

The Mizo Non-Cooperation Movement, 1948-49

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Mizoram today occupies an area of strategic importance as it has 630 Kms¹ of international boundary with Myanmar in the east and south and Bangladesh in the west. Mizoram remained under the British administration, classified as Excluded Area as per the provisions of the Government of India Act, 1935 till 1947. Before 1954, it was known as Lushai Hills District under Assam State. The Lushai District Council became an operative body following the election to it in 1952.

When Indian independence was drawing near, a sense of uncertainty and apprehension filled the minds of the more enlightened leaders of the Lushai Hills. Before the formation of the Mizo Union as the first political party in April, 1946, there was practically no organised agency through which the people of Lushai Hills could voice out their aspirations and grievances. In fact, the Mizo leaders became aware of the current political developments in the Indian sub-continent. Those who were educated in the colleges of the plains during the Indian national movement had witnessed what was happening at the national level.

The British Administration in the Lushai Hills mainly aimed at securing the loyalty of the Mizo people at the cost of minimum expenditure so that they would no longer create problems in the neighbouring British territories. Besides, as far as practicable, the British tried to keep the Lushai Hills isolated from the plains. The political situation in the Lushai Hills District under the British administration was characterised by the dual autocracy of the District Superintendent and the local Chiefs. It should be remembered here that the Mizos lived in isolation from culture, ruled by their local chiefs. Hence, the British administrators carefully saw to it that the internal rule of the villages by their respective Chiefs remained undisturbed.

Before 1947, the Governor of Assam administered Mizoram as a district through the District Superintendent on the spot. The great distance between the capital of Assam, Shillong and Aizawl with poor communication system enabled the District Superintendent to exercise

his powers "both autocratically and aristocratically".² He exercised both civil and criminal jurisdictions. Moreover, the provincial government did not wish to interfere with his administration since he was the agent on the spot. Thus, the real administration of the District was in the hand of the Superintendent who successfully managed to use the local chiefs as administrative instruments. The Mizo Chiefs who ruled over the villages were thus subservient to the Superintendent as the latter had the authority to punish, remove and replace the Chief as situation demanded. On the other hand, so long as the Mizo Chiefs carried out the orders of the Superintendent to his satisfaction, their positions were safeguarded by the British.

With the coming of the British Administrators, the common people of the Mizo society had to perform dual obligations with the new additional burden of *Kuli* while they had to pay taxes, build the Chiefs' houses etc. The common people were virtually enslaved at the hands of both the British Superintendent and their Chiefs. Every thing depended upon the sense of values of the Superintendent. As a result, the Administration at Shillong did not understand the aspirations of the people and the actual administrative conditions under which the Mizo people were living. Added to this, the District Superintendent, an Englishman : never really understood the sentiments and feelings of the Mizos.

The local Chiefs, on their part, owed their office to the good will of the British and hence their main obligations were directed to the British administration, not to the welfare of their subjects. As long as they could please their British overlords, the danger of their disposal from office was out of question. So they become irresponsible, autocratic and burdensome for their subjects who paid them all their necessities. In order to ensure the stability of their positions, the Chiefs started very bad practice of bribing the Superintendent with livestock, *Sarep* (smoked meat), eggs, rice etc. which they frequently demanded from their subjects. For the common man, the visit of officials to his village meant demand for his livestock or the other. This was an irksome burden for the common people. Besides giving all the taxes such as fathang (vice tax) and *Sachhia* (share of meat for the chief) etc, to the chief, a common man must not complain even if his fruits or vegetables in the garden were taken by the Chiefs family members without permission whatsoever. Nobody dared to criticise the actions of the Chiefs openly.

