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Author/s: SRIJANI BHATTACHARJEE

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In Liaison with Nature: Glimpses of Changing Human-Nature Relationship in Lushai Hills

Dr. SRIJANI BHATTACHARJEE
Assistant Professor, History
School of Social Sciences and Liberal Arts
Adamas University, Kolkata, India
Email: srijanideys@gmail.com

Abstract: Human-nature relationship in the hill states of North East India has been a sort of interdependence since early times. The traditional Lushai community who inhabited Lushai Hills or the present state of Mizoram was no exception to this. Ecology, environment and natural elements were intimately associated with every element of Lushai life. The people used nature for their regular requirements and at the same time protected them through religious norms and social taboos. Changes, however, began to emerge with the arrival of colonial administration in the region. The administrative norms and measures of the alien government began to interfere with the traditional forest rights of the people. Gradually, the spread of Christianity and implementation of Western education influenced the social, cultural and religious beliefs of the people on their natural environment. The post-independent government of India realised both the commercial importance of nature and the ethnic-cultural bonding of the people within their natural milieu and consequently, it adopted measures to accomplish both purposes. But in this process, the human-nature relationship underwent considerable changes. The paper seeks to make an enquiry into the changing position of nature among the Lushais at different periods of time.

Keywords: Nature, forests, Lushais, tribes, colonial, chiefs.

Introduction

Men and nature in India have shared intimate bonding since early times. The people depended on nature for their survival and also protected it through societal norms and on religious grounds. Thus there was a kind of symbiotic relationship between them. However with the arrival of the British administration, noteworthy alterations appeared in this relationship. The implementation of scientific forestry practices by the British government over indigenous forests depicted the latter as 'commercial commodity' that could harvest profitable financial returns. The forest based tribal people initially could not understand this view and consequently had conflicts with the colonial government on issues like land ownership, land uses and forest rights, etc. This viewpoint towards nature however began to influence the tribes after Indian independence. The tribes being infested with illiteracy, unemployment and poverty began to involve themselves in commercial undertakings associated with forests and natural elements. The government of India after independence adopted measures to protect the indigenous forest rights of the people.

The Lushais inhabited the Lushai Hills district of British Assam which is presently known as Mizoram. It is situated in the north eastern tip of India surrounded by the Indian states of Tripura, Manipur and the Cachar district of Assam and international boundaries with Bangladesh and Burma. Before the advent of the British, Lushai Hills was a collection of tribal units ruled by tribal chiefs known as '*Lals*'. By 1898 the region was annexed to Assam as one of its districts for administrative convenience and on strategic grounds. It remained as a district within Assam till 1954 and was renamed as Mizo district. In 1972 it was declared as a Union Territory within the Indian Union. Finally in February 1987 the region attained statehood with Aizawl as the state capital.

Objectives and Methodology

The paper seeks to enquire into the intimate relationship shared by the Lushai people with their natural environment. It intends to study the changing position of human nature relationship in Lushai Hills across pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial times. The paper is based on Gazetteers, scholarly works by British administrators, Census Reports and

anthropological researches (Mackenzie 1884; Shakespear 1912; Allen 1906; Singh 1995). The secondary literature by scholars such as Lalrimawia, Jagdish K.Patnaik, N.N Bhattacharya, Daman Singh, and Joy Pachuau illuminates the subject further (Lalrimawia 1995; Bhattacharya 1995; Singh 1996; Patnaik 2008; Pachuau 2015).

The position of Nature in pre-colonial Lushai society

Forests and natural elements were ingrained in every aspect of traditional Lushai life. Hunting and shifting cultivation, the indispensable occupations of the people were based and performed in forests. The chief mode of cultivation practiced by them was *jhum* or shifting cultivation. The latter was not only a mode of farming for the Lushais but was also intimately connected with their societal and cultural norms. Indigenous ceremonies like *Chapchar Kut, Pawl Kut* and *Mim Kut* were associated with the different phases of the *jhum* cultivating process (Patnaik, 2008, 93-94). *Chapchar Kut* was held in the months of February and March when the people prepared agricultural fields for cultivation after cutting the forests; *Pawl Kut* was performed in the months of August and September when the harvest was reaped; and *Mim Kut* was performed when maize harvest was almost reaped. It also dictated the life style of the people.

