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RESEARCH ARTICLE

COLONIAL MIZORAM: FOREST PRODUCE AND FARMING METHODS

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Abstract

Frequent raids of areas that the Lushais claimed as their hunting grounds occupied by the British culminated to the creation of the Lushai Hills district under the British rule. Maintenance of public order being the prime concern, policies relating to forests and fields were sparse allowing traditional patterns of livelihoods to continue almost unchanged. The demand for forest produce was only outside the District as there was no local industries or enterprises that needed raw materials. Trade in forest produce and traders, however, were introduced in this period. Trade permits were issued, Mahal awarded for extraction along the river banks, and minor forest produce were covered by permit and Royalty was collected. Difficult terrain, poor transportation system and shortage of labour were impediments to timber trade. Lack of supervision and management practices rendered the timber traders a free hand, leading to unsystematic felling of trees and damage to productive potential of forest resources. Mizos continued to depend on jhums and local forest resources for livelihood during the whole period of colonial rule. Training of inhabitants to hunt for financial prizes by officials led to the extinction of a number of species. The calls for conservation and forestation was not effective as it was perceived that the hills and jhums land replenished quickly causing no discernible negative impact.

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Introduction:-

All of northeastern India, with the exception of the Lushai Hills, later called Mizoram was ruled by the British by 1869. The Lushais' continued raiding of areas that they claimed as their hunting grounds and that were inhabited by British Raj subjects was the issue at this point. The Lushais (Mizo) were a horrifying new threat to the British because their chiefs invaded the plains, pillaged, raided communities, and abducted people before fleeing to the highlands. A little influence was made when troops were dispatched in retaliation in 1850, 1860, and 1869. These acts against the British subjects and property sparked diplomatic attempts, "punitive expeditions," and the establishment of outposts along the boundaries before a full-scale assault was launched.

Subsequently, terrible attacks had occurred in 1871 throughout the borderlands, resulting in the devastation of tea factories, the death of a tea farmer, and the abduction of his five-year-old daughter in Cachar (the kidnapping of Mary Winchester caused a stir in London). Unharmed, the child was rescued and brought back to England. The

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British expedition known as "Vai-Len hmasa" in 1871, which brought about a period of relative calm, came after this episode.

However, a number of further occurrences in 1888 prompted the deployment of more soldiers; these episodes were called "The Chin-Lushai Expedition 1889–90" by certain Mizo historians and known as "Vai Len Vawihnihna." Additional troops from Cachar helped put down the last rebellion of numerous chiefs in the western area. September 6, 1895, saw the official admission of the Lushai Hills into British India. Ultimately, on January 27, 1898, the districts from the north and south were combined to form the Lushai Hills district within the state of Assam, which would eventually become Mizoram.

Extraction System of Forest Produce

In the Lushai Hills District, there were no local industries or enterprises that needed raw materials, and demand for forest product was also not there. Thus the value of forest product was being realized only outside the District. Trade permits issued for regulation of cutting, sawing, conversion and removal of trees and timber were for export purpose, as were permit for the extraction, collection and manufacture of forest products. Cane and bamboo mahals as well as sunken log and drift timber mahals were awarded for extraction along the river banks, and minor forest produce were covered by permits. However, there were special licences for removal of rubber, wax, and rhino horns and passes could be issued to allow removal of trees to make dugouts, without charging royalty to encourage boat craft and stimulate exports.

The Divisional Forest Officer (DFO), Cachar was in charge of felling in the Inner Line Reserve. With periodical negotiation with timber traders from the plains, the area was divided into blocks and assigned to them. Trade permits were issued by the DFOs at Cachar and Sylhet in consultation with the Superintendent, Lushai Hills, and collect royalty as well on produce entering their revenue stations. The DFO Chittagong was also empowered to issue entering passes in lieu of trade permits at the Southern end. As an experiment, in the 1930s, anyone engaged in cutting or purchasing timber that had not been specifically barred could proceed without a pass, as long as he did go beyond a mile from the banks of navigable rivers or build a house. Royalty was collected at the joint revenue station (Barkhal) at the border by Bengal Forest Department. From this, a share was to be subsequently allocated to Assam.

