A Peaceful Resolution: Analysing Sustained Peace and Order in Mizoram

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With its extraordinary number of self-determination movements, Northeast India's troubled post-colonial history does not fit easily into the standard narrative of democracy in India. On one count, there are over a hundred militias currently operating in the region — most have been formed with the agenda of liberating territories and can be classified as ethnic concerning their goals, compositions, and support bases (Baruah 19, 20). The state has adopted a series of military and political measures to quell such insurgencies. However, the sustained violence demonstrates that such measures have only managed to keep a lid on the politically volatile situation. Order and security, for both the State and its citizens, continue to remain elusive. Mizoram provides a stark exception to this. Since the signing of the *Mizoram Peace Accord* in 1986, organised violence has been largely absent from the state (Sharma 3). This is a definite achievement for a territory that was embroiled in conflict for nearly two decades. The central aim of this paper is to study this exception — given the context of ethnic turmoil and breakdown in other Northeastern states, why has Mizoram been able to sustain peace and order since the signing of the Mizo Accord?

The paper is divided into four parts. The first provides a brief historical background of the Mizo insurgency and its settlement with the Accord of 1986. The second reviews existing literature on Mizo exceptionalism and places it in conversation with other conflicts in the Northeast to assess its validity. Moving beyond the existing literature on the state-insurgent relationship in Mizoram, the third section examines the relationship between the state and the insurgent organisation, the *Mizo National Front* (MNF), with the Mizo society. Through this section, I argue that the historical processes of state-making and inclusive mobilisation in Mizoram accredited uncontested authority to the MNF to govern the society through state institutions post-1986, and in doing so, facilitated a smooth transition to sustained peace and order in the state. While the focus of the paper is Mizoram, I refer to insurgencies in Nagaland and Manipur throughout to isolate the causes of Mizo exceptionalism. I summarise my arguments in the fourth and concluding section and list the substantive and methodological takeaways from this paper.

Historical Background

Mizo resentment against the Indian State can be traced to the famine, locally known as *Mautam*[1], of 1959. The Mizo District Council predicted the famine[2] in 1958 and asked for relief measures from the state and central governments in advance. However, the idea of a tribal population being able to predict a natural calamity was scoffed at by state authorities, and they refused to prepare for it (Pachuau and Schendel 297). In 1959, famine struck the land. The state's lack of preparedness, coupled with poor connectivity between Mizo districts and the rest of the country, made it impossible for it to adequately respond to the crisis (ibid. 300, 301). The responsibility of providing relief to the Mizo people and pressuring the state was shouldered by the newly formed voluntary organisation — the*Mizo National Famine Front* (MNFF) under the leadership of Laldenga.

The lack of formal relief measures resulted in widespread suffering, and over 5% of the Mizo population died of starvation (ibid. 300). The mishandling of the famine by the Indian government, which was much worse than that of earlier colonial governments, bred feelings of resentment and indignation across the Mizo districts. Seeking to represent the interests of all Mizo people, the MNFF relabelled itself as the *Mizo National Front* (MNF) in 1961 and argued the Indian State to be "an untrustworthy guardian of Mizo economic, political and cultural interests" (ibid.

302). It called for complete independence from India and envisioned a *Greater Mizoram* that would incorporate all Mizos in Mizoram, Manipur, Cachar and Tripura.

To achieve this goal through military means, the MNF formed the *Mizo National Army* (MNA) and launched *Operation Jericho* on 28th February 1966 (ibid. 304). Within a day, the MNA managed to occupy Aizawl, Lenglei and seven other towns (ibid.). The Indian State was taken by surprise. On 2nd March, it declared the Mizo hills as a "disturbed area" under AFSPA[3], militarised the region and on the 5th and 6th, aerially strafed Aizawl (Sundar 50). This marked the beginning of the twenty-year war in Mizoram and remains the first and only time that the Indian State resorted to air strikes within its own territory. The war included, most decisively, the launching of *Operation Security* — a counterinsurgency operation involving forcible grouping and resettlement of villagers into smaller concentrations (ibid.). The grouping was carried out in four phases, usually preceded by the burning of houses and agricultural farms, and by 1972, a staggering 82% of Mizoram's total population had been displaced (Sundar 51, Pachuau and Schendel 308). The civilian population's experiences of resettlement included those of state surveillance, forced labour, starvation, and physical and sexual violence (Sundar 52-54).

