

Currently serialised in two parts in *Newslink*, the daily newspaper of Aizawl, Mizoram, NE India

WHEN THE RATS CAME CALLING

The Year of the Rats brings a famine-like situation in India's tiny, hilly state of Mizoram. Caught in between a mad-made tragedy in the form of the Indo-Bangladesh border fencing (an exercise carried out by the government of India) that displaced thousands from the border areas, and a natural disaster in the form of "Mautam" (as the 'flowering of bamboo' is locally known as) are the Chakmas and other minority tribes who are living through trying circumstances in the face of the state's apathy and inaction. Dilip Kanti Chakma analyses the situation in one of India's remotest north-east corner.

The bamboo flowers once every 50 years in Mizoram. When it last did so, in the 1950s, the abundance of seeds led to a plague of rats - which in turn led to widespread famine and thousands of deaths in the region.

The resultant famine was because of the rapid increase in the rodent population which was in turn a fallout of the nutritious bamboo fruits which acts as a feed for the rodent population to multiply. And, in the absence of any emergency relief mechanism, widespread famine was the result. The rodent population attacked agricultural fields and attacked food supplies and they attacked human beings as well. The resultant famine was quite disastrous in ways more than one.

Most importantly, the political repercussions it had in the state in particular and the region as a whole is for everyone to see. It gave rise to militancy in the region as the

people increasingly started to feel left out and uncared for by the government machineries as a 'bamboo-flowering' induced famine-wrecked havoc in the hills.

As a child I grew up with grandma's stories of how people survived the great famine as they called it and how even wild yam and wild roots were scarce (rodents eat up everything except wild yam and wild roots!). If wild yam and wild roots or for that matter rat meats are a delicacy in Mizoram today, it is thanks to the great famine of the late 1950s when hungry people in search of food were left without any choice but to try the wild things that came their way.

As the bamboos started to flower again after fifty years, there have been reports of famine-like situations in Mizoram and of starvation deaths pouring in from some parts of the state. The 'bamboo flowers' have not only put the state government in an embarrassing situation but also proved how inadequately prepared the state administration was to handle such a situation.

Firstly, it is not as if the administration has been caught unaware since the flowering of bamboos occurs over a cycle of 50 years with severe consequences. Secondly, no lessons seem to have been learnt from the last '*Mautam*' that ravaged the Mizo hills in the late 1950s even though those who are ruling the state today are those who were at the forefront of the fight against the then Assam government's step-motherly treatment of the people of famine-ravaged Mizo hills in the late 50s. As history tells us, an ill-conceived state response or the lack of it thereof to such natural calamities could result in social and political turmoil, as was the case in Mizoram in 1959.

Unfortunately, this time too the responses of the government machinery have not been adequate and sympathetic and the results are there for everyone to see. Despite early warnings of the impending disaster, no serious efforts have been made to satisfactorily address the crisis.

Villagers are struggling to feed themselves after rats pillaged crops across the state. Estimates indicate almost 95% destruction of rice crop in many parts of the state

Government efforts including cash-for-work programmes and additional subsidised food through the public distribution system are falling short of needs. Though the State declared emergency in December 2007, efforts to act in emergency-like situations have been sluggish so far and such emergency measures have by and large proved inadequate in the face of the crisis.

People are living on one meal a day as they do not have enough money to buy subsidised rice. Many more are foraging in forests for food.

All the eight districts of Mizoram consisting of 824 villages are facing food crisis. The worst affected districts are Lawngtlai with 118 villages, Saiha with 76 villages, Mamit with 96 villages and Lunglei with 186 villages.

An analysis of the affected areas shows that minority tribes such as the Chakmas, the Reangs, the Lhais, Maras are the most affected ones as they are still dependent on '*slash and burn*' method of agriculture for their sustenance.

