

British Trade Relations with Mizoram Till 1930, and its Impact

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Among the North Eastern Hill Tribes the Mizos were the last to be conquered by the British. The usual methods used were punitive expeditions, imposing fines, exaction of forced labour, collection of a house tax or revenue, sending missionaries and establishing trading centres or bazars to turn the tribes more 'civilized'. Finally conquest and administration. Apart from outrageous policy of burning crops and villages, the most important successful device used to entice and to subdue the Mizo tribals was trade.

Before the British penetration into the hills, trade was already popular in the Western region along the border of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Mizo traders often went as far as Rangamati and Kessalong crossing the distance miles on foot and on raft. Trade relations also existed in the East with the adjoining tribes across the Burma border. In the extreme South Mizos trade with the Arrakanese and were having friendly terms with the latter authorities whom they never attacked. Whereas in the north hills the Tipaimukh bazar was already established even before the British, which was the main trading centre with the south hills of Manipur and Burma. Thus along these four corners trade flourished, but largely on a barter basis, and the use of coins was unimportant.

One interesting fact to be noted is that in Mizoram history there was no mention of either currency or coins. It was from 1891 only that the British imposed Indian currency in Mizoram. Perhaps, the reason for coins not being used for exchange commodities was that the hills were not governed by a single chief or king or monarch, strong enough to issue a standard medium of exchange which would be accepted by others. Or, perhaps that the tribes were not influenced by the practice, existing in the neighbouring states. The main reason could have been that due to lack of durable contact with the so-called 'civilized' societies Mizo tribals understandably had a 'barter economy'. On the other hand, since Mizo occupied an iso-block of

hills with very imperfect communications and limited contact with outside markets, like the Chins of Burma, they practiced a 'borderline economy'. Thereby, the neighbouring tribes were also quite willing to trade with the same-barter. Whether in the village or at the border the method of buying and selling was done by barter. Thus the lack of regular coins, however, did not hamper the economic life of the people.

Moreover, in the pre and post British periods the trade in fire-arms was quite prominent at the border. It was after 1825 that large number of guns began to find its way in Mizoram. It was largely obtained from the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Burma. It was usually exchanged with slaves-one gun for two healthy slaves. Further, according to a report, that guns as a trade had been widely in existence, and was mainly obtained from Sylhet and Manipur, and Sulphur from Burma.

With the coming of the British the history of Mizoram was to a great extent interwoven with their trade and punitive expeditions. The policy towards Mizos was to have peaceful intercourse, through trade. They said so to win the confidence of the tribes so as to persuade them to keep peace at their borders. It was also made clear to the chiefs that to pursue trade was much more profitable than raids and plunderings which were not at all useful for the future development of their economy. But the real motive was to gradually annex the whole hills under their rule. As a result from 1870s onwards friendly relation was maintained with the hostile tribes.

In the north hills trading centres were established at various stations-Tipaimukh bazar on the Turuang or Barak river (the precise date of establishment was unknown), Sonai bazar on the Tuirial or Sonai river and Changsil bazar on the Tlawng or Dhaleswari river. All the trade had been in the hands of a few Manipuri and Bengali traders who traded constantly in the hills at the risk of their lives. The traders were obliged to give a large share of articles to the chief called 'Sidah'. It was an annual tax in kind levied by the chief on any foreign traders who had shops or doing business within their jurisdiction. It was to protect the traders and shopkeepers by the chief.

Rubber and cotton were the main products of the hills sold to the traders. The trade in rubber became prominent after the expedi-

tion of 1870-71. Mizos often carried rubber even at a distance of nine miles from their villages. They also traded in ivory, wax, firewood and other minor products. The main articles of purchase were salt, tobacco leaf, steel, dao, thread, cosmetic etc. One of the most extensive utensils bought was the brass cooking pot. Thus as trade gradually flourished Mizos began to have more interest in the transactions of commercial goods. But all these transactions were done by barter.

However, as the tribes were not yet fully subjugated, and due to continue raids and plunderings some of the trading centres were either closed or destroyed. In October 1879 Changsil bazar was plundered but was re-established and withdrawn in 1884. On the other hand due to the opening of a new route Tipaimukh and the Sonai bazars were also closed in August 1888 and 1889 respectively.