Around 1938, there was no proper communication in the region, and difficulties in transport limited the reach of loggers. Due to the steep hilly terrain, and partly due to the administration having no plans to build roads, there were no cartable roads beyond the 13 mile stretch from Sairang to Aizawl. Because of this condition, the only feasible export route was the rivers. The easiest route, the Dhaleshwari River was navigable up to Sairang with difficulty. There were dangerous rapids between Sairang and Changsil, and accidents occurred each year (Singh, 1996). Below Changsil, the course was fairly clear, and it was only below Guturmukh that the water level dropped drastically in the dry season. The other possible routes were via the rivers Sonia and Barak into Cachar, and the Karnaphuli into the Chittagong Hill Tracts, which were a very long way.

Shortage of labour remained a problem apart from transport. Felling coincided with the agricultural season, moreover, the wage rate was not sufficient to attract local labours. Efforts were made to extract produce from these river banks despite these constraints, and timbers were float down the rivers to Cachar and the Chittagong Hill Tracts

Attempt to invest in local support infrastructure were not there from the authorities, as they are content with the existing method of extraction. There were no supervision and management practices, such as reserving areas for extraction, and pre-marking trees to be fallen were never introduced. This gave the timber traders a free hand, which led to unsystematic felling of trees (Singh, 1996).

This system affects the forests immensely. In 1915, a visiting expert viewed that the Inner Line Reserve was no different in character from unreserved jungle tracts elsewhere, and that unless there were plans to extract the timber on the high ridges, it was meaningless to reserve the area. He further noted that in the interest of efficient forest operations, systematic leasing and felling operations had to be planned as valuable produce existed along the Dhaleshwari as far as Sairang, the Pakuam, Tut, Barak, and sections of the Tuivai and Sonai rivers. He recommended that a Deputy Ranger and Forester be placed in charge of each river system to ensure marking and supervise felling, with headquarters either at Aizawl or Kolasib, and boats and boatmen be supplied to the staff [Mizoram State Archives (MSA), Forest Admin. Report, 1949].

In 1915, the Superintendent of the Lushai Hills took up the cause of improving systems for extraction and exploitation; a process requiring additional resources and control from Aizawl rather than Silchar (MSA, 1949). The proposal was initially scuttled by the First World War, and when brought up later, the Assam Conservator of Forests was not in favour of the proposal. The ill-effects of the existing arrangement soon became evident. In 1917, the DFO Cachar found many logs below the prescribed girth (6 feet at 4.5 feet height) while inspecting the work of the Surma Valley Saw Mills, a charge that was denied by the Mills. He point out the need to introduce marking of trees, numbering of logs, and general supervision of felling and extraction (MSA, Saw Mills, 1917). This however remained an aspect of neglect during British rule and continues to be so for a long time.

Forest Revenues

There is little record at Aizawl on the nature of transactions as commercial operations were handled by the Cachar and Chittagong forest divisions. Important information like the location and areas of sites cleared, species removed, volume extracted, and royalty paid by each lessee are not documented. Thus, the only available information is of annual revenue generated at various stations.

The revenue from the Karnaphuli drainage was transferred from the Bengal account to the Assam account. A record of such revenue is thus available for the period 1931-32 to 1948-49. Similar data for the Cachar division is available only for the years 1940-41 and 1946-47 to 1948-49. The available figures from north and south for the years are given in Table 1. After the Partition, loss of East Bengal market caused a drop in revenue for the year 1948-'49.

Table 1:- Receipts From Forests of the Lushai Hills District.

Division	1940-41	1946-47	1947-49	1948-49
1. Cachar	72511-9-0	65352-7-0	134789-2-0	153865-5-6
2. Sylhet	N.A	64569-7-0	incl. above	-
3. Chittagong	40504-14-3	57075-13-6	50919-3-3	-
4. Aizawl	N.A	1448-10-0	6612-5-0	17697-2-3
Total	113016-7-3	183446-5-6	192320-10-3	171562-7-9

Sunken log mahals and drift timber mahals were leased annually apart from timber, for small sums. Cane and bamboo mahals were also worked. Amount of revenues for the Karnaphuli River in 1933-34, which were Rs 205 and Rs 10 respectively, made a good example. Similarly other non-timber forest products generated little income. The Dhaleshwari was the principal river leased to a professional fisherman from the plains since 1909. Most of the catches were from the upper reaches, yielding little revenue. As supply to Aizawl alone was not economically attractive, a condition was made that for a sale of once a week in the plains, sales have to be made in Aizawl twice a week. Without this concession, no one would take the lease (MSA File No. 3/1935).

