

TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

Lecture21

Lecture 21: Case Study on Lushai Hills: Part-II

Thank you. Good morning, everyone, again. Today, we will continue with our NPTEL online MOOC course titled Tribal Studies in India: Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Approaches. We have come quite far, and today we will be doing lecture number 21, which is a continuation of where we stopped in the last class. Now, lecture number 20 was also about a case study, specifically on Lushai Hills.

And, , today it will be a continuation of where we stopped in the last lecture. Now, in the last lecture, what we tried to do was understand the colonial expansion in Northeast India, particularly in the context of Lushai Hills. But more than that, what we also tried to explore and understand was the way in which the colonial state imposed itself in terms of its authority and exerted sovereignty in these tribal territories. Now, this experience and encounter between the colonial state and the tribal communities, as we have seen, was something very violent, and we dealt in detail with two major expeditions which were launched by the British: one was the Chin-Lushai Expedition in 1870, from 1869 to 1871, and the second Lushai Expedition, which was from 1890 to 1891. Now, apart from these two major expeditions launched in the Lushai Hills, the British engaged in several small or minor micro-expeditions throughout the 19th century.

Now, it is also important to understand that this experience of violence imposed by the colonial state on tribes is not unique in the context of the Lushai Hills, but it was something very common across India. So, therefore, we are using Lushai Hills as an example to understand how the colonial state invaded and exerted its authority in tribal territories. So, it was only after close to a century of expeditions by the British that they finally brought many parts of tribal regions in Northeast India today within the colonial empire. And we have also seen that the British instituted different kinds of administrative policies, one of which was indirect rule,

which basically used traditional institutions such as the chiefs in the context of the Lushai and the Mizo to rule and govern over the Lushai Hills. So, the British also introduced numerous laws and legislations that kept the tribal communities at excluded areas.

, that kept tribal communities as excluded areas. Now, this policy of administrative exclusion has further reinforced the isolation of tribal communities. And many times we think that the colonial state, was very paternalistic towards the tribal communities and the tribal communities were very happy under colonial rule. But today what I wanted to do by taking forward from where we stopped, and also bringing back the issue or the experience of the Lushai Hills is that the Mizo communities in Mizoram today had a lot of anger and resentment against the colonial state. And there was a lot of political mobilization, particularly by the commoners, especially towards the end of the colonial period.

So today we will try to further enrich our understanding of how the colonial state ruled Northeast India, particularly in the Lushai Hills. But at the same time, despite the colonial state following a policy of administrative exclusion in tribal areas. They were unable to stop the rising political consciousness and aspirations among tribal communities. Now, again, like I said, , we are not only going to talk about the Lushais, who are known as the Mizos today, but much of our discussion is quite relevant for many tribal communities in India. We are not going to talk only about the Lushais, who are known as the Mizos today, but much of our discussion is quite relevant for many tribal communities in India.

Now, to begin with, the British employed indirect rule in Lushai Hills, allowing traditional chiefs to retain their authority while embedding them within the colonial administration. Lushai Hills was put under the government of India in 1935 as an excluded area. Now, in these areas, the assumption was that tribal communities living in excluded areas were not in a position to be governed or to govern themselves using modern laws. Therefore, what the colonial state did was use traditional institutions or existing institutions to rule and govern the communities.

So in the context of the Mizo, what they did was that since the chiefs were at the center of the political life in Mizo society, they did not overthrow the chiefs in Lushai Hills. Rather, they used the chiefs to rule and govern the entire Lushai Hills. What does this do? This created a dual system of governance that served

British interests while maintaining local power structures. Another structure of governance introduced during the same time was the circle interpreters, who were integrated as part of the larger colonial governance system.

