

CHAPTER 5

Mizoram: The Politics of Bamboo Flowering

5.1. The Preliminaries

Human society has always been influenced by the impending natural calamities which in course of time has changed the course of the life of humans. Such instances of natural happenings in otherwise cases have also produced an area on which politicking could be done. The instances of bamboo flowering in Indian state of Mizoram for example has provided an affluent ground for doing politics of which different social groups and political parties have taken adequate advantages of the situations. Mizo history and society is replete with many instances of the bamboo politics. The entire course of the statehood movement in the then Lushai Hills District of Assam centered on the bamboo flowering and associated famines of 1959-60. The politics in post-statehood till date has been largely associated with the instances of bamboo politics in Mizoram. In the forthcoming section we are attempting an analysis of bamboo politics in Mizoram.

5.2. Bamboo Flowering: Contextualising the Political

Natural environmental process and calamities have always influenced and impacted human civilisation. History witnesses that many a times natural environmental process and calamities

changes the course of the life of man in society. The state of Mizoram and the Lushai-hills during the British period have witnessed such disastrous calamities through bamboo flowering and consequent famines as no other region in North-East must have experienced (Banik:1998; Nag: 2008;). The sufferings of the Mizos due to famine were far reaching and unbearable and often creating/providing socio-political structures for political opportunities and thus initiating a debate on the role of the state in providing the human security which can be argued from the utilitarian angle as the utility of the state to provide human security. The famines associated with natural process of bamboo flowering were not new to the Mizo society. However, such incidences were not recorded and hence became part of the Mizo folklore which was transmitted through generations. The British colonial administrators were the first to record such famines. In order to have a better coverage and understanding regarding the contextualising of politics of bamboo flowering, we are studying by converting the flowering history into three phases: a. Pre-British Period, b. British Period, and c. Indian independence to the Statehood of Mizoram.

5.2.1. Pre-British Period

Mizo chroniclers conjectured that the previous tribe who inhabited the present Mizo land had vacated the hills due to the severity of the recurrent famines arising out of the incidents of bamboo flowering which they failed to cope up with. Mizo tribes migrated to the present habitat in and around Lushai Hills in and around 1724 AD from the land between Run Lui and Tiau rivers in Upper Burma where they lived during the period 1540-1723 AD. The oral calculations of the Mizos demonstrate that a

major famine was experienced in the area in 1719 AD by the earlier tribes who had inhabited the Lushai Hills, who evacuated the area just before the Mizos reached there for settlements. The new inhabitants of the area, the Mizos have experienced the hardship of such rat-famines in 1737 and 1767 AD. (Mackenzie: 1994). The Mizo oral historical testimonies recorded that during the last of these 18th century famines, the remaining former occupants of these hills evacuated leaving it totally to the incoming Mizos. (Hodgson: 1925; Sangkima:2000). The famines during this period in fact forced the Mizo Chiefs to end the hostilities among themselves and seek the help from the Britishers. The three principal chiefs, Poiboi, Khalkom, and Lalhai, met and agreed to a cessation of hostilities even with the Britishers, and at once sent men into the Cachar district of Assam to obtain supplies of food. (Elly: 1893; Rev.Lorraine:1925; Needham: 1925; Parry: 1925; Lalbiakthanga: 1978; Rokhuma: 1988; Mackenzie: 1994; Chakraborty: 2012). Huge amounts of rice and paddy were carried from the plain areas of Assam including Silchar, Cachar and others, but they proved to be insufficient. The Britishers whole-heartedly supported the relief measures which to a greater extent eased the pressure off the Mizo Chiefs. The Britishers were now accepted as good and benevolent people and hence the Britishers could easily enter the Lushai Hills territory and finally annex the area into British India. However, the local administration still remained with the chiefs who enjoyed a respectable position in the mizo society (Chatterjee: 1995; Rengsi: 1998; Rao et.al: 1991; Parry: 1931; Shakespear: 1921).

5.2.2. British Period

The Britishers having come into close contacts with the Lushai Hills encountered an amazing ecological phenomenon: a severe famine apparently caused by the rats when they entered the Mizo hills¹. The Mizo hills are covered extensively by various species of bamboo, which periodically rot, flower and seed opening a vista for a unique phenomenon of famine following the multiplication of rat and rodent population. The bamboo seeds appeared to be a delicious food item for jungle rats and rodents, which emerged in massive numbers to devour them, and the consumption of bamboo seeds, seemed to produce a vast increase in the rodent population. Once the millions of rats had exhausted the bamboo seed, they began to attack the standing crops in the fields and devastated them. The result of such devastation soon manifested in the scarcity of food that led to massive hardship, starvation, and deaths. British administration encountered first of such famine in 1881(*Thingtam*) where about 15,000 (Fifteen thousand) people lost their lives (Ghosh: 1965; Ghosh 1980; Rokhuma: 1988; Alam: 1995).

Similarly in 1911, there was a mass (gregarious) flowering of Muli (*Melocanna baccifera*) bamboo followed by another famine in 1912 (Agarwal, Chopra, & Sharma: 1982; Gadgil, Prasad: 1984; Palen: 2006). This particular flowering of bamboo and famine was widespread than the earlier one of 1881, as it covered huge areas of Mizo Hills, Chin Hills, Chittagong Hills and the Chin Hills falling under the Burmese jurisdiction. The Burmese government set an example by killing thousands of rats which helped in minimizing the severity of famine. Administration on the part of British India also took the

initiative and motivated the tribals to follow the Burmese example. The people, on the initiative of administration set and reset traps in the fields and killed thousands of rats. An individual could trap around 500 rats in a single night with the help of long log traps designed for the purpose (Bhangre: 2001; Behari: 2006). The caught rats then were used as an alternative source of food which to some extent lowered the intensity of famine among the rat eaters² (Agarwal, Chopra, & Sharma: 1982; Gadgil, Prasad: 1984; Palen: 2006). The villagers who had retained the surplus products as reserve for use during famine, from the earlier harvests, struggled to protect it from not only the rats but also the humans (Rokhuma, 1988; Alam, 1995; Ghosh 1980; Ghosh 1965; Alam, 1995).. The acute shortage of food items compelled the people to search the forest for roots, jungle yams and other edible wild products³. Some tragic incidents were related to the Mizo people while searching for these wild produce to satisfy the hunger. It was reported that the entire forest in many parts of the Lushai Hill District was honey Combed with yam pits four to ten feet deep and large enough to admit the body of a man or two (Banik: 2000; Behari: 2006; Bhangre: 2001).

The British administrators found it interesting that the traditional knowledge which had passed on to generations through oral history can be that useful in predicting such phenomenon. The Mizos had experienced the ravages of famine arising out of bamboo flowering and rodent outbreaks for ages (Saha and Howe: 2001; Kelley and Sork: 2002; Keeley and Bond: 1999; Blatter: 1930). The experiences had taught the Mizos that there can be two major types of famine due to the resultant flowering of two particular types of bamboo. One was the Mautam (associated with the flowering of muli bamboo;

melocanna baccifera) and the other was the Thingtam (associated with the flowering of *bambusa tulda*). These two varieties of bamboo had a periodic life cycle of 48-50 years; i.e. both these bamboos rotted, flowered and set their seeds every forty eight to fifty years. It was during these times that the devastation described by the Mizos as *Tam* occurred (Agarwal, Chopra, & Sharma (eds) 1982; Gadgil, Prasad: 1984; Palen: 2006; Behari: 2006; Bhangre, 2001). With the aid of the Mizo elders, the colonial administrators prepared a record of the past famines, and on that basis could predict the approximate years of the impending series of famines. For example, Mautam 1862, Thingtam 1881, Mautam 1911, Thingtam 1929, Mautam 1956, Thingtam 1977, Mautam 2007-08 and Thingtam (Expected in 2025).

Based on this calculation, the British administration made an advance preparation for the expected 1929-30 famine. By the year 1925, both the administrators as well as the people experienced the signs of the famine. During this advance preparation and even during the famine, the administration was even assisted by an active ally in combating the natural calamity- i.e. the Missionaries⁴. This time they began preparation to counter the natural disaster that the Mizos were about to experience. Rev. J. H. Lorrain of the Baptist Mission post at Lungleh, took extra initiative to create an awareness, prevent and minimise the impacts of expected famine. He wrote to the Superintendent of Lushai hills,

"I am taking this liberty of writing to you regarding the expected Thingtam famine and I have no connection with the government I trust the expression of my own opinion as to the means which might be employed

successfully to counteract the effect of such a visitation will not be unwelcome to one like yourself who has the welfare of the Lushai people so much at heart."