Shifting cultivation performed in forests made it imperative for the Lushais to shift their place of habitat from one place to another in search of new cultivable sites and thus compelled the people to lead a nomadic life. Moreover, the Lushais also believed that burying the dead within the village made the site unhealthy and therefore has to be regularly changed. The selection of new sites was usually decided by a group of elders. They were made to sleep on the spot and a cock was engaged for the purpose. If the cock crow in an hour before daybreak, the site was approved of. There were no customary laws on the use of forest products and therefore clashes on forest use were infrequent (Shakespear 23). Nature based superstitious beliefs dominated the shifting cultivation practices of the people, such as if, in the process of clearing the forests, a skull of a monkey was found, the owner would instantly withdraw from his fields for the fear of being prosecuted to death by the evil spirits. Similarly a tree root lying across a brook would cause the cultivator to vacate his land as this was considered to be an unnatural occurrence (Jha 44).

Indigenous ceremonies were also associated with the hunting and fish catching operations of the people. As per the traditional societal standards, the competence to hunt was a vital quality that was required to be possessed by a Lushai man. It was believed that such proficiency could entitle a man to attain *Pial ral*, the Lushai paradise after death. The skill to hunt was considered essential due to several factors. Meat was an important part of the Lushai diet. Moreover, hunting was undertaken for security reasons, for trade, and on religious grounds. The Lushais hunted almost all types of animals excepting few, the slaughters of which were prohibited by social taboos within the society. The *Minhlong* clan claimed descent from the Great Indian Hornbill and therefore never killed it. The *Hnaihlen* clan did not kill tigers and the *Bonghias* clan did not kill pythons. After the hunting expedition was over, each household presented a *sachhiah* (meat tax, a portion of every animal hunted) to *Lals* (the Lushai chiefs). A tax named *khuaichhiah (*bee tax) imposed on the portion of honey collected was also given to the chiefs. *Chichhiah* was a share of salt collected from the salt mines (Singh 1996, 12-13).

Trade in natural products with the neighbouring areas formed an essential part of the traditional Lushai economy. The mode of transaction was usually through barter. The important trading marts of the Lushais were the Bepari Bazar in the Sylhet border and Kasalang in the Chittagong region. The natural products on which the Lushais traded were rubber, elephant hides and skins, ivory, roots and shoots amongst others (Mackenzie 363). The British administrators encouraged the trade relationship of the Lushais with their plains and hill neighbours. Under the initiative of Captain T.H. Lewin the British Political Officer of Chittagong Hill Tracts, trade marts were established at the foothills of the region by 1872. The most popular mart was located at Tipaimukh at the confluence of rivers Barak and Tuipui. Small markets like Lushai *Haats* (markets) were situated near Sonai and Jhalnacherra on the bank of river Dhaleshwari. With the establishment of these marts, trade on salt, iron, brass, copper utensils and tobacco were carried on in these areas by the Bengali traders in exchange of rubber, ivory and other natural products from the Lushais. The Kukis of Cachar and Sylhet frontier used ivory as the medium of exchange (Mackenzie 363).

Nature dictated the religious norms in the Lushai society. Sacrifices formed an important part of traditional religious beliefs. Animal sacrifice was indispensable in Lushai religious beliefs as a way to propitiate evil spirits. Several rituals were associated with the hunting expeditions. An '*Ai'* ceremony was performed to gain control over the spirits of the dead animals where it was necessary for the performer to sacrifice a *mithan* (tamed bison), a goat and a pig with the belief that such sacrifices would enable him to acquire control over the animal that has been killed. This ceremony was not performed for tamed animals (Shakespear 77-78). Natural elements had immense religious and ritualistic importance in the Lushai society. Prior to the arrival of Christianity, the Lushais believed in a spirit called '*Pathian'* who was supposed to be the creator of everything. They also believed in spirits that lived in trees, mountains, rocks, caves and streams known as '*Huai'* or demons to whom every illness and misfortunes was attributed. The '*puithiam'* (the village priest) knew the causes of evils and suggested the form of sacrifices to be offered to overcome them. The spirits who could be propitiated by sacrifices were guardian spirits of the clan and were supposed to visit villages and houses. Sacrifices were made to cure sickness, barrenness in woman, to increase the fertility of agricultural fields, cutting of plough, and after the hunting expeditions. The Lushais also believed in '*Khuavang'* who was identical to '*Pathian'* but was inferior to him (Hminga 33-34).

