

## **Economic Growth and Development in Mizoram: A Study of Pre-Independence Era**

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The economy of the Mizos in the early period has been an area of concern for many historians which still remains to be explored critically. In this paper, attempt has been made to present the Mizo economy in two period - Pre-Colonial period and Colonial Period. In the pre-colonial period, the Mizo economy was simple. Their economy was sustained by Jhum cultivation. Agriculture was their principal occupation. Besides agriculture, other ancillary activities like hunting, fishing, raids and wars, domestication of animals, *hmatlang*, cottage industries, etc. also played a very important part in their economy during that period. Jhuming continued to be the mainstay of the Mizo economy during the colonial period. However, trade and commerce was carried out by the Mizos with the neighbouring dwellers during this period. The idea of trade came into their minds with the establishment of bazaars in the border areas. The medium of exchange was still by 'Barter System'. The chief commercial articles during the period are rubber, ivory, timber, bamboo, common salt, arms and ammunitions, tobacco, etc.

**Keywords:** Mizo, Economy, Jhum, Growth, Development.

### **Introduction**

The economy of the Mizos in the early period has been an area of concern for many scholars who involved themselves in studying the history of the peoples. It is an interesting area, which still remains to be explored critically. It deserves the attentions of the scholars for a systematic study (Singh, 2007). The Mizo economy was sustained by Jhum cultivation and supported by other ancillary activities like hunting, fishing, raids and wars, domestication of animals, cottage industries, etc. in the pre-colonial period. But during the Colonial period, besides agriculture, the Mizo economy was sustained by trade and commerce which were carried out with the neighbouring dwellers after the establishment of the bazaars in the border areas. In this paper, attempt will be made to present the Mizo economy in two periods- Pre-Colonial period and Colonial Period and how those ancillary activities had sustained the Mizo economy.

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### **Pre-Colonial Period**

In the Pre-Colonial period, the Mizos are without any strong economic and professional foundations. They have very little background and training even as traders and merchants (Zorema 2007: 79). During this period, agriculture was the backbone of their economy. Their standard of living was so low that they could procure their requirements simple by jhuming, supported by other ancillary activities like hunting, fishing, domestication of animals, etc. So, the Mizos during this period were more or less self sufficient by exploring with intelligence the economic potential of their surroundings (ibid). In fact, the Mizo economy during this period was simply to meet the demands of the basic needs of day-to-day life.

#### *Agriculture*

Agriculture was the main occupation of the Mizos. The entire population of the Mizos can be classified as agriculturists or cultivators as except only a few people like blacksmith and professional priests lived on contributions of rice and meat given to them in exchange for service rendered to the community (Mate, 2005: 58).

The Mizos cultivated their land by jhum method. It consists in felling all the bamboos and trees in a piece of jungle and setting fire to it when it has completely dried up. The ground is thus not only cleared but manured by the ashes at the same time. Timbers which are not burned completely are gathered together and burned or dragged to the side of the field and used for rough fence to keep beast out of the field. At the first sign of rain, the cultivator goes to the jhum with a small basket of seeds slung over his shoulder with a small hoe or dao in his hand and thus started sowing seed in the field. Usually, he starts from the lower end of the jhum. Very often, the whole village would join together in corporate labour in sowing seeds (Pudaite, 1963: 45).

The main crops of the Mizos are rice and maize and rice was the staple food of the people. Before rice was cultivated, maize, millet, arum-bulb, gums, sweet potatoes are their staple food (Siama, 1978: 17). Tradition says that rice was first cultivated by the Mizos only when they reached Lentlang (Sangkima, 1992: 48) or the present Chin Hills of Burma. Besides the above mentioned crops, the primitive Mizos also grow peas, job's tears, chilies, etc. cucumber, watermelon, melon, etc. were other fruits grown (Zochungnunga, 2004: 54). In course of time, they also grew cotton and developed the art of spinning and weaving. They also dyed their clothes by using indigo grown in the locality. With other crops, they also cultivated tobacco for local consumption.

#### *Domestic Animals*

In the economic life of the primitive Mizos, domestic animals like mithun, pig, dog, chicken and goat played a very important role. Apart from being important sources of food they are used for sacrifices and ceremonies.

Among the domestic animals, mithun was the most valued indigenous domestic animal and played a very important part in the economic life of the early Mizos. Apart from being important source of food, and used in rituals, it was used as the marriage price of a girl (in a sense that the marriage price was determined in terms of mithun). It was also used for exchanging the captives and other valuable properties. Its skin was

also used for shields (ibid: 67). A man's wealth was also judged by the number of mithuns he possessed (Seletthanga 1987: 59). Mithun occupies such a dominant place in the primitive Mizo economy that some writers suggested the "Zo culture" as "mithun culture" (Vumson 1986: 12).