Lorrain then went to suggest measures to counter the catastrophe. These were, first, the Tribals may be ordered to save a little grain in rat-proof baskets, and secondly, application of liver-pool virus to spread a deadly epidemic amongst the rodents, which could destroy them totally.

The initiatives taken by the missionaries was appreciated from all angles including the administration, which however, had some reservations on the measures suggested by Rev. Lorrain. The governments responded to Rev. Lorrain with the arguments that; firstly, The tribals themselves produced a bare subsistence. Most of them did not have a full year's rice, hence to enforce compulsory saving might create more hardship for them and even promote reactions. And secondly no virus had been found to be effective in controlling rat population in other parts of the country. Moreover, the most deadly and rapid spreading virus, the plague bacillus, had had little effect on the rat population of north and western India during the past 28 years. This rendered the application of liver-pool virus out of question.

The administration suggested the use of rat-traps and poisons⁵ to prevent the rats from damaging the crops in the jhum and in the fields. But the most important task from the administration point of view was that the food supply available to the rats must be avoided. For this, the administration proposed that the bamboo forests were to be cleared and burnt before they produce any food for the rats, therefore, standing crops in the fields would remain protected (Rokhuma: 1988; Alam: 1995). By 1925,

the bamboos had started to flower, as a result, the rats of jungle increased enormously. People who were already scared took all possible measures to destroy the jungle rats. In December 1924, 45,000 to 50,000 rats were killed in Aizawl sub division alone. To fight the menace, the people, the administrative machinery and non-governmental agencies like the Church joined hand. The famine was caused by the enormously increased number of jungle rats, which almost finished the standing crops of the fields. Rats increase due to the consumption of the bamboo seeds was understood, but why the rats multiply in numbers after having the seed was unsolved problem. (Needham: 1925; Parry: 1925; Lorraine: 1925; Hodgson: 1925). Alexander Mackenzie wrote in 1884,

'The famine arose according to the concurrent testimony of all persons concerned, from the depredation of rats. In the previous season bamboos had seeded, the supply of food thus provided caused an immense increase in multiplication of rats'.

There was corroboration of this from Missionary witnesses, and like others, they were also perplexed by the possible connections between the bamboo seed and the multiplication of rats. The Baptist Mission report stated:

"The periodical flowering, seeding and dying down of certain species of bamboo all over the hills was followed last autumn by an enormous increase in the number of jungle rats.... the connection between the flowering of bamboos and invasion of rats is a disputed point, but the theory which seems to be most satisfactory is that the bamboo fruits has the property of making the rats

which eat it, extraordinarily prolific. Whatever may have been the cause directly, the bamboos had seeded and the rats began to increase and swarm everywhere.”

A letter to the administration was written by, Rev.Lorrain,

“It appeared that the rats began to get more than extraordinarily troublesome years before the simultaneous seeding of the raw – thing bamboos but as soon as the seeding was over, they increase to such an extent that no human power could save the crops from their degradation.”

The bamboo seeds caused the multiplication of rats number was a fact known to people, but still the problem remained the same, unsolved. There are different opinions regarding the multiplication of rats aftermath of bamboo flowering.

- That perhaps the seeds had some properties that made the rats extraordinarily prolific in terms of reproduction. Perhaps there was some hormonal change in the rats due to excessive protein that the bamboo seed contained, enabling the female rat to produce a litter much earlier in age than in normal circumstances (Dickman:1999; Jaksic & Lima: 2003; Krebs: 2008).
- That whenever there is an increase in the supply of food, it is normal to find an increase in the rat population. Perhaps rats were migrating from deficit areas to areas of abundance (Rokhuma 1988: 98).
- That it was only a visible increase, not a real one. Generally the rats lived in their holes, but with the

bamboo flowering they came above ground to eat the delicacy and became more visible to the people. This would be misconstrued by the people as an increase in the number of rats, as they were not used to seeing so many at a time (Singleton: 2003; Singleton, Belmain, Brown, Aplin & Htwe: 2010).

The theory that gained most credence was the first one. Although the people, the administration and the Missionaries were firm in their belief of this theory, the administration made no attempt to establish its scientific basis. They concentrated on relief and rehabilitation. The famine, which is a significant phenomenon, had a major impact on the domain of Mizo culture. Though the Mizos had developed enough knowledge about the calamity, they were hopelessly ill-equipped to counter such natural disaster. The only thing they could do was escape to safer places to escape the hardship. Their knowledge was empirical and not scientific hence they developed hardly any technology to escape the turmoil. Since it was severe in its impact and was natural in character the Mizo people considered it a curse of God. Hence they took to religion to evade the punishment. There were particular rites to ward off the curse. Every year in the month of *Chhippa* (corresponding to June) they performed a ceremony called *Chakalai*, to drive out the evil spirit that caused the famine. The day of the ceremony was fixed by the chief himself. At noon on the fixed day the village crier would send the message that *Chakalai* would be performed that night. When the night fell, each householder threw out all the half-burnt firebrands from his house, shouting *Chakasila, chapho sila, hiakha thlong la, thlatla tlongla* which meant go away famine to Haka or Thlatla. On this night the women would not weave. At dawn rice was cooked with very little water and every one ate as

much rice as he could and the whole day would be fasting for the entire village.

The north-eastern tribes belonging to the Lushai-Kuki family have a firm belief in *Paithan*⁶, *Huai*⁷ and *Puithiam*⁸. The life of these tribal people is spent in propitiating these good and bad spirits. They believe that whatever good or bad happens, it happens because of these these spirits. Therefore, they link the famine also to these spirits and hence continuously appease the spirits for mercy with offerings and sacrifices in the form of animal sacrifice including dog in some cases. The Hindu sub-tribes of Mizo settled in and around Tripura and Hailakandi district of Assam like the *Riangs* perform an elaborate Hindu ritual in front of a constructed idol of famine deity. During the famines, the other Mizo tribes ceaselessly pray to *pathian* the savior. (Agarwal, Chopra, & Sharma (eds) 1982; Gadgil, Prasad: 1984; Palen: 2006; Nag: 2008). Apart from this mythological practices to avoid the famine and limit its wrath, the people also prepare themselves for fighting the rat menace on the onslaught of the flowering of bamboo species, which are likely to jeopardise the sustenance of human lives. Before the blooming starts, the tribes begin to make baskets with covers to store the food grains and prevent them from the rats. They start the repairing and even constructing of the new houses because of the fact that there shall be scarcity of bamboo for many years after the flowering and dying of bamboos. The flowering of bamboos and the consequent famines also give rise to a number of rumors and myths⁹ the tribal people and these are transmitted to generations orally.

The Mizo tribals had experienced many such famines, and were used to the hardships, starvation and death that accompany the phenomenon. What they were not used to was being assisted in such times of crisis: this was the difference that the British made to the tribals. Their first taste of British aid was when they began to migrate towards the plains. The tribals would not normally descend to the plains except for raiding or trading, but the hardship due to scarcity of food pushed them down to the plains. In the first batch, about eighty families from the village Kalgom, followed by the eastern Chiefs and then the western Chiefs, migrated to the Dhaleshwari river valley via Jhalnacherra. (Chaltuahkhuma: 1992; Chatterjee: 1990; Chawngkunga: 1998; Rokhuma: 1988; Kyndiah: 1999). This caused alarm among the tea labourers of the plains, as they feared the tribals, but the administration apprised them of the situation and calmed them. The distressed tribals were desperately looking for food and livelihood till the famine subsided. They were willing to sell their labour and trade forest products which they had brought along. The administration facilitated their entrepreneurship by temporarily abolishing the duty charged on such products at forest toll stations. They were offered employment in clearing the jungle and felling of trees - jobs to which they were well suited. Within the hills, the administration realised the importance of having a communication network for taking relief to the tribals. So they employed the tribal manpower to construct roads and railways. The missionaries also employed them to construct houses, clear jungle, prepare gardens, etc. But the problem of food supply still remained. About 18,000 *maunds* of rice and 2,000 *maunds* of paddy was exported to the interiors of Mizo hills in 1881-82 alone. During that crisis the total expenditure in famine relief stood at Rs.2,240. Of this 1,100 was used for the purchase of

paddy and rice, and Rs.1040 for hire of boats to transport the supply Chaltuahkhuma: 1992; Chatterjee: 1990; Chawngkunga: 1998; Rokhuma: 1988; Kyndiah: 1999)

The missionaries and the administration also supplied cooked food to the hungry. Private traders were encouraged to send rice up to the main markets of Tipaimukh on the east and Changsil on the west. They were asked to open their storehouses of rice and paddy, and they were also provided with Frontier Police protection against possible attack from the tribals. The Government itself opened two storehouses at Tipaimukh and Guturmukh in 1910; these were not to compete with the private traders, but to act as a reserve. In addition, government officials visited the affected areas. In 1881 Rai Han Charan Bahadur, the Special Extra Assistant Commissioner, accompanied by Mr. Place, Sub-divisional Officer of Hailakandi, visited the frontier areas. Bengalee doctors from Silchar and Chittagong were impressed to treat the sick. In 1911-12, W. N. Kennedy (IAS officer who served Lushai Hills District as superintendent, from 1911 to 1912), of the Lushai hills borrowed a sum of Rs.80,000 from the British Government to help the Mautam famine victims (Dhamala: 2002; Dokhuma:1999; Ghosh: 1997; Hluna: 1994; Lalchungnunga: 1994; Lalrawnliana: 1995).

