CHAPTER 3
Chapter - III

Scarcities and Famines

Natural calamities have always influenced human society. History proves that many a time it has changed the course of the life of man. The present state of Mizoram and the Mizo-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. The sufferings of the Mizos due to famine were unbearable. At a point, the then ruling British Government had to interfere for the same cause.

Famines and the Mizos:

Though the British were the first to record the famines, the famines were not new to the Mizos. It is a part of their life and history. In fact Mizo chroniclers conjectured that the previous tribe who inhabited the present Mizo land had vacated the hills due to the severity of these recurrent famines which they failed to cope up with. According to their calculations, the Mizo tribes migrated to the present habitat in about 1724 AD from the land between Run Lui and Tiau rivers in Upper Burma where they lived during the period 1540-1723 AD[1]. Retrospective calculations by the tribal elders demonstrate that a major famine was experienced in the area in 1719 AD which was just before the Mizos reached the area. Since then they have experienced the hardship of such rat-famines in 1737 and 1767 AD. 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.

The experiences of these cyclic famines and hardship associated with it taught the Mizos about the periodicity of the phenomenon, prediction and imminence of the next famine, the difference between the two varieties of the famine and their causes and impacts. It is also obvious that despite the body of knowledge gathered around the phenomenon, there is precious little the Mizos could do about it. They were totally helpless against this natural calamity. In fact repeated famines depleted their population considerably despite the continuous migration of their people from their place of previous settlement. Starvation death during famines until the next harvest was considerable. Due to the nature of the tribal society, they neither deserted their community nor any nuclear families migrated to other places. The Mizos therefore temporarily migrated to the plains of Cachar and Sylhet during the famines and lived on the charity of the plainsmen. They returned back to the hills only when the severity of the famine had subsided. In these process some smaller sub-tribes permanently settled in the foothills near the plains and never went back to the high hills. The Mizos settled near the Hailakandi district of Assam thus trace their migration to the area [2]. In fact the recent anthropologists detected a distinct migratory trend among the Mizos towards the plains of neighboring Assam and Bengal, which was put to a halt by the advent of the British in the region who made conscious efforts to stop the migratory movement of Mizos and to confine them within the hills [3].

(2) Oral Testimony collected from Katlichera, Assam, January 2002.

The historians conjecture that if such efforts were not made, the major portion of the Mizos would have come down to settle in the plains of Cachar and Sylhet as done by the other tribes like Kacha Nagas, Hmars and Brus. During such settlement some Mizo tribes even picked up the technology of settled rice cultivation in the foothills by terrace cultivation. Despite their history of headhunting, there is no record of hostility between the tribes and plainsmen during the temporary migration to the plains due to famine hardships.

From the repeated experience of famines, the Mizos also learnt to differentiate that in reality, there were two varieties of famines that occurred- Thingtam and Mautam. The former occurred due to the flowering of one variety of bamboo plants which the Mizos called *Thing* and the other the *Mau*. The former occurred at about a thirty year cycle and was less severe in its impact and vice versa. Moreover, *Thingtam* was more localized in its impact occurring mainly in the areas west of Langkaih river from where it generally spread to the rest of the area over a course of a year. *Mautam* on the other hand affected the areas east of Tuirini river before actually hitting the rest of region\(^4\). *Mautam* produced a larger number of rats and lasted longer while *Thingtam* was of shorter duration. It was also noticed that the *Thingtam* famine did not affect the Lakher tribes of the hills. The reason perhaps was the *Thing* variety of bamboo were not found in that area.