A series of armed confrontations and negotiations between the Indian State and the MNF finally resulted in the signing of the *Mizoram Peace Accord* by both parties on 30th June 1986. The Accord afforded statehood to the Mizo hills under Article 371(G), granting it significant autonomy to preserve its language, culture and customary laws ("Temporary, Transitional and Special Provisions"). The MNF, led by Laldenga, formed the government in the state. The 1986 Accord remains one of the unique instances of all members of an entire insurgent organisation disarming at once, and the state co-opting into its structures the very same non-state actors who challenged its authority.

Literature Overview

Though post-1986 Mizoram has witnessed its own share of group mobilisations and ethnic tensions, especially directed against the non-Mizo population, insurgency-related violence has remained largely absent from the state.

Existing literature seeking to explain sustained peace in Mizoram largely focuses on different aspects of the State-Insurgent relationship. It attributes sustained peace in Mizoram to the Indian State's decisive military superiority to the insurgents (Nag 2002), its willingness to negotiate and share power with the insurgents (Jafa 2001), and its economic largesse towards Mizoram (Goswami 2009). They argue that the aforementioned points provided the state with the upper hand in negotiations, and simultaneously, reduced the incentives of participating in active insurgency for the Mizo people. Doing so, they argue, brought forth a period of peace and order in the state. While there is definite merit to these arguments, in that the peace process in Mizoram could have neither been initiated nor sustained without deliberate state efforts to do so, I posit that they do not provide a complete argument towards explaining Mizo exceptionalism. State's military advantage over the insurgents, willingness to negotiate with them and channelling large development funds are conditions that animate many Northeastern conflicts — most notably, Nagaland and Manipur. However, despite these measures, peace has remained elusive in these states — in some cases, the state's willingness to negotiate and channel development funds has been exploited by insurgent organisations to sustain the insurgencies (Baruah 36). In many more, they have led to the factionalisation of the insurgent organisation and/or counter-mobilisations by other groups in the state (Wouters 87, Baruah 24). This points to the fact that there is more to the story of Mizoram — background conditions exclusive to the state that allow for the sustenance of peace within its territory, and not elsewhere.

In an attempt to identify such factors, I move beyond the state-insurgent relationship and explore the role of the Mizo society in sustaining peace. Through the following section, I study the Mizo society's relationships with the state and the insurgent group to understand its role in explaining Mizo exceptionalism.

Analysis

In his seminal text *Counterinsurgency Redux*, David Kilcullen defines an insurgency as "a struggle to control a contested political space between a state (or a group of states or occupying powers), and one or more popularly-based non-state challengers" (Kilcullen 2). Here, the contested political space refers to both the territory and the

population under conflict. The dynamics of insurgencies are, therefore, shaped by a three-way relationship between the state, the insurgent group(s) and the population. As the relationship of repression, negotiation and economic largesse shared between the Indian State and the MNF was not unique to Mizoram but animates many conflicts in the Northeast, it cannot sufficiently explain the causes of Mizo exceptionalism. In order to identify other reasons, I turn to the third actor shaping conflict and post-conflict dynamics in Mizoram — the Mizo society.

In modern states, a contest over controlling the population is essentially a contest to establish a monopoly over governance. When extended to times of peace, such a monopoly over governance is assumed to have the consent of the population being governed. This brings in the question of representation — which structures and groups can claim to establish a monopoly over governance and representation in a state? Fissures arise when these questions of governance and representation are seen to be fragmented or contested beyond the scope of regular democratic electoral politics.

Through this section, I analyse the Mizo society's relationship with the state and the insurgent organisation. First, I trace the history of state-making in present-day Mizoram and show the nature of colonial rule coupled with practices of petitioning the state-entrenched state institutions in Mizo society. In doing so, it gave the state a monopoly over governance in the hills. Second, I show that inclusive mobilisation practices by the MNF along with its origins as a voluntary famine relief organisation positioned it as the legitimate representative of pan-Mizo interests. I argue that the combination of both these processes accredited uncontested authority to the MNF to govern the society through state institutions post-1986, and in doing so, facilitated a smooth transition to sustained peace and order in the state.