The administration took initiatives to reduce the spread of the famine. Since invasion of rats was the main cause of the famine two methods were applied to combat their attack. One was to destroy the rats in large numbers. The Government provided the people with rat traps, designed specially on the French model (which could trap more than one rat at a time) and further developed by Dr. Chitre¹⁰. They also used log traps around the paddy field, and rewards were announced for killing rats. In one

night alone farmers trapped about 500 rats in one trap by setting and resetting it. People made large rice bins with clappers attached to the bed by a string. During the night some member of the family who was awake would occasionally pull the string to flap the clapper and make a sound to scare the rats. It worked for a time, but soon the hungry rats got used to the sound and were not afraid any more (Agarwal, Chopra, & Sharma: 1982; Gadgil, Prasad: 1984; Palen: 2006). Despite destruction of rats in such massive numbers, it did not seem to make any impact on the exploding rat population. Further, the saving devices also could not work for long simply because the tribals had no surplus to save. The government too, could not force compulsory saving rather opted for the relief measures to be undertaken (Banik: 2000; Behari: 2006; Bhangre, 2001).

Significantly, this affected a metamorphosis of the image of the Raj in the minds of the tribals. The British first came into contact with the tribals of Mizo hills in 1826, when the later raided the Sylhet plains and perpetrated head hunting and kidnapping. After the discovery of tea in Assam, there was a rush to acquire foot hill lands for starting tea gardens in the Cachar area as well. This threatened the tribals, who feared that soon the Europeans would invade the hills and deprive them of their home land. Since then, they had led a valiant fight against the white men, resisting every advance of the British towards their hills. In fact, they would often attack the plains, loot settlements, kidnap people, and practice head hunting on the British subjects. This was to register their protest and to scare the Europeans from invading the hills. The white skinned Europeans were objects of hatred for the Mizos (Agarwal, Chopra, & Sharma: 1982; Gadgil, Prasad: 1984; Palen: 2006). They were also amazed at the physical look of these new comers.

The Europeans were also ridiculed for their white skins, as 'half-cooked' (Nag: 2008) people. But the same Europeans came across as kind and helpful people during the successive famine related hardships, as Church records testify :

“In many ways we have been able to alleviate the want and distress around us and gratitude of the poor people has been most pleasing to witness. Scores of men and women who had no food to eat, have been enabled to go down to Demagiri to a fresh supply of food by the loan of a few pounds of rice apiece. Many others have been kept from want by being employed in building, road making , jungle cutting, gardening, and other works about the compound. While not a few who have been unable to work have been assisted with gifts of rice. It has been a peculiar privilege to be living in the Lushai hills this year and thus be able to help the people in their hour of need. They have always looked upon us as their friends and at such times, as this, the poor especially find our presence a source of comfort and strength for they feel that they come to us in their extremity and be sure of a helping hand.”

The same was true of the administration too. The same report further stated,

“whatever feelings of resentment may have lingered in the hearts of some of these hill people against those who have occupied their country in order to prevent a repetition of their headhunting raids upon the peaceful inhabitants of the plains, this famine must have surely dispelled it. For there are hundreds who would have starved to death this year, but for the kindly help

rendered by the government in bringing up thousands of sacks of rice to supply their need.”

The relief measures provided by the Raj, had a profound effect on the overall image of the Raj in the minds of people, who began to look up to the Raj, as a kind and merciful system manned by white skinned Europeans. The administration was paternalistic, and the White men were now addressed as Saab-Pa (White Father), Mirang Bawipa (white master), Mikang Topa (nice white people) or Mirang Topa, or Mirang Lalpa, (white lord). One British officer, Lewin was so popular among the Mizos that, he was known to the villagers as Thangliana- a Mizo name. While the administration attended to the requirements of the people, and their needs, the administrators merged totally with the people, learning their languages and within a short time participating in their festivals, rituals and even their routine social life. This type of social acceptance of the Britishers by the Mizo people had far-reaching political consequences. The British could not only lightly annex the Lushai Hills territory but also strengthen their hold and consolidate over the entire northeast region with the ease. Moreover, the propagation of christianity had erased the differences between the two groups of people and hence the Mizos accepted the British rule as their own (Nunthara: 1996; Patnaik: 2008; Patnaik: 2008; Pillar: 2001; Prasad: 1994; Prasad: 1973; Prasad: 1987; Ralte: 2001; Rao: 1991; Rao: 1987; Scott: 1970; Sen: 1992; Sengupta: 2004).

5.2.3. Indian independence to the Statehood of Mizoram

With the end of colonial rule, the Lushai hills came to be known as Mizo Hills. As anticipated, in October 1958, the Mizo District Council predicted the imminence of famine on the basis of Mizo calendar and cycle, following the flowering of bamboos and passed a resolution to take precautionary measures. Reverting to the chronological sequences, the next event of importance was the Mautam in 1959 and the consequential famine in the following year. So, the bamboo flowering of 1958-59 in the Mizo hills was the first experience of independent India. (Lalbiakthanga: 1978; Rokhuma: 1988; Mackenzie: 1994; Chatterjee: 1995; Rengsi: 1998; Rao et.al: 1991; Mackenzie: 1994). According to their prediction based on the Chronological records of the periodicity of the occurrence of famine, the Mizos had a famine in 1959, the first in post independent India. The Mizos, who had become accustomed with the phenomenon of bamboo flowering started preparing by: a), Migrating to greener pastures, b), Abandoning the jhum and other cultivation, and c), Including the wild products in the meals including the roots, palm, leaves and so on.

Sensing the impending doom, the Mizo District Council resolved on 29th October, 1958, "With the flowering of the Bamboos in the Mizo District, the rat population has phenomenally increased and it is feared that in the next year the whole district would be affected." As a precautionary measure against the imminence of famine, following the flowering of bamboos, the District Council felt that the Government be moved to sanction to the Mizo District Council a sum of Rs. Fifteen lakhs, to be expended on a

test relief measure for the whole of Mizo district including the Pawi-Lakher region (Liangkhaia: 2002; Parry: 1925; Shah: 2000; Shyam: 2004). The Assam Government of which Mizoram was then a district, headed by Chief Minister Bimola Prasad Chaliha, rejected the resolution on the ground that such anticipation was not scientific; famines could not be predicted. It even ridiculed the connection between bamboo flowering, increase in rodents and the consequent famine as tribal beliefs. Such rejection not only betrayed the total lack of understanding of the society and environments of one of its constituent district on the part of the Government of Assam, it also reflected the basic lack of empathy with its tribal population¹¹. True to the anticipation of the Mizos, the Mautam (famine) struck Mizo hills district in 1959. The Assam Government was taken totally by surprise at the rapidity of the events and the disaster that a single bamboo flowering phenomenon could effect (Dhamala: 2002; Dokhuma: 1999; Ghosh: 1997; Hluna: 1994; Lalchungnunga: 1994; Lalrawnlana: 1995). The Mizos were dying in large number due to starvation. When the Government woke up to the situation, it found it had hardly any roads connecting the Mizo district to send relief materials. In fact the only highway that linked Mizoram to Silchar was actually could be used by jeeps and truck loads of food could not even be sent to the starving tribals (Mackenzie: 1994; Veghailwall: 1951; Verghese: 1996; Verghese: 1997; Zakhuma: 2001; *Statistical Handbook of Mizoram: 2006; 2008; 2010*; Chatterjee: 1995; Vanlalhluna: 1985).

