

TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

Lecture41

Lecture 41: Tribal Politics and Political Parties: Case Studies from North-East India (Mizoram)

Thank you. Good evening, welcome back to the NPTEL online certification course Tribal Studies in India: Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Approaches. Today we are already on lecture number 41, and in this lecture, we will be specifically focusing on a case study about the formation of a political party in Mizoram, that is, the Mizo Union. Now, in the last few lectures, we have laid out some of the broader contexts of these lectures in the sense that we tried to trace back the history of, or the establishment of, democracy in India and how tribal communities have actually participated and articulated their political aspirations. And these articulations of political aspirations are a very important feature of the emergence of political parties within the communities or from within the tribal communities.

And all over India, we have seen that tribal communities have established or formed their own political parties in the hope that they will achieve some form of political recognition. And this form of political recognition was essentially articulated in the demands for statehood, separate statehood, or political autonomy. And in that line, a very important political party that was established in the northeastern part of India was the Mizo Union. Before I go into the depth of my lecture, I just wanted to also give some preliminary remarks about why it is important to talk about this. I have also mentioned this in my last lectures that many times, the assumption is that tribal communities, such as those in Mizoram, for instance, were administratively very isolated because, under the Government of India Act, it was declared as an excluded area.

Now, in excluded areas, we know that there was no representation in the provincial assemblies or the assemblies. And in that sense, tribal communities

were prevented from participating even in the anti-colonial movements. And there was also no sincere effort by the mainstream political parties to reach out to tribal regions and areas because of the kind of administrative setup that was laid down by the British. So, the assumption always remains because of the nature of the communities in terms of where they live, that is, geographically isolated spaces, which only gets reinforced by the, you know, different legislations that were introduced by the British. But on the contrary, what we see is that these spaces were never quite political in a sense that there was a lot of political articulations, political mobilizations that was happening.

And through this lecture, we will try to understand what kind of political mobilization, what kind of political articulations happened in the state of today's Mizoram in the north eastern part of India. So, the Mizo Union is very very important when it comes to talking about political parties in the context of Mizoram essentially because it was the first political party that was established and it resulted into the establishment of a democratic consciousness among the minds of the Mizo people. And till today, we can see that the foundation which was laid by the Mizo Union continues to resonate in the democratic culture of the Mizos. So, in the 1940s, we see that all over India, there were very, very strong anti-colonial movements. And regions like Mizoram, which was put under excluded areas, was not entirely silent.

So there was political churning that was already happening. And a few sections of people who got exposure in the First World War, in the Second World War, or who received modern education started aspiring or started articulating political rights, began to talk about the issue of political representation. So, the political changes in the 1940s generated a political awakening among the Mizos in the then Lushai Hills. Today's Mizoram, was known as Lushai Hills till 1947. It was renamed as Mizo Hills in 1954 and then Mizoram in 1972, a name which it retains till today.

So I'm going to use Lushai Hills and Mizoram synonymously. So don't be confused with the term. It means the same area, the same region. So, being apprehensive about their future and their uncertain present, the Mizo intellectuals felt the need to have a political party of their own to determine the course of their future. So by the 1940s, it began to be clear that the British were going to leave India at some point, sooner or later.

And at that kind of juncture, communities like the Mizos began to think about what their political future would be. What would their political future look like? Now, on the one hand, we see that the Indian National Congress was definitely interested in bringing all these diverse people and regions together, but the British also had their own plans in the sense that they wanted to retain some form of control over these regions, such as the Lushai hills, the Naga hills, Arunachal Pradesh, and all. Essentially, because they thought that these communities were not yet ready for any kind of political independence and were not mature enough to participate in formal political processes. So the kind of approach that the colonial state followed, or the attitude of the colonial state, was very, very patronizing, very, very paternalistic.

So in that kind of situation, we began to see that the Mizos did not want someone to think for them. So what they essentially wanted was to think for themselves about what would be best, what would be good for the communities, not only in the present but also in the long term. In that sense, the first political party, the Mizo Commoners People's Union—this was the first name of the Mizo Union—was formed in April 1946 and was later renamed the Mizo Union in 1946 in the same year. So, since its formation, the Mizo Union emerged as a very strong political force in the entire Lushai Hills, and the vast majority of people immediately supported the party. At the dawn of independence, we had the Bordoloi Committee, which was a very important committee to understand the political aspirations of the tribes, particularly in the northeastern part of India.

