

Mizoram: First as UT, then as State

Although Mizoram became a state only in 1987, it got the status of a Union Territory (UT) in 1972 along with the statehood for Manipur, Tripura and Meghalaya. Interestingly, while the APHLC was up in arms against the Pataskar commission for not recommending statehood for Meghalaya, one of the key recommendations of the Commission was the creation of a UT in the area covered by the Lushai Hills. It may be mentioned that both the Mizo Union and the MNF had boycotted the Commission because they said that they had already submitted their memorandum to the Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, which inter alia read:

'A step motherly treatment meted out to the Mizo Hills (by Assam government) is responsible for the unfortunate feeling of discontent that we are being treated as second rate citizens ...unless the political aspirations of Mizos are fulfilled through the creation of Mizoram, as there is no desire to remain part of Assam, there is still that sincere desire in the hearts of majority of Mizos to feel themselves as Indians'.

Having said this, it must be pointed out that while there was absolute unanimity about wanting to get out of Assam, the Mizo Union wanted a state within India , but the MNF which had its origins in the Mizo National Famine Front established in 1960 wanted a sovereign Mizo state. From 1959, the entire region had been ravaged by a debilitating famine , the attitude and response of the Assam government was absolutely callous and indifferent. This alienated all sections of the Mizo society, and the attempts to impose Assamese as the administrative language for the entire state aggravated this feeling of discontent and frustration.

In fact , right from the 1952, when the District Council in the Lushai Hills was established under the Sixth Schedule , there was a clear feeling that the government of Assam was hell bent on making it a moribund . While the old

chieftain system had collapsed, the new Council was quite weak to step into its shoes. Even though the Mizo Union had won the elections handsomely, both to the Advisory Council in 1948 and then in 1952, the traditional chiefs, who held hereditary power under the old dispensation were clearly opposed to them.

In their memorandum to the SRC, the Mizo Union which was dominating the District Council sought the inclusion of Mizo dominated areas of Manipur and Tripura in the Lushai Hills. This reconstituted district was to be part of the Eastern Hills State comprising Manipur, Tripura along with the autonomous districts of Assam and NEFA. However, given the linguistic and ethnic diversity in the proposed Hill state, the Mizos reneged from their position, and pressed for a separate Mizoram state within the Indian Union.

After 1961, there was a clear split between the Mizo Union and the MNF, which declared its aim of a sovereign Mizoram. By 1963, the party gained currency, especially among the youth, and though it captured 145 village councils, the Mizo Union was still the dominant political force – it had 220 village councils with them. But the Laldenga led MNF, egged on by its supporters in East Pakistan launched *Operation Jericho*, an armed struggle for a sovereign Mizoram by launching simultaneous attacks on the Assam Rifles (AR) garrisons at Aizawl, Lunglei and Champhai, BSF outposts and the Aizawl Treasury on 1 March, 1966. Even the Deputy Commissioner of Aizawl, TS Gill had to take shelter in the AR camp. But the AR garrison held on, and the proposed victory parade scheduled for March 2, could not be held for the insurgents had underestimated the strength of the Indian army and overestimated the support of ISI and East Pakistan. But even though the insurgents could not hoist the flag, they released the prisoners from the Aizawl jail and looted the shops of the non-Mizos (*Vais*).

On 2 March 1966, the AFSPA was invoked, curfew imposed in Aizawl and reinforcements sent for Assam Rifles by helicopters. After the attack on the chopper of Eastern Army commander, Lt Gen Sam Manekshaw, the IAF jets strafed the MNF insurgent posts using machine guns on 4th/5th March, the one and only instance of *combat action by IAF* within the country.

In all this, the Mizo Union was steadfast in its support for India. Their biggest grouse was that the CM of Assam BP Chaliha was supporting MNF – a

secessionist organization- because for him *'the disintegration of the state of Assam is more serious than the amputation of Mizo Hills from India'*. It may not be true, but this was certainly the popular perception. Meanwhile , in October 1966 the Governor of Assam Vishnu Sahay suggested that *'Mizo hills should be plucked from Assam, and formed into a Union territory'*. The Govt was also cognizant of the fact that the Autonomous Council under the Sixth Schedule had failed to meet the political aspirations . The Mizo Union presented a memorandum to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in December 1970 for a full-fledged state, but a compromise was struck with the enactment of the North Eastern (Areas) Reorganization Act, 1971 under which Mizoram was formed into a UT with thirty three legislators and one seat each in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha . The veteran Mizo Union leader Ch Chhunga took the oath of office as Chief Minister in May 1972.