

Village Grouping and Social Transformation in Mizoram

B. S. Mipun and R. Ramthara

Department of Geography, North Eastern Hill University,
Shillong-793014.

Abstract

Second half of the twentieth century has noticed a remarkable social transformation in Mizoram. One among many socio-political instruments responsible for such transformation is village-grouping system. The isolated Mizo society which for a long time adhered to a traditional value system with cohesive village life and cooperative work culture suddenly started sliding away to catch the modern stream of development. The present paper makes a descriptive analysis of the impacts of the village grouping process in Mizoram by narrating the transformation that took place in certain socio-economic and cultural variables viz., demographic restructuring, infrastructural facilities, educational development, diversification of economic activities, religious re-configuration, emergence of social organisation and the overall life style of the people.

Key words: Village grouping, Social transformation, Jhumming, Agriculture work-partnership system.

Introduction:

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In the olden days and till 1956, Mizo society is ruled over by their *Lal* or Chief. The Chiefs were independent and each village was a separate state. The villagers lived like a big family in which they looked after the needy families. The give-and-take policy was being practised till the outbreak of insurgency in the state, leading to deterioration in solidarity and harmony in Mizo society.

In any society, impact of modernisation can be observed on their social relations. In Mizo society also, the emergence of political consciousness facilitated gradual modernisation on their social relationships. The introduction of village groupings, mainly due to the emergence of political consciousness among the people of Mizoram, brought about changes in the solidarity of the people, values, way of life, relationship among the village people and their social practices.

Shifting of remote villages into larger units brought about tremendous changes in the structure of relationship among the villagers. Bases of traditional social solidarity were shattered and the grouping centres were now exposed to a network of social and economic relations linking different centres with the nearby towns. In these circumstances, the traditional village harmony and homogeneity gave way to different structures of relationships. With the emergence of numerous occupations, the structure of relations becomes much more complex than what it was before. Villagers became a part of wider society, which in turn was a part of the still wider national society. Though encapsulated within itself it became part of the ever-growing process of modernisation and gradually lost its distinctive community traits. As such the villagers became very much affected by what happened in the capital town of Aizawl.

Work Partnership:

In the traditional setting, the village harmony was largely based on agricultural works, which bound the villagers together as homogeneous community. Agriculture meant jhumming and jhumming did not mean a mere economic pattern, but a way of life in Mizo society.

The agricultural work of the Mizos centred round the agricultural work partnership. The agricultural work partnership among the Mizos largely confined itself to the unmarried young men and women and it did not, in any way, reflect the status of the members of the working party. It was a reciprocal give-and-take form of agricultural work. The Mizo youths combined themselves in such a way that agricultural work would be performed reciprocally on two or more plots of land alternately. In this way, a group of youths forms a bigger agricultural work partnership. For the youth, it was like dating a girl in modern society and demand for work-partnership was accordingly high for beautiful girls.

In the olden days, agricultural work-partnership was highly cherished by the Mizos. Old people earnestly retold their youthful days in relation to their agricultural work-partnership of the past, which brought them with happy memories of youthful days. For the young people who were not burdened family responsibility, work-partnership was the main attraction to agricultural work. So far as the Mizo experience is concerned, agricultural works and agricultural land had a sentimental value and not merely a material product, but a kind of romantic attachment and fascination. This was mainly due to the social interaction, which

had taken place at the agricultural land, and during agricultural works particularly among the agricultural work-partners.

The social interactions in agricultural land were by means of perfect co-operation. The relationship of interaction between the agricultural work partners might take various forms, as members might not be too conscious to fulfil the expectations of others. But in agricultural land, among the agricultural work group, mutual adaptation and perfect co-operation governed the relationship. Thus the method of jhum cultivation had provided the ethos necessary for the villagers to experience the feeling of oneness. This feeling of oneness has resulted in common sharing of the village land in a uniform way. The practice of jhum cultivation does not permit permanent land holding system and any individual villagers considered the village land as their own belongings. So the sentimental attachment to jhum land materialised itself in the affectionate adaptation to the whole village territory resulting in the solidarity of the village communities. The jhum cultivation cycle was usually eight to nine years. In this way, the whole village land was connected with agricultural sentimentalism since many cycles would take place in one's lifetime. Therefore, it appears that the solidarity of the villages was the effect of the system of agricultural work and agricultural land. Any dislocation in traditional agricultural system would thus result in disharmony in the village solidarity and the whole structure.

Village groupings in Mizoram destroyed the traditional village economy, work-partnership, which was a common customary practice throughout Mizoram, became dying custom in most of the grouping centres. The (Table 1) shows the difference between the two grouped villages and one ungrouped village regarding the age-old work-partnership custom in Mizoram.