There were no roads to facilitate supplies to the remote villages. There were no organized porters, animal transport or mule tracks to carry the air dropped food supplies (Lalrintluanga: 2008; Lalthangliana: 2003; Liangkhaia: 2002; Parry: 1925; Shah: 2000; Shyam: 2004). In order to placate Pu Laldenga,

who had been propagating "Mizoram for Mizos", the Government of Assam sought his help in the famine relief supply measures in 1959. This increased the prestige of Pu Laldenga. (Bhuyan: 1992; Chaltuahkhuma: 1992; Chatterjee: 1990; Chawngkunga: 1998; Rokhuma: 1988; Verghese: 1997). A large number of Mizo Youth were voluntarily involved in relief works in town and the remote villages. The Mizo villagers only saw the Mizo National Famine Front Volunteers delivering food stuffs in their villages and gave all the credit to Laldenga and his band of volunteers. Being in close contact with the MNFF volunteers, the poor villagers were bound to believe the words of the MNFF and take it as gospel truths that the Assam Government had neglected the Mizos and had not taken any remedial measures before and during the famine period.

However, when the famine started, the government of Assam realised that the famine of this magnitude was the first of such experience to the government and was thus clueless regarding the preventive measures on the one hand the relief measures on the other. To the contrary, the Mizo people felt neglected and underestimated. The state Government of Assam could not handle the situation and hence help of the Indian Air Force was sought to carry out the relief measures. The instances like the supply of wheat flour to the rice eating Mizo people and the faulty supply chain further created a sort of anger and hatred in the Minds of the Mizo people against the state government of Assam. The Mizos started cultivating a feeling that they were at the receiving end as beggars and were looked down upon. This created a tension in the existing federal relations on the one hand and demand for an independence of Mizoram from the Indian Union on the other (Banik: 1998; Arya, Sharma, Kaur & Arya: 1999). The MNFF under the leadership of Pu Laldenga¹²,

Pu Lalnunmawia, Pu Sainghaka and Pu Vanlalhruaia got the praise and all the credit for the supply of food stuffs to the remote villages. The bulk of the relief funds were believed to have been spent by way of subsidy on transport of grain, purchase of vehicles and petrol and construction of godowns for storage of rice. Whatever little food stuffs which reached the remote villages were the ones which had been carried by people as head loads. In the hilly terrain, it is difficult to carry more than 25 Kgs and that too to a maximum distance of 15 miles a day. Due to defective packing unsuitable for air dropping, led to wastage. Due to bad weather, the Air Force had to unload rice meant for certain southern villages, in dropping zones of areas having clear weather and thus some villagers got sufficient or even excess quantity of rice when some did not get any rice at all (Rokhuma: 1988; Saha & Howe: 2001; Kelley & Sork: 2002; Alam: 1995).

In the absence of proper supply of food grains from Silchar, people in the interior villages got the wrong impression that the people of the plains were intentionally holding back the rice bags in Silchar. The MNFF aired it as an economic blockade staged by the Assam Government. The Mizo Union blamed the administrators in Assam, while the MNFF blamed the Mizo Union for not taking adequate precautions when, as the bamboos started flowering, their educated leaders were warned in time about the impending "*Mautam*" (Agarwal, Chopra, & Sharma (eds) 1982; Gadgil, Prasad: 1984; Palen: 2006). The Mizo District Council started sending information about starvation deaths which the administrators took as another method of maligning the Congress Ministry in Assam and treated the information as false and cheap propaganda.

In 1959, Chief Minister of Assam Mr. Chaliha and the Tribal Affairs Minister Capt. Williamson Sangma faced a serious protest from the Mizo Cultural Society headed by Laldenga when they were in an official visit to Aizawl to assess the impact of famine. The same Mizo Cultural Society got converted into Mizo National Famine Front (MNFF). The MNFF started to pressurise the state government for the supply of relief materials to the famine stricken people. On the other hand, seeing the popularity of MNFF, the state government sought the help of MNFF for the distribution of relief materials including the food materials to the remote villages, which were not approachable by the roads (Bhangre: 2001; Banik: 2000; Palen: 2006 Behari: 2006). The efficient and laborious volunteers of the MNFF soon became popular among the Mizo society. In contrast to this, the indifference of the state government of Assam towards the famine stricken people and the late initiation of the relief measures created a sense of discontentment and hatred in the minds of the Mizos against the Assam Government. The congress party which was in power in Assam had its ally in the form of Mizo Union¹³ in Mizo Hills District, which too became unpopular because of its inaptness during the course and before the famine. MNFF leader Laldenga taking the advantage of the situation took all the credit of saving the lives of the people by operating relief measures with the materials they received from the State government of Assam as well as the District council (Bhangre: 2001; Banik: 2000; Palen: 2006 Behari: 2006).

The data regarding the cases of starvation and death supplied by the District council were referred as exaggerated and faulty by the state government of Assam, straining the relationship between the congress party in power in Assam and Mizo Union in Mizo Hills District Council¹⁴. The leaders of Mizo Union too

slowly drifted away from supporting the Assam government and became critical of the same. The discontentment among the common people was also on the rise as it was planned and constructed by Laldenga and others that, Assam government neither cared for the Mizo people nor does it respect the Mizo district council (Rokhuma: 1988; Saha & Howe: 2001).

In the meantime, an amount of Rs. 190 lakhs was sanctioned by the Government of Assam as a relief amount to the famine affected people. The money was to be utilized as per the following heads:

Table 17: Relief Amount during Mautam of 1959-60

Sl No.	Item on which to spend the amount	Amount
1	Gratuitous Relief	Rs:04.90 Lakhs
2	Relief Work	Rs: 28.00 Lakhs
3	Subsidy on Transport of Grains	Rs: 66.00 Lakhs
4	Purchase of Vehicles	Rs: 13.00 Lakhs
5	Cost of Petrol etc.	Rs: 03.00 Lakhs
6	Accommodation to IAF and other Personnel	Rs: 00.87 Lakhs
7	Construction of Rice Godowns	Rs: 00.62 Lakhs
	Total	Rs. 190.00 Lakhs

(Source: BAFFACOS, Achievement Report, 2009)

Despite the relief measures undertaken, cases of starvation and deaths were increasing in the famine affected areas. The hatred against the indifference and callousness of the Assam Government was on the boiling point and as the sense of alienation and marginalization of the Mizo people was complete, the ideas of separatism and secessionism began to emerge.

The MNFF, which had become the hot cake of the Mizo society, was encouraged by the congress government of Assam to convert itself into a political party as an alternative to Mizo Union. Accordingly, the Mizo National Famine Front, re-organised and converted itself into Mizo National Front¹⁵ (MNF) as a political party on October 22, 1961 with Laldenga as the party president and S. Lianzuala as the General Secretary. The Mizo National Front (MNF) circulated its objectives to every nook and corner of the Mizo Autonomous Hill District, so as to reach every individual, who had so far developed bitter experiences vis-à-vis the Indian Union and the Assam government. For the attainment of the objectives given below, MNF prepared for a violent armed struggle and hence, the demand for secession from the Indian Union, greater regional autonomy and better status grew stronger in the Mizo Hills. The objectives read as:

- To serve the highest sovereignty and to unite all the Mizos to live under one political boundary.
- To uplift Mizo position and to develop to the highest extent and
- To preserve and safeguard Christianity.

The demand for regional autonomy was preceded by the appointment of a sub-committee by the Constituent Assembly under the chairmanship of the then Assam Chief Minister, Gopinath Bordoloi, named as '*North East Frontier Tribal and Excluded Areas Committee*', the recommendations of which were incorporated under Article 244 (2) and the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Accordingly, Autonomous District Council status was given to the Mizo Hills District Council in 1952 and the Pawi, Lakher and Chakma Regional Council in 1953. The famines following the bamboo flowering in and around Mizo

Autonomous District Council and the subsequent neglects from the Assam government provided another political space in the Mizo Hills. The Mizo National Famine Front which had played a pivotal role in famine combats converted itself into a political party with some long term strategies¹⁶. In July 1965, the MNF set up an underground government with the name of Mizoram Sawrkar¹⁷ with legislative, executive and judicial wings to pressurise the Central as well as State government of Assam and to project an effective demand for the Mizo Independence. Even an armed wing known as Mizo National Army was created, mobilized and trained for the violent struggle. The MNF finally launched insurgency on 28th February' 1966 with a demand of complete independence from the Indian Union with effect from 1st march' 1966. Lawlessness followed by violence and killing became widespread and hence sensing more troubles and problems, the Union Government of India addressed the problem seriously. As a compromise, the Mizo Hills District Council was elevated to the status of Union Territory on 21st January'1972. However, the insurgency continued for several more years until the signing of Peace Accord¹⁸ or the Memorandum of Settlement between the Government of India and Mizo National Front on 30th June' 1986.

