

Mizoram: Post-Accord Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

The paper attempts to address the major issues of the postaccord Mizo society and the various challenges thereof. The signing of peace accord does not ensure peace dividend and lasting solution to problems that are pre-insurgency in nature. The paper seeks to explore the reasons for the non-recurrence of major conflicts in the state due to the presence of discontentment among the minority groups, such as Hmar in the north and Brus in the west. The paper also tries to analyse the emergence of human rights groups vis-à-vis the protection of the cherished values of the Mizo community. It then examines the factor responsible for the growing discontentment in the state and offers a solution for it.

Key Words: Peace Accord, Discontentment, Human Rights, Mizo Society, Mizoram, Community, Central Young Mizo Association (CYMA).

Mizoram, now one of the eight Sisters' state of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Sikkim and Tripura, was least known in pre-independence period. It was not until 1947 that Mizoram could be said to have been firmly integrated, politically and administratively, with the rest of newly independent India. The difficult geographical terrain of the region was one of the reasons for its long isolation from the mainstream. The isolation of the state was such that, even today, Indians from other states are treated as foreigners/strangers by the common village folks in several parts of Mizoram. Being a late comer in the national mainstream, it has its own legacy of emotional and

psychological ambivalence in its relationship with the rest of India, though such a feeling is not uniformly prevalent throughout Mizoram after 30 years of peace and moreover, is increasingly feeble with the passage of time.

The State of Mizoram is now 30 years old. It came into being as a separate state on 20th Feb., 1987 following the signing of Peace Accord¹ on 30th June, 1986 after an arduous struggle of insurgency of two decades. Since then Mizoram exudes a semblance of peace reflecting a testament of the peoples' love for peace. It is the only peace accord that the Union Government has signed that has stood the test of time in the North-eastern

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region. However, the fact that peace in Mizoram has provided stability and development is a matter to be reckoned with though, there are now questions regarding the sustainability of peace through development.

The Peace Accord and Its Aftermath

One of the most deserving of considerations in reasoning about the peace accord in India is Mizoram. The causes of insurgency and the accord itself in the state still attract scholars, not only in Mizoram, but also scholars in the north east and the national mainstream even after three decades of the signing of the accord. The root causes of the Mizo insurgency were many: unsettlement of the future of Mizoram from a meaningful political platform in an amicably manner, the nature of civil administration under the District Council, apathetic treatment of the Mizo District before and during the Mautam² famine by the Assam Government and Laldenga's personal grievances against District Council authorities at that time etc.

The declaration of independence by the MNF on March 1, 1966 was preceded by an attempt to revive the dying spirit of Mizo nationalism through various activities by the MNF party and submission of memorandum to the Prime Minister of India on October 30, 1965. Like other insurgent groups in the north east, the MNF also depended on the use of violent means to strike terror against supporters of government. Although their violent tactics were further responsible for

the coming of deep schism within the Mizo community, but in a way, it contributed in strengthening the hands of those who were involved for the return of tranquillity in the state. Anyway, the road to peace was a long journey and hard struggle for those who were actively drawn in for the restoration of normalcy in the state. There was no doubt that the church was the first social institution which started to intervene between the Gov't of India and the MNF insurgents. The involvement of political leaders, prominent citizens, and church leaders coupled with the peoples' aspiration toward ending of insurgency in the state was responsible for the signing of accord between the Congress (I) Party and the MNF on June 25th 1986 on the one hand and Gov't of India and MNF on June 30th 1986 on the other.

This accord is hailed as the most lasting peace accord ever signed by the Indian Government with any insurgent group in the country, making Mizoram the most peaceful state in India. Although, numerous scholarly works have already been written about dealing with the causes of insurgency in Mizoram, scholars often tend to ignore the factors that contribute to the near total absence of major conflicts in the state. This is mainly due to the non-identification of the various factors that work for the prevalence of peaceful atmosphere thereby preventing the recurrence of conflicts in the state.