Another indigenous domestic animal of the Mizos was pig. Every family domesticated pig and are fed on a species of arum and rice husks boiled together. They are killed for sacrifices and ceremonies. Their socio-economic and religious values are very great to the early Mizos.

Dog was another domestic animal of the early Mizos. Dogs are eaten freely, and their chief value is derived from the demand for sacrificial purposes (Shakespeare, 1988: 31). Dog meat is one of the favourites of the Mizos.

Chicken or fowls are domesticated by every family in the early period. Their importance in the socio-economic and religious life of the primitive Mizo people was very great.

Goat, another domesticated animals, of the primitive Mizos was used for meat and for sacrificial offering. Though it was the indigenous domestic animal of the Mizos, it is not known when it was first domesticated (Zochungnunga 2004: 68).

### *Hunting and Fishing*

In the economy of the primitive Mizos, hunting and fishing or trapping played an important role in the past. They were good hunters and fond of fresh meat and tried to catch any kind of animals. They make large hunting parties and frequently made expeditions into the uninhabited parts of the forest in search of wild animals like elephants, wild mithun, deer, tiger, bear and others for food. Their most favourite game was the wild elephant (Lewin 1977: 138) which were hunted for their tusks and meat for food. The party camps at a certain spot for weeks until they are satisfied with the number of animals they have killed (Pudaite 1963: 51). However, there were times a large hunting party will return home with few or not even an animal.

The return of the hunting party was well publicized by firing guns before reaching the village and the whole village turns out to welcome them with plentiful supply of rice beer. Besides animals, the Mizos also killed birds for food. To supplement these animals and birds, the early Mizos also catches fish. The ordinary way of catching fish was by casting net and sometimes with spears or daos at night by torchlight. However, the most reliable method of catching fishes was by trap known as Ngoi (Ngawi), build of bamboos and timber reinforced with stones and earth which stretches from side to side of a running water (Shakespeare 1988: 35). They also caught fish by poisoning the small streams with the fruits of a tree called 'ru' or the roots of certain tree called 'rulei' and the bark of a certain tree poured into them. In this way, the early Mizos catches animals and fishes to satisfy their hunger for meat.

### *Raids*

The Mizos in the early period were war like tribes and often indulged in inter-tribal wars and also carried out raids to loot and to get slaves which brought wealth to the family. These slaves were employed for economic works to work in the jhums or domestic work

(Zochungnunga 2004: 58). In this way, the slaves brought wealth to their owners either in the form of increased labour power or by the considerable prices they fetched in the local markets (Stevenson 1986: 12).

### *Hnatlang (Community Work)*

Another important aspect of the economic life of the early Mizos was Hnatlang or community work on free services rendered by the people when need arose. In the village, the weaker sections of the people were uplifted by this system. The chief's house and the Zawlbuk are built by this system. Cleaning of village spring, making of inter-village path and jhum path are done by the local people through this system (Seletthanga 1987: 50). In this kind of community work, at least one person from each house must come forward for the work except widows and disabled persons who really deserved exemption from the service. Otherwise, the absentee family will be fined as demanded by the participants.

### *Common Salt*

In the early period, the Mizos used to obtain their common salt from the salt springs by means of evaporation. The numbers of salt springs were very limited and as a result it became a valuable economic asset for the Mizos. Inter-tribal feuds often arose as a result of dispute over the possession of the salt springs (Zorema 2011: 60). However, such dispute ceased gradually after the annexation of Cachar by the British in 1832 when salt trade was carried out by Bengali traders at the trade marts set up at the foothills.

### *Cottage Industry*

Cottage industry played a very important role in the economic life of the early Mizos. It includes cotton weaving, basket works, pottery, brass work, iron work, manufacturing of musical instrument, etc. Cotton weaving of every kind was exclusively the work of the womenfolk. They were expected to make cloths for all the family members by spanning the raw cotton which they grow in their jhums. Major McCall remark about Mizo weaving: "The weaving is excellent, and is done on complicated indigenous hand looms, home-grown cotton being used. The whole process requires patience and time" (McCall 2002: 182).