5.2.4. Analysis

The analysis of the various phases of Mizo history pertaining to bamboo flowering and the resultant social impact, more particularly the threats to livelihood and human security reveal an interesting trend. Before, the Mizo Hills coming under the British Colonial Rule, the conflicts and feuds between various tribal chiefs and occasional agreements for peace was a result of

an indirect impact of bamboo flowering. For instance, the food shortages and human insecurity following the bamboo flowering in 1881, led to a political compromise and coming together of the three chiefs viz. Poiboi, Khalkham and Lalhui, to address the social consequences of bamboo flowering. Similarly, the entry of the British – both the missionaries and the colonial rulers was facilitated by the difficulties encountered by the Mizos to sustain their lives owing to famine resulting from bamboo flowering. The help and support rendered unto the tribes during the events of suffering and human insecurity in the aftermath of 1881 bamboo flowering infused a sense of gratitude and acceptance of the Britishers by the tribes, facilitating a gradual process of colonial intrusion into the Mizo Hills.

Further, the careful handling of the similar situations by the British colonial administration, avoiding all possible reactions from the masses for the management of crisis situation emanating out of bamboo flowering on the one hand, and, implementation of short run measures like the clearing of forests, construction of roads etc as a crisis mitigation and employment generation measures, on the other unfold the political. This is because, such measures had twin objectives, firstly, the clearing of the bamboo forests acted as a preventive measure avoiding the supply of bamboo seeds as food to the rats, avoiding the demographic explosion of the rodent population and secondly the construction of roads could act as lifeline during the relief operations and also acted as employment generation exercise for the likely famine affected tribes in the event of bamboo flowering during 1881 -83. Both these measures were strategically designed mechanisms through which consent towards British rule and the subsequent legitimization of the colonial control was sought.

Similarly, in the post independent period, it was basically the famines associated with the bamboo flowering which provided as political opportunity structures for the creation of Mizo District Council, emergence of insurgent groups as under Laldenga, as a famine combating force initially, ultimately culminating into a revolutionary force fighting for the Independent state of Mizoram uniting all Mizos scattered in India, Bangladesh and Burma. The violent revolutionary movement led by the Mizo National Front in due course of time fetched the status of Union Territory for the Mizo Hills ultimately resulting in the creation of Mizoram as a state of the Indian Union. As revealed, although, indirect and remote, the whole basis of the creation of the state of Mizoram within the Indian Federal framework too owes significantly to the political space provided by the failure on the part of the state of Assam of which Mizo Hills was a district, in handling the crisis situation threatening human security in the aftermath of bamboo flowering and the associated famines, starvations and deaths.

5.3. Politicking Bamboo Flowering

The consequences of conflicts linked to the *ecological* are staggering. This chapter aims to contextualize the issue of bamboo flowering in the spectrum of broader power structures and provide an analysis of how this is related to problems of democracy, justice and civil society. It delineates the linkages between political activism, participatory politics and differential forms of mobilization for social justice. The Chapter revisits the process of the implementation of the projects and programmes associated with the mitigation of the menace of bamboo

flowering in Mizoram and discusses political economic issues which emerge therein locating them in the political economic context of post statehood Mizoram, although with a cursory reference to the politicking of bamboo flowering prior to the formation of the state of Mizoram.

5.3.1. Politicking Bamboo Flowering: A Pre-Mizoram State Scenario

The British colonial administrators found it astonishing and interesting that the tribals could correctly predict the year of famine that follows the bamboo flowering (Hossain, 1962; McClintock, 1970). The tribals had historically experienced the varieties of bamboo flowering and categorised two distinct varieties of bamboo species in the region which they named 'Mau' and 'Thing'. The colonial botanists found that the Mau variety was actually *Melocanna bamboo soidef* as classified by European Botany and the Thing was scientifically called *Bambusa tulda*. Both these varieties followed a periodic reproductive blooming cycle. 'Tam' meaning famine in Mizo thus was associated with Mau and Thing giving 'Mautam' and 'Thingtam'. With the assistance of the Mizo elders, the colonial administrators could thus prepare a calendar of famines (Hossain, 1962; McClintock, 1970; Janzen, 1976; Agarwal, Chopra, & Sharma (eds) 1982; Gadgil, Prasad, 1984; Palen, 2006). In the context of Mizoram, three great famines: one of 1881, the other of 1911 and thirdly the famine of 1959 – 60 are mostly referred by the economists and historians as devastating having far reaching consequences. The famine of 1959-60 particularly bears a great significance as it testifies the (in)ability of the independent India to meet such famines arising out of natural process of bamboo flowering (Nag: 2001; Ghavami:

1989; Godbole and Lakkad: 1986; Heck, 1956; Kitamura and Ishizuki: 1953; Kitamura: 1963; Lakkad and Patel: 1981; Lakshmana: 1985; Liese: 1985; Liese: 1986; Liese: 1987). The gregarious flowering of bamboo in 1958-59 had not only gripped Mizoram but also major areas of Tripura, Manipur and Barak Valley of Assam, which was followed by famine in those areas. The reference of these famines has not only been recorded but also it has been transmitted to the generations in the form of folktales¹⁹, folklores and proverbs²⁰. The loss of man and material during of famines of 1911-12 was less in comparison to 1881-83, because it is argued that the foreign government, the European planters and the Christian Missionaries had made advance preparations and came up with the helping hand to the people by providing food, employment and thus livelihood securities (Koshy and Harikumar, 2000; Nadgauda, 2004). Therefore, the assistance and famine relief carried out by the Europeans put the Mizos in the comfort zone and as such the effect of famine was minimum (Rout and Das, 1994; Saha & Howe, 2001).

The flowering of Mau (*Melocanna baccifera*) was predicted and calculated in advance by the Mizo Hills District council and had set up one organisation known as 'Anti- Famine Campaign Organisation (AFCO) in 1951. (Koshy and Harikumar, 2000; Nadgauda, 2004; Nadgauda, Parasharami & Mascarenhas, 1990; Nag, 1999; Rout and Das, 1994; Saha & Howe, 2001). This particular organisation prepared a set of objectives and action plan to minimise the impact of famine on the one hand and mitigate the livelihood insecurities on the other. The plan of action as prepared by AFCO as advance preparations before the flowering of bamboo were; a), the general improvement in jhum practices and methods, b). Development of transportation and

communication infrastructure, c), Diversification of cropping and promotion of cropping which were not rodent friendly like that of banana, and d), General awareness and training on the use of rodenticides.

However, most of these plan of action and objectives of the AFCO were not supported rather rejected by the state government of Assam as well as Union Government of India by objecting on the ground that famine and the like natural calamities could not be predicted (Rokhuma 1988). However, the AFCO, was assured of the help and assistance if any such natural bamboo flowering occurs that could be followed by famine or famine like situations. As an outcome, the state resources could be mobilized only when the severe famine conditions became widespread. The relief operations started quite late in the year 1959 and hence a huge casualty had already occurred. The measures thus adopted had to focus only on relief and not the prevention (Rokhuma 1988; Filgueiras & Pal. 2008; Jeeva, Kiruba, Lalhruaitluanga, Prasad & Rao, 2009; Lalnunmawia, 2008; Maruta, Hasegawa, Kanzaki , Shibata, 2009). Mizo Cultural Society with Pu Laldenga, as its secretary (formed in 1955), which took an active part in the famine relief measures; re-designated as Mizo National Famine Front became popular with huge public sympathy and support. The MNFF, taking the advantage of the situation turned itself into a political party, Mizo National Front (MNF) which altogether changed the course of Mizo history. Therefore, MNF which emerged out of MNFF, staged a major uprising²¹ in the year 1966 aiming at the creation of Mizoram, a sovereign state for the Mizos inhabiting the areas in Mizo Hills, Nagaland, Manipur along with the areas falling under the jurisdiction of East Pakistan and Burma. On the 6th of

March' 1966, the MNF was declared as an unlawful association under the defence of India Rule.