Structures that Govern

Most studies of civil war begin with a Weberian conception of the state — they assume its monopoly and centrality in societies. When applied to many post-colonial nations, this assumption does not stand. The dominant state-society relationship in Northeast India can be better understood by Joel Migdal's conception of a *limited state* — a state whose monopoly over governance cannot be assumed *a priori* but is shaped by the society in which it exists (Migdal xiii). In such states, control of the population is contested between the state and one or more social actors; and the state's strength is an outcome of such historical contestations. In both Nagaland and Manipur, the monopoly over rule-making and governance continues to be contested and a greater degree of control rests with the traditional sources of authority, such as the Hohos[4] rather than the state exclusively. Through this subsection, I trace the process of state-making in Mizoram and show that as a result of historical contingencies, the state exercises a legitimate monopoly over governance in the region — making it an exception in the Northeast.

Up until the advent of British rule in the Lushai Hills[5] in 1889, social and political authority in the region rested with the Sailo[6] chiefs. While each village was autonomous and its chief, a hereditary position limited to members of the Sailo clan, supreme; there was some form of supra-local authority with villages being organised into groups and each chief owing allegiance to the chief of the most powerful village in the group (Hassan 72). Like other territories governed under indirect rule[7], the colonial state relied on the pre-existing structure of authority i.e. that of Sailo chieftainship to collect revenues, acquire legitimacy and penetrate society on its behalf (Lalzuimawia 147). While the chiefs enjoyed autonomy within their villages, their powers were gradually diluted and they were placed within a unified and hierarchically regulated system under the superintendent appointed by the British government. This allowed the colonial state to simultaneously subsume traditional sources of authority within it, and use them to penetrate society and carry out administrative functions on its behalf. Doing so, helped the state establish a monopoly over governance in the region.

By 1940, an emerging new class of citizens, educated and employed by the church, started petitioning the colonial state to introduce power-sharing mechanisms in the hills. They were successful, and in 1943,*Lushai Hills District Conference* (LHDC) was set up with representatives from the chiefs and 'the commoners' (Hassan 78). Conscious of their numeric strength, the commoners began calling for the dilution of the chief's powers and by 1946, for a complete abolition of chieftainship (Goswami 131). They organised themselves into the *Mizo Commoners' Union* in 1946 — it was later rebranded as a political party, the *Mizo Union*, in 1947 (Hassan 79). The use of the word *Mizo* here is important because, unlike *Lushai,* which refers to one of the many tribes living in the hills, it is an all-

encompassing, neutral term meaning "the men who live in the hills" ("Mizoram Culture"). This coincided with the independence of India and as state authority to democratically-elected governments, the MU heightened mobilisations demanding the abolition of chieftainship and the introduction of democratic representation for the Mizo people.

Such mobilisation made the MU popular among the masses, especially in rural areas, who shouldered much of the burden of chieftainship. By the end of 1947, the party had over 30,000 full members and won a thundering majority in the LHDC[8] and Assam State Assembly[9] elections (Hassan 81). The MU-dominated LHDC passed the *Lushai Hills (Abolition of Chiefship) Regulation* in 1952, and despite initial apprehensions, it was ratified by the government of Assam in 1954 (ibid. 82). The same year, the *Lushai Hills District (Change of Name) Act* was passed and Lushai Hills came to be officially known as the Mizo Hills (Lalzuimawia 5). Consequently, the state acquired the authority of the chiefs — crucially, their land-owning rights — and this was vested in the elected District and Village Councils (Hassan 82). The elected bodies were now responsible for both day-to-day administrative functions and larger structural reforms on land-ownership rights and legal codes being followed in the district. Therefore, with one quick stroke, the abolition of chieftainship by the state changed the basis of power relations and asserted its primacy over governance in the hills.

