Assam, Mizoram - Manipur - Assam, Mizoram - Bangladesh - Tripura and Mizoram - Burma - Bangladesh) have formed an important core of activities at the time of insurgency. This is the reason why this frontier has attained strategic and geopolitical significance.¹⁵

The important characteristics of the State of Mizoram can be summed up as:

- i) It has a predominantly mountainous terrain.
- ii) It is predominantly consisted of tribal population.
- iii) Its accessibility is limited to Silchar-Aizawl Highway (NH 54). The communication within the State is also limited.
- iv) It has predominantly subsistence agriculture with wide



- spread jhum cultivation.
- v) Its socio-economic profile is confined to tribal structure.
 - vi) Its economy is agro-based and household goods churned out in the homes mainly cater to the local needs.
 - vii) The tribal population is predominantly Christians and highly politicised. Significant non-Christian elements in the south-western part of the State have added to the tendency of balkanization of the State.

Mizoram is the cradle of diverse communities like the Lusei (wrongly spelt Lushai), Ralte, Paite, Bete, Powi, Lakher, Hmar, Riang, Tlanglau, Pangs, Bawm, Chakma and so on. They are mostly of Mongoloid stock, who migrated to the present location from the southern and western parts of China through upper Burma. The inhabitants are mostly Christians (83.81%) followed by the Buddhists (8.19%) and others, Hindus (7%) and Muslims (0.45%). The literacy in Mizoram is one of the highest in the country, next to Chandigarh, Delhi and Kerala (70.42%) as against all India average of 36.23%. Despite high literacy, Mizoram, as a whole, is economically backward. This is largely due to unfavourable natural environment, poor and inadequate communication network (11.89 km. per 100 sq. km. as against 47.02 km. of all India average). It is more or less isolated from the rest of the country. The communication within the State itself is also limited. The mountainous terrain has exerted substantial influence on agriculture which is the main source of livelihood of the people.

Some Terminological Clarifications

The use of the term* geopolitics has long remained proscribed as it connotes designs for territorial expansion and the ideologies that encourage such an action. The constant figura-

* The geopolitics is wrongly used by the politicians to mean an instrument of war, territorial expansion or imperialism or increasing sphere of influence only. "The geopolitical issues are not rivalry between the super powers, or the deployment of political and military forces in politically sensitive areas, but also take into account the increasing serious problems caused today by the division of large number of people and ethnic groups by the changing frontiers of the State. So the problem of territorial planning and regionalisation are also the geopolitical issues, because they concern the decision of those who rule the State. The important developmental designs and schemes pose geopolitical problems as much as the vital industrial installations."

tive use of the term has further diluted its significance. But persistent review of relevant literature suggests that Geopolitical is, in effect, a study of complex relationship between politics and geographical configurations of a territorial unit. Applying it on a scale, geopolitical reasoning reveal alternative approaches to the interpretation of crisis situations and parameters and their impact on stability. In other words, inherent in such an understanding is the accounting of spatial configurations while examining the relationship between forces and masses, and that crisis on scale are inter-related. Thus, the present study, not only accounts for the role of permanent geographical features but also of changes and movements in the realm of politics which occur for a short time over a small area. These changes and movements frequently unsettle or speed up or at times overturn the peculiar power relationship to create specific pattern of spatial ensembles. The articulation of which outlines the value of geographical and geopolitical* reasoning.

By the term 'crisis' we mean the consequences of the locational attributes at local, regional and national levels. In

Normally, geopolitics is used in three senses:

1. Publicists and editorial writers use the term to mean power position of the nation insofar as their power is conditioned by nature.
2. Some writers apply the term to mean as synonymous for applied political geography which is separate and distinct from political geography and history.
3. A large number of writers and speakers used the term loosely to mean the national policy as affected by natural environment.

The geopolitical approach, in recent past, correlates three factors, the globe as a whole, regionalism and national power of every individual state. Broadly speaking the world has been divided into two regions —geo-strategic and geopolitical. A geo-strategic region encompasses larger region and includes heterogeneous elements. The geopolitical region is, for that reason, narrow and includes limited elements. The geo-strategic region is the expression of inter-relation of a larger part of the world in terms of location, movement, trade orientation and culture and ideological bonds. A geopolitical region is a part of geo-strategic region and is directly related to geographic region. It expresses the unity of geographic features and provides a framework for a common political and economic actions. Its main features are contiguity of location and support of resources.

* Geopolitics is again used here to mean the application of geographical knowledge in understanding or governing the relations among the groups of people within a national territory. "If Politics is the art of Government then, geo 'prefix' implies the application of geographical knowledge to this end. The term is usually applied to foreign policy, but some domestic matters could also be benefitted from the exercise of geopolitics".

other words, problems faced by a given territorial population, group or sub-group and its inter-relationship with the environment. The environment, in such a context, is applied in a wide sense and covers perception and responses. Frequently, the crisis is often used in conjunction with problems. The present attempt adopts the same approach but with one qualification, that the problems or crises faced by a territorial group with definite territorial parameter transform itself when there are changes in preconditions.