The committee was to give advice and policy suggestions on what kind of political autonomy should be granted to the tribes. Now, the Bordoloi Committee also considered the Mizo Union as the representative body of the Lushai Hills. In that context, when the committee members visited Lushai Hills, they met leaders belonging to the Mizo Union. They also co-opted some of the leaders to be part of the committee. Now, why is this important?

Essentially, the context is that by the 1940s, it was clear that the British were going to leave at some point. By 1946, India needed to start thinking about its political future and its constitution. Therefore, it became important that, with different political aspirations being articulated in the context of northeastern India, the Bordoloi Committee was established. It was formed to seek representations and listen to different communities about their political aspirations. So, during

colonial rule, the local Mizo chiefs—in traditional Mizo society, there were broadly two strata: the chiefs and the commoners.

And the chiefs, you know, were very, very responsible. The chiefs, you know, were highly respected and highly regarded by the community up until the colonial rule. Now, during the colonial period, there was a transformation of the role of the chiefs in the sense that the chiefs became the eyes and ears of the British. And the perception of the chiefs by the vast majority of the commoners began to change drastically during the colonial period. So many times, the role of the chiefs was reduced to collecting taxes, and the role of the chiefs was acting on behalf of the colonial state. Therefore, the relationship between the chiefs and the commoners began to be very, very sour.

Now, in the pre-colonial period, the chiefs were the centre of the Mizo-sociopolitical life, and the status of the chiefs was highly respected and highly revered. But in the case when the Lusai Hills were integrated into the colonial state, the institution of the chiefs underwent significant transformation, and the image of the chiefs itself began to change drastically. So the local chiefs owed their office to the goodwill of the British, and hence their main obligation was directed to the British administration and not to the welfare of their subjects. There is a caveat here. One caveat is that when there was any chief who rebelled against the British, then many times their chieftainship was revoked, or else they were punished.

And secondly, anyone in Mizo society could not become a chief. But during the colonial period, the British also granted chief status to many individuals who particularly expressed their absolute loyalty to the colonial state. So the transformation of the institution of the chief during the colonial state was not entirely of the Mizos, but it was also facilitated by the colonial state. And by the 1940s onwards, Mizoram being colonized and integrated into the colonial state from the late 19th century onwards. So what we essentially see is that in the last 40 to 50 years, from 1890 to the 1940s, there was a section of people who began to be educated.

So, this educated class began to demand recognition of their status in the rest of Mizoram society. This inevitably brought them into direct conflict with the Mizo chiefs. So, the people of this new class were Mizo unionists who were against

the chiefs and wanted the abolition of the chief rule. They wanted the abolition of chief rule essentially because the role of the chief was reduced to being the eyes and ears of the colonial state. The role of the chiefs was essentially reduced to mere tax collectors.

So, even in the pre-colonial society, Mizo chiefs collected taxes. Mizo chiefs performed a lot of duties and responsibilities, but then it was never met with any kind of hostility. People were very happy to pay taxes, but the difference was that chiefs also performed their roles and responsibilities. But after they entered the colonial state, that role got transformed, by which people saw paying taxes to the chiefs as a huge burden. And this resulted in the confrontation between the commoners, particularly led by the new educated class in Mizo society, which was supported by the vast majority of the Mizo commoners.

Now, the confrontation between the Mizo chiefs and the commoners began to gain momentum, which eventually led to the formation of the Mizo Union. Now, to talk about these political shifts that happened from the pre-independence period to the post-independence period, the primary goal of the Mizo Union was to establish a democratic governance structure that would replace the hereditary chieftain system. It aimed at introducing social reforms in Mizo society and was primarily against the tribal chiefs. Now, one of the primary agendas of the Mizo Union was to abolish chiefs and institute a democratic governance structure. Therefore, the Mizo Union saw a lot of promise in the independence of India and the establishment of India as a democratic country.