The people also preserved lands on religious grounds. Certain lands were never cleared for cultivation as they were considered to be the abode of supernatural beings who, when offended, would take vengeance on those who encroached upon them. By tradition people never dug out jungle yam or roots indiscriminately and kept them for rare emergencies (Nibedon 36). A Lushai peasant believed that the presence of spring water was always haunted by evil spirits. The concept of nature worship was however not prevalent among them. Rather they believed in the existence of evil spirits in nature responsible for devastation of all forms and could be propitiated by sacrifices and feasts. The people believed in both good and evil spirits and had a faith that these spirits existed in almost all natural objects like mountains, rocks, trees, caves, streams etc. (Bhattacharya 25).

Natural elements occupied a vital position in Lushai societal norms. During marriages among the chiefs, the bride's father presented the

bridegroom with elephant teeth which was considered as a precious possession. Ivory was an important component of traditional Lushai jewellery. Natural products played an important role in maintaining political relations as well. The chiefs presented elephant teeth to the dignitaries as a mark of respect. It was also collected as tributes by the senior chiefs from their subordinates (Chatterjee 1990, 57-58). Superstitious beliefs were attached to the use of animal products on medicinal grounds. A tiger tooth was hung around the neck as necklace as it was considered to have magical powers. White goat's hair along with red thread was worn by the people with the belief that it had medicinal values. In case of pain or cut in the body, people wore skin or feathers of the animal or bird considered responsible for the illness or injury after sacrificing it to the demon (Shakespear 14). Natural products also served as penalty in thefts and in other forms of crimes. Theft of any sort was punishable by the fine of one *mithan* quite irrespective of the actual value of the stolen article. The chief of the village assisted by his '*Upa'* (council of elders who assisted the chief in administration) was the only court of justice prior to the arrival of the British (Shakespear 50-56).

Artistic and handicraft products were prepared with natural elements. Bamboo, cane, wood, feathers and animal hides were intensively used for making handicrafts, utensils and various types of artistic works. Cane works like baskets and hats portrayed the skilled workmanship of the people. Even the houses had bamboo walls and floors with thatched roofs and were generally built on hill slopes with the support of wooden posts. Traditional ornaments worn by men and women were usually made of bamboo. Men wore a headgear of bamboo band with parrot feathers stuck on it and decorated with beetles at the end. Other forms of bamboo products included traps for catching fishes and animals, hats, baskets and equipment for shifting cultivation. Bamboo shoots also served as food. The smoking pipes used by the people were also made of bamboo (Sadangi 203). *Zawlbuk* the chief social institution among the Lushais was constructed with wood, bamboos and thatching grass (Patnaik 6). Bamboo occupied an important position in the traditional Lushai beliefs. Bamboo branches were erected at the entrance of villages to ward off evil spirits and its flowering indicated the possible occurrence of some natural calamity (Chatterjee 1995, 57). *Cheraw'* dance or bamboo dance, a fundamental part of Lushai culture was performed with bamboo (Sadangi 203). Wood,

bamboo and forest based products were indispensable for food, medicinal purposes, preparation of dyes, ropes, posts, making gun powder and for construction of houses and bridges.

Natural components were the major characters around which the Lushai folklore revolved. Flowers, especially the crimson ones, were always associated with the charming beauty of young maidens. Streams and rivers formed important component of Lushai folk songs, tales and literature such as the story of '*Chala* and *Thangi'* who were lovers united after long and painful phase of separation but the lover lost his lady love in the strong current of a stream. Animals like bear, tiger and monkeys were necessary characters of Lushai folk tales. The people believed that during eclipse the dead animals became alive and had an idea that some time a general transformation would take place when human beings would turn into animals. Some of the people were symbolized as animals or as birds. It was believed that men with striped clothes would become tigers. Some chiefs were often considered as the representations of hornbills while others were believed to become king crows. It was also assumed that the domesticated animals often turned into wild ones (Shakespear 93). Therefore, the folktales reinforce the animistic world view of the Lushai people.

Coming of the British and ensuing changes

The history of British-Lushai relationship can be traced to 1757 when with the battle of *Plassey* and colonial occupation of Bengal, the Lushais came into contact with the British. The latter, during this period, developed a spree to explore new territories in India to bring them under their control. The fertile lands and forests, diverse fauna and flora, discovery of indigenous tea plants, petroleum and natural gas in Assam soon attracted the colonial administrators towards it by the first half of the nineteenth century. After annexing the plains of Assam within the colonial ambit by the Treaty of *Yandaboo* in 1826, the British rulers incorporated the hill areas under indigenous chiefs adjoining the Assam plains on various pretexts at different periods of time. By 1898 Lushai Hills was annexed to British Assam on strategic grounds although Manipur and Tripura functioned as independent monarchical units.

