

**THE
MIZO
SOCIETY
IN
TRANSITION**

CHITTA RANJAN NAG

The work covers a geographical region which is now politically known as Mizoram—a tiny state situated in the eastern corner of the Indian union bordering Burma and Bangladesh. So, the “Mizo Society” contextually means the society of the Mizos inhabiting Mizoram.

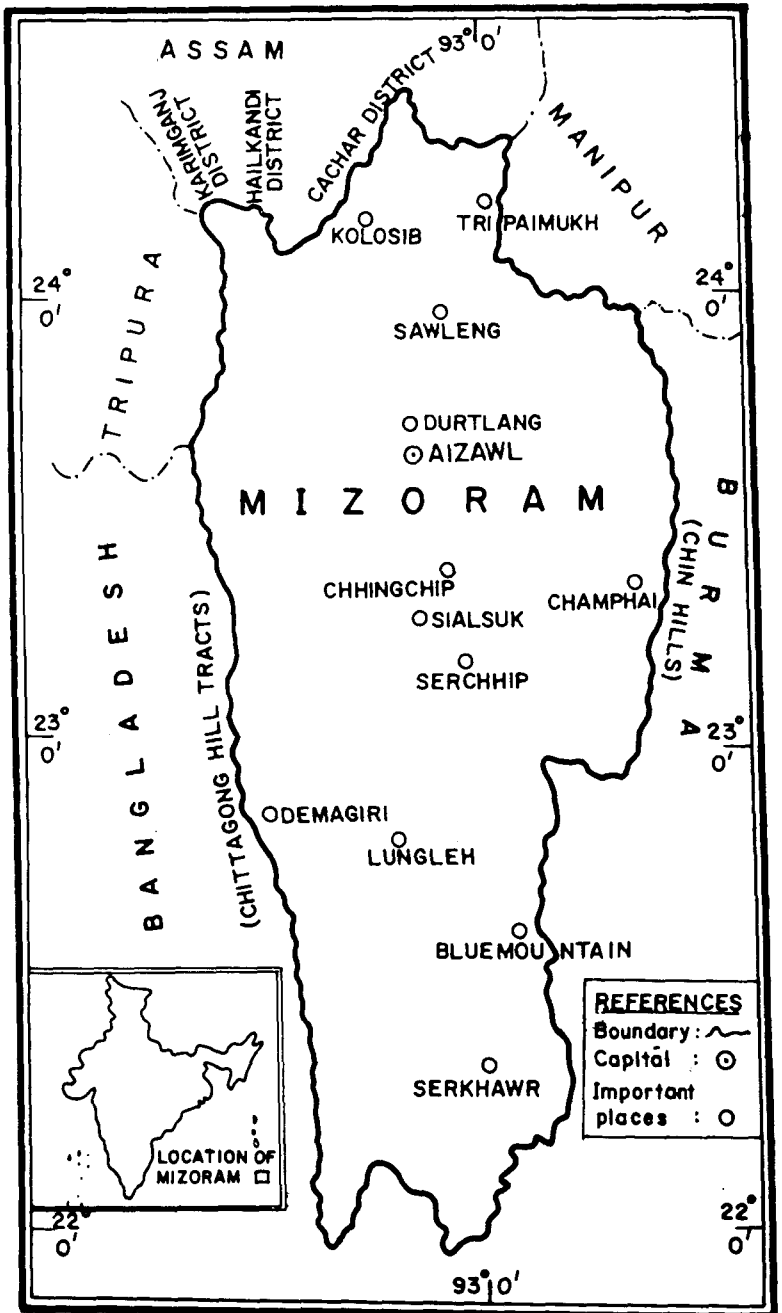
The book concentrates on the study of the Mizos in relation to their social life in the past and the present. The author paints a detailed picture of the indigenous Mizo society—with its quaint customs and beliefs—as it was before the Mizos came into contact with the Western agencies namely, the British administration and Christian missionaries. Christianity exercised a profound impact on the Mizos who, till then, had practised an animistic religion. The author traces the transition of the Mizos from ferocious head-hunters a century and a half ago to a gentle soft-spoken, cultured people as we see today. The missionaries gave the written script to their language and led the Mizos from zero literacy rate to a high literacy rate of over 55% at present in a short span of less than a century. The British annexation had its benefits for it opened Mizoram—an inaccessible, backward region, to the modern world and its influences. Village domains ruled by Chiefs gave way to a more democratic rule introduced by the British. A network of roads and small garrison towns grew. The transformation of Mizoram and its people with schools, hospitals, industries and a people who favour western religion and culture to their own is an amazing, absorbing account.