Non-cooperation movement in Lushai Hills

- The British employed indirect rule in the Lushai Hills, allowing traditional chiefs to retain their authority while embedding them within the colonial administration. This created a dual system of governance that served British interests while maintaining local power structures.
- Another structure of governance was introduced in the form of circle interpreters (CIs), which were part of the colonial governance system. Alongside, several other colonial state agents, or administrators, were at the top of the hierarchy of the government. This allowed the colonial administrators to alter or introduce changes in the administration and, subsequently, the people's lives.



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Now, alongside several other colonial state agents or administrators at the top of the government hierarchy, which allowed the British or the colonial administrators to alter or introduce changes in the administration and subsequently in the people's lives. Now, first, indirect rule was not something unique to the Lushai Hills. It was imposed or used in varying forms in different parts of India. Not only India, but also in Africa, where colonial European powers ruled and governed for a long period, indirect rule was commonly used. At times, we think that just because these regions and territories were under indirect rule, no change was happening within them.

On the contrary, what happened was that, whether it was direct or indirect rule, it was the colonial state, the British, who were at the top of the administrative hierarchy. So, there were many internal changes happening with the arrival of the British. The chiefs, once seen as community leaders, were merely reduced to colonial agents. So, basically, there was a transformation of the institution of chieftaincy. There was a transformation in terms of the role the chiefs used to play in the past.

Now, during colonial period, the chiefs were reduced as mere tax collectors and law enforcement. This transformation generated resentment among commoners who increasingly viewed the chiefs as collaborators with the British rather than protectors of the people. Now, in medieval society, in traditional pre-colonial medieval society, the institution of the chief was very important. Likewise, the

chiefs themselves are very important to unite the villagers, to bring people together, to work for the welfare of the people, to work for the welfare of the villagers now, and people put a lot of trust and faith in the institution of the chieftainship or their chiefs. Now, their life revolves around whether a village is good or bad, whether a village is prosperous, whether every village is wealthy, whether a village is well-known or not; it all depends on the wisdom of the chief. Now during colonial period, what happened is that the image of the chief itself was transforming in the eyes of the people.

Before independence, the governor of Assam administered Mizoram as a district through the district superintendent. The chiefs were subservient to the superintendent and carried out his order. So, as a part of this transformation that was happening, the chiefs were reduced as mere agents of the colonial state. So, they were becoming like the eyes and ears of the colonial state. The common people were virtually enslaved at the hands of both the superintendent and their chiefs.

The superintendent safeguarded the position of the chiefs, which made the people realize that there was no room for them in the British administration. Now, politically, since Lushai Hills was made part of the excluded areas, they have no political representations in the provincial or in the larger political systems. Now, what this implies is that the people have no space to assert themselves politically, to express their resentment, or to address the wrongs they believe have been done to them. So it was entirely an autocratic system that was being imposed using the chiefs. Now, to ensure the stability of their positions, the chiefs started bribing the superintendent with livestock, eggs, rice, etc.

So during the colonial period, it's not that every chief in the Mizo Hills, every chief in Mizoram, sided with the British. Of course, there was very little room for rebelling against the colonial state because they were already subjugated. But at the same time, many chiefs started bribing the superintendent because whether or not the superintendent favoured the chiefs becomes very important. At times, what the British did was that in Mizo society, there is something known as the chief clan, meaning only certain clans could become chiefs. But during the colonial period, the British started giving chief titles to individuals whom they believed were loyal to them.

At the same time, they removed the chief titles from people who were suspicious or who rebelled against the superintendent's orders. So what happened was that many chiefs started rallying behind the superintendent to stay in their good books. Now, the impact of this was strongly felt by the common people. And every time any official visited their village, it meant there were rising or endless demands for livestock or other things. And this was over and above paying taxes such as, in the Mizo language, 'fathang', which is tax for land use, and 'sachhia', which is the share of meat for the chief.