\(^{4}\) D.Rokhuma, *op.cit*, p.97.
The tribal elders also confirmed that the arrival of Mautam was always preceded by the swarming of an insect called Thangang (brown locusts) [5]. Such swarming was taken by the Mizos was a sure sign of an imminent famine. The swarming generally start at dusk and continue till late night slowly moving towards the high mountains. The teeming millions of swarms would create a strong sound similar to the sounds of monsoon cloud. Eyewitnesses recorded that the insect was the size of a grain of a corn, dark brown in color and spotted. The trees of the entire hills would be full of these insects. The zoologists believe that the flowering of the bamboo plants led to the migration of these insects into the region. The famine also brings other hardships as it was inevitably followed by Dysentery and Cholera causing further havoc of the people. This was because of lack of proper human food. The people would eat just about anything to satisfy the hunger during the famines. The havoc caused by each of these famines is therefore a milestone in the oral history of the tribals and the survivors of these calamity use them as a calendar mark.

Thus if an elder Mizo was asked to track down the memory lane he would say "before or after that great famine" [6]. The impact of the famine on the demographic structure of the tribe was such that if a youth survived a Mautam, the tribals would be sure that he would live long, to see another seeding of a different variety of bamboo called rangia which does not attract rats. But the tribals confirmed that there were very few who saw two mautam famine.

(5) Ibid.

(6) Ibid.
Famine under the British administration:

When the British entered the Mizo hills, (part of the Indo-Burmese range of hills, then known as lushai hills), they witnessed an amazing ecological phenomenon: a severe famine apparently caused by the rats. The Mizo hills are covered extensively by various species of bamboo, which periodically rot, flower and seed. The bamboo seeds appeared to be a delicious food item for jungle rats, 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. As they devoured the grains, the resulting scarcity of food led to massive hardship, starvation, and deaths.

In the famine of 1881, which was the first to happen under the British rule, about 15,000 people perished. [7] In 1912, another famine resulting from the same circumstances took place, affecting a region covering the Mizo hills, Chin hills, Chittagong hills and the Chin hills falling under the Burmese jurisdiction.

The government of Burma organized a great battle against the rodent and destroyed scores of thousands of them. [8] In the Mizo hills, on the initiative of the administration, the tribals set and reset traps in their fields. Individual farmers could trap as many as 500 rats in a single night, and were often seen with basketfuls of dead or flattened rats on their backs, which they had taken out of their long log-traps early in the morning. [9]

(7) Suhas Chatterjee, Mizo Chiefs and Chiefdom, (New Delhi, 1995), p. 13


(9) Ibid.
The Mizos ate rats. Trapped rats would be fried over the fire and then used as food. But the abundant supply of rats at these times would have diminished their value. \[^{10}\] Moreover, a diet of rats would hardly make up the loss of rice, which was their staple food. Some of the tribals, who had rice left from the last harvest, struggled to protect it from the invading rats. The unfortunate remainder, who constituted the majority, would search the forest for roots, jungle yams, and other wild produce. \[^{11}\] Wild sago palm was collected from the forests, dried, pounded and its pith sifled, the powder being made into a kind of dumpling that was wrapped in a leaf and boiled. The resulting food for the family was very sticky, insipid mass, full of gritty particles. Others ate a kind of yam found in the jungle. \[^{12}\]

The plant itself was a creeper. The upper part of the root was inedible, but lower down, it changed into a long tuber rich in starch and somewhat resembling a potato in taste. The root was vertical, and often very long, so to get out of the tuber, the tribals frequently had to dig to a great depth in a very hard soil.

Tragic instances were related of tribals searching for these wild produce to satisfy their hunger. \[^{13}\] It was reported that the entire forest in many parts of the country was honey combed with yam pits - most of them four to ten feet deep and large enough to admit the body of a man.

Impact of famines:

The colonial administrators found it interesting that the tribals could correctly predict the next famine from indications in their surroundings.