Because the hope was that if India is a democratic country, people will elect leaders, and leaders will be elected. People will no longer live at the mercy of the chiefs. Chieftainship has no place in a democracy. Therefore, the institution of chief-tainship will be abolished. By which the vast majority of people also supported the Mizo Union.

So, the Mizo Union was formed with the permission of the British political superintendent in 1946. However, the party soon started gaining support from all sections of society, and the colonial state saw this as a threat that was emerging. And several efforts were being made to curtail the progress of the Mizo Union. And one of them was that A.R. Macdonald, who was one of the political superintendents in the 1940s, actually took away all the financial donations from

the party. And this was essentially to cripple the Mizo Union by preventing them from organizing events, meetings, or even rallies to raise funds.

Now, for a political party to function without any kind of funds is nearly impossible. And A.R. Macdonald actually tried doing that with the Mizo Union. However, the Mizo Union persisted in mobilizing support despite various challenges, using public protests, political songs in Mizo (known as party hla), and grassroots activism to garner widespread backing from Mizo commoners. Now, the commoners being the majority, the political culture—the democratic political culture—was deeply ingrained in the minds of the people. It was the Mizo Union which had established this democratic culture among the common people.

They had sold the vision of democracy to the vast majority of Mizos, who were actually becoming the backbone of the anti-chieftainship movement as well. The Mizo Union leaders were able to navigate between the dual aspirations effectively: the first being the overthrowing of the chiefs, and the second, the demand for autonomy provisions under independent leadership. 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 Mizoram. So, from 1946 onwards till the 1950s, what we essentially see is that on the one hand, we have the British and the chiefs standing together, and on the other hand, we have the Mizo Union and their supporters. And this dominated the political scene and determined the political trajectory in the early years of independent India in the context of Mizoram.

So, towards this, A.R. Macdonald, who tried to sabotage the rise and growth of the Mizo Union, convened what he called the District Conference to take place on 6 January 1946 as a body to represent the Mizos. So, basically, they were trying to undermine the Mizo Union. The Mizo Union opposed being part of this conference as they objected to the chiefs having equal representation. The MU demanded twice the number of representatives for the commoners. Now, so, what MacDonald was trying to actually do is trying to give preferential treatment to the chiefs by granting them an equal number of representatives, which the MU definitely opposed, saying that they should have more numbers, essentially because they are more and they have the support of the commoners.

Meanwhile, new developments took place with L.L. Peters, who replaced MacDonald in 1947, and he continued with the same policy of suppressing the Mizo Union. After India attained independence, the District Advisory Council was constituted and elections were conducted on 23rd March. Now, there was no doubt that the Mizo Union was much in favour of the elections. And it was not a surprise that they swept 25 seats, which were set for the commoners, and they formed the majority against the Chiefs. This implied the Mizos consent to be part of the Indian Union as the Bordoloi Committee accepted the Mizo Union as the sole representatives of Lushai Hills, and the subcommittee represented the northeastern region in the constituent assembly framing the constitution.

So, on one hand, the primary concern of the Mizo was sorted out in the sense that the Mizo Union emerged victorious. And on the other hand, their aspiration for political autonomy was granted because they were considered as the sole representative of Lushai Hills. So, when the Constitution came into force, Mizoram was directly put under the Sixth Schedule. The entire state of Mizoram was under the Sixth Schedule, which grants it significant autonomy. This triggered public debate among the Mizoram leadership who were divided on this issue.

However, the Mizo Union adopted a resolution in support of the merger of the Lushai Hills with the Indian Union. So, basically, the Mizoram Union was a party that was pro-integrationist, and they were essentially integrationist because of their hope of a democratic future, a political future, which was democratic in nature. So, in 1947, a different political party was formed, which also emerged as, you know, the most significant political rival of the Mizoram Union and was supported by the chiefs. In 1947, the United Mizo Freedom Organization was formed in reaction to the formation of the Mizo Union, which supported the chiefs to oppose merger with India. The first Lushai Hills District Council government was formed by the Mizo Union.