The administration charged grazing tax of two rupees for buffalo and six annas for cow, bull, and bullocks over two years of age. Exemptions however were made for those who have few cattle. Little was gained in the collection of grazing tax as cattle rearing were not common. The sum for 1945-46, 1946-47 and 1947-48 were meager: Rs 37-6-0 (including Lunglei Sub-division), Rs 20-10-0 (excluding Lunglei Sub-division), and Rs 16-8-0 (excluding Lunglei Sub-division) respectively. There was proposal, to almost double the rates, by the Conservator of Forests, Assam. This was not supported by the superintendent on the grounds that it could be at the expense of milk-purchasers (ie. foreign residents) who would have to pay much higher prices (MSA, House, building and other advances, 1949).

By the last few years of colonial rule, it does seem that the Lushai Hills yielded a fairly steady income from forests. It is likely that unsupervised felling through unscientific methods in unregulated quantities disregarded the need to allow for adequate regeneration. Over a period of time, this should have resulted in depletion of growing stock. Timber traders must then have proceeded further upstream up to the last negotiable section of the rivers. Meanwhile, abandoned areas would have been taken over by bamboo, which was also harvested for export. Repeated clear felling of bamboo at short intervals may have subsequently resulted in the degeneration of herbaceous vegetation. This is a subject on which no document is available. Thus, in the context of prevailing technology and communications, forest exploitation during British rule in the district could not have reached excessive proportions.

Trade in Forest Produce during the Colonial Rule

Before Indian independence, British took interest in the trade affairs of the Lushais. Three markets were being established in Tipaimukh, Sonai and Jhalmacherra in the Cachar frontier (Chatterjee, 1985). Prior to the annexation in 1890, the most important commodity in the Lushai commerce was crude Indian rubber. A considerable amount of

forest produce such as timbers, bamboos and canes were cut by foreigners and exported from the hills (Sailo, 2006). After colonization, engaging in trade in forest produce required a grasp of official procedures, abilities to organize procurement and transport. Understanding of how markets operated; capital investment, and a spirit of enterprise were also of great importance. The Mizo were at disadvantage in each of these requirements. While official procedures could be learnt, trading operations were controlled from Cachar which acted as a natural barrier to the local people. Lack of experience prevented the people from dealing with confidence and competence with the clever market operators of the plains. With minimal source of capital and no business skill, the Mizos were unable to gain a foothold in commercial forest transactions in their own district (Sailo, 2006).

To export forest products in bulk, only a few opportunities were open to the Mizos. Among these is a reference to one 'Liankhuma & Sons of Aizawl' being allowed to collect reeds for broomstick and flowers for sale outside the district on payment of royalty in 1947 (MSA, Forest Dept., 1947-48) and one Hrangbuaia being given permission to extract bamboo and cane along the Tlawng and Tut river for sale in the plains (MSA, Forest Dept., 1947-48). A fair degree of local interest in the sale of bamboo must have been there. In 1938 the Superintendent held a conference with the village chiefs as the question of peoples' representation was given thought and politics was no longer outlawed. The following year a representative council of chiefs was formed as a consultative body which met in 1939 and 1941. The record of the proceedings of the conference held with council of chiefs in 1941 describes a significant resolution regarding forest produce. The chiefs stated that they did not like to see non - Lushai timber workers entering territory where their own villagers could not enter. It was also argued that if allowed to make use of timber on river banks, people would not be so ready to burn the hill slopes (MSA, Agri., 1941-42).

Although the level of trade in forest produce was not sophisticated and the volume involved was not that high, the importance of trade assumed a new dimension that it cater the need of the time.

Fauna and Protection of Wildlife

During the early British rule in the Lushai Hills, a rich wealth of wildlife was found in the area. The early gazetteers reported that wildlife included elephants, rhinoceroses, tigers, leopards, Himalayan black bears, Malaya bears, several kinds of deer, bisons, guals, and serows (Ray, 1982). The Lushais were good hunters and they always regard guns as prized possessions. In order to preserve wildlife, the British made attempt to curb the compulsive hunting habit of the Mizos by game laws which prescribed particular closed seasons and the licensing of guns to the limit of one per 15 houses. Permit was required for hunting rhinos. Shooting elephants and setting traps was prohibited under the Elephant' Preservation Act, 1879 (Chakraborty, 1990). In view of the importance of meat in the Mizo diet, observation of the law is likely to have been low.

