

Ethnicity and Autonomy: Unending political process in Mizoram

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Abstract

North East has become one of the most diversified regions in terms of ethnic identities. As such, the present state of Mizoram cannot escape such 'diversity' in term of ethnicity. Right from the dawn of independence till today, smaller ethnic communities struggle for their ethnic space. Ethnic tribal minorities like Lai, Mara and Chakma succeeded in establishing institutional autonomy in the southern parts of the state of Mizoram. But, the struggle for greater autonomy has been continued till today. Not only that, the other ethnic communities like the Hmar and the Bru are also pressuring the state government for creation of Autonomous District for their territorial autonomy and protection. This deeply embedded in the social, cultural and political realities, discourse on ethnicity becomes 'problem' for the policy makers, academician, and also media. Therefore, the present study will take a precautionary step to look into three thing: First, origin of the three autonomous districts and the present demands for greater autonomy; second, the demand for district autonomy initiated by the Hmar and the Bru, and the creation of SHDC; third, the paper will try and search the solution for the deep cleavage "deep diversity" within the state.

I. Introduction

The term 'ethnicity' has occupied one of the core issues in the study of North East. Defining the term reflect complexity as the region is divided internally and externally, covering tension and conflict arising out of cultural heterogeneity in the region. (Lacina 2009: 998, Gohain 2008) Moreover, ethnicity hardly exists in pure form because in the present context, it is always closely associated with what one can called 'political, cultural, religious and other social views and forms of interaction, which constitute important ingredient of the ethnic phenomenon' (Baqai 2004: 58). In the context of North East, we can see that the institutional arrangement particularly (State, UTs, Autonomous District, etc.) are designed for the larger ethnic communities (major groups), though never in a "peaceful" manners. While the minority groups (even some major

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groups of the plains) who felt to be left out of such institutional accommodations, resort to conflict and claims their rights based on their cultural, languages, territory, etc. (Manor 1996: 460). As a result, 'armed separatist' movements and 'counter militarism' have become the enduring feature of the region's politics (Hassan 2008: 53, McDuire-Ra 2008 :190, Lacina 2007).

This may be the reason why North East has been viewed as region of continuous 'conflict' and 'struggle' where the line is drawn between 'us' and 'them' for creating an 'ethnic space'. One can also argue that indiscriminate use of the term ethnicity in such situation "can produce more distortion than understanding" (Manor 1996: 459). It is therefore, necessary to go beyond the 'conflict zone' and construct a positive idea which is entailed in the name of democracy and also development (Dasgupta 1997: 346, Chandhoke 2006, Cline 2006: 126, Rao 1979: 592). The question however remains - will the Indian model of democracy success in the present context of North East India (Weiner 1989, Hazarika 2003). Therefore, the term 'ethnicity' and autonomy are become the necessity to employ for unifying the region or each territorial state other than disintegrating them (Sahadevan 2002: 104).

The state of Mizoram in the northeast region of India is no exception in such context. The state is though often regarded as one of the peaceful state in Indian Union after the signing of the Mizo Accord in 1986¹, but still the minority communities who felt 'left out' of the state formation process turn against the state. The reasons may differ among the communities. While the Lai, Mara and Chakma successes in establishing Autonomous Districts, the movement of the Hmar People's Convention (later HPCD) for Autonomous District and the pressure exerted by the Brus for more 'ethnic space' has entangled the state for political solution.

II. The Autonomous Districts

It is noticed in Mizoram that the minority communities took their own course in search for autonomy and protect their distinct identity. The struggle for autonomy exerted by the minority communities in Mizoram has now become the central theme of internal politics. This major challenge needs to be addressed with deep caution so as to integrate them in the larger political and cultural realm.

With the formation of the Mizo District Council in 1952, the minority communities within the Mizo District felt that their rights and autonomy should be protected from the majority community 'Mizo' through the Sixth Schedule. Thus, Tribal Union party was formed by the Pawi and Lakher on October 25, 1949 at Lawngtlai. (Chalngingluaia 2001: 2-3) The party ultimately succeeded in the formation of Pawi-Lakher Autonomous

¹ Memorandum of Settlement was signed between the Government of India, Mizo National Front (MNF) and Government of Mizoram on 30th June 1986. This memorandum is known as 'Mizoram Peace Accord' as it marked an end two decades of armed movement by the MNF for sovereign nation-state.