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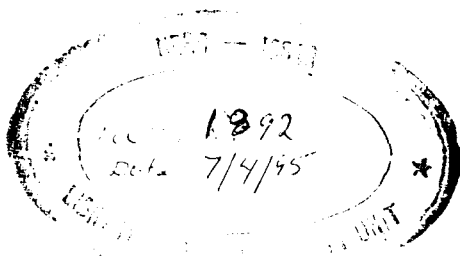
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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>Acknowledgement</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Glossary and Abbreviations</i>	<i>xi</i>
Chapter-I : Introduction	1
Chapter-II : Traditional Mizo Society	8
(a) Social Structure	8
(b) General Habits	14
(c) Mizo Economy	22
(d) Mizo Politics & Administration	27
(e) Language, Literature & Education	31
(f) Institution of Marriage & Divorce	38
(g) Religious Institution, Religious Rites and Practices	46
(h) Ceremonies, Feast & Festivals	65
(i) Philosophy of life of the people of Indigenous Mizo Society	80
Chapter- III : Mizo-West Contact	82
(a) Mizo-British Contact	82
(b) Mizo-Christianity Contact	98
(c) Findings of the Mizo-West Contact	119

Chapter-IV : Transition in the Mizo Society	123
(a) Making of Aizawl and Road Communication	123
(b) Evolution in Religious Life	125
(c) Social Evolution	133
(d) Transition in Mizo Politics and Administration	182
(e) Change in the Mizo Economy	193
(f) Change in the Philosophy of Life	202
Chapter-V : Findings of the Mizo Transition Together with Author's Observations	206
Appendix-i : List of clans & sub-clans of the Mizos	213
Appendix-ii : Questionnaire	216
Appendix-iii : Questionnaire	218
Appendix-iv : List of persons consulted and engaged in the translation work by the author	224
Appendix-v : Chant uttered in <i>Sakhua</i> sacrifice	226
Appendix-vi : List of first District Council Members	229
Appendix-vii : PPVs and Ungrouped Villages	231
Appendix-viii: List of first M.L.A.s and Ministers of the Union Territory of Mizoram	238
Appendix-ix : List of first Ministers of the full- fledged State of Mizoram	241
Appendix-x : List of State heads & other high officials of Mizoram as in 1976	243
Appendix-xi : List of State heads & other high officials of Mizoram as in 1987	245
Appendix-xii : List of State heads & other high officials of Mizoram as in 1991	247
Bibliography	250

Chapter - 1

Introduction

(a) The Land : The Mizos' habitation, politically known as Mizoram, is situated in the eastern corner of the Indian Union and in the extreme south of the State of Assam bordering Bangladesh and Burma between 22.20' and 24.27' N, and 92.20' and 93.20' E. It covers an area of 21,090 sq. kilometres. More specifically, it is bounded on the north by the districts of Cachar and Karimganj (Assam), and the State of Manipur, on the south by the Arakan, on the east and south by the Chin Hills of Burma, and on the west by the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh and the State of Tripura (India).

The entire Mizoram with the exclusion of a small portion lying in the plains is full of hill ranges running in north-south direction. The ridges of the ranges of hills vary from about 3,000 feet to 7,000 feet. The Blue Mountain, called by the Mizos as *Phawngpui*, situated in the south Mizoram, is 7,100 feet high. The slope of the hills is very steep. The gorges are so narrow and deep that, in many cases, one cannot see right to their bottom. The plain areas are mostly located in the eastern part of Mizoram, namely, the places known as Champhai (about 7 kilometres in length and 3 kilometres in width), and a portion of Vanlaiphai (about 6 kilometres and 1 kilometre in length and width respectively). There are a few rivers in Mizoram that flow through the narrow valleys, the most important of which are Dhaleswar (Tlawng), Sonai and

Tuivawl in the northern part, Koladyne with its tributaries - Mat, Tiau and Tuipui on the east, Karnaphuli and Tuilianpui in the western part of Mizoram. The soil of the hills is fertile. The Mizos dwell in the plains and mostly on the ridges of the ranges of the hills.