It is important to note here that the state's ability to intervene in traditional forms of authority and regulate social relations in the Mizo hills derived from mass mobilisations, i.e. it was at the demands of the people to abolish chieftainship that the state intervened. This, coupled with the fact the political party in power, the MU, was a local one enjoying widespread support, provided legitimacy to state authority in the hills — this is in stark contrast to the case of Nagaland and Manipur where state intervention was seen as an external imposition and was, therefore, met with resistance from their respective societies. The consolidation of state authority in the Mizo hills had an enabling effect on the MU — the Mizo Hills became the only hill districts in the Northeast, and one of the first in the country, to introduce reforms in land ownership and distribution; consolidate administrative and justice systems in different districts under a unified, coded legal system; define rights of the tenants and secure their property by issuing land certificates (Hassan 72, 84 and Das 219, 220). These measures had two far-reaching consequences for the state in the Hills. First, it allowed the state to penetrate society by enhancing the downward reach of its institutions and agents. Second, it brought the masses, i.e. the land tenants, directly in contact with the state and, in doing so, established a central role for state institutions in their lives. Both these factors added to the state's authority in the hills, making the state and its structures the primary point through which political and social control was exercised in the hills.

Through this section, we observed that as a result of historical contingencies, such as the presence of chieftainship structures, the rise of local political parties and mass mobilisations, the state in Mizoram was seen as a legitimate actor enjoying a monopoly over governance. As a result, by the time of the rebellion, it was long accepted that the state was the primary site for contestation, meaning that to control the population, one had to control the institutions of the state.

People who Represent

Having studied the question of which structures have a monopoly over governance in Mizoram; I now turn to exploring which actors are seen as representative of the Mizo people, and therefore, as legitimate in staking a claim to these structures. I show that the MNF's inclusive mobilisation strategies coupled with the experiences of collective suffering fostered a pan-Mizo identity in the hills, and its role in identity mobilisation and relief work positioned it as the legitimate representative of pan-Mizo interests. I then proceed to argue that the combination of both these processes accredited uncontested authority to the MNF to govern the society through state institutions post 1986, and in doing so, facilitated a smooth transition to sustained peace and order in the state.

Many have attributed the successful transition from insurgency to peace in Mizoram to the lack of fragmented identities and identity politics in the state (Chandoke 2015). However, a closer look at the demographic composition of the state, and its comparison with other Northeasters states, will dispel these notions — Mizos comprise 70% of the state's population and are internally divided into five major tribes, eleven minor tribes and over 300 clans

(Lalhruaithanga 77, "Mizoram Culture"). This is comparable to the compositions of Manipur[10] and is more diverse than Nagaland[11]. The exception in the Mizo case, therefore, does not come simply from its demographics but from the manner in which identities have been historically constructed and mobilised in the hills.

As observed in the earlier section, the beginning of political consciousness and mobilisation in the hills can be traced to the MCU's anti-chieftainship demands. The MCU led the charge with inclusive mobilisation practices by choosing to mobilise along the axis of class rather than a tribe. The MNF, with its origin as a famine relief organisation, took this further by seeking to mobilise all Mizos against the non-Mizos and, in doing so, bridging the chief-commoner divide exemplified by the MCU as well. The term Mizo is inclusive of all branches of the Zo tree, and the MNF aimed to secure freedom for Mizoram and *Zo-fate* (Pachuau and Schendel 303). As Pachuau and Schendel note, "by invoking the notion of the Zo-fate (people belonging to the Zo family), a pre-colonial conception was rekindled to serve a post-colonial role" (ibid.). Mobilising along the axis of the broad identity of the Zo family (rather than narrower axes, such as dialect, language, clan, tribe and district) helped cement intra-Mizo cracks by emphasising Mizo-non-Mizo faultlines (Hassan 96). Doing so was crucial in the development of a pan-Mizo identity. Experiences of shared suffering under the famine, and later, state repression by the Indian Union further solidified the common Mizoness of different sections of society (Pachuau and Schendel 312; Hassan 91, 93). As a result, it is not that diversity in tribes and sub-tribes did not exist in Mizoram but that they were not historically mobilised to achieve sectional interests.

The MNF played a critical role in not only putting forward the notion of the *Zofate* but also in mobilising for it. Its prior relief work had helped it establish networks at the grass-root level and secure legitimacy in the eyes of the masses — these networks, coupled with its chief Laldenga's excellent oratory skills, proved to be useful in popularising the notion of a pan-Mizo identity. Its armed rebellion against the Indian State to achieve the freedom of Mizoram, and defend the interests of its people, earned it a reputation as "a band of heroes who had fought and suffered" (Hassan 98). The combination of both these factors helped position the MNF as an organisation with local roots, standing for pan-Mizo identity and culture, and deriving widespread legitimacy and support from the masses. As a result, we observe that the historical processes of state-making and inclusive mobilisations led to the presence of a strong State and unified society in Mizoram. It is in this context that the success of the 1986 *Mizoram Peace Accord* between the Indian Union and MNF needs to be understood.