Council (PLRC) (Hnialum 2010:4, Zohra 1997)².

Soon in April, 1953 election for the first Pawi- Lakher Regional Council was held in which 9 seats were elected and 3 seats were nominated by the Government. The PLRC was inaugurated in Lunglei on April 23, 1953. (Chalngingluaia 2001:9) The Pawi-Lakher Regional Council functioned for two decades, till Mizoram was declared Union Territory in 1971. Here after, PLRC was trifurcated into three Regional Councils; viz., Chakma, Lakher and Pawi Regional Councils under the Pawi-Lakher Autonomous region (Re-organisation) order, 1972.³ Later, the three Regional Councils were also upgraded into Autonomous District from April 29, 1972 immediately after Mizo District attained Union Territory⁴.

The trifurcation of PLRC into three Autonomous Districts viz., Pawi Autonomous District, Lakher Autonomous District and Chakma Autonomous District were formed by amending paragraph 20 of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution. The three new Autonomous Districts were inserted in Part III of the table appended to paragraph 20 of the Sixth Schedule and continue to the 'tribal areas' of the present State of Mizoram. Later the Pawi and the Lakher were change into Lai and Mara thus, the present Autonomous Districts are known as, Lai Autonomous District, Mara Autonomous District and Chakma Autonomous District.

If one looks into the political history of the formation of Regional Council under the Sixth Schedule, apart from the then Pawi-Lakher Regional Council, there was no other Regional Council formed by the State Government. In other words, the then Mizo District was the only Autonomous District under Assam where Regional Council was constituted to protect other minority communities under the Sixth Schedule. Therefore, the formation of the present day Autonomous Districts in Mizoram has a long political route whose lineage can be traced to the dawn of Independence.

III. Demand for Greater Autonomy: Political 'Imbrogio'

Sensing the well protected nature of the tribal under the Sixth Schedule, the presence of three Autonomous District Councils in Mizoram seem to have encouraged other ethnic minority communities, viz., the Hmar and the Bru (GoM 1986) to struggle for new institutional arrangement within the state of Mizoram. (Sen 1992: 78, Lalrinawma 2000: 28) The present state of Mizoram has therefore been caught and entangled in the struggle and demands for autonomy by these two ethnic communities.

Among them, it is the Hmar who put strong and constant pressure on the State Government for the creation of separate Autonomous District to protect their 'define distinct identity'. In the case of the Bru community, the demand for autonomy has been

² Government of Assam, Vide Memo No. TAD/R/52/15 dated 20.05.52.

³ Vide Administrator of Mizoram Notification No. CCMP3/72/70-72 Dated 1.4.1972

⁴ The Mizoram District Councils (Miscellaneous Provisions) Order, 1972

a recent phenomenon that was initiated by a group (namely, Bru National Liberation Front, BNLF) from the 'repatriation campaign' in Tripura. Their main agenda was to claim 'homeland' and representation for the Bru in the Mizoram Legislative Assembly. (Times of India 2001, Sept. 8) Though in both the cases, the State Government was adamant not to create another autonomous region (Times of India 2001, August. 4) but in the case of Hmar, Memorandum of Settlement had been signed to for the creation of Sinlung Hills Development Council (SHDC) that covers Hmar occupied villages to accommodate their struggle. Therefore, it is necessary to have a brief study of the struggle of other minority communities for autonomy.

The struggle of the Hmar community for autonomy has taken a long process. It was initiated with developmental issue based on territorial orientation but was soon turned into struggle for homeland or in other word 'ethnic space' (Chonzik 2010, Singh 1994: 127). The struggle came to the front soon after the conversion of Mizoram Hmar Association into a political organization called Hmar People's Convention in December 18, 1986. The main agenda of the HPC was the creation Autonomous District comprising of all the Hmar-dominated areas in the north and northwest Mizoram under the Sixth Schedule⁵. To push their demands the HPC resolved to an armed struggle which lasted till 1992 and finally 'halt' when the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) was signed between the Government of Mizoram and HPC. The MoS ultimately concluded with the Five Point Agreement in 1994⁶

According to the political dialogue, SHDC was officially formed on August 27, 1997 but the discontentment advocated by the various Hmar groups was of the nature of implementation of the MoS which is not yet arrived till today. (Bhaumik & Bhattacharya 2005, Hassan 2006) Some of the discontentments exerted were - the demarcation of the SHDC area could not be settled and election to the SHDC could not be held. Moreover, there was the issue of implementation of the Hmar language as a medium of instruction in the SHDC areas (The Assam Tribune 2012: December 6). The members of the SHDC were not elected by people but appointed by the State Government which seems to implicate that it is fully controlled by the Government. Even after two decades of the signing of MoS, election could not be held in SHDC though in September 23, 2013 the State Cabinet approved the creation of SHDC areas into 12 constituencies under SHDC Election Rules 2008 for election (Vanglaini 2013: September 30).