This was on the basis of their past experience. The Mizos had for ages gone through the ravages of the bamboo flowering, and dreaded its impact on their lives. They had observed that there were two distinct varieties of bamboos in their regions, which they named as
This was on the basis of their past experience. The Mizos had for ages gone through the ravages of the bamboo flowering, and dreaded its impact on their lives. They had observed that there were two distinct varieties of bamboos in their regions, which they named as Mau and Thing. The colonial botanists found that the Mau variety was known to European botanists as *Melocanna bambusoides* and the Thing as *Bambusa Tulda*. Both these varieties had periodic reproductive blooming; in other words, they rotted, flowered, and set their seeds every thirty to fifty years. It was during these times that the devastation described by the Mizos as *Tom* occurred. With the aid of the Mizo elders, the colonial administrators constructed 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 1929 Mautam 2007

Thingtam 1881 Mautam 1956

Mautam 1911 Thingtam 1977

On the basis of this calculation, the administrators had made advance preparation for the impending 1929-30 famine. Indeed, by 1925, the signs of bamboo flowering were already visible. This time the administrators had an active ally in combating the natural calamity - the Missionaries.

(14) Lalbiakthanga, "The Mizos: A Study in Racial Personality", New Delhi, 1978
The Baptist Mission Society was one of the first groups of Missionaries to arrive in the Mizo hills. They had witnessed the ravages of the 1881 famine, and had been active in reducing the suffering of the people in the famine of 1912. 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 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." [15]

Lorrain then went to suggest measures to counter the catastrophe. These were

1) ordering the tribals to save a little grain in rat-proof baskets, and

2) application of liverpool virus to spread a deadly epidemic amongst the rodents, which could destroy them totally.

Though, the government appreciated the initiatives of the missionaries, but disagreed for some crucial reasons:

1) The tribals themselves produced a bare subsistence.[16] 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.


(16). J. Needham, Sub Divisional Officer, Lunglei, to the Supt. of Lushai Hills Dt. 5.2.1925.
2) 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.[17]

This rendered the application of liver-pool virus out of question. The superintendent suggested the use of rat-traps and a poison (Barium Carbonate) instead. The later would be most effective as well as easy to apply. But the most important task was to reduce the food supply available to the rats: thus the bamboo forest were to be burnt, and standing crops in the fields were to be protected.

Native Knowledge and Western Science:

The discovery of the rat famine related to bamboo reproduction by the British was through tribal knowledge of the phenomenon. Although the European Christian Missionaries who had actually witnessed the unfolding of the events, were perplexed. It was from the tribal elders that they understood the phenomenon and accordingly informed the colonial authorities. The first two famines (Thingtam in 1861 and Mautam in 1881) were not directly witnessed by the British as they were still fighting a battle of conquest against the British and had not gained any foothold inside the hills. Therefore the idea they formed were from Christian missionaries who were already inside the Mizo habitat and the tribal victims of the famine who came down to seek refuge.

A look at the structure of knowledge developed by the western science on the phenomenon show that the tribal knowledge was no different from it.

Famines are simply food shortage. The shortage could be due to natural or artificial causes\(^\text{(18)}\). Among the natural causes, shortage caused by infestation of vermins have been listed as one\(^\text{(19)}\). But such famines were 'minor and localized'. Rats have been also listed as one of the vermins who through depredation cause food shortage. Rats eat almost anything that humans eat. Perhaps the most serious damage is to the seeds of grain both before and after harvesting. Grain stored on farms is often not only eaten by rats but also rendered unsuitable for human consumption by being mixed with rat dropping. With population explosion among the rats the destruction of food stuff also increases. Therefore as far as food stuff of human beings are concerned the rats have been identified as a major destroyer\(^\text{(20)}\).

Bamboos are arborescent grasses belonging to the family of *Poaceae* and are grouped under the subfamily *Bambusoideae*\(^\text{(21)}\). Out of the 110 general and 1110-1140 species of bamboos in the world, India according to the latest reports accounts for 18 general and 128 species of bamboos. North-East India has extensive bamboo vegetation covering an area of 3.05 million ha.

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\(^{(19)}\) Ibid.


Out of this, the state of Mizoram accounts for highest forest cover with bamboos. It has 9 general and 20 species. The reproductive cycle of the Bamboos also vary from species. Based on the flowering cycle they are classified into three types:  

1) Annual or continuous flowering (species which flower every year and do not die).
2) Gregarious or periodic flowering when the whole clump flower in an extensive area and dies after seed setting. The flowering may continue for two or three years in an area or in the same clump.
3) Sporadic or irregular flowering which occurs in isolated clumps in one or to two in an area or in parts of one clump. Thus flowering periodicity of bamboos varies from three to one hundred and twenty years.