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- In order to ensure the stability of their positions, the Chiefs started bribing the Superintendent with livestock, eggs, rice etc.
- For the common people, the visit of officials to their village meant demand for livestock or other things. Moreover, besides giving all the taxes, such as *fathang* (tax for land use) and *Sachhia* (share of meat for the chief) to the chief, a common Mizo was not supposed to complain even if their fruits or vegetables in the garden were taken by the Chiefs family members without permission.
- This was greatly resented by commoners, and the call for the abolition of this system started to rise.



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And a common Mizo was not supposed to complain even if their fruits or vegetables in the garden were taken by the chief's family members without permission. Now, in traditional Mizo society, most of the land belonged to the chief. So, therefore, people pay tax for using the land. That is known as 'fathang'. And hunting was something which was very, very common.

Forest in Mizoram, if you go today, it's largely an estate which is very forested. Now, you can imagine 100 years ago, how forested it would be. Therefore, hunting was something that was part and parcel of the life of the people, and whenever a community was successful in hunting, they had to give text to the chief that is known as such here; now, over a period of time, the people began to really carry the burden of this taxation. And what happened was that there was this strong resentment which began to brew among the minds of the people that they started talking about the abolishment of the chieftainship. At the same time, during the colonial period, the Lushai Hills, , we have already studied in the last lecture that it was integrated at the end of the 19th century.

That was basically in 1896. And it was only in 1898 that the colonial state was firmly entrenched in the region. Now, coming to the 20th century, many things happened. There were a lot of global events, right? And two global events which were very important was the First World War and the Second World War.

Now, during this period, many Mizo men were taken to work as coolies or to help the empire the British, because they were engaged in fighting the First World War and the Second World War. Now, many Mizo men, particularly if you look at many tribal communities, you will see that many tribal communities were taken by the British to help them in the war, particularly in Europe. So, there were a lot of Mizo men who were taken to Europe, particularly like in France, England so on and so forth. Now, what happened is that living in a very geographically isolated region, they suddenly experienced these and were exposed to global events. Now, this experience of moving out of the territory has a significant impact on their lives in the way they started to look at new things.

At the same time, during this period, some Mizos became very successful businessmen, particularly in the capital city, Aizawl. All of this largely reduced the only highness of the chiefs. So people began to be very uncomfortable with the fact that the chiefs are ruling over them, ruling over anyone, irrespective of whether they are good or bad. So during the same period, there was a rise of new middle class, or a middle society who wanted recognition and thus came in conflict with the chiefs. Now, during colonial period one of the things that the British did was also the introduction of modern education.

Like in any other part of India, you will see that the colonial state played a very important role when it comes to educating Indians. Now, even in Mizo Hills, what happened is that the British began to introduce modern education. And over a period of time, new educated leaders, new educated individuals begin to emerge in the society. New educated leaders, new educated individuals begin to emerge in the society. Now, this section of people who got exposure or who are educated began to emerge as the new middle class in Mizo society, who are not only educated but also very articulate in terms of what they want, their desires, and their aspirations.

So, overall, this leads to a resentment against the oppression of the superintendent and the chiefs, which gained momentum. And it was this

resentment that resulted in the formation of the first political party in Mizoram, known as the Mizo Union, in 1946. Now, until then, for close to 60 to 70 years of colonial rule in the Mizo Hills, since it was put under administrative isolation because of the kinds of laws and legislations that were being imposed in Mizoram, political mobilization was something unthinkable. And the colonial state sent out this image that these tribal communities were unsuited for any kind of modern laws and governance. But what we see is that different kinds of events were happening.

One, World War I and World War II were happening, where Mizos got a lot of exposure. They came back and really understood the kind of changes; they began to look at things very differently. Secondly, new entrepreneurs were emerging. Third, there was a section of this new middle class, which was constituted by educated individuals. Now, all of these people came together, and by 1946, they established the first political party, which came to be known as the Mizo Union.