The study of relationship of the geographical conditions and political processes is the primary task of political geographers.* Apart from the knowledge and background of economic and geopolitical implications, the field of study also embraces the application of concepts of state power to which measurement and evaluation of the state policies could be made.

The influence of the 'Core' on the activities of the periphery (i.e., Mizoram) inevitably leads us to an area analysis emphasising the tactical concepts and processes. The identification and formulating explanation for questions, like under difficult terrain condition with limited resource potentialities how insurgency developed, become obvious. Other aspects, like the psychological background and the environment that made the inhabitants responsive to these conditions fall within such a perspective.¹⁷

The conflict of two or more opposing interests are the inherent causes for aggravation of problems everywhere. The two opposing interests in this case were the State (Central

* The political geography visualises the power of the state on the basis of its area, natural resources, depth of space used for socio-economic development, demographic pattern, political structure and military preparedness. The scope of geopolitics is wider and embraces military, naval and air strategy. Like political geography, it gathers facts as they are, but unlike other subjects it analyses and interprets the national political situation and formulates the internal and external policy of the state. It focuses the national boundaries, maritime belts, gulf and bays, territorial waters and sphere of influence. The geopolitics looks upon the state not as an static object but a living and dynamic organ. Its dynamic character is maintained by population explosion, rising economic needs, increasing raw materials and greater use of transport, emergence of new political space and drive for political and psychological equity. It attempts to understand the problems of national powers exclusively in terms of geography.

Govt.) and the dissidents comprising the traditional pressure groups and extramural forces. The final outcome of the two interest groups depends much on the mobilisation of resources and management of the crisis parameters.

Traditional patterns and modernisation have exhibited clash of interest between the State, the pressure group and the population causing a sustained rivalry among them. The resort to insurgency was a means to eradicate this conflicting relationship, despite the attempts of the State to rationalise social and economic relationship. Violence as a means to redress problems has continued.¹⁸ These were either launched by the majority population groups in Mizoram like Lusei and associated groups, or the minority like the Pawis, Lakhers and Hmars etc. The crisis parameters are also different from the pattern of State formation. These influenced the nature of conflicts and had determined the development of the territorial unit's extent. Ample testimony is provided by the size and shape of the unit as well as by the recommendation of the Boundary Commissions. The demarcation of the boundary was also clear reflection of settlement pattern of constituent territorial units, as in the North Mizoram, particularly those groups bordering the thickly populated plains of Cachar, Manipur, Tripura and Bangladesh.

Being the victim of physical and political circumstances, Mizoram is far behind in socio-economic and political development. For long, the tribal villages were dominated by the feudal Chiefs. The influence of modernisation process and exposure due to the world wars enabled the traditional pressure groups to seek separation. In consequence, the State experienced dependence and under-development. Its economic and political rhythms were reactions to change or to the impulses generated in other parts of the country.¹⁹

Crises or problems, therefore, reflect the responses of a territorial population/sub-group to a given set of circumstances—these circumstances were primarily locational attributes of the State.

The geopolitical* perspective emerged when relationship

* Geopolitics also stresses upon the fact that the strength of a nation and its chances of survival depends, to a great extent, on geographical factors like location, manpower, natural resources, industrial capacity and socio-political organisations.

between people, territory and ideology was sought on the basis of distribution of geographical phenomena of the State. In other words, crisis was the manifestation of inherent drawbacks of the territorial unit and the response of the inhabitants who continuously strove to offset these drawbacks vis-a-vis, regional and national conditions.

The crisis posed a threat to the traditional imperatives. It is prematured to deal extensively the responses of the Govt. for, the diagnosis of the ecological aspect is only at the beginning of the State. The impact of this depends on a variety of unpredictable factors including the attitude of the participants (including the leaders of the political organisations) and the shape of the public opinion. Much depended on whether these crises were coherently interpreted as a part of the overall ecological imbalance, or whether a rational path to equilibrium, can be treated with vividness and equity.

Initial response was to strengthen the co-operative tendencies in the State. These were, however, the product of circumstances of intense perceived diversity. It did not lend itself to solution by way of regional contrast.²⁰

It is an accepted proposition that physical and ecological phenomena affect the political events in a state. It is more applicable to Mizoram where geographical environment costs tremendous influence on the development of the State. The socio-economic changes are the product of the same phenomena. The courses of events and pattern of development in Mizoram can be analysed in the light of some important factors like distance, accessibility, resource endowment, location of territorial groups, perception as well as response of the inhabitants distributed in a wide territory.²¹

Mizoram, like the other States of the North-East India, has a peripheral location. This peripheral location offers an ideal ground for the study of the interplay of distance, dependence and differences which interact with each other to create a mosaic of uncertainty within the territory and the people living therein.

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