One of the most unusual flowering phenomena occurs in many bamboos. All plants of a species flower at about the same time at lengthy intervals as mentioned above. During flowering, individual aerial stems sometimes live for much less time than their species cycles and flower only at the end of the cycle when an inborn signal initiates the formation of inflorescences. Fruit development in a few species has also been reported. The size and shape of bamboo fruits vary according to the species. The morphology of fruit was a dependable character for identification ban 1 boos. Research have furnished an account of bamboo fruits belonging to 17 general and 22 species.

(22) Ibid.
Although bamboo fruit are generally known as *caryopsis*, based on morphology, researchers classified them into three types:

1. **Caryopsis**: *The pericarp* as membranous, thin, soft and adheres to the seed coat. The fruit has an apparent ventral suture which is nearly as long as the whole fruit. An articulate navel is located at the fruit base.

2. **Glans**: have hard, smooth, *crustaceous pericarp*, separated from the seed coat. The fruit has no ventral suture and navel.

3. **Bacca**: has thick fleshy *pericarp* separated from the seed coat. It indicated that the morphology of starch grains can be used as a distinguishing character for identification.

The gregarious flowering of bamboo may over saturate the food supply and assure bamboo production. This phenomenon however seriously affects the normal balance of nature. Animals dependent on bamboo vegetative growth such as the Panda, loses a favored food source entirely after a flowering episode\(^{23}\). A glut of bamboo fruit may also incite an explosion of population of rodents that eat the fruits. For example the flowering of *Muli* or *terak* bamboo (*melocanna bambusoides*) in its native habitat around the bay of Bengal in cycles of mostly 30-35 years lead to disaster. The accumulation of avocado sized fruits promotes a rapid increase in rodent population which lead to the loss of human food supplies and epidemic of rodent carried disease\(^{24}\).

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\(^{23}\) As in Note 12, Vol.1, p.744.

\(^{24}\) Ibid.
A research at the Dehradun institute of forest Research on the connection between bamboo fruit contained.

1. Starch (on zero moisture basis) 50.240%
2. Protein 11.556%
3. Fat 0.231%
4. Ash 3.030%
5. Moisture 9.400%
6. Others 26.493%

Shillong based zoologist A K Ghose reported [25] that it has high protein of nearly 12 percent and very high starch, content of about 50 percent besides vitamin A which helps augment the fertility of rodents [26]. It is also conjectured that some hormonal change in the rats due to the excessive protein that the bamboo fruit contained enabling the female rats to produce a litter much earlier in age than in normal circumstances. Even in normal circumstances however the rats are prolific breeders [27]. Although larger types reproduce once a year others produce several litters during a single season. Some have only one to two young at a time while others have large numbers. Most rodents are polygamous and mate for the duration of a single breeding season and few like beavers have permanent mates. The rather high of breeding is intensified by the fact that in many of the smaller rodent sexual maturity is reached at an early age, normally earlier in the females than in the males.

(25) D.Rokhuma, op.cit, pp. 131-132.


(27) As in note 12.
The females bred when less than a year old. The house mouse reproduce through out the year with an average of 5.5 litters and 31 young per female per year in building houses and 10.2 and 57 young per year on farms in the United States. Wild Norway rats are able to breed at three to four months and can produce up to seven litters a year containing 6 to 22 young. Therefore the reports that rodents produce prolifically after consuming the bamboo fruits were not untrue. The tribal elders from ancient times had understood the connection between the increase in rat population and the consumption of bamboo fruits and the resultant famines, which have been subsequently confirmed by the findings of modern science.

Bamboo flowers: The cause of famine

By 1925, the bamboos had started to flower, as a result, the rats of jungle increase 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 Aizwal sub division alone.\[28\]

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.