The official interpretation of wildlife conservation was however selective, as it considered certain animal species redundant. The British policy of ridding the land of such species by declaring them as vermin and offering cash rewards for their killing was introduced in the district, with the rationale of promoting cattle rearing. In pursuance of this policy, the hunting skills of the people were put to enthusiastic use. By the year 1904, rewards were paid for killing of 249 Himalayan black bear and Malay bear in the Lushai Hills district, nearly half of the total number of bears killed in the entire province of Assam (Singh, 1996). The annual administration reports of the Lushai Hills used to show figures of wildlife killed and rewards given. For instance, the annual administration reports of the Lushai Hills district for 1905-06 gives figures for six months upto October 1905 (Ray, 1982).

Table 2:- Number of Wild Animals Killed in Mizoram in 1905.

Wildlife killed	Rewards given
11 full grown tigers	Rs. 180-0-0
10 full grown leopards	Rs. 50-0-0
4 half grown leopards	Rs. 10-0-0
203 full grown bears	Rs. 1015-0-0
97 half grown bears	Rs. 242-8-0
25 wild dogs	Rs. 226-0-0
Total	Rs. 1723-8-0

The annual administration reports of 1916-17 shows that wild animals killed during the year included 26 tigers, 26 leopards, 159 bears and 91 wild dogs. The depredation of wildlife continued over the decades unjustifiably. They

were killed for foods, skins and just for pleasure in hunting (Ray, 1982). The early rewards were considered too low to make a serious dent in the vermin population, and were later revised, for which an annual budget of Rs 1200 was sanctioned. Rates declared were twelve rupees eight annas for tigers, five rupees for wild dogs, five rupees for leopards, one rupee for King Cobras, and four annas for cobras (MSA, Rewards for destruction of wild animals, 1944-45).

Table 3:- Wild Animals Killed for Which Rewards Were Paid:

Year	Tiger	Leopard	Wild dog	King cobra	Cobra
1943-44	5	3	77	7	10
1944-45	10	2	61	-	-
1945-46	7	7	65	1	3
1946-47	8	11	44	5	3
1947-48	9	4	62	2	2
Total	39	27	309	15	18

In view of reported depredations of wild animals and the number killings rewarded during the five years alone, wildlife must have abounded in the hills. The net result of the vermin eradication programme was therefore an all round decrease in wildlife numbers and started becoming scarce. In the entire state wildlife was threatened due to encroachment of their habitat and shifting cultivation (Ray, 1982).

Shifting Cultivation During Colonial Period

Shifting cultivation continued to be the mainstay of the Mizo during the whole period of the British rule in Mizoram. It was restricted only in few forest reserves. Within the Inner Line Reserve jhuming was regulated and confined to areas where bamboo forest existed. Within the town reserves of Aizawl, Lunglei, and Champhai, it was strictly banned. Reverine and roadside reserves were also not open for jhuming. Elsewhere, Chiefs sensibly controlled most jhuming (McCall, 1977).

The rapid regeneration of the vegetation prevented the government from being unduly concerned about the environmental implication of the practice. Steep hills and heights above 4000 feet were in any case avoided, so that there was a wide area of permanently preserved protective forest (Jha, 1997). In the lower reaches, much of the jhumming was undertaken on self-regenerating bamboo slopes so that the incidence of denudation at any one time was limited to the current years' jhums and being unduly concerned about the environmental impact of the practice (Singh, 1996). Thus, the people continued to jhum the slopes, much as they had for generations, the only difference being that there was no longer the option of relocating the village. There were jhummed in rotation in successive cycles.

During that time the people were beginning to feel the pressure of stationary settlements and a growing population. Jhumming being the sole avenue for survival, complete freedom in cultivation was a long standing desire. This was expressed at the conference held with the council of chiefs in 1941 (Singh, 1996). A resolution noted that as the people were facing a shortage of jhum land, they should be allowed to cultivate land adjoining government roads on the understanding that any damage would be fully compensated by the cultivators.

Shifting cultivation has been regarded as primitive and destructive practice which is wasteful of timber. As long as it did not make threats to timber prospects, jhuming was tolerated. Alternatively, there were also areas where the colonial rulers either ignored shifting cultivation or endured it within certain limits. The north-eastern hill region provides notable instances where this approach was adopted. As mentioned in the discussion on State control over forest resources, political concerns often took priority over economic concerns. Again, economic prospects were often not attractive enough to be worthy of attention. Lastly, jhumming was often allowed to prevail due to the lack of technically superior alternatives. All these reasons caused shifting cultivation to remain the unchallenged occupation of practically the entire Mizo population during British rule.