The practice of basket making was chiefly carried on by man. There are different designs and size required for various purposes and the material used for making these are generally bamboos and canes which are available in the jungle. There are different types of baskets used for various purposes such as Thul, Deron, Em, Bomrang, Paikawng, etc. The Thul is a basket which has a conical lid and was used chiefly for keeping valuables at home. It was made quite waterproof. Deron, another kind of basket was used for carrying goods. A basket called Em was similar to the Deron but about half the size. The Bomrang, another type of Basket with an open- work with an oval mouth was used for carrying goods on long journeys. The Paikawng, another type of basket which was similar in shape to the Em, was used for carrying wood, water tubes, etc. Besides, these there are several types of baskets made and used by the Mizos in their homes. Pottery was another Mizo handicraft which was in vogue among the women folk in the indigenous period.

There were two types of pots - a small circular pot, used for cooking and a large jar, used for brewing rice beer. It is believed that some people had acquired knowledge in Brass work. The early Mizos also acquired knowledge in iron work and was one among the Mizo handicraft in the indigenous period. This was proved by the existence of blacksmith in every Mizo village in the early period who manufactures and repair tools and implements of the village (Shakespeare 1988: 27-28). The indigenous musical instrument of the Mizos includes gongs, drums, rotchem, tingtang, bengbung, phenglawng, lembawi and tuium dar. Besides, the early Mizos also made Thimkual (Hair pins), Dawhkih (hair stick) etc., by using bamboos. All the above were the Mizo handicrafts made for their own use which are the product of their cottage industry.

### **Colonial Period**

During the Colonial Period, jhumming continued to be the mainstay of the Mizo economy. It was the backbone of the society, the sole source of survival and around this activity were intertwined their customs, cultures, measures of time quantities and distances (Sailo 2006: 58).

#### *Trade*

Trade of modern times was unknown to the Mizo of the indigenous society. The idea of trade came into the minds of the Mizos with the establishment of the bazaars in the border areas. Trade was carried out through barter system. Some sorts of trade connections between the Mizos and their neighbouring people had already existed before 1871-72. But the traders were mostly Bengalis and Chakmas in the south and Bengalis and Manipuris in the north. The two well known trade marts were Bepari bazaar in the north and Kassalong in the south in the Chittagong border. They welcome those traders as friends because they got sulphur, gun and flint-glass from them which had very important place in the Mizoram armament. After 1874, Capt. T.H. Lewin encouraged the establishment of trade marts at different places at the foothills of Mizoram. Accordingly, several trade marts were opened within Mizoram. The popular trade marts or bazaars in the north were - (1) Tipaimukh bazaar at the confluence of Barak and Tuipui or Tuivai river; (2) Sonai bazaar or Lushai hat on the Tuirial or Sonai river; (3) Changsil formerly known as Bepari bazaar on the Tlawng or Dhaleswari river. Another bazaar in the south of Mizoram was established at Demagiri or Tlabung in 1873 at the recommendation of Capt. T.H. Lewin who was the Deputy Commissioner of the Chittagong Hill Tracts at that time. These bazaars were set up partly as an attempt to induce the Mizos to enter into peaceful activities and also used as a means to obtain information on the chiefs, their movements and inclinations.

With the increase in the number of marts, the Mizos became dependent more and more on the produce of the plain peoples and started direct trade with the neighbouring traders for their day to day necessity. To have a clear idea of the early Mizo trade, some of the commercial articles of trade are briefly discussed.

#### *Rubber*

Prior to the annexation of the Hills in 1890, crude Indian rubber was the most important

commodity in the Mizo commerce which was found abundant in the hills. In those days, when no synthetic rubber was invented, demand for crude rubber was very high. It became the lucrative commercial commodity for the Mizos with the establishment of bazaars in the neighbourhood as there was a good demand from the traders. In the initial stage, the Mizos were unaware of the market values of rubber. The traders bought it at an average price of Rs 27 a mound and sold it again in Silchar at Rs 50 or Rs 60 (Sailo 2006: 61). In course of time, the Mizos realised the commercial value of rubber and by the beginning of 1880s, Mizos in bigger numbers began to take down their rubber for sale directly to the plain markets such as Lakhipur, Hailakandi, Silchar, etc. (Sailo 2006: 61). Rubber being the principal item of the Mizo commerce, it fetched a good amount of income annually (Zochungnunga 2004: 60). However, neither the Mizos nor the British administrators have shown any interest towards its preservation. Instead the rubber trees were carelessly over tapped and were destroyed forest after forest. This led to the decline in production. As a result, the country became completely free from the Indian Rubber trees within a decade or two after the British had annexed the Lushai Hills. Thus, the age old indigenous natural industry died down damaging the backbone of the Mizo economy (Joshi 2010: 96).