On the other end, it seems that MoS itself suffer major setback right from the beginning as it was resulted in the formation of a faction among the HPC called HPC-D (Hmar People's Convention Democratic). The HPC-D was against the MoS and continued to hold armed struggle against the Government of Mizoram in demand for greater

⁵ The HPC quest for Hmar autonomy started with the demand for the creation 'Hmar Ram' a homeland in the Hmar occupied areas in the states of Assam, Manipur, Mizoram and Meghalaya in 1987. HPC's first *memorandum* dated 21st January, 1987, submitted to the then Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi. This was soon followed by Second *memorandum* dated October 5, 1987, narrowing their demand area only to the state of Mizoram.

⁶ Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) was signed in Aizawl on July 27, 1994. Following the agreement the armed cadres of the HPC surrendered their weapons in October 1994.

autonomy⁷. The demand made by the HPC-D has not been materialised till date because the State Government reaffirmed that it could not afford the creation of another Autonomous District (Vanglaini 2013: July 19 & August 17). The State Government's indifference to the demand of the HPC-D is supported by the non-governmental organisations in Mizoram⁸. The main idea behind the support made by the NGOs is that, the Mizo communities as whole (Nation) could not afford another 'territorial division' which would further intensify 'ethnic' differences. They therefore, urged all the minority communities to define their term under Mizo and Mizoram, culturally and politically.

IV. Against the State

In order to intensify their cause, the HPC-D boycotted the Village Council election in 15 villages that was to be held on February 23, 2012. The Government of Mizoram was left with no choice but extended the term of the existing Village Councils in these villages⁹. Moreover the movement also turns against the largest NGO (Young Mizo Association) whom the HPC-D accused of being against their demands. Thus, the HPC-D made public declaration to the YMA branches in the villages covered under the 'demand areas' for the submission of the YMA 'official seals' to the Central YMA¹⁰. The YMA branches under the 'demand areas' has no option but to comply by the HPC-D notifications.

Therefore, the initiative taken by the HPC-D in their struggle for autonomy has indicated three important things: first, it has put pressure on the government for the full implementation of MoS, particularly the creation of District Council under the Sixth Schedule¹¹. Second, the HPC-D resistance against the CYMA clearly signifies that they will put pressure on any organisations that do not support their demand for autonomy.

⁷ In the beginning of 2007, the Mizoram Government initiated a series of steps for political dialogue with HPC-D. The HPC-D who pursued greater autonomy demanded tripartite talks between the Central Government and the Government of Mizoram. According to the HPC-D, their terms mainly entailed the creation of Hmar Territorial Council (HTC) in the State of Mizoram under the Sixth Schedule. Moreover to win the heart of the Mizo the HPC-D also stated that "it would not compromise the territorial integrity of the State of Mizoram and had no intention of breaking away from it".

⁸ 'Joint Resolution' published by the CYMA, MHIP Gen. Hqrs. & MUP Gen. Hqrs., August 5, 2013, Aizawl.

⁹ State Election Commission Notification, No. B. 12011/48/2012-SEC/VC/Vol-II, the 10th July, 2013.

¹⁰ In the month of February 2012, there was a rumor spread by 'some unknown' that the CYMA president in his public speech proclaimed that the YMA was against the up gradation of SHDC to ADC. This had created a tension between the CYMA and the HPC-D in which the Chairman of HPC-D Zosangbera sent open letter to T. Sangkunga, President CYMA accusing him of making such speech in the public. Soon, the General Secretary of CYMA made a clarification that "the President did not make such speech and urged the YMA branches in the HPCD Demand Area not to submitted their seals to the CYMA and that the CYMA has tries to pacify the existing tension". 'Central YMA Thuchhuak', CYMA office, April 20, 2012, Aizawl. (<http://centrallyma.org.in/news.php?readmore=172>, accessed on October 7, 2013)

Thirdly, and most importantly, they tend to create separate ethnic identity and space within Mizo (Nation), similar to that of the Lai and Maras, and seek recognition of 'their difference' under the Constitution of India¹².