So, political consciousness began to take deep root among the Mizos, and this was partly because of dissatisfaction with both the colonial rule—there was a lot of resentment against it—and the oppressive chieftainship system. Now, one of the reasons why the Mizo Union was established was that they were also inspired by the anti-colonial movements that were happening. That is, the demand for freedom. Now, by establishing the Mizo Union, the intention of the party was to abolish the chieftaincy because they thought it was an oppressive institution. At the same time, they also rejected the continuation of any form of colonial rule by the British.

So, therefore, they were influenced; their ideas were shaped by the larger anti-colonial movements and freedom movements that were happening in India. The commoners, who constituted the majority in Mizo society, were burdened by taxation and forced labour. They began to assert themselves, demand their rights, and they were demanding a new political order—that is, by abolishing this system and establishing democratic institutions. So, the Mizo Union was formally established on April 29, 1946, by educated Mizos who were inspired by nationalist movements across India. The primary goal of the party—was to establish a democratic governance structure that would replace the hereditary chieftaincy system.

So, what did the party do? It was not that the Mizo Union was established and everyone was very happy. There was a lot of opposition from the chiefs. There was a lot of opposition from the political superintendents—that is, the British. Now, the British did not want any kind of political mobilization to happen.

So, they were trying to suppress these aspirations of the Mizo people. However, the leaders of the Mizo Union were very stubborn and very brave. At the same time, they were strongly inspired by the Indian nationalist movement. They knew that if they wanted to do something good—if they wanted to work for the welfare and benefit of the larger interests of Mizo society—then they might also have to pay a price. So, with that kind of mentality, they began to mobilize the people, and they started enrolling people from all over Mizoram, as well as outside of Mizoram, where Mizos were living, such as in Manipur and Tripura.

So, the rise of the Mizo Union was very impressive because, in no time, the party began to see a huge enrollment, and the amount of support was really threatening the institution of the chieftainship and the colonial state. really threatening the institution of the chieftainship and the colonial state. So therefore, the MU strongly opposed both colonial rule and the chiefs, positioning itself as the voice of the commoners. The leaders of the Mizo Union envisioned a Mizo society governed by elected representatives rather than traditional rulers. So, towards the end, the British opposed the Mizo Union, favouring the continuation of the chief's rule.

They believed that the commoners lacked the ability to govern themselves and dismissed the MU as an illegitimate organization. So, it was not that the British were really supportive or the Britishers were not doing anything. There was a strong anti-mizo union movement that was happening and this was to not allow any kind of establishment of political party, that is one. Second is that leaders of the miso union were threatened with imprisonment. They received a lot of threats by taking up this issue of demanding political representation.

So, in short, the British political superintendents in Mizo Hills were not happy at all with the establishment of the Mizo Union. So, in order to weaken the Mizo Union, the political superintendent, A.R.H. McDonald, banned all financial donations to the party. McDonald, banned all financial donations of the party. This is just one example. So, they don't allow them to do anything.

Political campaigns, rallies, and so on and so forth, like the democratic culture that we see in India today, many of the things like campaigning, , reaching out to people, mobilising people. So this, some of these things got banned, , and one of the particular issue or one particular tactic that was used by A.R.H. McDonald who was the political superintendent in the Lushai hills was that they banned all financial donations to the party. Now one can imagine the consequence of a newly formed party when they are not allowed to receive any kind of financial donations. What happened was that the British were trying to cripple the Mizo Union. It was trying to prevent it from functioning at all.

So, this order to ban all financial donations to the Mizo Union, it crippled its ability to organize whole meetings and fund its activities. Despite these challenges, like I said, the Mizo leaders knew very well that this is not going to be an easy task. There will be a lot of resistance. But what they did was that they were persistent in their aspirations. So they continued to mobilize the people.

The people themselves were ready to pay the price for what they strongly believed in. So during this time, we're talking about the 1940s and the 1950s. And we see that the independence movement in India was at its peak. People already knew that freedom was going to come very soon. That kind of political awakening was something that we see even in the Mizo Hills.