#### *Ivory*

In the Mizo economy, ivory was an important medium of exchange during the colonial period. Besides, the bones and the hides of elephants were also valuable articles of commerce. The elephant hides are exported to the Mughal traders of Bengal. The Mizos also supply elephant tusks, hides and bones to the neighbouring Rajas of Manipur, Tripura and Cachar thereby making a good market for these items in the neighbouring plains. The supply of this commodity reached as far as the Mughal court of Delhi and the aristocracy of Bengal through the craftsmen of Sylhet. The Mizos also supplied ivory to the traders of Sylhet, Cachar and Chittagong. The Mizo chiefs, sometimes, paid their dues to the colonial rulers in terms of elephant's tusks.

However, with the extension of tea gardens in the southern borders of Cachar, there was encroachment upon the forest of the Mizo hills. Considering the encroachment as a check upon their natural right of hunting, the Mizos came in direct clash with the garden authorities (ibid: 97). They took every step to preserve this right as elephant hunting had an important place in the Mizo economy.

#### *Cotton*

From a very long time, the Mizos grow their own cotton to meet their domestic needs. They have two types of cotton - pure white and light brown. They have already known the art of cloth making from cotton and the Mizo women usually weave clothes for their family. Almost all the Mizo women were capable of weaving all kinds of designs as they grew up with weaving in the family and by participating in weaving (ibid: 100). After they came into contact with the plainsmen in the frontier markets, the sale of row cotton as a commercial item was gaining ground. Row cotton had become the principal commercial commodity which was exported from Mizoram to the frontier markets when rubber and ivory trade began to decline after the famine of 1881-82 (Zochungnunga 2004: 63).

*Bamboo and Timber*

Bamboo and Timber are other commercial commodities which the Mizos had exported from Mizoram during the Colonial Period. They had derived a fair amount of income from the export of these commodities. There was considerable increase in the export value of bamboo and timber in 1876-77 and 1877-78. In 1876-77, 30 bamboos and 3170 timbers are exported from Mizoram whereas in 1877-78, 2293 bamboos and 21753 timbers are exported. The export of bamboo further increased during the famine of 1881-82 and it reached up to 425000 bamboos (ibid: 62). Many Mizos had migrated near the border areas to earn their livelihood by selling bamboos and other forest products.

**Commercial goods imported to Mizoram during Colonial Period***Common Salt*

Common Salt was an important article of Mizo commerce during the Colonial period. After the annexation of Cachar in 1832, the local disputes between the Mizo chiefs or inter-tribal or inter-clan feuds over the possession of salt springs ceased as the Bengali traders were encouraged to carry on trade in salt with the Mizos at the foot hills. The same thing was done by the plain traders of Chittagong. A huge quantity of salt was brought in by the traders as there was a great demand of it by the Mizos. But in course of time, the greedy traders sometimes charged exorbitant rate for salt on the pretext of high cost of transport (ibid: 63). The price of salt sometimes reached such an absurd limit that it became very difficult even for the chiefs to purchase a mound of that commodity and this often led many hostile chiefs to plunder the trade marts. The Mizos purchased salt in exchange of ivory, rubber and jhum products from the traders (Joshi 2010: 97).

*Arms and ammunitions*

Arms and ammunitions are important trade for the Mizos. They had a great deal of trade in arms and ammunitions with the neighbouring traders. They imported flint lock guns mostly old two muskets from the Burmah, Chittagong and Sylhet district. At first they obtained arms from the traders of the British territory. Sulphur for making gun powder was obtained from Manipur and Upper Burmah. Thus, gun and gun powder became a passion of the Mizos (Zochungnunga 2004: 64). The Mizos also obtained guns from their raiding expeditions on the plains. They also possessed arms which are local made. They possessed arms to defend themselves from their enemies as well as for raiding their neighbouring dwellers.

*Tobacco*

The Mizos were good smokers. It is very likely that they learnt it from the Burmese (Joshi 2010: 98). In course of time, it became very common among the Mizos. The trade marts at Changsil, Sonai bazaar and Kassalong sell tobacco from where the Mizos bought it. Later on, the Mizos learnt the technique of growing and processing it locally. As a result, they also used local product in large number.

**Conclusion**

During the period of study, the Mizos also imported many essential goods like iron,

utensils, brass, copper, cotton piece goods, etc. from traders of the plain areas. With the establishment of trade marts in the bordering areas, there was a regular contact between the Mizos and the plainsmen. The establishment of trade marts greatly accelerated trade and commerce which in turn speeded up the British occupation of the hills and the introduction of their rule in 1890. The introduction of British rule led to better transport facilities which in turn led to the extension of trade and commerce. Later on some shops were opened in Aizawl at Kulikawn and Lunglei. Later, weekly bazaars had been started at Aizawl and Lunglei which proved to be the forerunner of marketing system of today's Mizoram.

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