The Tropic of Cancer runs through Mizoram. It lies only about 50 kilometres south of Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram. As a result, the climate of Mizoram is tropical. As Mizoram consists of ranges of hills and each is separated from the other by narrow valleys and sinuous gorges, the climate is thus not similar in all the places at a particular time. Comparatively, the valleys are unhealthy and unpleasant. It is moist during rains. The higher ridges are fairly cool even in the tremendously hot season of the year. Winds and storms blow across the hills during the monsoons from the Bay of Bengal in April or early May. The rains generally start in May and end in October. Subject to the condition of monsoons, rainfall in Mizoram varies from 70 to 170 inches a year. Temperature varies from 20.30° to 29.80° in summer and 11.80° to 21.30° in winter⁽¹⁾.

Until the British annexed the present Mizoram, the abode of the Mizos in the late 19th century, the place was little known to the outside world. It was only since the occupation of the British, the land with the nomenclature 'The Lushai Hills' began to be known far and wide. However, the name of the land 'The Lushai Hills' did not last long as it could not cover the identity of all the allied ethnic groups of people inhabiting this land. It could only give recognition to a particular clan named *Lushai* among all the clans of the same ethnic group. Since the independence of India a desire for change of the nomenclature as to the identity of the people and the land had been voiced among the Mizos which revealed itself in the Census Operation of 1951 distinctively. The name 'The Lushai Hills' connotes the place of habitation of a

(1) S. Barketaki, "Tribes of Assam." p-81.

particular clan as the name was derived after the name of the *Lushai* clan, the then most powerful clan of the Mizos. But there had been and still are many other clans of the same origin as that of the *Lushai* living in the same land. With a view to showing equal justice and paying due recognition to all the clans along with the *Lushai* clan and to ensure unity, equality and oneness, and also to avoid disintegration, the word *Mizo* had been proposed as a substitute for the word in practice '*Lushai*', to cover more fully the identity of the people and the land. The proposal, thus, for changing the name in regard to the identity of the people and the land was finally placed before the Parliament of India which at last changed the nomenclature from '*Lushai Hills*' to '*Mizo Hills*' along with the change in the racial identify from '*Lushai*' to '*Mizo*' by an Act called '*Lushai Hills District*' (change of name), 1954⁽²⁾ with effect from the 1st September, 1954. Since then, the land had been known as the Mizo Hills District until it achieved its separation from the State of Assam on 21.1.1972 and gained the status of the Union Territory of Mizoram. And now the land is politically and popularly known as MIZORAM meaning Mizo land.

(b) The Mizos: The term '*Mizo*' is a collective name for the people inhabiting Mizoram, possessing one language, same origin and a common way of life. Formerly, with the advent of British Administration over this land in the late 19th century, the Mizos were identified as the '*Lushais*'. But even during the British Rule, the people, when speaking of themselves, used to use the word '*Mizo*' to suggest the identify of their race⁽³⁾. It is said, the word *Mizo* had been in use as their racial identity from an unknown past long before the British annexed this land.

Etymologically, the word '*Mizo*' means '*hillman*'. The

(2) Government of India Act 18 of 1954.

(3) Census of India, 1961, District Census Hand Book, Mizo District, Assam. p-5.

word is derived from two Mizo words - *Mi* and *Zo*. *Mi* means man and *Zo* means hill. Again, the term *Lushai* as used by the Britishers bears an etymological significance. In fact, it stands for the word 'headcutter' in English, for the Mizo word *Lu* means head and *Shai* means to cut⁽⁴⁾. J. Shakespear, however, admitted that the term *Lushai* as used to suggest the common identity of the people of this land was a misnomer, an erroneous transliteration of the word *Lushai* or *Lusei*. The word *Lushai* or *Lusei* originated from two Mizo words - *Lu* and *Shai* or *Sei* which means head and long respectively. Thus, the word *Lushai* or *Lusei* signifies longhead. J. Shakespear* and A.G. McCall* both interpreted it as 'wisehead' (5).

Besides the above explanation from the etymological standpoint, there are other explanations put forward by two Mizo writers Lalmama and V.L. Siama. Lalmama's explanation is based on a testimonial evidence from some Mizo soldiers who had been to Lisu land, a place situated in the upper Salween Canyon in South West China. According to these soldiers, the Lisu tribe understands the Ralte** dialect, and in many ways the Lisu tribe resembles the Mizos. Thus, Lalmama opines that the name 'Lushai' might have originated from Lisu⁽⁶⁾. Again, V.L. Siama is of the opinion that the name *Lusei* has come from two Burmese words - *Lu* and *Se* meaning 'tribe' and 'ten' respectively. So, he means to say that the term *Lusei* stands for the tenth tribe. Nay, he goes further to justify his interpretation from an old story which he claims, is known both amongst the Burmese and the Mizos that once there lived ten tribes in the plains of Burma and the

* They were British administrative officers posted at different time in Mizoland in connection with the administration of Mizoland, who contributed literary works on the Mizos.