As jhumming was vital part of the Mizo culture, anything which concerned jhumming came to be the most sensitive issues. During the 1940's, there were complaints to the Superintendent as to how jhum lands were distributed by the Chiefs regarding the preference given to 'Ramhuals' and 'Zalens'. These 'Ramhuals' and 'Zalen' were selected by the Chief from his favorites and they enjoyed the privilege of assisting the Chief in his day to day administrations along with the 'Upas' or Councillors. The Commoners did not find the reason why these 'Ramhuals' and 'Zalens' who had no contributions to the public, should chose jhumlands before them. On the other hand, the 'Ramhuals' and 'Zalens' tried to please the chief by any possible means so as to retain their dignified positions. This was greatly resented by the commoners and the abolition of this system became one of the first demands of the Mizo Union Party. The Mizo Union submitted a memorandum to L.L. Peters, the Superintendent of Lushai Hills in 1949³ in this regard. However, the Superintendent replied the memorandum fully safeguarding the authority of the Chiefs as well as the positions and rights of 'Ranhuals' and 'Zalens'.⁴ This strongly convinced the commoners that there was no room for them in the British Administration.

The two world wars had a great effect on the social and political outlook of the Mizos. Those who served in the army during the wars came home with a more wider knowledge of the outside world. They were regarded by their kinsmen as moneyed and well-to-dos. Moreover, there were some Mizo boys with education and political bendings who were looked upon as learned and leaders. At this time, some Mizos at Aizawl ran business successfully. All these greatly reduced the "only highness" of the Chiefs. "Flow of money and the experience of serving in the army, getting recognition in government service, professions, trade and commerce and living outside the confines of the hills resulted in the emergence of a new class in the Mizo society who wanted recognition of a new class in the Mizo society who wanted recognition of their status and hence they came into conflict with the local Chiefs".⁵ There were also some Mizo Unionists who were fully conscious of the British enslavement of the Mizo. Pu Lalbuai accused the British of keeping the Mizos in ignorance as long as possible.⁶ Saprawnga had once embittered MacDonald, the then Superintendent of Lushai Hills by saying that Mizos were treated by the British as slaves. He was called by Macdonald "the energetic fool".⁷

Thus, the more progressive section of the Mizo society, fully aware of the tendencies of the local Chiefs who were trained and influenced by the Mizo Chiefs. The resentment against the oppressions of the Superintendent and the Chiefs gained momentum among the commoners all over the District and found enthusiastic leadership in educated commoners which in turn, led the people to organise themselves into political party. the Mizo Union on 9 April, 1946.

At this time of political uncertainty Mr. ARH Macdonald, the Superintendent of Lushai hills called for a conference of the leaders of Lushai Hills which he named District Conference in January, 1946. This was the first body in which the commoners were included in any kind of administrative body and 20 representatives of the Commoners. The conference would consist of 20 representatives of the Chiefs. The conference received a great response when in Jan. 1946 the first meeting of the conference under the Chairmanship of the Superintendent himself passed the abolition of the much hated power of the chief to expell any villager from his village. The commoners felt that, with the Superintendent on their side, they would receive a sigh of relief. from the oppressions of their Chiefs. It was this Macdonald who gave permission to form the first political party the Mizo Union.

As the Mizo Union party was formed with the permission of the Superintendent, it was felt that he was on the side of the commoners. As such, the party attracted members from all walks of life, Government servants, teachers, Pastors etc. This gave a fillip to the rapid growth of the Mizo union Party. But seeing the developments and the rapid growth of the Mizo Union Party which put his District conference in the back-ground, the Superintendent presented a hostile attitude towards the party. He suspected that they had some connections with the Indian National Congress.⁸ On the other hand the Mizo Union leaders suspected that the Superintendent had some specific intention to lead them under the Crown Colony Scheme. Added to this, The Teachers' Conference of the South Lushai Hills under Mr Carter passed a resolution that they welcomed the Crown Colony Scheme for Mizoram.⁹ When the Mizo Union leaders looked back these decades of the British rule and their experiences under it, they strongly opposed the continuation of the British administration who safeguarded the autocracy of the local chiefs. To them the absence of the British in Mizoram meant the end of oppressions from their Chiefs. and with that alone would the commoners survive

The anti-Chief attitude could be found in the Mizo Union right from its birth. In its first conference on 34th September, 1946 at M.E. School, those members from villages openly shouted slogans against the Chiefs. Pu Lalbuai said that shouts from outside could be heard through the windows like "Lal an ban loh chuan ka nghawng ka fik ang" (I will cut my neck unless the Chiefs are deposed).¹⁰ The Assembly resolved that the 'Upas' (Chief elders/Councillors) should be elected by the people, that Ramhual should be abolished, that "Phutluoh Kuli"(hard labour) be stopped etc. and ratified the draft constitution of the Mizo Union.