(28) N.E.Parry, Supt.of Lushai Hills to the Commissioner, Surma Valley, Silchar Dt. 19.1.1925.
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'. [29]

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." [30]

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."[31]


(30) Report for 1912.

(31) Lorraine, 1925
The bamboo seeds caused the multiplication of rat's number, was a fact known to people, but still the problem remained the same, unsolved. Few felt that perhaps the seeds had some properties that made the rats extraordinarily prolific in terms of reproduction.\[^{32}\]

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.\[^{33}\] Others brushed aside this theory, saying that whenever there is an increase in the supply of food, it is normal to find an increase in the rat population.\[^{34}\]

Perhaps rats were migrating from deficit areas to areas of abundance. The third theory was 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. The theory that gained most credence was the first one.

\(^{32}\) Report for 1912

\(^{33}\) Dr.S.Trivedi, Dept.of Forests, Govt of Arunachal Pradesh and Prof.H.Y.Mihanram, Department of Botany, Delhi University have conducted research on the phenomenon.

\(^{34}\) Hodgson, 1925
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.

Ritual, Myths and Legend Formation:

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 they considered it a curse of Gods above. Hence they took to religion to evade the punishment. There were particular rites to ward off the curse.\[35\] Every year in the month of \textit{Chhippa} (corresponding to June) they performed a ceremony called \textit{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 \textit{Chakalai} would be performed that night. When the night fell, each householder threw out all the half-burnt firebrands from his house, shouting \textit{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 was \textit{aoh} for the entire village.

\[35\] N.E. Parry, \textit{The Lakhers}, Calcutta, 1931.
Practically all division of the Lushai-Kuki family believe in a spirit called *Pathian* which is supposed to be the creator of everything and is a beneficial being but however has little concern with men. [36] Far more important to the average man are the numerous *Huai* or demons who inhabit every stream, mountain and forest and to whom every illness and misfortune is attributed. The village *puithiam* (sorcerer) is supposed to know which demon causes which kind of trouble and what kind of ritual and sacrifice will appease him. The entire life of Lushais (Mizo) is spent in propitiating these spirits. The famine was believed to be caused by one such spirits. The Mizos are not really nature worshippers; they did not worship sun or moon or any of the forces of nature. They appease spirits or *huais* who are uniformly bad as they only bring calamity and suffering to men. During the epidemics that follow the famines, the Mizos feel that bad spirits had possessed the village. The sick were abandoned and people scatter, some families taking up their abode in the *jhum* huts, other in the jungles. The neighboring village close their gates to all coming from the infected neighborhood and to terrify the *huai*, who was supposed to be responsible for the epidemic, a gateway was built across the road leading to the stricken villages, and on the sides an arch of rude figures of armed men made of straw with wooden spears are placed. A dog was also sacrificed. The Hindu Mizo sub-tribes in 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.

As far as the more practical part of the anti-famine campaign was concerned, the tribes began to make huge baskets with covers to store the food grains to protect them from the invading rat population. They also begin to cut the bamboo to construct new houses, as after the flowering, the plants would die and there would be a scarcity of bamboo stick for such construction.

The famine also gave rise to myths and rumours. For example, the explosion in the rodent population after eating the bamboo flower was explained by the villagers by saying that during *mautam* even vegetables like brinjal and insects like caterpillars turn into huge rats. [37] It was also believed that if bamboo fruits were fed to cows, their milk production increased. They believed, even cats and other domestic animals grew huge in size and reproduced more off-springs than they normally did. [38] It was also reported that rats grew as big as piglets during mautam and they were born of mother earth rather than rat-mothers. [39]

Colonial Aid And Famine:

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.

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(38) Ibid.

(39) Ibid.
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 purposes 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. 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.

(40) Mackenzie, 1884.

(41) Ibid
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.\(^{[42]}\)

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; 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 of the Lushai hills borrowed a sum of Rs.80,000 from the British Government to help the Mautam famine victims.\(^{[43]}\)

The administration also 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 and further developed by Dr. Chitre. 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. But the destruction of rats in such massive numbers did not seem to make any impact on the exploding rat population.