So, like I said, when the constitution came into force, the Mizo Union was put under the Sixth Schedule, and it became imperative that elections to the council were conducted. It was inaugurated; the first Lushai Hills District Council government was formed by the Mizo Union. So, basically, they defeated the United Mizo Freedom Organization, which was supported by the chiefs. And the first district council was inaugurated on 26 April 1952, and Mr. Lalsawia was

elected to take the place as the chief executive member, Lushai Hills District Council, which was later changed into Mizo District Council, effective from 1952, as per the Lushai Hills District Act of 1954, enacted by the Indian Parliament. Now, like I said, Lushai Hills, Mizo Hills, Mizo—all these are the same.

So, over a period of time, the name was changed from Lushai Hills to Mizo Hills and then to Mizoram, a name which is retained even till today. Now, certain members of the Mizo Union expressed their desire to change the chief executive member of the Mizo Union. This led to internal debacle and resulted in the formation of the Mizo Union right wing. So, very early on, there was a division of opinion in terms of who should lead the district council. And this resulted in factionalism within the Mizo Union, leading to the formation of the Mizo Union right wing.

The reshuffling of the CEM, which led to the birth of the Mizo Union right wing, apparently impaired the performance of MU (Mizo Union) in the second district council election. The Mizo Union right wing contested the election and scattered the party's vote bank. On 1st October 1957, the Missouri Union right wing and AMFO dissolved their parties and formed the Eastern India Tribal Union, Missouri branch. The main propaganda of this new group was to unite all the hilly political parties in the state of Assam to achieve a separate hill state. So, you see that the political trajectory began to take a different turn.

By the 1950s, you will see that the Mizo Union right wing and AMFO, which was a party established by the chieftains or with their support, merged to form the Eastern Tribal Union. This was the period when Assamese was being imposed as the official language of Assam, and the Eastern India Tribal Union demanded a separate hill state that would include present-day Mizoram and other tribal areas in the northeast. Under these circumstances, the Assamese Language Bill was passed in 1960. The Assam chief minister's action was widely criticized, and the hill people lost trust in the government. The Mizo Union also opposed the introduction and passing of the bill.

They condemned the Assam government's handling of the 1959 famine as well. As I mentioned earlier, Mizoram faced two significant challenges. One was the famine caused by bamboo flowering in 1959, which resulted in hundreds of Mizo deaths, and the other was the attempt to impose Assamese as the official

language. In protest against these events, the MLAs from the Mizo Hills district resigned as a sign of protest. However, one of them, by the name A. Thanglura, was unwilling to resign from his post, so he left the party and formed the Congress Party.

So, basically, we begin to see how this sea of change or political change in Mizoram provided new opportunities for the establishment of political parties such as the Congress. So, what can be understood is that political consciousness and political culture in Mizoram did not come from any outside forces. It was something that emerged from within. And it was much later on that national political parties such as the Congress also established their presence in Mizoram. And it was only in 1961.

A special assembly of the party was held on 10 July 1963, demanding a separate state for the Mizo. At this assembly, more votes were cast in favor of a separate state for the Mizo as opposed to the Hill State policy. It was also proposed that if the Indian government did not meet the demand for statehood before the end of 1964, direct action should be taken. So the demand for statehood was growing everywhere. Every tribal community in the Northeast was clamoring for separate statehood by separating themselves from the dominance of Assam.

So in that spirit, the Mizo Union was leading the movement for upgrading Lushai Hills or Mizo Hills to a full-fledged state. On 31st August 1963, the Mizo Union submitted a memorandum to the Government of India demanding statehood. In December 1964, the Mizo Union councillors held a meeting and decided to withhold taking direct action. The decision of the Government of India to convert the Mizoram district into a Union Territory caused a difference of opinion among the members of the party. In the MDU General Assembly held on 1st December 1971, members were asked to choose either the Union Territory or the state by voting.