On 7th November, 1946 the third District Conference met again under the Chairmanship of Macdonald. As was apprehended the Superintendent declared "the first business of this meeting today is whether to inform the Governor or not that the Mizo Union does not represent the Mizo people and that only the District conference represents the people".¹¹ This was a drastic step by the Superintendent to reduce the influence of the Mizo Union. As a reaction to this, the Mizo Union submitted a memorandum to the Superintendent which reads-in English

We had already submitted to you on 6.11.'46 that this Conference is not qualified to represent the people. What we want is, if the Conference is deemed to represent the people of Mizoram, the representatives of the Commoners must be doubled to the representatives of the Chiefs. If this is not comply with, we cannot participate in the meeting merely to be overruled.

For representatives of the Commoners
Ch. Saprawanga.
(8.11.1946.)

With its memorandum, the Mizo Union boycotted the District Conference which became inactive then on.

When the North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub-Committee, popularly known as the Bordoloi Commission visited Lushai Hills in 1948, it coopted the two Mizo Union leaders-Khawtinkhuma from North Lushai Hills and Ch. Saprawnga from South Lushai Hills. These two leaders and other influential personalities met the Commission. A common trend observed in the suggestions of

different groups was that the Mizos needed some kind of special protection and guidance. They were also unanimous in their demand for autonomous status.

In July, 1947, L.L. Peters replaced Macdonald as the first Superintendent of Independence India. At this time, political consciousness among the Mizos, harboured by the Mizo Union was developing very fast. The Mizo Union welcomed him with high expectations. Looking at the situation and apprehension of the Mizos as to what their political future would be, Mr.L.L.Peters invited some 50 prominent personalities of Aizawl for a meeting. One of the resolutions of this meeting was "to request the Governor (of Assam) to inform them in writing whether the Lushais could be permitted to join either Pakistan or Burma, or that the Mizos could be given the right of secession from India".¹² In his reply under Notice No. 7629-30-G of 2.9.1946, the Governor of Assam notified that :

(1) There can be no question of the Lushais leaving the Indian Union as in law, the Lushai country (through) being an Excluded Areas was already part of Assam.

(4) That the Lushais must remain with the Indian Union and cannot join either Pakistan or Burma.

(6) That in view of the Constitutional status stated above, the question of opting out after 10(ten) years does not arise.¹³

As regard the local Administration, Mr. L.L. Peters formed District Advisory Council as a replacement of Macdonald's District Conference. At first Mr Peters did not openly show his favours to the Chiefs. But in course of time, he proved to be corrupt and an ardent safeguard for the Chiefs. Most of the veteran Mizo politicians of those days termed Mr. Peters the corrupt and the source of malpractices in the administration. It is said that in order to get a plot of land for house site or the other, one had to offer him a cock, or eggs or fish or testicles and hump of an ox which were his favourite dishes or had to please his wife. This kind of bribe could be afforded only by the Chiefs and a very few rich families. As a result, he steadily favoured the chiefs and safeguarded their interests. It is also said that once he toured for the first time from Aizawl, before reaching Lunglei, he had received a "thul" (basket) full of eggs¹⁴ as bribes from the Chiefs of

various villages he visited. It seems that Mr. Peter did nothing to improve the wide gap between the chiefs and the Commoners, rather, he purposely favoured the chiefs. Administrative set up remained unchanged with the commoners to their discontentment. This was greatly resented by the Mizo Union. It is a sad thing to mention here that when the Mizos, with high hopes for ending their miseries under free India, the first Superintendent of free India proved to be the most corrupt and illusioned person among the local administrators of the Lushai Hills. This had a deep adverse effect on the Mizo attitude towards the free Indian.