\(^{(42.)}\) Ibid.

\(^{(43).}\) Vumson, *Zo History, Aizwal*, New Delhi, p. 139
The other initiative was to encourage the people to save: this came mainly from the missionaries. 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. Nor did other saving devices work for long, as the tribal economy was basically a subsistence economy, and they hardly had any surplus to save, except for the Chief and his patrons. The Government did not want to antagonize the tribals by making it compulsory to save, but it arranged to see that those who had surplus food shared with those less fortunate. Tribals were employed to descend to Demagiri and bring back sacks of rice to the hills. Thus the combined efforts of the colonial administration and the Church were able to relieve the distress of the famine affected people to a considerable extent. Significantly, this effected 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. They were also amazed at the physical look of these new comers. The Europeans were also ridiculed for their white skins, as 'half-cooked' people.\[^{[44]}\]

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.\[^{[45]}\]

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.\[^{[46]}\]

This report stated the situation after the second famine under the British rule. Since then, three more famines have stalked the hills of Mizoram. The relief measures provided by the Raj, had a profound effect on the overall image of the Raj in the minds of people, who

\[^{[44]}\] Ibid. p. 116

\[^{[45]}\] Report for 1912.

\[^{[46]}\] Ibid.
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, Mikang Topa, or Mirang Topa, or Mirang Lalpa, meaning white master, nice white people, or even the 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.

The Famine of 1959

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. The tradition worked this way. "Reverting to the chronological sequences, the next event of importance was the Mautam in 1959, and the consequential famine in the following year". The Mizos have for ages dreaded the flowering of Bamboos. The flowering of bamboos culminated in the unprecedented increase in the rat population in the country side causing havoc to the standing crops leading ultimately to famine. 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. Sensing the impending doom, the Mizo District Council had 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 feels 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...” (47)

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 population. 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.

True to the anticipation of the Mizos, the Mautam (famine) stuck 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.

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 can be used by jeeps and truck loads of food could not even be sent to the starving tribals. Earlier, a famine of considerable magnitude had taken place in 1911-12. People saw the flowering of the bamboos all along the hill sides and realized its significance. So, as a precaution, extra strong storage bins for food stuffs were arranged and every one thought that the serious famine could be avoided. But, as the paddy started ripening in the "jhums", rats appeared in the fields overnight. The havoc created by the rats was terrible and very little of the grain was harvested. To sustain themselves, many Mizos had to collect edible roots and leaves from the jungles. Others moved out to far away places. Considerable numbers were said to have died of starvation. Children were always the last to suffer and parents often collapsed in their efforts to obtain food for their little ones. Many welfare organizations tried their best to help the starving villagers in the remote corners by head-loads. 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.

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. 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. Somehow the famine months came to a close.

The MNFF under the leadership of Pu Laldenga, Pu Lalnunmawia, Pu Sainghaka and Pu Vanlalruaia (known as Harry to his friends) 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.

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". 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, prior to converting the Mizo Cultural Society into "Mizo National Famine Front", Laldenga had staged a demonstration and conducted a procession when Chief Minister of Assam, and the Tribal Affairs Minister Capt.Williamson Sangma visited Aizwal. The MNFF demanded food for the Mizo Hills District which led to the state government seeking the help of MNFF in distributing food supplied to remote villages, brought by vehicles and air dropped by the Air Force planes.

The initial indifference of the Assam Government to the distress of the Mizos and the inordinate delay in initiating relief measures caused serious discontentment among the Mizos. The fact that the Mizo Union, an associate of the ruling Congress in Assam, was at the helm of the affairs in the Mizo Hills District, gave Pu Laldenga and his MNFF an additional handle to direct their propaganda campaign against the Mizo Union. The part played by the Chaliha Ministry and by the District Council was purposely hidden by the MNFF, and they took all the credit for saving the lives of the Mizo villagers.