From the Table-1, it can be observed that both the grouped villages have lower level of agriculture work-partnership than that of the ungrouped village. In both the grouped centres Farkawn and Khaywhai shares of agriculture work-partnership is 27.20 percent and 35 percent of the total agricultural workers respectively. This means that only one-third (1/3) of the agricultural workers were still practising work-partnership. However, the case is different as far as the ungrouped village is concerned. In the ungrouped village Kelsih, over two-fifths (2/5) of the total agricultural workers (i.e., 41 %) were still enjoying the traditional pattern of agricultural work-partnership.

Table 1
Level of Work-Partnership in Agriculture

Village	No. of Work-Partnership	No. of no Work-Partnership	Total
Farkawn (Grouped)	108 (27.20%)	289 (72.78%)	397
Khawhai (Grouped)	71 (35.00%)	132 (65.00%)	203
Kelsih (Ungrouped)	50 (41.00%)	70 (59.00%)	120

The low level of agriculture work-partnership in grouped villages is a sufficient indication of the depressing economic conditions under which the people were unable to engage themselves in this traditional system of reciprocity and it certainly hampered agricultural works. The main reason given by those who did not engage in this customary practice was largely due to the acute food shortage, and they were no longer in a position to practice this kind of works. Also they were no longer free agricultural workers as they used to be. Since they had to spend lots of time and energy on manual works to relieve them of the precarious situation, they were not in a position to engage in agricultural work-partnership especially among the jhum cultivators.

On the other hand, the engagement in agricultural work-partnership among the jhum cultivators in ungrouped villages was much higher than the grouped villages. The main reason for higher percentage of work-partnership in ungrouped village is a higher degree of self-subsistence family among the jhum cultivators and self-contained, except some school teachers.

The people in the grouping centres are interested in education and send their children to schools. Even the poorest families have the desire to educate their children and send them to school to study as high as they can afford. Besides, the higher percentage of literacy in the grouped centres is due to the availability of educational facilities within the village. Other available facilities in the grouping centres also inspire the people to educate their children. It is also due to the competitive mindedness, which made the people to pursue education. The interaction with the outside world also plays an important role for their education, which makes them change in their walk of life.

Being exposed to the world of modern amenities like schools, medical facilities and monetisation in the grouping centres the people were in much better conditions compared to ungrouped villages.

Moreover, the condition and institutions are much better in the grouped centres. The grouped village Farkawn, has five primary schools, two are Government, two are Private and one is Deficit. There are two middle schools, one is Government and another one is Deficit. It has only one Government High school. The condition in Khawhai grouped village is a bit better than Farkawn village. In Khawhai village there are five primary schools, two are Government, two are Deficit and one is Private. There are three middle schools, in which two of them is Government and one is Private. The State Government runs the only High School in Khawhai. Whereas, the ungrouped village Kelsih, have only one Government primary school and one Private middle school.

The grouped villages are normally provided with amenities and aids to run their school affairs, whereas the ungrouped villages were not provided with government assistance except in the primary level.

Social Values:

The sudden introduction of grouping of villages without proper planning had far reaching consequences on the traditional social organisation. The emergence of new occupations with greater emphasis on monetary value diversified village communities in the grouping centres. In the villages before the grouping, the influential persons were largely those who successfully operated agricultural work and made some profit of it. So jhum cultivation before village grouping was a way of life rather than a mere means of earning their livelihood. But in the process, the influential persons were detached from the traditional jhum cultivation in the grouping centres and jhum cultivation was left to the poorer families who were unable to make a start in other occupations. Thus, jhum cultivation lost its traditional significance as a source of village harmony. Thus, a new source of value based economy of monetisation has emerged.

As a result, all the grouping centres have been accruing easy material benefits, such as petty contract works, government subsidies and various grant-in-aid, petty shops and other commercial trades. The successful persons in the cash economy had high social standing, which was not existed prior to village grouping in the community. The influential persons in the grouping centres are the wealthy persons who were successful in trades. This created the gap between the wealthy and the poor. Thus, the structural consequences of village groupings are transformation of the relatively undifferentiated, simple village community into the relatively differentiated and complex.

Moreover, grouping of villages resulted in dislocation of agricultural work system. Greater emphasis on the monetary economy gave rise to the immediate monetary profits, which, resulted in widespread misappropriation of developmental funds at all levels. The quick transformations have forced many people in difficult situations and are unable to adjust themselves. This resultant anxiety and tension caused the emergence of new structure of relationship. Capital crimes like murder and theft, which were almost unknown to the Mizo society before village grouping, have become common a phenomena in the grouping centres. The people in the grouping centres are exposed to criminal laws. The Village Council Courts are become less important and acts only as nominal bodies.