Now, during this period, a new kind of political mobilization was beginning to take shape, where songs were composed by people to express their aspirations— what they hoped for after the departure of the British, how they envisioned Mizo society would look like. Where there would no longer be a differentiation or a distinction between chiefs and commoners, but where everyone was equal, where everyone was free. So, in many ways, the rise and popularity of the Mizo Union were aided by songs composed by people from different walks of life. So, one way of interpreting these political songs, or in Mizo we can call them 'party hla', is that they represent a political party. Party songs enabled reaching out to a vast section of people.

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- Towards the end, British officials opposed the MU, favouring the continuation of the chiefs' rule. They believed that the commoners lacked the ability to govern themselves and dismissed the MU as an illegitimate organisation.
- In order to weaken the MU, the then Political Superintendent, A.R.H. MacDonald, banned all financial donations to the party. This crippled its ability to organize, hold meetings, and fund its activities.
- Despite these challenges, the MU continued to mobilise support through public protests, political songs (party hla), and grassroots activism, gaining widespread backing from Mizo commoners.



They also spread awareness about the vision of the Mizo Union to the people. So, from 1946 onwards, what we see is that, , there was a strong movement for the abolishment of chieftainship. Now, the commoners, who constituted the majority of the people, no longer saw the chiefs as respected figures, but rather as decentralized despots. This is taken from the work of political scientist Mahmood Mamdani, who has written about how the colonial state transformed traditional institutions, particularly in Africa. So, the Mizos—the commoners—began to view the chiefs as decentralized despots, essentially because they were only enforcing British policies. They were only enforcing British policies.

They were collecting taxes on their behalf and served as intermediaries between the colonial administration and the people. Now, the Mizo Union was very clear in its objective and promise: to abolish chieftainship, which began to be or was viewed as a remnant of colonial rule and an obstacle to democratic governance. Now, the movement, no doubt, gained massive support, particularly among the rural population, and the Mizo Union was very popular during the mid-1940s onwards. So, like I said, people began to compose songs as a way to mobilize the masses. But at the same time, it was through these songs that they began to write about their aspirations, why they supported the Mizo Union, and what the movement meant to them.

Now, in any kind of nationalist movement, even till today, we know the power of songs in terms of reaching out to people and the emotions they can generate. So likewise, the Mizo Union tapped into the power of songs to use them as a tool to mobilize the people and to reach out to a wide section of people across age groups and regions. So these songs were used to challenge colonial rule. They

denounced the chiefs and rallied support for democratic governance. And they also emerged or became a cultural expression of resistance and solidarity.

By 1946, the contest and confrontation between the British, the chiefs, and the Mizo commoners, led by the Mizo Union, dominated the political scene in the Lushai Hills. And what we see is that, on independence, the Mizo Union movement was very successful. And the success was evident after independence when, in 1954, the institution of chieftainship was abolished and a democratic form of governance was established. And Lushai Hills, since Lushai is only relevant to the people who are actually Lushai or the chief clans. Therefore, it is exclusive because there are many other clans and tribes, who belong to the non-Lushai communities.

Therefore, the Mizo people also think that the name Lushai Hills needs to be changed. And this was subsequently done in 1954, when Lushai Hills was renamed as Mizo Hills. And in 1972, it was again renamed as Mizoram. So, the state continued to have this name. To conclude, what happened, why this is important, why this history is important, why we are talking a lot about history, is not only to provide context for the kind of political mobilizations that happened, but also, many times, we think that tribals are living in isolated spaces, isolated regions, and the British have further isolated them.

And many times we also think that tribal communities did not contribute to the nationalist movement because they were outside of the larger colonial state. But on the contrary, the example of Lushai Hills is quite demonstrative of the fact that there was a lot of political movement and political mobilization happening. There was resentment, against the colonial state. And this resentment found expression in the way in which the people rejected the continuation of any form of colonial rule and domination. Thank you so much.