Cases of starvation deaths officially reported by the Mizo Hills District Council were denied by the Assam Government as grossly exaggerated and gradually the relationship between the Government and the Mizo Council controlled by the Mizo Union became strained. The Mizo Union leaders, who were staunch supporters of the Assam Government, gradually drifted away and became more and more critical of the Chaliha Ministry. Discontentment grew in the minds of the Mizo people. The District Council was equally unhappy, as it was felt that the Assam Government did not attach importance to the Council, to the extent expected.
The first shock was experienced by the Mizo District Council authorities, when questions were raised as to whether the Mizo District Council was entitled to use "service stamps"; whether its members were entitled to use Inspection Bungalows etc. Such simple issues were allowed to remain undecided for long. The Government of Assam had been neglecting the development of the district, or providing financial support.

The resolution of the Mizo District Council asked the Government of Assam to take precautionary measures and sanction Rs. 1,50,000/- as relief money to be spent on the Mizo districts including the Pawi-Lakher region to ensure counter-steps against the imminent famine. But contrary to the resolution of the District council, the Assam Government did not heed to the request of the District Council, rather criticized the basis of prediction of the occurrence of famine [48]. True to the prediction of the District council, the bamboo flowering in 1959 resulted in an unprecedented growth of rats eating up all the standing crops, grains, fruits and anything that was edible to them leading to a massive food shortage. The Government of Assam was caught unawares. Also the arrival of the relief materials were slow and inadequate due to the lack of awareness of the severity of the famine by the Government. Moreover the non-development of road communications also hampered the relief measures.

(48) Vumson, Zo History, Aizwal, not dated.
The Riang and Chakmas were eating wild *arami*, a kind of grass and there were reports of starvation death and flight of people before the relief arrived. The indifference and the callousness of the Government of Assam alienated the Mizos.

When the relief was found to be slow in coming, the District Council charged the government with incapability. Vanlalbiaka, a member of the District Council was quoted as saying,

"If we continue to be neglected ...the peoples feeling will be for secession from Assam."

He recalled that even the British had come with all-out help to the Mizos when such famines occurred during the colonial period. The Assam Government on the other hand charged the District Council which was dominated by the Mizo Union with non-cooperation, which was not quite correct. When Captain Williamson Sangma, the Minister for Tribal Area Development visited Aizwal, a demonstration was organized to pressurize the Assam Government to declare Mizoram as a famine affected area. The Government of Assam sanctioned a sum of Rs. 190 lakhs for a famine affected population of 332390. The break up of money used was as follows:

Rs: 04.90 lakhs - Gratuitous Relief.
Rs: 28.00 lakhs - Relief Work.

(49) Ibid
(50) Ibid
(51) V. Venkata Rao, op. cit, p.237.
(52) Ibid.
(53) Ibid.
Rs: 66.00 lakhs - Subsidy on transport of grains.
Rs: 13.00 lakhs - Purchase of vehicles.
Rs: 03.00 lakhs - Cost of petrol etc.
Rs: 00.87 lakh - Accommodation to IAF and IAC personnel.
Rs: 00.62 lakh - Construction of rice go-downs.

To help supplement the government’s weak relief measures, the Mizo cultural society formed a new group called the Mizo National Famine Front to render voluntary services to the people most affected by the famine. They helped the villagers by making sure they received their share of Government aid. Laldenga, a clerk in the district council office, did tremendous work to mitigate the disaster. In doing so the Mizo National Famine Front had earned the goodwill of the people and the villages even recognized them as leaders of the Mizo people.

The initial bottlenecks and red-tapism regarding relief measures very belatedly taken up by the Assam Government caused serious discontentment among the people. Cases of starvation deaths officially reported by the District Council were denied by the Assam Government. After the tragedy, there was acrimonious debate in the district council about the indifference and callousness of the Assam Government, while the starving Mizos were dying. As the sense of alienation and marginalization of the Mizo people was complete, ideas of separatism and secessionism had begun to emerge. More so as such apathy and rejection from "a people (Indians) with whom we have nothing in common" was already at the time of the merger.