The Mizo Union who claimed to represent the Mizo people especially the commoners submitted various complaints regarding the defects in the administrative set up to the District Superintendent. But they never get proper attention and reply from the Superintendent.¹⁵ Therefore, the Mizo Union leaders felt necessary to put pressure on the authority so that they would be listened to and that their status in the society would be recognised. They regarded Mr. L.L. Peters as the source of all their grievances. To worsen the situation, Mr. Peters issued an order, copies of which were given only to the Chiefs that any subject who "misbehave" must be reported to the Superintendent by the local Chiefs and that the culprits would be punished. This vague order gave a good chance to the chief to accuse the Mizo Union activists of his village of "misbehaving" who had by now openly opposed his authority. With this encouraging order in their pockets, the local chiefs sent many Mizo Union activists even for minor reasons. Pu. R. Thanhlira the President of Mizo Union at the time, said that whenever the victims of this administration were presented before the court, what the District judge would always asked was "Are you a member of Mizo Union ?" He further stated that on many occasions, the seriousness of a person's case depended upon whether he was a member of Mizo Union or not¹⁶

In late October, 1948, a meeting of the leaders of Mizo Union Headquarters, Aizawl and Aizawl Divisional Working Committee members was convened. Without even consulting their rural units and sub-headquarters at Lunlei, the meeting resolved that "in order to bring the ruling of partial judgements to an end and bring right ruling to Mizoram, the meeting demanded, for the sake of true judgement, the transfer of the main obstacle Mr.L.L.Peters from Mizoram. If that was

not accomplished, the only way for the people is 'Non-violence-Non-cooperation with the Government'.¹⁷ The meeting left the detailed programmes for their implementatins to the Headquarters' leaders.

After much thinking the deliberations, the Mizo Union leaders at Aizawl fixed the 27th December, 1948 as a deadline for the transfer of the Superintendent, Mr.L.L.Peters. If the Government took no action, then the Mizo Union would launch the 'Non-Cooperation movement' from 28th December, 1948, The Headquarters' leaders prepared a noti fication called "Mizo Union Thupuan No. 31/38 of 1.12.1948" in which they clearly outlined the various accumulated grievances of the commoners. It stressed that "since sometime back, the Mizo Union members have been ill-treated by the officials from top to bottom; in matters of judgement we never received proper attention..... we are being falsely accused of just because we are trying to improve the lot of the common man within the framework of laws for which we are unlawfully punished we are forced to go for Kuli much more frequent than others and if reported, whatever might be cause, we are promptly locked up (Hajat) without any clarification from our end; we are punished just because we are not willing to double the bamboo planks for the Chiefs walls..... So we feel that our system of law is favouritism and that there is no way for the Mizo Union members to get true judgement we can not bear this..... anymore. As the Superintendent Mr. L.L.Peter is mainly responsible for our sufferings, we have asked the Assam Government to take him away from our land before 27th December, 1948. If he is not taken away as demanded, the Mizo Union will start no-cooperation movement from 28th December, 1948 against the Superintendent and the Chiefs. To show our non-cooperation-

(1).We will not submit or clarify any case to Mr peter and his Officials. This does not mean that we are going to take judgements to our own hands, but no one could stop any amicable settlements between the contending parties.

(2). We will not obey the orders and Parwana of Mr. Peters and his Officials.

(3). We will no longer pay 'Sachhiah', 'Buhchhun' and others to the rural Chiefs, and we will no longer build the Chiefs' houses.

The Notification clearly states that this non-cooperation was only against the mal-administration of Mr. Peters and his Officials, not against India or the Assam government.

Before releasing the 'Mizo Union Thupau', the Mizo Union President Mr. R. Thanhlira sent a memorandum to the government of Assam, stating all their grievances and complaints on 24.11.1948. The Mizo Union Headquarters deputed Mr.R.Thanhlira and Mr. Hrangaiia to pursue the Memorandum. The deputation met Shri N.K. Rustomji, ICS, Adviser to the Governor of Assam who told them that the Governor was unhappy with their programme of non-cooperation. He tried to convince the Mizo leaders to withdraw their decision. They were further told that the government would not tolerate such kind of movement.