The Cachar, Sylhet and Chittagong Hills districts of Bengal and Assam were situated near the Lushai border and with the British occupation of

these regions, the ambit of the pre-colonial trade between the Lushais and the plains people developed further. This increased commercial interaction rendered some non-Lushai people to enter the Lushai territory for trading purposes which was abhorred by the Lushai chiefs (*Lals*) as they had a strong sense of belonging for their forestlands. Non-Lushai people entering the region had to pay a safety tax to the chiefs and accept their supremacy over the region. The first instance of Lushai conflict with the British took place on this ground when in 1826 a party of Sylhet woodcutters entered the region and were massacred by the Lushais for failure to pay the safety price to the chief in whose territory they had felled trees. The matter was viewed seriously by the British who imposed a siege on the markets with which the Lushais carried on their trade (Sangkhima 70). The strained Anglo-Lushai relations headed for conflict in January 1871 when the Lushais killed Winchester, the planter in Alexandrapore in Cachar and imprisoned his six year old daughter Mary. This paved the way to the Chin Lushai Expedition of 1871-72 and later the Lushai Expedition of 1889-90 after which the area was finally annexed to British India on administrative grounds (Chatterjee 1990, 144). Merger of Lushai Hills with British Assam undermined the power of the chiefs over the indigenous forests and natural lands. Under the conditions of the Assam Frontier Tract Regulation 1880, the Lushai chiefs subject to good conduct and efficiency were given the hereditary charge of forestlands as custodians but not as owners (Jha 1997, 50). In 1898, the Superintendent of Lushai Hills issued certain orders that notified the duties of the chiefs towards forestlands (Patnaik 262).

Even prior to the British annexation colonial officials had begun to engage in land deals and contracts with Lushai chiefs that gradually began to erode the latter's autonomy over indigenous forests. Certain agreements concluded between the British and the chiefs decided the extent of powers to be exercised by the chiefs over their indigenous forests. For instance, under the terms of the agreement between the Lushai chief Suakpuilala and the British government, it was the duty of the chief to see to the safety of the traders and woodcutters who traded and cut timber in the hills. The colonial government assured the tribal chiefs that if they complied with colonial terms, they would enjoy military protection of the British government (Rosanga 24)

This type of colonial arrangement to control the Lushai chiefs, however, failed to secure popular support. Some of the chiefs resented the colonial terms put forward to Suakpuilala and opined that these terms were against their dignity. They also alleged that the continuous spread of tea gardens in the Cachar-Lushai frontier has led to felling of trees in the region leading to encroachment over their traditional hunting grounds. The chiefs united and carried out a series of concerted actions against the British in the form of raids in the Cachar-Lushai border (Rosanga 24). In 1877, an area of 509 square miles of forests in the region was reserved as 'Inner Line Reserve' to act as a buffer zone between Cachar-Lushai border and as a measure of protection. This was perhaps the first time when forest areas were reserved as a measure of protection. The forest administration of the province was placed under the Superintendent of Lushai Hills who was placed under the supervision of the Conservator of Forests, Assam. Some reserves were also created on environmental grounds. Apart from them, three town reserves were also created (Singh 1996, 39-40).

The establishment of colonial control over Lushai forests placed the Lushai chiefs in a disadvantageous position. Official norms with paper works concerning the operation of markets, investments and a 'culture of contracts' were some of the spheres which they could hardly comprehend (Kar 41-67). In 1941 the village chiefs presented a resolution to the British government whereby they clearly stated that they resented the presence and activities of non-Lushai traders in their indigenous forestlands. They also protested against the colonial arrangement whereby the chiefs were made to keep a watch over the forest products being carried out of their lands without having a single share of them. The chiefs stated that under such an arrangement, it was impossible on their part to act as custodian of forests on behalf of the British government. In response to this resolution, Mr. A.G. McCall, the Superintendent of Lushai Hills wrote a letter to the Governor of Assam suggesting that the interests of the chiefs should be taken into consideration without which their cooperation in the forest administration of Lushai Hills could not be expected (Singh 1996, 48).