The Peace Accord, apart from granting Statehood to Mizoram, also seeks

to protect the religious or social practices, customary law or procedure, civil and criminal justice system on the basis of Mizo customary law and ownership and transfer of land of the Mizo. The accord has provided for review and codification of the existing customs, practices, laws or other usages of the Mizo by the state government. The rights and privileges being enjoyed by the minorities in Mizoram, as envisaged in the Indian Constitution, are supposed to be preserved and protected along with their social and economic advancement. Besides, the accord promises not to amend or repeal the existing Inner Line Regulations without consulting the State Government. Moreover, conduct of border trade in locally produced or grown agricultural commodities is another important feature of the Mizo peace accord. Apart from these, proposal for the establishment of a separate University was put in the hands of the State Government; being an ambiguous term *a separate University* was, after much public discussion and pressure, the state government gave the nod for a central University³. Creation of a separate High Court for Mizoram lies with the State Government, if it so desire, which is still kept in abeyance.

A closer analysis of the Peace Accord points to the fact that more responsibilities are put on the shoulder of the State Government than in the hands of the Central Government with regard to the maintainance of peace and tranquility, and the security of the people. Conferment of statehood to the Union Territory of

Mizoram and transfer of resources to the new state for development and relief and rehabilitation of the overground personnel were, no doubt, a Herculean task on the part of the Central Government as it involved numerous responsibilities, but it was successfully achieved. It is now opined that the Central Government has completed its duties as is stated in the Memorandum of Settlement, although there may be some exception relating to payment of compensation in respect of damage to crops, buildings destroyed/damaged during disturbance in the state and rental charges of buildings and lands occupied by the Security Forces.

When one examines the Memorandum of Settlement signed by the Gov't of India and MNF after thirty years of its operation, there are many unsolved puzzles that could be a breeding ground for the rise of dissidents and to justify their undemocratic activities. One of these is the unsolved boundary dispute with the state of Assam⁴, which caused lots of trouble for the Gov't of Mizoram as it is always a politically charged issue. Another relates to the preservation and protection of the rights and privileges of the Minorities coupled with their social and economic development. It may be mentioned, in this connection, that soon after the signing of peace accord in 1986, Hmar People's Convention (HPC) started an armed struggle for their social, economic, cultural and educational development. Although an accord was signed between HPC and the Gov't of Mizoram on July 27, 1994, it could not

provide lasting and amicable solution to their problems. Besides, Reang (Bru) community faced mass exodus in the later part of 1997 and solution to their problems is still a far cry even after 20 years of hardship and suffering. If minority communities' social and economic developments are not ensured properly, it amounts to violation of the accord itself thereby encouraging the minority communities to fight for their own social, cultural and economic advancement in an undemocratic means which could jeopardize the existing peace in the state. Rehabilitation of former underground personnel is still a headache for the state government. The slow pace with regard to the setting up of a separate High Court for Mizoram could also disrupt the peaceful atmosphere in the State as there is every chance of violating individual and community rights in the absence of independent judiciary.

Challenges of Human Rights

The feeling of a certain uniqueness marking the state of Mizoram from the rest of India is more than matched by a sense of social autonomy. Its people are traditionally an atomized group and the society is characterized, more than anything else, by a nearly total absence of social intercourse with members of other community for a very long time, though it is changing very fast as the society has been more and more exposed to the rest of the country. Yet, it still tries to maintain its own uniqueness and identity in certain areas, of which issues on human rights is

one of them where even laws find it hard to impregnate the social autonomy. Therefore, it is very necessary to analyse how the maintenance of social harmony comes into conflict with the promotion of individual human rights in the state, how the Non-governmental Organisations and Church leaders interpret human rights in the context of Mizo society, and how human rights activists in the state try to resolve clash between individual human rights and community rights.

In recent years, a hot debate has been triggered in the Mizo society regarding the promotion of human rights, whether it should take precedence over the civil society or vice-versa. This has happened at a time when the watchdogs of human rights and the so-called defenders of Mizo Civil Society seem to cross paths. The issue of the relationship between human rights and civil society has assumed great significance in the context of the transition of the Mizo society from tradition to modernity. In fact, the link between human rights and civil society is questioned when one group accused the other of unleashing a 'reign of terror' unmindful of human rights and dignity in the name of cleansing the Mizo society.