With the effort of the North Lushai Hills Military Police battalion under the supervision of Major Loch once again the river traffic above Changsil village was made possible. Ultimately from 1890, Sairang village had become the most important trading centre in the north hills. The river route was widely used to export forest products. But the Aizawl-Sairang cart road was completed in 1910 only and improvement of this cart road was made after the 1930s and for the purpose the government spent the amount of Rs.5,91/- only.

In fact from 1893-94 with the exception of the two shops in Aizawl, the trade were carried on at Sairang. Mr. E.R. Elles in his report stated that the "bazars provided good means of communications with the hill people, helped to maintain friendly relations with them and were very remunerative to the traders bartering salt, cloth and iron for rubber and other forest products".

After the amalgamation of the North and the South hills in 1898 efforts were made to improve the trade routes. In 1905 under the supervision of Major Shakespear another path was constructed between Rengte (Kolasib) north of Aizawl and Silchar which was widely used till the present time. Thus goods supply was now mainly transported through the Tlawng river by boat or raft from Katakhal and then by road to Kolasib. All these transactions were now conducted not by barter, but by money.

In the South Hills trading centre was established by the British in 1871 at Demagiri or Tlabung. In 1872 eleven shops was established under the supervision of T.H. Lewin the then Deputy Commissioner of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. By 1894 seven to eight traders established themselves at Lunglei and three of them permanently settled in the sub-headquarters.

It was reported that over three hundred Mizos visited Kessalong and Rangamati following the policy of intercourse with the British and their subjects. On the other hand, the Lakher clan of the extreme south often traded with the Arrakanese and Haka tribes of Burma. Kerosene oil too found its way into the local bazars. But kerosene lamp was commonly used after the 1930s only.

Till the late 1890s there were more shops in Lunglei than in Aizawl. By 1917 in the whole hills there were thirty shops including four tailor shops at Aizawl, two at Sairang, one at Champhai, fourteen on road sides near Aizawl, three at Lunglei and four at Demagir. The bi-weekly bazars at Aizawl and the weekly bazars at Lunglei were well attended. Vegetables fruit and other articles were brought in for sale and usually found a ready market. With the improvement of roads in the late 1930s Aizawl became the main trading centre in the whole hills and shop also grew in number.

As a whole the principal imports were cotton and woolen yarns, salt, brass utensils, piece goods, tobacco, daos, cigarettes, condensed milk, umbrellas, enamelled ware, plate, glass, iron pans, steel, soap and beads. Exports comprised bees wax, cotton, chillies and forest produce. The traders and the shopkeepers were mainly Bengali merchants and traders from Rajasthan. While in the extreme south, cotton and sesamum seed were commonly sold to the Arrakanese traders. In spite of the increasing number of shops in the hills, there were few local shopkeepers.

Thus, the historic intercourse with the British generated a strong demand for varieties of articles and various goods obtainable from the bazars and the Cachar plains. The introduction of new items at the domestic front led to some modifications of the traditional way of living. Many of the new articles were installed permanently as features of new life and changes were seen in the social and in the domestic circle. Indeed the progress of trade inhibited the breakdown of the primitive life style of nomadism.

However, the inter-village trade was not so prominent. Money was scarce and there was no way in which the household could purchase costly civilized goods or articles. The traditional tribal economy of reciprocity for ordinary goods was now replaced by money economy. But the new rulers made no further encouragement for any large scale manufacturing from the indigenous products. Though the cottage industry was started in 1936-37 however, it was not successful. Ultimately Mizos began to rely heavily on imported materials-and there was no employment to generate an income large enough to maintain their standard. The new ruler as a whole had no formulated economic policy to develop the so-called 'backward people'.

The main impact on the tribe was that it created money mindedness and commercial consciousness in the society. In fact the British method to detribalize the tribe at the initial stage was to some extent successful, but had failed to create sufficient opportunities outside agriculture. The government could neither help to develop nor change the traditional method of cultivation to achieve surplus produce.

Nevertheless with the outside world being opened, it led to some degree of 'impersonal' trade and the acceptance of the concepts of wages, profit, price and wealth with capital investment. It greatly helped to regular their daily economic processes. Thus trade which had been prominent in the hills was now modified and extended in the post British periods.

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