New Farming Methods:-

Even though the early colonial rulers did make some efforts in replacing shifting cultivation by modern agriculture in the north-east region, very few exemplary cases are there. To promote cultivation in the Lushai Hills district, the

chiefs and headmen were given a share of the corresponding land revenue as an incentive (Ray, 1982). The hill tribes were also encouraged to take plough cultivation where practicable and good results were seen.

First attempt of wet rice cultivation in the Lushai Hills took place at Champhai in 1898. This had gathered momentum by 1901, and was extended in 1904 to North Vanlaiphai. In 1925, Tuisenhnar was also included (Singh, 1996). Lack of valleys with running streams however proved to be a hurdle for extension to other villages. To regulate cultivation in these villages, rules were framed to restrict destruction of jungle, moving hamlet sites, leaving the land fallow for more than two consecutive years, jhumming, and migration. The rights of cultivation were made hereditary as long as the households settled in the valley observed these rules. It was also reported that adoption of the new technology in the culture of rice farming among the ethnic group of Mizos, or the Lushais started in 1921 when it was first practiced by the Mizo residents in Burma (Jha, 1997).

As containing migratory tribes to peaceful behavior was a difficult task, the government was keen to introduce permanent cultivation primarily to facilitate law and order enforcement. It was difficult to introduce permanent cultivation everywhere because of the terrain. However, some suitable areas were found where long stretches of flat lands were available (Ray, 1982)

A lot of interest was generated in agriculture experiments. Experiment in rubber cultivation was started, reclamation of valley land was taken up and experimental cultivation of many new crops like potatoes and wheat were also being undertaken and were successfully raised. The only scientific way of agriculture in the steep hills, terraced cultivation was introduced. To show the benefits of terracing, a party of Lushai chiefs were taken by the Superintendent to the Naga Hills where terracing was a good success (Ray, 1993).

Later, it was found that numerous crops grew well under local conditions. This was proved by trials at government demonstration farms at Aizawl and Lunglei. In spite of this, to find a steady export market could be expected only if communications with the plains improved. Orange was termed an outstanding success, sugarcane, potato, and pineapple performed well, and the importance of cotton was increasing. Silk rearing had been introduced by the Salvation Army in the 1920s, and cocoons had export potential. It was felt that with a degree of experimentation, non-perishables like cinchona, cardamom, coriander, sesame, pomegranate, ground nut, chillies, and cotton held considerable promise. Yet the government made only a low-key attempt to find alternatives to shifting cultivation. To its disadvantage, there were few options that would be feasible in the context of the local terrain at that time. Due to poor extension and inaccessible markets the option that did exist failed to take off.

Conclusion:-

The strategic interest of policies relating to forests and fields in the Lushai Hills under the British rule were steered by the need to insulate the area and its people, minimize expenditure, and avoid intervening in aspects other than the maintenance of public order. Consequently, both legislative and executive measures were sparse. This allows traditional patterns of livelihoods to continue almost unchanged. Trade in forest produce and traders, however, were introduced in this period (Chatterjee, 1985).

For livelihood and biomass needs, Mizos continued to depend on jhums and local forest resources respectively during the whole period of colonial rule (Ray, 1982). There was no viable alternative, except perhaps the export of forest produce from riverside villages to the Assamese and Bengali timber merchants. There is evidence that the district's inhabitants were trained to hunt for financial prizes by officials, which led to the extinction of a number of species. This must have reduced the consumption of meat at some stage. Forests provided the colonial government with revenue, but the methods of extraction were obviously unscientific and even damaging. Such operations could well have exhausted the productive potential of forest resources if obstacles in the river routes, the absence of roads and the distance from the railhead were not there.

It can therefore be said that no sufficient information was there to change the principles of forest policy during the British rule, which were 'founded on considerations of a directly economic character connected with the conservation of grazing resources and forest produce of the country'. However it was suggested that steps be taken for stricter conservation, or even in some cases reforestation, to prevent land denudation in important catchment areas of torrents, streams, or rivers.

The reaction from the Lushai Hills to the call for conservation and a forestation reveals the perception prevalent in 1911. It was said that because the hills regenerate so quickly, generations of intense jhumming had not had any discernible impact on the bamboo and tree forests. Recovery was stated to take place within six to seven years in bamboo forests and a little longer in tree forests, restoring the land to its original conditions of growth. It therefore appears that clearing forest whether by traders or farmers, was seen to cause a purely temporary setback to tree cover.

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