A serious controversial issue of human rights in Mizoram is the validity, nature and form of community vigilante organized by local Village Defence Party (VDP)/Joint Action Committee (JAC) in collaboration with police personnel. The role of local community is crucial in checking crimes due to the relative

strength of the communitarian relations at the grassroots level. The members of Village Council/ Local Council are also directly involved in issues of public order and crime fighting because their reputation depends on their effort to control them. Community policing has singlehandedly been done by local VDP/JAC, and many a time it involved in violating and abusing individual human rights against the principles of human rights regime. Sometimes after being assaulted, alleged offenders are handed over to the police.

Therefore, one of the most important human rights issues in Mizoram is the debate between Community rights and individual human rights. This emerged from the argument that 'what characterizes western societies is that they tend to put rights and privacy first, whereas collectivist societies tend to value harmony and duty'. The Mizo society is a close-knit society, where individual life has been secondary to community life for many years, and it is this community life that has shaped and re-shaped Mizo identity for many generations. Even after the exposure of this society to the outside world, many members still have a very strong inclination towards community life. This community life has been built on the premise of 'traditional Mizo value'⁵, which is expressed in the various roles they are being played by the members within the social structures and the way these social structures are so deeply structured. However, when a society is exposed more and more to the outside, new ideas and knowledge began to step

in, which shape and mould (perhaps challenge) the values cherished by the members of the society; and, this has naturally led to the reshaping of their world view system.

In Mizoram, the war on drugs and liquor is blamed for the increasing NGOs' repression, adding to the woes of people already worn down by poverty. In their effort to reduce the supply line, they are rolling back the rule of law, taking their cue from the parent body's war on drugs and illicit liquor. The Central Young Mizo Association (CYMA)⁶ as the unrivalled hyper-power also sets the tone for governmental behavior, and is accused of trying to 'subcontract torture'. When the most powerful NGO in the state thumbs its nose at the rule of law and human rights, it naturally grants license to others to commit abuse with great impunity. Apart from that, the insensitivity of the government towards human rights abuse by verbally supporting and defending such activities of NGOs maintain the existence of harmonious interests between government and such voluntary, civil association in Mizoram. What begins as an endorsement of the value of community and social harmony ends in an assertion of the supreme status of the NGOs regime and its leaders. In view of this, there is a need to maintain a degree of separation between the government and civil society that can provide a public space for the flourishing of Mizo community.

If the claim that human rights emerge in the context of particular social,

economic, cultural and political conditions is correct, the circumstances that prompted the institutionalization of human rights in the West may not exist in Mizoram, but the Mizo society has been experiencing tremendous changes to drive the state in the direction of imbibing a robust human rights regime. The importance of maintaining core identity and the community in Mizo Society is incompatible with the primacy of the individual, upon which the Western notion of human rights rests. The relationship between individuals and community, coupled with the primacy of 'traditional Mizo values' constitutes the key difference between Mizo society and Western society. Increasing rate of all types of crime and the fear of social breakdown can be cited as evidence that bond of community and cooperation within community can be an effective instrument in checking this unwanted trend in the Mizo society. However, identification of those societal problems that can jeopardize social harmony and integrity of Mizo community should be of central importance before moving too far from global human rights regime.

Culture of Discontentment

There are important groups in the Mizo society like the Church, the Young Mizo Association (YMA) and other prominent members of civil society that are playing a crucial role in sustaining peace in the State; in the last couple of years, however, there seems to be a growing sense of discontent among the

people, and this begins to affect governance of the State.