The Mizo National Front by politicking bamboo flowering generated political consciousness among the Mizos and started preparing them for the political Independence. The Insurgency that followed the unilateral declaration of Independence by the MNF was cultivated on various grounds. Firstly, the indifference on the part of the State of Assam and the Union Government of India generated a sense of dis-satisfaction among the Mizos against the two sets of the governments. The MNF made a cause that the Mizo interest could be secured only in the independent state of Mizoram. Secondly, the rising political consciousness among the Mizos even prior to the Second World War also created a sense of deprivation by not having an adequate representation in the various councils prior to Indian independence and the legislative assemblies after independence. The political oppressions that the Mizos suffered when they were excluded from representation in any legislative council or assembly under the provision of backward area Government of India Act 1919) and Excluded Area (Government of India Act 1935) had accumulated political discontentment. When India gained independence in 1947, the educated Mizo leaders from the Lushai Hills felt uncertainty and apprehension about their political future in the state of Assam and Union of India. Even the Mizo Union, the principal political organisation in the Mizo Hills was preparing for the separation from India. The MNF cultivated and cultured a 'Mizo nationalism' that was time and again strengthened and inspired by the songs of independence, nationalism, self determination of the Mizos and political sovereignty.

Therefore, the search for practical political solution continued in the Mizo Hills of Assam. The recurrent violence and insurgency was followed by counter insurgency by the Government of India amount to huge casualties. In the meantime a delegation met the then Prime Minister of India, Smt. Indira Gandhi and submitted a memorandum demanding full-fledged statehood for the Mizos. In a response to this memorandum and in order to restore peace in the Mizo Hills area, the Government of India offered a proposal of establishment of Union Territory of Mizoram by upgrading it from the district council under the state of Assam putting it under the direct supervision and control of the Union Government of India. The Mizo leaders were ready to accept this with a pre-condition of upgrading further to the status of full-fledged state under the union of India with certain provisions which would be designed in a course of time. Accordingly, the Union Territory of Mizoram came into being on 21st January' 1972 with a representation of two members in the Union Parliament of India; one each in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. However, there was no end to the insurgency and it continued till the signing of Peace Accord, creating the State of Mizoram. This was given effect by the consequent upon the passage of the constitution 53rd Amendment Bill, namely the State of Mizoram Bill (1986) which was introduced in the Parliament on 7th August '1986. The Bill also provided for a 40 member single chamber Legislative Assembly, three districts, nine sub-divisions, three autonomous Hill District Councils, and 301 Village Councils. After six months of the interim Government the first Assembly election was held in Mizoram. The MNF won a landslide victory by Securing 24 seats out of 40. That was a milestone in the history of Mizoram Politics under the Constitution of India. The MNF cadres returned home and were given rehabilitation. It was the agreement which closed the

bitter chapter of insurgency in Mizoram and now the 23rd state of Mizoram is often describe as the most peaceful state of India.

5.3.2. Politicking Bamboo Flowering Today

The fight against bamboo flowering in 1959-60 ultimately led to a fight for independence in the post 1966 period spearheaded by the Mizo National Front. However, the separate state of Mizoram too had to counter the menace of Bamboo flowering in the year 2007-09. As the year of latest mautam was approaching, different preparations were made in advance by the government to facilitate both mitigating the impact of the anticipated famine as well as to properly document and record the incident. The government of Mizoram set up an organisation, *Bamboo flowering and famine combat scheme* (BAFFACOS), to prepare for the anticipated bamboo flowering and famine. During the bamboo flowering and famine period in 2007-09, around 177 villages were ravaged by armies of rats/rodents in different areas of Mizoram; almost 70 villages had nothing to harvest while the others had little or in some areas around half. This put the thousands of families in famine situations.

However, this time the Mizoram government was arguably better prepared and funded to meet the crisis of *mautam* in 2006-08 and famine in 2007-09 than before. The objectives of BACCAFOS represented a comprehensive program of proactive measures and mitigations to reduce the impact of the 2006-08 *mautam* both on the livelihoods of Mizo people and on the Mizoram economy. The objectives represented more or less the same of the previous mitigation strategies that included; a), need for control of rodent population through proper means, b), adoption of diversified and

intensified cropping of cash crops which can be market oriented having the potential of export for income generation, c), farming of crops which are not rodent friendly like turmeric, ginger, banana, cotton, potato, jatropha, sugarcane, oilseeds and pulses etc., d), farming of early maturing rice and maize and e), bamboo shoot harvest and commercialization because more attention was to be paid to the prospective loss of a major bamboo resource (Behari 2006). The possibilities of planting other bamboo species to have a more diversified bamboo forest resource were also explored with also an objective to minimise the dominance of *Melocanna baccifera* forests on the one hand and the other that a more diversified bamboo resource for forestry that might not create a havoc in future with such gregarious flowering at such a large scale.

5.3.3. Bamboo Flowering and Local Politics

It could be clearly understood from the foregoing discussion that despite the advance preparations, the flowering of bamboo created a famine situation in the state of Mizoram affecting the lives of the people at all levels. During the bamboo flowering period, almost 10 percent of the Mizo populations were living in the so identified below poverty line approximately numbering around 1,05,000 while around 60 percent of the people directly depended on the agricultural mode of production and subsistence. The rodent population estimated at around 10 million that is almost ten times higher than the human population had the possibility of creating havoc on the Mizo society (Filgueiras & Pal. 2008; Jeeva, Kiruba, Lalhruaitluanga, Prasad & Rao, 2009; Lalnunmawia, 2008; Maruta, Hasegawa, Kanzaki , Shibata, 2009; Shibata, 2009). The outbreak of bamboo flowering has shaped the politics of Mizoram for years.

The failures of the administration to adequately prepare for and mitigate the insecurities arising from bamboo flowering among the rural people have always been politicized by the political leaders at the village levels. The bamboo flowering has at times been reflected in the public speeches of the political leaders²², reiterating the demands for more grants-in-aid from the central government to operate the relief measures.

5.3.3A. Bamboo Flowering and State Politics

The flowering of *Melocanna baccifera* started as early as 2005 in the northeastern part of Mizoram, slowly spreading towards the central and southern part of Mizoram. The importance of this bamboo flowering in the state politics of Mizoram could be understood from the fact that such incidences had changed the political regimes in the state. The reference can be made of the flowering of 1959-60, which being neglected by the then state government of Assam led to a violent insurgency in Mizo Hills leading to the carving out of the state of Mizoram from the state of Assam. In the current scenario, the politics is cultivated though remotely on the instances of bamboo flowering. The state government announced a monetary incentive of Rs. 1 per rat tail for each rat killed and tail deposited with the public officials as proof. Later, the monetary incentive was increased to Rs. 2 per rat tail. This contributed to a massive rat kill activity killing millions of rats. This, however, could not prevent famine simply because another millions of rats could not be killed. The ineffectiveness of the state government in the period of famine followed by bamboo flowering again led to a change in the political power structure in Mizoram as manifested in the assembly election 2008. It is argued that, despite years of preparation, the response to the famine crisis by the Mizoram

State Government and the Union Government of India was inadequate, and even corrupt, with possible political repercussions. The Mizo National Front, with Zoramthanga as the chief Minister suffered a heavy political debacle loosing the power to the Congress Party. The congress thus came to power with the highest majority ever, bagging 32 out of 40 seats in the state legislative assembly in the State Assembly Election during 2008.

5.3.3B. Bamboo Politics and the Union-State Relations

The Union Government of India had been preparing for the anticipated famine following the gregarious flowering of *melocanna baccifera* since 2001, with active support and participation of the Mizoram state government and the botanical and Zoological experts. Despite this, no effective plan could be developed that could actually prevent the famine or at least effectively mitigate it. The different measures undertaken like commercial exploitation of the bamboo forest before it starts dying proved to be ineffective as because the majority of the bamboo clumps were inaccessible and hence could not be cleared. This area provided sufficient amount of food required for the rats to grow in numbers having the potential to create devastation of jhum and other fields with the depletion of bamboo seeds in the forest. The second objective of building rat-proof granaries remained unutilized as because the majority of the rural population engaged in agriculture had no surplus to store. Perhaps the most useful measure was the construction of road network to link the remote villages of Mizoram and the construction of helipads in the remote areas not connected by

the roads for the delivery of relief materials. The *Mautam* and the associated ineffectiveness of the MNF led state government of Mizoram were used by the congress as an instrument for political gains in Mizoram.

The *Mautam* became one of the greatest political issue in Mizoram when Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, the leader of India's Congress Party, criticized the state government for failing to mitigate the famine effectively despite huge funds being allocated by the union government of India to deal with the famine. In order to facilitate and develop measures for the prevention of famine and mitigation of livelihood insecurities arising out of bamboo flowering, the government of India had sanctioned Rs. twenty (20) crores in the 2004-05 plan period and Rs. thirty (30) crores in the plan period of 2005-06, for implementation of BAFFACOS constituted for a period of five (5) years, as one time grant. Besides this, an amount of Rs. 566.55 crores was earmarked for implementation of the scheme covering 5 (five) years period and all work components envisaged in the scheme was to be implemented in the identified locations. The contention of the MNF led state government on the other hand was that; the grant-in-aid allocated by the union government was too low to meet the requirement of the famine situation.