With the better channel of source of information in the grouping centres, the disharmonised village solidarity has given way to group cohesiveness. This has created 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 was prevailed, which called for group cohesion. This kind of group sentimentalism or group feeling could be observed elsewhere whenever there is a high degree of group homogeneity. This fact has been recorded by Coser when he says, "the greater is the group nationalism and ethnocentrism, the greater is the group homogeneity of attitudes, beliefs, language spoken and ways of behaving, the greater is the group cohesiveness and the greater the pressure for homogeneity and cohesiveness.

Thus grouping of villages brought about numerous modifications in the structural relationship, but did not bring about major structural changes. Thus, despite the wider contacts and changes that it has brought about, grouping of villages results in the emphasis on the maintenance of separate structural existence, and inter-group relations continue to be based largely on enmity and hostility like other subordinate groups elsewhere.

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 with the non-tribal. This naturally increased the group cohesiveness and hostile attitude towards non-tribal and any opinion different from tribal movement become branded as treasonous. This seems to have widened the gap between tribal and non-tribal.

The dispersion of local groups due to the introduction of grouping of villages shattered traditional social and political organisations. This gave the tribal level political articulation. It is mainly because of this political articulation stressing tribal identity in terms of Mizo tribal group becomes much more relevant for the newly emerging leaders of the Mizo society than in any other tribal areas of India. And this has been strengthened by the introduction of grouping of villages with the resultant deteriorating condition of local level solidarity.

The sudden and forced nature of changes in the traditional system caused difficulties to many families. They could not adjust themselves in the grouping centres due to the new situation, which resulted in tension, anxiety, inter-village feuds and insecurity. Emerged as a result, different kinds of social mal-adjustments, which were earlier unknown to Mizo society.

Development through Test Relief (TR) programme brought in the grouping centres several work opportunities that motivated the Mizo villagers participate for a direct monetary incentive 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 further caused diversification in religious denomination among the Mizos. Forced migration of people to the grouping centres caused segregation between religious leaders and their followers. The isolated religious leaders adhering to their own denominations activated themselves in re-establishing their status in the new society with a new group of followers. As a result of this religious re-configuration the society started experiencing diversified religious denominations. This is evident in the following empirical findings. In both grouping centres, we find that there are as many as four (4) denominations. On the other hand, we find only one denomination in the ungrouped villages. It is to be noted that there is only one religion prevalent in Mizoram i.e. Christianity.

Although economic opportunities dissuaded the individual Mizos from offering voluntary services, the society couldn't ignore the importance of long cherished community life sustained through collective endeavour. The urge to get back the benefits of their old community life motivated the youth to revive the old practice of voluntary service, but in an institutional manner following the modern organisational technology. As a result of the above social transformation, Social

and voluntary organisations like Young Mizo Association (YMA), Mizo Hmeichhe Insuih-khawm Pawl (MHIP), Village Defence Party (VDP), etc. are successfully operating in the contemporary Mizo society.

Conclusion:

The agricultural work-partnership system, which was highly cherished by the Mizos has been very much declining due to the introduction of village groupings. However, changes can be observed on the dependency ratio and size of the family members. Lower dependency ratio and higher size of family members are prominent in the grouping centres. Better level of literacy rate is observed in the grouping centres. Female literacy is higher in the grouping centres. Better condition of educational institutions and other offices are located mostly in the grouping centres. Transformation of village communities into diversified work is evident due to the introduction of village groupings. Before groupings, most of the village people were jhum cultivators except a few school teachers. Their interest and way of life are more or less the same, which binds them like a big family. But after groupings, diversification of occupations occurred, which changed their way of life and their outlook. In course of time, the undifferentiated, simple village communities turned into differentiated, complex village communities. Another impact of village grouping in Mizoram is group cohesiveness, which created ethnocentrism and group identity mainly due to the hardship faced during village groupings. It created enmity with the non-tribal due to the atrocious activities of the security personnel in the grouping centres. It also resulted on the tribal level political articulation stressing tribal identity in terms of Mizo tribal groups. The sudden and forced nature of changes caused tension, anxiety and inter-village feuds, which, in course of time, led to social evils like corruption, murders, theft, etc., hitherto unknown in Mizo society. Village solidarity has been shattered when different villages were grouped into one village. This is evident from the diversification of religious denominations in the grouping centres. Emergence of social organisations to serve the contemporary Mizo society is one of the major transformations observed.

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