The process of assimilation of minor tribal groups like the Chakmas and Brus within the State of Mizoram seems to have run into difficulty due to numerous reasons. Despite the efforts of the State and Central governments in bringing back the Bru refugees, who had fled home to Tripura during the disturbances in the late nineties, there are still problems regarding their re-settlement in the State. Opening of polling booths in the Bru refugee camps in Tripura by the Election Commission of India during elections to the Legislative Assembly and Lok Sabha in Mizoram has not gone down well with groups in civil society. 'If they (the Brus) want to cast their votes, let them do so inside Mizoram' is the common refrain. Similarly, even though the Chakmas have their won Autonomous Council in the State, the majority of Mizo are not yet ready to treat them as 'sons of the soil'.

The political scene is heavily tilted in favour of the Congress party. The ruling Congress party bagged 34 out of 40 seats in the State legislature, an increase from 32 in the previous elections held in 2008. This thumping majority seems to have sealed the fate of other minor political parties like the Zoram Nationalist Party (ZNP) and Mizoram People's Conference (MPC), at least in the foreseeable future. The largest opposition party could manage to win only four out of forty seats. Against this political backdrop, the people are now expecting miracles from the political elites – miracles

that will solve myriad problems such as bad roads, scarcity of daily necessities like domestic gas, insufficient power supply, etc.

Conclusion

The Mizo society is now at a crossroad. Political stability and peace do not necessarily translate into economic development. The present ruling party may have won a majority of seats in the Assembly, yet there has been no major economic progress. There are rising expectations on the part of the people, but the government hasn't quite been able to meet their growing aspirations. The gap between the two is creating deep chasms in the society. The aspiration for growth

and development has happened concurrently with the rise of political consciousness among the people. Meanwhile, the near total absence of economic growth seems to have encouraged many people to take the easy but illegal way out. Drug use and smuggling are on the rise, with people looking for quick financial gains within a short span of time. Some State Government officials have also been booked for their alleged involvement. Therefore, what is most needed in Mizoram is very vibrant civil society organizations that are able to effectively address the growing democratic deficit in the state.

Endnotes

- ¹ The official title is Memorandum of Settlement. This so called accord could never be acceptable to some people since, as they said, it is a memorandum signed between the insurgent group, MNF and the Gov't of India for the settlement of the overground MNF personnel who once fought for independence.
- ² It refers to the flowering of bamboo, during which there is an increase in rat population and this leads to massive destruction of crops and often results in famine. It is a cyclic ecological phenomenon that occurs every half century in the state of Mizoram and its adjoining areas.
- ³ Mizoram University, a Central University was established by an Act of Parliament in 2000. It started functioning since July 2, 2001.
- ⁴ Mizoram State Boundary Committee with C.Chawngkunga, former Minister as its Chairman was formed in March, 2012 to resolve the boundary disputes with neighbouring Assam and Tripura. In the monsoon session of the State Legislative Assembly in July, 2014, replying to a query from Lalruatkima of the opposition Mizo National Front (MNF), Land Revenue and Settlement Minister R Romawia said that the state government's accepted boundary with neighbouring Assam was the border accepted in the treaty signed between the then Mizo chief Suakpuilala and the British government representatives in 1875.

- ⁵ Many Asian Scholars and Government leaders talked about ‘Asian Values’ that cherished ‘Order and Discipline’ as opposed to ‘Western Value’. Here, ‘traditional Mizo Values’ simply refers to ‘the willingness to do community services by members of the Mizo society’.

The idea of society, according to Mizo, is a community of trust rather than merely a system of adversarial relationships, and that human beings are duty-bound to respect their family and society.

Many members of local NGO (YMA) and VDP/JAC whom I interviewed testified that their involvements in such activities are due to their willingness to serve their community, in spite of their busy time.

- ⁶ The Young Mizo Association is the largest and most comprehensive non-governmental organization, established on 15th June, 1935 under the auspices of the then Christian Missionaries and the pioneer Mizo Christians in Mizoram. Initially, it was called ‘Young Lushai Association’ but later changed into ‘Young Mizo Association’ in October, 1947. All the branches of YMA, within Mizoram and outside of the State are subjected to the Central YMA (CYMA) which has its headquarters at Aizawl, Mizoram.

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