The above political debate reveals the typical North-eastern feature of politics for central resources. Deficit states as they are from the point of view of income tax collection, they have to depend on the central assistance for meeting the developmental needs. Moreover, with largely undeveloped civil societies (where even NGOs are dependent on central or foreign assistance) and Panchayati Raj system at its nascent stage of development (complicated also by the rivalry between traditional self governments institutions and newly established panchayats) the

accountability and effectiveness of states' developmental expenditure is always questionable. Any reader of typical north eastern newspapers would vouch for innumerable allegations of corruptions in public expenditure.

5.4 NGOs, Civil Societies and Bamboo Politics

Several NGOs and charitable institutions were moved by the conditions and situations of the Mizo people specially living in the rural areas aftermath of the crop damage by the population explosion of the rats in the period following bamboo flowering. The Salvation Army²³, an evangelical body set up ten (10) fair deal centers in the remotest areas of the state. Canada Norlyn Audio Vision Service²⁴, an NGO from Canada, took an initiative to distribute the packet foods to the victims of the famine. The packet food distributed by this NGO had rich nutritional qualities and was brought directly from Montreal and Ottawa. The Salvation Army too was distributing the nutritious and quality food articles at half the price of their prevailing market rates. Young Mizos Association²⁵ (YMA), since its inception, had been helping the poor and the needy. The Famine aftermath of bamboo flowering in 2007-09, which had struck the Mizo people provided them with an opportunity to carry out the relief measures in every nook and corner of Mizoram. Mizoram Chakma Development Forum, Mizoram Football Association, Mizoram Upa Pawl (organisation of the Senior Citizens), Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP), a women organisation, Mizo Zarlai Pawl, Mizoram Students Union and various other organisations were active in relief operations. However, the civil societies and the NGOs in Mizoram being trapped in the dependency syndrome for the grants from the government and international donor organizations primarily remain state centric

and hence reflect the state/official version of crisis and crisis management strategies. Mizoram being the state of India with one of the highest literacy rate is yet to achieve the mark on the higher education sector. The Mizo society is still embedded in their traditional root of lifestyle, socio-cultural and even agricultural practices and is still unable to come out with innovative responses to contemporary social transformations including different crisis situations.

5.5 Role of the State in Mitigating Insecurities

The state of Mizoram had made advance preparations for the anticipated (2006-08) famine, 'Mautam'. Government of Mizoram took an initiative with a detailed and comprehensive programme to help population in combating insecurities arising out of the phenomenon of bamboo flowering and famine. The programme, Viz. Bamboo Flowering and Famine Combat Schemes (BAFFACOS) aimed at providing and assisting the farmers and thereby increasing their purchase power at the time of food shortages and also provide alternative source of income when the agricultural fields are devastated by the invading rodents. BAFFACOS was designed as a linkage between the different departments which could coordinate the prevention as well as mitigation activities. The BAFFACOS was initially designed as a long term plan extending over a period of five (5) years with a focus on dual strategies:

- a. Harvest maximum possible bamboos before flowering and thereby preventing the anticipated damage that was to follow post flowering period. As a matter of fact, the clumps die after flowering thereby minimizing the

possibilities of exploitation in future. Hence, the state aimed at assisting the farmer in creating the surplus which could be used during the famine years.

- b. Control the impact of famine in the post flowering period by providing alternative source of employment with an aim of reducing the poverty and increasing the welfare activities.

Based on the above mentioned strategies in combating the bamboo flowering and famine, the following course of activities were carried out:

- a. Maximum possible of exploitation of bamboo forests were carried out both by the state machinery as well as there was an encouragement for people and society at large to follow the same. This action aimed at two targets; 1) maximum possible bamboo forests could be cleared thereby limiting the flowering area and 2) greater income could be generated and saved for the future famine years.
- b. The state engineered 'move from food crop to cash crop' plan which again had the dual objectives; first, by cultivating the cash crops that are not rodent friendly could prevent them from being damaged and second, the cash crops could fetch more income to the rural/poor farmers who are primarily engaged in agricultural activities by bringing in practices like the cultivation of oil palms, turmeric, ginger and other cash crops, and to provide alternative livelihoods like sericulture to limit the threat from the rodents to swindon farming or jhum.
- c. 'Destruction of rodents', another strategy aimed at killing the rodent in large numbers so that their damage could be controlled. For this BAFFACOS provided a large number of rat-traps to the farmers and also announced an

honorarium of re. 1/- per rat tail for every rat that is killed and the tail deposited in the respective collection centers. This was introduced as early as 2002, but stopped three years later in 2005 and resumed again in 2007 with a hike in the incentive rs. 2/- per rat tail.

- d. Regular import of food from the adjoining areas of Assam got priority among the activities undertaken by the state with an objective of allotting adequate foodstuff for the whole of the state. Storage facilities like godowns were renovated and new ones constructed for storing the food grains that were imported and were to be sent to Fair Price Shop which were installed in number of places in order to prevent the shortages of food among the masses.
- e. The air-dropping of food items during the famines of 1959-60 had been a great failure and rather had created discontentment among the people. This time, in order to avoid that construction and repair of rural roads to reach the remotest corner were initiated so as to reach to the people during the times of emergencies.
- f. In order to create adequate manpower needed for the activities related to preventing and combating famines, a large number of NGOs were tied up with the BAFFACOS, with an honorarium.
- g. Six industrial units for bamboo stick production were established in Zuangtui, Aizawl, Sairang, Lunglei and Zanlawn and many others were planned varying from bamboo mat production centers, bamboo shoot eatables, bamboo charcoal to bamboo pebble mat industries for the purpose of utilizing the bamboo extracted before the onslaught of flowering mechanism.

5.6. Concluding Observations

Despite the huge and detailed preparation on the part of the BAFFACOS in particular and the state in general, neither the flowering could be limited nor the damage could be controlled. As shown in fig 4.3 in chapter 4, the agricultural production was largely affected. The loss of production is reported to be varying from 56% in some agricultural products like oilseeds to 96% in maize and more than 85% in rice production. However, the livelihood insecurities as projected and shown by the state was highly exaggerated and manipulated at different levels.

The centre state relation is such in India that the states are in a dependent status and to a large extent depend on the central assistance for its number of activities. There is often politicking of different issues for allocation of funds from the centre. Taking the advantage of the anticipated bamboo flowering, the state of Mizoram could play a politics of fund. The entire scenario of bamboo flowering was reduced to an act of play were the political parties in power in Mizoram politicized the whole mechanism as an instrument of grant-in-aid for addressing the issue. A close nexus was observed during the study between the state, politicians, bureaucrats, the business groups, the church and the NGOs.

Corruptions were reported by people at different levels starting from the counting of rat tails to the supply of food. None of the programmes were properly implemented and coordinated. The destruction of food and the loss in yield as shown by the state and the estimation of the farmers as obtained during the visits to the affected areas do not match. The crisis that is supposedly

shown happens to be more socially constructed rather than by the invading rats. The destruction of food by the rodents in practical field visit is much less than that is actually shown by the government. Unlike 1960's there is neither insurgency of any type against the state, nor are there the reports of malnutrition, starvation and deaths following the bamboo flowering and famine. There has been no reporting of the loss in the wild life, impact on the ecosystem by the loss of large cover of bamboo forests, huge increase or decrease in the number of rodents and so on by the department of forests and environment. Therefore, the problem is found to be largely socially and politically constructed rather than natural.

Therefore, bamboo politics has always shaped and conditioned the political aspirations of Mizos in their entire struggle for survival. The recurrent and periodic flowering of bamboo often followed by the population explosion of rats has created externalities impacting the food and livelihood securities of Mizo population in different phases of history. To this, the Mizo leadership too has been actively involved in mitigating the insecurities on the one hand and capitalizing the situations with politicking bamboo flowering on the other. During the British Period, the famines that had followed the bamboo flowering has played a crucial role in bringing the Britishers and the Mizo people in close and cordial relationship with each other. This had also facilitated the entry of Christian Missionaries into the Mizo society which in due course of time had converted the entirely animist Mizo society to the fold of Christianity.