** Ralte is one of the clans of the Mizos living in Mizoram.

(4) T.H. Lewin—"A Fly on the Wheel" p-370.

(5) A.G. McCall, "Lushai Chrysalis." p-XIII.

J. Shakespear, *The Lushai Kuki Clans* .p-19.

(6) Lalmama, "Mizo Titi." p-19.

present Lushais (Mizos) were the tenth of the ten tribes who, as time went on, migrated westwards⁽⁷⁾.

However, whatever be the explanations and interpretations, since India achieved her Independence there was a deep undercurrent of dissatisfaction and resentment among the non-Lushai people of the same stock on the issue of their racial identity. Their obvious dislike for the name 'Lushai' to suggest the racial identity of all the clans came to the forefront in the Census Operation of 1951 when non-Lushai clans categorically expressed their annoyance at the use of the word 'Lushai' to mean their racial identity, and offered two alternatives: either they be recognised as 'Mizo' or identified by their own clan's name. Finally the movement for changing the name from 'Lushai' to 'Mizo' as the racial identity took its stand in the Parliament of India and in consequence, the name 'Mizo' rather than 'Lushai' as the racial identity came into force with effect from 1.9.1954 by the Act 18 of 1954⁽⁸⁾.

In a critical estimation as to whether the name 'Mizo' or 'Lushai' or 'Lushei' is apt to denote the common or racial identity, it is clear from the above that the name 'Mizo' is best suited and most appropriate, for it includes all the people living in this hilly region, with one language, same origin and a common way of life. If the word 'Lushai' is used, taking into account its etymological sense, then these people have to be assumed to have the connotation 'ferocious'. But seeing the present trend of the Mizo society it is not fair to say that the Mizos are a ferocious race. Contextually, in the words of J.M. Lloyd, "No doubt this description of Lushais as a ferocious, lawless people was exaggerated"⁽⁹⁾. Moreover, in every society, at the initial stage, there prevails barbarism to some degree for want of amenities. And the people who the

(7) V.L. Siama, "Mizo History." p-7.

(8) Census of India, 1961, Assam, District
Census Hand Book, Mizo Hills. p-5.

(9) J. M. Lloyd, "On every high hill." p-68.

discussion is on, are of recent origin. History speaks of their arrival to the present habitat only in the 19th century and the Mizo-West Contact - the Mizos' contact with the British administration on the one hand and the Mizos' contact with Christianity on the other in the late 19th century marked the beginning of an era of enlightenment for the Mizo society. So, it is clear that the people in the Mizo society during pre-British and early British rule lived at the elementary stage of social living when social intercourse and communications were done only orally. Therefore, if the word 'Lushai' is used taking into account its etymological meaning i.e., headcutter to denote the racial identity of the people, it is a gross error, as barbarism is more or less common in every primitive society.

J. Shakespear is of the view that the term 'Lushai' is an incorrect transliteration of the word 'Lushai' after the name of the Lushai clan, the then most powerful clan of the Mizos mostly from whom the British annexed this land after a strenuous struggle⁽¹⁰⁾. But considering from moral and democratic view point, for the identity of a race of numerous clans, derivation of a word after the name of a particular clan is not proper. In other words, if the name of a tribe is derived after the name of a particular clan of that tribe, then it reflects a narrow outlook, for in that case the tribe would simply mean that particular clan denying the existence of numerous other clans of that tribe.

Again, the word 'Mizo', if taken liberally, will include all the hill people, but it still does not identify a particular race. But if the word 'Mizo' is used in a restricted sense to cover only those hill people who came together to this land and have same origin, similar language, culture, cult and way of life, then the name bears significance. It is therefore concluded

(10) J. Shakespear, "The Lushai Kuki Clans." p-XIII.

that the word 'Mizo' is chosen in the restricted sense to mean the identity of the race because there are other tribes living at present in Mizoram such as the Chakmas, etc. who are not treated as Mizos as they have got no affinity with the Mizos in any respect*.

* Clan picture of the Mizo tribe is drawn in Appendix—I.