On one hand, the MNF's position as an uncontested authority in representing pan-Mizo interests meant that its access to state power was not seen as threatening by sections of Mizo society. This coupled with a history of inclusive mobilisation in the state played a crucial role in ensuring that the entire MNF machinery demilitarised post the Accord, without fractionating into smaller groups contesting for state power, and no new insurgent organisations came up later either. This has been a first in a region where peace deals with one insurgent organisation have either led to its fractioning or the emergence of new insurgent organisations, based on clan, tribe or linguistic divides, each staking claim to state authority to protect their specific interests. On the other hand, the presence of a strong state ensured that, once in power, the MNF could enjoy a monopoly over governance in the region. The presence of socially-entrenched state institutions, uniform administrative and legal practices and the legitimacy accorded to them to regulate social relations has helped the MNF be efficient in responding efficiently to the social demands put on the government. This has been crucial in two ways. First, it helped the MNF implement pro-people policies and interventions (Hassan 99). Doing so also helped popular demands to be voiced through the means of democratic politics and reduced the possibility of new grievance-induced insurgencies. Second, it helped the MNF fulfil its electoral promises and ensured sustained support for the party (ibid. 98). This has, in turn, ensured the stability of leadership in the state.

Conclusion

Through this paper, I have shown that the historical processes of state-making and inclusive mobilisations led to the establishment of a strong state and unified society in Mizoram. I have then proceeded to argue that the combination of both these processes accredited uncontested authority to the MNF to govern the society through state institutions post 1986, and in doing so, facilitated a smooth transition to sustained peace and order in the state. I have attempted to move beyond the dominant literature seeking to explain causes for Mizo exceptionalism through the state-MNF relationship alone, and towards centring the role of the Mizo society and history in this process.

The troubled post-colonial history of India's Northeast has made it a site for the study of conflict. However, there remains a methodological concern with the existing literature — in the absence of systematic comparative work in the region, most works either tend to treat the northeast as a single unit of analysis or only focus on case studies of one specific state in isolation. This makes it difficult to isolate causes of conflict and peace, pointing towards a need to study cases in relation to one another to be able to arrive at more accurate and holistic conclusions about conflict perpetuation and resolution. This paper has been a humble attempt towards this goal of studying Mizo exceptionalism, while using the case studies of Manipur and Nagaland, to isolate causes under review.

Notes

[1] Famines caused by the collapse of mau bamboo trees (Pachuau and Schendel 297).

[2] The hills in the region are covered with mau bamboo forests which are distinctive for synchronising their reproductive cycles every fifty years i.e. all individual bamboo plants flower, produce fruits and then die off at the same time. This ecological peculiarity has a significant impact on the population – as bamboo plants die off, the rats attack standing agricultural crops and village granaries, and in the process, further deprive the population of their food supply. This is known as the bamboo famine, or *Mautam*, and occurs with considerable regularity in the region. Its regularity has made it possible for the Mizo society to predict them, however, historically it has not been easy to prepare for them (Pachuau and Schendel 297).

[3] Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958.

[4] Hohos are apex governing bodies for each tribe in Nagaland – they are usually composed of village elders and exercise traditionally derived social and political authority over members of their clans and tribes.

[5] The Mizo hills were known as the Lushai Hills till the passing of the Lushai Hills District (Change of Name) Act in 1954 (Lalzuimawia 5).

[6] Sailos are one of the many clans within the Lushai tribe.

[7] Indirect rule refers to a form of colonial control in which day-to-day governance functions are delegated to local power-holders in areas considered beyond the reach of the state's direct authority (Naseemullah and Staniland 1).

[8] The Mizo Union won 17/18 seats in the Lushai Hill District Conference elections (Hassan 81).

[9] The Mizo Union won all three seats assigned to the Lushai districts in the Assam State Assembly elections (ibid.).

[10] Meiteis form 65% of the state's population, they are internally-divided into 33 tribes.

[11] Nagas comprise 90% of the state's population, they are internally-divided into 17 major tribes.

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