The District administration reacted by arresting the Mizo Union leaders - H.Vanthuama. General Secretary and Lalbuaiia, Treasury on 4th December, 1948. The same day, the Mizo press at Kulikawn which printed the Mizo Union *Thupuan* was closed. Mr. R. Thanhlira was arrested in Shillong but was released on bail. On his return, he was again arrested by the Police at Zarkawt on 21st December, 1948 before he reached home. Other 7 leaders of the Mizo Union were arrested the next day. Those arrested were - H.Khuma (Bara Bazar), Chawnghnuaiia, V.Rosiamia (both from Kulikawn), Vanchilanga, D.K.Kawnga (both from Mission Veng), Hrangaiia (Thakthing Veng) and Ch. Chhunga (Saron Veng).

The government of Assam did not take any step to improve the situation and the Mizo Union's deadline 37th December, 1948 passed. On 28th December, 1948, as an implementation of their programme, the jailed Mizo Union leaders started fasting to show that they meant business in their movement. The next day on 29th December, 1948, the Mizo Union at Aizawl organised a big procession. Starting from the southern part of the town, the Mizo Union activists shouted slogans - Go home Peters etc."

The procession marched towards Aizawl jail in the heart of the town demanding the release of their leaders. Before the procession could reach them, the Mizo Union leaders were charged with Assam maintenance of Public Order Act 1947 sec 2(1) by which they were to remain in jail for 6 months without trial. At the same time, they

were hurriedly transported to other jails in the plains, The Superintendent sent Police to disperse the procession.

When they came to know that their leaders were already shifted, the procession dispersed in dismay. In Aizawl, the movement was directed against the Superintendent and government Officials. The Lusei clerks, who acted as the main local agent of the government did not enjoy much reputations in the public and hence they were not targets of the Movement. There was total failure of law and order in the whole District for a few days. To show their non-cooperation with the government, the Mizo Union members stopped payment of government dues, 'Fathang, Sachhiah and also refused to build the chiefs' houses. In Aizawl, the public was strongly against 'Phutluh Kuli' and 'Personal Residence Surcharge'.

Though not consulted in the decision making for the movement, the Mizo Union Sub-headquarters at Lunglei organised a procession of the same kind. All pamphlets and instructions they had received from Aizawl were seized by the Police. With great difficulty and lathi charges, the Lunglei Polie could at last disperse the procession.

Rural units of Mizo Union in villages followed their leaders in the town. As they did not get proper guidance, the Mizo Union activists at once attacked the houses of their Chiefs, Upas, the Ramhuals who still retained their positions even after repeated requests by their headquarters' leaders. Not only the houses, the commoners also destroyed their gardens. These village administrators were the main targets of the movement in villages as was the District administration in the town. However, no human casualty at the hands of the Mizo Union activists was reported. In villages, the personality and sense of values of the individual chief greatly determined the intensity of the movement. A kind Chief received radical actions from his villagers. It should be noted here that Aizawl town had no Chief and thus the anti-chief movements concentrated in rural areas. However, the villagers received full support and encouragements from their leaders in the town.

In retaliation, the Superintendent deployed whatever force he could gather-the Police and the Assam Rifles under his subordinate Officials. These deployments visited each and every village, arresting and beating publicly the Mizo Union activists. The local Chiefs received these deployments with open arms and furnished all necessary informa-

tion. The forces, wherever they went, demanded from the villagers rice, poultry etc. They seized fire arms and the Mizo Union Party documents. In some villages, they assembled the Mizo members and ordered them to withdraw their membership from the party. If the members refused, they were beaten before the public, many of whom received casualties and could not continue their cultivation.¹⁹ Among those beaten, the middle aged-men were in majority rather than the energetic youths. Many of them were sent to Aizawl till there was no more space in Aizawl jail. Many of them were fined on various charges. The amounts of fines varied from Rs.30/-, Rs.40/-, Rs.70/-, Rs.100/-, Rs.200/-, Rs.300/- which were huge amounts for the time.²⁰

The ill-treatment and unscrupulous partiality by the officials made the Mizo Union members, both in town and villages, deeply loyal to their party. This clearly revealed that Commoners had developed a strong sense of political conviction and that they had become strongly against the local government. Therefore, they presented a firm united stand against the local autocracy.