The colonial authorities utilised the hunting skills of the indigenous people. Abundance of wild life in the region obstructed the mobility of the colonial officials, and the latter decided to utilise the hunting skills of the indigenous people to deal with the problem. Cash rewards were offered for

killing the animals declared as vermin. If a full grown tiger was killed, the hunter was paid twenty five rupees and if it was a cub, the amount was lowered down to twelve rupees and eight *annas*. Killing a full grown bear and a bear cub would fetch ten and five rupees respectively to the hunter (Thirumal & Lalrozami 384). The indigenous hunters were provided with certain hunting guidelines. Some seasons were declared as closed seasons for hunting. The people were required to obtain licenses for killing certain animals like rhinoceros and elephants. In course of time, the attitude of the colonial authorities changed when certain animals were brought under the preservation schemes of the British government. Consequently, some acts were passed to preserve wild life such as the Elephants Preservation Act of 1879 (Singh, 1996, 49).

Measures were also undertaken to regulate the agricultural practices of the Lushais. The Assam Forest Regulation 1891 came up with some provisions that curbed the shifting cultivation practices among the people. Apart from this, the government declared leases and passes for orange and cotton cultivation in those bamboo jungles where the people usually carried on shifting cultivation. Ban on shifting cultivation was imposed on a strip of 150 feet of forests on both sides of the government roads. No rice cultivation with shifting cultivating method was permitted in the region without a valid pass signed by the District Officer (McCall 1980, 196). In some areas such efforts produced desired results. Part of the Champai province was brought under wet rice cultivation under the initiatives of Colonel J. Shakespear, the first Superintendent of Lushai Hills and the *jhum* slopes were replaced by horticulture and plantation crops (Lianzela 113).

Along with the above colonial endeavours to control indigenous forest use and farming habits among the Lushais, the advent of Christianity further re-moulded the forest-based practices amongst the people. Christianity gradually replaced the animistic beliefs of the Lushais by bringing a revolutionary change in the pre-colonial Lushai social structure (McCall 1949, 211). The change was visible in Lushai beliefs, management, social, religious and cultural norms associated with nature. The introduction of modern education by the western missionaries provided further boost to the process. Sacrifices and rituals also began to get obliterated. Christian preaching about love for nature and its creation by

one God brought immense changes in the head hunting culture of the Lushais.

The Post-Independence Phase

The government of India after Independence implemented constitutional measures to preserve the indigenous ethnic and cultural rights of the Lushai people. Firstly, District Councils established under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, laid provisions to protect the traditional forest rights of the people. Secondly, chieftainship also gradually began to lose its importance and was ultimately abolished by a resolution approved by the Legislative Assembly in 1954 (Thangtungnung 243). Thirdly, Village forests created under village councils as a measure to protect indigenous forests were placed under the Local Administrative Department. As a concession, shifting cultivation was permitted within specific 'unclassed forests' and certain reserves like safety and bamboo reserves were created under government initiative. Although such measures were undertaken, the administrative, commercial and exploitative structure of colonial forest administration could not be totally transformed. The Forest Department as an organ of the government tried to implement forest conservation arrangements, sylvicultural measures, fire protection and commercial forest-based schemes. These measures have put restrictions on large-scale shifting cultivation, hunting, and felling of trees by indigenous people. Thus, the post Independent Forest Department has tried to tread a cautious and balanced path between tribal autonomy over forests and the interests of commerce and trade in forest products.

Conclusion

The culture, economy, social attitudes and religious beliefs of the Lushais like any other tribal societies of North East India revolved around nature and natural surroundings. Lushai chiefs considered themselves as the custodians and preservers of the forest lands and strictly abhorred non-Lushai interference over these areas. Without romanticizing the pre-colonial tribal reliance and interdependence on nature, it can be stated that pre-capitalist tribal economic practices had less impingement on the natural habitat. However, with the emergence of colonial rule, the intrusion of a commercialized appropriative mentality along with the advent of Christianity and English education revolutionised the Lushai society and customs in a way that transformed the pre-colonial structure of nomadic

habits within the span of less than a century. This change was reflected in the dispossession of the hierarchical status of the Lushai chiefs and the decline of social practices such as *Zawlbuk (*bachelor dormitory*)*, system of burials, acceptance of bride price in marriages and the *Bawi* system (slavery). It also transformed Lushai social norms/usages and made them into one of the most literate communities of India. Among other aspects, my paper shows that Lushai interaction with nature and their management/administration of forests/natural resources also underwent major modifications over the course of the colonial and post-colonial period.

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