Surprisingly, more members chose the Union Territory. So, present-day Mizoram passed through different stages of political developments. First, the district was put under the Sixth Schedule and in 1971, it was upgraded to a Union Territory status, and in 1987, it was declared a full-fledged state. Now, in all this process, it was not only the government of India imposing its decisions, but we also see that it was this formation or the creation of different political structures and institutions

in response to the political changes happening in the region. So during this time, more members of the MU supported the status of UT for the Mizo Hills.

There were several factors. Firstly, the pioneer leaders of the MU party did not believe that the MNF would win the fight for Mizoram's independence. During this period, there was an armed struggle happening, led by the Mizo National Front. Secondly, the MAU preferred independence from Assam state and attaining the status of Union Territory as soon as possible rather than delaying it and going through the lengthy process of fighting for statehood. So, basically, the idea was that it would be far easier or reasonable to demand Union Territory because it might take a long time to actually achieve statehood.

Thirdly, leaders of the MU felt that it was preferable to be under the direct supervision of the government of India than rather being under the poor and unjust Assam state government. So, basically, what happened is that the kind of dissatisfaction and resentment against the actions of the Assamese or Assam government resulted in the belief that, you know, it was better to get out of Assam, whether it was a UT or a state. But the easy route seems to be that, you know, if it is UT, that will be the first step. So, therefore, Mizo-Indian leaders in some sense, were quite pragmatic in their approach, by which they say that for the time being, let us settle with Union territory, and we will see what will happen next. So, by this time, you know, Mizo Union was not a very old political party, but it has seen different phases.

And over a period of time also, it began to see its decline as well. So, under the North Eastern Reorganization in 1972, the Mizoram district was upgraded to the status of union territory and it was renamed as Mizoram. The first election to the Legislative Assembly was held in 1972. In the elections, the party secured 21 seats, forming the first governmental unity of Mizoram under the leadership of Ch. Chhunga as the CM. The Indian National Congress secured six seats, and independent candidates won two seats in the election.

During this time, because of the political situation in Mizoram, there was a proposal to merge the Mizoram Union with Congress. And this happened in July 1974. And after that, Congress became a strong political force in Mizoram, essentially because of the merger of Mizoram Union into the Congress Party. So, this is how, this is the story of how national political parties like Congress have a

very strong hold in today's Mizoram. The Mizoram Union Executive Committee and Mizoram Congress Committee decided to form the Ad Hoc Committee on 23rd January 1974 and form a government under the Congress Party.

The MU, which was the first political party in Mizoram, dissolved after 27 years from its establishment. So, a political party with a very, very rich and vibrant history was buried in 1974 after 27 years of its existence. The Mizo Union right-wing members joined the People's Conference Party, which was formed in 1975, and the People's Conference Party became one of the most important rivals of the Congress Party for at least 10 to 15 years. The Mizo Union, during the entire course of its existence, played a very, very important role in inculcating a spirit of regional sentiment and socio-political consciousness among the masses and tried to preserve the Mizo ethnic identity. So overall, what we see is that the political history of Mizoram cannot be discussed without referring to the role played by the Mizo Union.

The Mizo Union was not just another political party. It aspired to a political status in terms of articulating certain demands, but at the same time, most importantly, what the Mizo Union did was also create a democratic culture, a democratic consciousness in the minds of the Mizos. And this is something that continues to be seen in the context of Mizoram, where people have a strong belief in the idea of democracy. So, the groundwork for political mobilization and political consciousness was something that was laid down by the Mizo Union, and its leaders were very, very competent leaders in the sense that they were some of the first educated leaders, and despite that, they were capable of gaining a lot of support from the vast majority of people who were commoners. The Mizo Union is also important because if one goes back to the history of Mizoram, one will see that they have been quite instrumental.

And some of the things that they have done for Mizoram are still very much visible today. For instance, the renaming of Lushai Hills to Mizo Hills and then to Mizoram, and also the official renaming of Lushai to Mizoram. So, in that sense, the contribution, the role, and the kind of political aspirations that the Mizoram Union has articulated are very important. And since we are only talking about the Mizo Union here, I believe that there are also different political parties which have played significant roles, particularly in the context of tribal studies. And it is

important that we really understand the kind of political trajectories and political aspirations that are being articulated by these communities.

Thank you so much.