To have a spot verification of the political situation and to seek ways by which the Mizo problems could be solved, Shri NK Rustomji ICS, Adviser to the Governor of Assam arrived at Aizawl on 21.1.1949. He summoned one of the Mizo Union leaders, Mr. R.Dengthuama who was jailed only the night before. The two had discussions on the issue. It was believed by other Mizo Union leaders that apparently Mr. R.Dengthuama was convinced by Shri Rustomji to call off the movement.²¹ The next day, Shri Rustomji left for Shillong with a light heart and at the same time, Mr. R.Dengthuama was released on bail.

Before he left the prison, the other jailed Mizo Union leaders fervently requested Mr. R.Dengthuama not to make any agreement with the Superintendent until and unless their leaders were released from the plains. In spite of his friends' requests and much against the wishes of the Party activists, Mr R.Dengthuama made a compromise with the Superintendent. He even did not consult the Mizo Union leaders at the Headquarters. On his own capacity as the vice-president of Mizo Union sub-headquarters, Lungleh, Mr Dengthuama issued "Mizo Union Thupuan" dated Aizawl, 27.1.1949 under the seal of General Headquarters, Aizawl whereby he called off the non cooperation movement. The notification states that Mr.L.L. Peters, during his tenure of Office, promised to recommend for the release of the Mizo Union leaders from

the plan, to return all the fines imposed during the movement, and to lift all the restrictions imposed upon the Mizo Union activists because of the movement etc. Mr. R.Dengthuama urged the local units to report to the Superintendent or the Sub-Divisional Officers that they had stopped the movement. He also informed the units that the sooner the movement stopped, the more likely Mizoram would function as District Council Administration.²²

As the notification was issued under the seal of the General Headquarters, Aizawl, all the Mizo Union units in the District obediently called off the movement. This indicated that the Mizo Union members had great faith in their leaders. On their release and return to Aizawl, the Mizo Union leaders were very disappointed with the R.Dengthuama's notification. But they could do nothing as the notification had already reached all the local units. They, therefore, earnestly pursued whatever promises the notification contained. The prompt release of the Mizo Union leaders appears to be a sincere gesture on the part of the Superintendent of his promises. However, the administrative set remained unchanged and thus there were various factors towards the discontentment of the politically conscious Mizo Union leaders. In years to come, the Mizo Union remained the main pioneer of Mizo autonomous movements, till its merger with the Congress in 1974.

It may be pointed out that although the leaders of the Mizo Union Party called the movement as "non-violence-non-cooperation", its characteristics and trends appeared to be a kind of civil disobedience. Even some of the Mizo Union leaders like Mr.R.Thanhkira, President and Mr. H.Vanthuama, General Secretary of the party during the movement do not deny the civil disobedience character of the movement. Both of them said that the movement could also be called "Civil Disobedience Movement". This may be justified by the non-payment of taxes and government dues, disobedience to the government by refusing to do government obligations were fully carried out by the Mizo Union activists which indeed were the characteristics of civil disobedience. Pu Labuaia said that they were very much influenced by the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence. This statement is supported by the "Mizo Union Thupuan No 31/38 of 1.12.1948 2 (2)" that there must not be any kind of violence in their movement.²⁴

The movement which involved more than 80% of the total population of Lushai Hills had deep significance in the political consciousness of the Mizo. First, it made known to the people of other states who the Mizos and what type of people they were. Second, the movement gave a strong sense of solidarity and spirit of unity among the Mizos. Third, it taught the Mizo people the value of endurance and perseverance. Fourth, the movement enlightened the political outlook of the general masses and trained the Mizo people for their future political developments. Fifth, the movement truly testified the sincere loyalty of the Party members to the Union and their self-less sacrifices for the general welfare of the Mizo people as a whole. It may be right to say to the credit of the Mizo Union that its leaders were sober, realistic and far-sighted. They were always ready to sacrifice their personal interests for the cause of the public. When one looks back to the various achievements of the Mizo Union and their selfless sacrifices, the movement they organised, petitions and memorandums they had submitted to the Assam Government for the upliftment of the Mizo people, it may not be wrong to call those early Mizo Union leaders "Patriots" for the Mizos. Pu R.Thanhliira boldly claimed that had the MNF insurgency not disrupted them, the Mizo Union would have surely brought home statehood for Mizoram without shedding a single drop of blood.²⁵

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