The State Government is caught in the political 'imbroglio' as constant pressure is exerted by demanding greater autonomy within the state. Till now, the State Government has remained adamant on its position on not creating separate autonomous region. For how long it can hold or divert the struggle for autonomous space remains a serious political question. With regard to the Hmar issues, some degree of political dialogue has been initiated between the Government of Mizoram and HPC, i.e., formation of Sinlung Hills Development Council (SHDC), but the continuous demand made by the faction group HPC-D for greater autonomy still remains at large.

The question is – will the granting of Autonomous Council to the Hmar within the state of Mizoram lead to harmony. Or, is it affordable to the State Government to create another Autonomous District where many minority communities compete for territorial recognition within the State boundary.

Experience has shown that simply granting Autonomous Council does not offer the 'best' solution for ethnic minorities within the State¹³. Even in the present context, one can clearly see that the ADCs put constant pressure on the State Government for greater degree of autonomy if possible 'total autonomy' what one can term it. Thus apprehension persist up to what extend the term 'autonomy' can be defined and In the case of the Hmar, one needs to think and rethink seriously what will be the possible 'solution' which can be realised in letter and spirit to cede the struggle.

V. Concluding Remarks

It has been the task of the policy maker, academician, the NGOs, the leaders of the ethnic communities, the media and of course the insurgents to find the best solution to the present context. How far this ever growing movement of autonomy will persist? Will it end? Does the establishment of institutional arrangement (ethnic space) will ever end the quest for greater autonomy? It is difficult to answer such questions as the state often tries to deviate from the issue instead of putting efforts for possible solution. Thus, it is necessary to look into the real situation where the presence of different ethnic communities indicates deep cleavage within the society itself. In this context it

¹¹ In the memorandum submitted to the then Governor of Mizoram, the leaders of HPC states that "Hmar District Council is the dragnet to overcome all the prevailing problems of the Hmars." Memorandum submitted to the Governor of Mizoram by HPC General Hqr. in Aizawl, October 12, 2000.

¹² Mizo Hmar Welfare Community issued a public statement stating that: "Hmar is the largest tribe of the Mizo and ...that they will never detached or disintegrated from the Mizo" see, *MHWC Press Release*, Aizawl, August 7, 2013.

¹³ Most of the States in North Eastern Indian has faced the challenge on how to accommodate the ethnic minorities. There are hardly any Autonomous District which is content to their relation with the State and the Centre Government, particularly the financial relation.

may help to employ Charles Taylor's "deep diversity" to answer the problem arises out of deep cleavage. First, 'deep diversity' itself is necessary to understand that there is a cleavage of difference in each community in a wider context. Second, 'the politic of recognition' is a necessary instrument which is well advocated by the communitarian to accommodate difference through institutional arrangement. To attain recognition, "dialogue" is an essential element that sanctions accommodation of the minority culture. But, the most important is "inter dependent" which is important for the survival "deep diversity".

Inter dependent is the most important to put remarks in the context of the present study. Defining and refining our difference from other though necessary, but it keeps constant distance between 'us' and 'them'. The institutional arrangement under ADC in the present context of Mizoram gives an example that though each Autonomous Districts enjoy certain degree of autonomy the question remains on the nature of 'autonomy' which is unending political process. Moreover, apprehension laying over the issue of 'autonomy' that it can lead to distortion rather than solution if deviated from the real cause. For example, one need to question does 'autonomy' result in a unifying nature of the Mizo as a nation or 'divide'. It needs one to seek a balance tendency in the struggle for autonomy. It is also the duty of each community particularly the Mizo society in a larger context to give space for ethnic minorities. It ought to find commonality with other (individually or community) and that one needs to deepen our dependence on each other for integration and development. Thus, one needs to be careful in pursuing autonomy on ethnic line as it can lead to distortion than understanding. This is the exact stands of NGOs such as YMA which keep iterating for integrating the various ethnic communities under one umbrella, though difficult is not impossible. It is necessary to propagate that each community needs the other for their survival and integration is must for development. It does not imply that minority will have no autonomy or not accommodate in the larger realm. But the demand for 'autonomy' has to come along with the process of integration with faith and mutual understanding. It is necessary to re-define and refine our notion of autonomy by involving various parties and seek solutions, of which the state take the lead.

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