In the post independent period, particularly during 1960's bamboo politics was at its peak in Mizoram, where the failure of the state government of Assam on the one hand and the Union

government on the other, was capitalized by the Mizo leadership for the struggle for Independent State of Mizoram. The violent and bloody armed struggle that lasted for decades in the area is responsible for the loss of many lives and property in the present day Mizoram. In the post-statehood period, the instances of bamboo flowering and famines has been capitalized an instrument for grant-in-aids politics from the central government of India. The menace of bamboo flowering as wrath on the people has been more constructed more socially and politically than ecologically.

The experiences of bamboo politics in Mizoram has often taken for granted the sufferings and plights of the people and the role of the state has often been referred as unprepared and incomplete as was apparent during the mishandling of the famine situation during the 1960s. In the current situation, the attitude projected by the government of Mizoram by creating Bamboo Flowering and Famine Combat Scheme (BAFFACOS) since 2004, which offered alternative trades and encouraged people to grow crops that are suitable for early harvesting and selection of crops that are not easily attacked by rodents like ginger and turmeric etc were a failure due to lack of proper storage and marketing strategies (Chakraborty: 2012). The funds in the name of BAFFACOS were also being diverted to other uses despite the hardship being faced by the people in the famine stricken areas.

The other side of the scenario reflects a hesitation on the part of the civil society and the general public to carry out the instruction and suggestions provided by the state machinery. The Mizo society being very traditional and orthodox regarding its cultural and socio-economic practices was reluctant to

implement the crop changing pattern from food crops to cash crops as suggested by the BAFFACOS. There were very less number of state sponsored agricultural training sessions in order to familiarize the farmers with the cultivation of the suggested non rodent friendly cash crops. The training sessions conducted in the small urban and semi-urban areas could not attract the people rooted in their traditional socio-economic and agricultural practices. The people rather found it wise to protect the agricultural crops from the invading rodents by using their traditional method of rat trapping rather than going for a change in their agricultural practices. The other reason for this being that the hunted rats could substitute their meal. There are obviously two sides of this situation. A radical change in the cropping pattern would affect adversely the traditional food habit and livelihood patterns of the Mizos. Moreover, inexperienced as they are unlikely to derive much benefit from growing cash crops because they do not have any control over the processes of marketing and value addition. On the other side, the traditional control mechanism for rodents has been proved to be ineffective during the time of crisis. These have to be a third way of retaining the traditional fabric of Mizo society and devising an effective control mechanism for the rodent population. With an underdeveloped civil society initiative the Mizo society is yet to find this third way.

Notes

¹ Part of the Indo-Burmese range of hills, then known as Lushai hills.

² Some Mizos are rat eaters and the trapped rats would be fried and used as source of alternative food. However, the abundant availability of the rats had minimised the utility of rat meat. The rat meat also

could not substitute the absence of staple food like rice for long. Other Mizo tribes who were not rat eaters, unfortunate and the majority faced severity of food crisis.

³ As a primary source of food, Wild sago palm was collected from the forests, dried and powdered. The powder was then made into a kind of dumpling that was wrapped in a leaf and boiled for cooking. The resulting food for the family was very sticky, insipid mass, full of gritty particles. Others ate different kinds of yam found in the forest as an alternative to staple food. Some yams were creeper, and the upper parts of the root were inedible, but lower down, it changed into a long tuber rich in starch and somewhat resembling a potato in taste. The roots rooted deep inside the hard soil and hence the people had to struggle a lot to get them out by digging.

⁴ Different groups of Christian Missionaries had already established themselves in Mizoram. The Baptist Mission Society which was one of the first groups of Missionaries to arrive in the Lushai hills had witnessed the ravages of the 1881 famine, and had been active in reducing the suffering of the people in the famine of 1912. (Banik: 1989; Banik: 1991; Banik: 1994. Banik: 1998 Arya, Sharma, Kaur & Arya: 1999)

⁵ It was argued by the administration that the poison like *barium carbonate* could be more result oriented, effective as well as easy to apply.

⁶According to the tribal belief *Pathian* is the creator of everything and is a beneficial being but however has little concern with men.

⁷ *Huai* or demons are more important to the average man and they are numerous who inhabit in every stream, mountain and forest and to whom every illness and misfortune is attributed.

⁸ *Puithiam* (sorcerer/village witch doctor) is supposed to know which demon causes which kind of trouble and what kind of ritual and sacrifice will appease him.

⁹ Various myths and rumors are associated with the bamboo flowering and famine, like a). that during *mautam* even vegetables like brinjal and insects like caterpillars turn into huge rats. b). that if bamboo fruits were fed to cows, their milk production increased. c). that even cats and other domestic animals grow huge in size and reproduce more off-springs. d). that rats grow as big as piglets and they were born of mother earth rather than rat-mothers, to mention few (Veghaiwall: 1951; Verghese: 1996; Hmingchungnung: 1997; Khiangte; 1991; Anand: 1981; Bhuyan: 1992)

¹¹ This is significant considering the fact that, at the withdrawal of the British from India, the Mizos were apprehensive about merging with India fearing that a tiny tribal group like the Mizos would be thoroughly marginalised and ignored in the giant structure of Indian nation. After a acrimonious political process, the Mizos had agreed to merge with India on the hope that their oppressive institutions of chieftainship would be abolished in an egalitarian India and that they would be granted maximum autonomy.

¹³ Mizo Union, a political party in Mizoram, was founded on April 6, 1946 as the Mizo Common People's Union. At the time of Indian independence in 1947 Mizo Union was the major political force in the Lushai Hills. The president was Khawtinkhuma and the general secretary Vanthuama. MU had a programme of social reform in Mizo society, against the rule of tribal chiefs. The exact politics of MU at the time of independence has been debated. Some claim that MU in fact wanted a Mizo sovereign state, whereas the majority view is that the party wanted autonomy of some sort within the new Indian state. MU had, on the whole, good contacts with the Indian National Congress. In the Assam assembly elections of 1951 MU won all three seats it

contested. MU demanded the unification of all Mizo-populated areas into a single administrative unit, which was achieved through the Lushai Hills Autonomous District Council. In 1955 MU split, and a minority joined Eastern India Tribal Union. MU lost its political strength after the 1959 famine, as the party had been accused of indifference towards the suffering of the Mizo people. MU won the first assembly elections in Mizoram in 1972. In 1974 MU merged with Indian National Congress.

¹⁴ S. K. Chaube (1972), in his, *Hill Politics in North East India*, has argued that due to the slow reaction of the Assam government to provide security and relief measures, the relationship between the Congress Government of Assam and the Mizo Union led Autonomous District Council of Mizo reached the lowest ebb.

¹⁵ Mizo National Front (MNF) is a regional political party in Mizoram, India. MNF emerged out of the Mizo National Famine Front, which was formed by Pu Laldenga to protest against the inaction of the Indian central government towards the famine situation in the Mizo areas of the Assam state in 1959. It staged a major uprising in 1966, followed by years of underground activities. In 1986, it signed the Mizo Accord with the Government of India, renouncing secession and violence.

¹⁶ Launch a violent movement to achieve the goals of greater Mizoram incorporating all the Mizo inhabited areas. To acquire and promote dependable support (money and arms) from some foreign countries and To contest in the electoral battle and consolidate its position.

¹⁷ Mizoram Sawrkar is the terminology given to the underground government set up by the Mizo National Front under the leadership of Pu Laldenga.

¹⁸ Memorandum of settlement, see appendix A for details

¹⁹ One such folktale transmits the idea that the cyclical visitations on the Mizos are a deliberate act of God. It argues that the God has destined such regular and periodic famines so that the Mizo people may not just sit idle but strive for their own betterment and all around development.

²⁰ Some proverbs in Mizo say that: 1). When bamboo flowers, the destruction follows; 2), Bamboo flowering is the curse of God.

²¹ The Mizo uprising was a direct revolt against the Government of Assam and the Union Government of Mizoram aimed at the establishment of the sovereign state of Mizoram for the Mizos. The Mizo National Front made a unilateral 'Declaration of Independence' on 1st March' 1966 followed by raids and coordinated attacks in the security posts and the government offices.

²² One such political speech was made by Zoramthanga, in 2008 at Lunglei.

²³ The Salvation Army is an integral part of the Christian Church, although distinctive in government and practice. The Army's doctrine follows the mainstream of Christian belief and its articles of faith emphasise God's saving purposes. Its objects are the advancement of the Christian religion, of education, the relief of poverty, and other charitable objects beneficial to society or the community of mankind as a whole.

²⁴ An NGO from Canada, engaged in the production and distribution of Christian videos.

²⁵ Young Mizo Association (YMA) is a non-political, Voluntary organization, established on the 15th June 1935 at Aizawl, Mizoram.