Most of the affected areas are not easily accessible and often can be reached only by foot along jungle trails. With the onset of monsoon many villages will be totally cut off and in the absence of health care facilities in these regions the killer malaria will play havoc among the already affected families. Nutrition deficiency and related diseases are sure to bring about fatal consequences among the children, many of whom would have already dropped out from schools. And, in the absence of medical facilities in these areas the already grim situation will further deteriorate in the coming months.

Maybe this time the prevailing situation is no match compared to the last one in terms of magnitude and scale of population affected. However, that was then. Today an

independent Indian marched through sixty years or so and is being counted among one on the world arena. Mizoram itself has marched ahead on its own in myriad ways.

A section of the population has merged ahead while a section of it remained where it was in terms of developmental parameters. There are tribes in the state such as the Chakmas, Brus, the Lhais, Hmars, the Maras whose literacy rate is as low as thirty percent as compared to the ninety plus something percentage that the state enjoys in the national literacy map.

There are still sections of the populace in the state who are still backward, and in fact too backward to even imagine facing any eventuality such as the Muatam without proper relief delivery machinery in place. Let us not forget that there are still minority tribes in the state who remain to this day as backward as the Mizos were way back in the late 1950s, when the last *Mautam* happened. If the magnitude of starvation was severe then, it is no different this time to these tribes who dwell in the remotes corners of the state in late 1950s rural set-up.

The recent report by ActionAid India has revealed the grim reality of starvation faced by thousands of people across Mizoram belonging to the tribes of Chakma, Lai, Bowm, Burmese and Mara.

A team who visited remote villages of Lawngtlai, which is a dominantly minority district in southern Mizoram reported that there were nearly 10,000 people facing extreme situations of starvation. Their food stocks have been depleted and their agricultural fields and kitchen gardens are completely destroyed by the rodents beside their homes being infested and their belongings ruined.

The people in these parts depended largely on *slash and burn* method of cultivation for sustenance and they barely have any other sources of income for purchasing food. But due to the *Mautam*, their crops planted in 2007 hardly yielded any harvest. Reports

indicate that nearly 55 per cent of the population is surviving on roots of yam and banana from the jungles.

As the onslaught of the rodents continues without any relief support from the government or from any non governmental agencies – people fear that even these forest reserves will be exhausted in the coming two to three months and they will have to further forage into the jungles for food. Most families in the villages have reduced their meals from three a day to just one or two a day and in the absence of any other alternative source of income generation the situation seem grim.

In an era when the world is busy talking and debating about human rights and other allied rights such as the ‘right to food’, ‘the right to health care’ and the like, reports of even a single starvation death coming from these remotest parts of the state ought to be seriously noted. And, as the report undertaken by ActionAid India showed, minority non-Mizo tribes such as the Chakmas, the Brus, the Lhais, the Maras, the Hmars are primarily the ones to suffer the most.

Besides the immediate impact of widespread famine, there is every possibility that like the one in the late 1950, the ongoing *Mautam* might have far-reaching consequences in the long run. Economically, it will leave these effected families without food grains for the next few years, debt-ridden and debt-trapped in the absence of any alternate source of income to feed them. Pictures of backward Vidharba district in Maharashtra and the farmer suicides therein scan through one’s mind here and it would not be a surprise if a similar eventuality is witnessed in these remotest parts of the state as well. Socially, one can foresee social turmoil and conflicts at some point of time as the affected populations begin to lose faith in the sincerity of the administration and its failure to tackle a disaster it always knew was coming.

Mass dropout of students from schools is bound to happen and healthcare needs of the people will go for a toss in the absence of an integrated approach from the administration.

Unlike a tsunami or an earthquake that wrecks havoc without a warning, Mautam has been always on the cards and the state could have been better prepared to face it head-on. The government's initiative of 'BUFFACOS' – providing Re1 for every rat tail submitted by a villager- has not brought any relief to the people as people in these parts do not even know about such a programme and in hindsight it now looks like a mere child's play and a policy subjected to much ridicule and merciless jokes.

Politically, there is already palpable resentment among sections of the population. The Bru problem is yet to find a solution and the Lhais and the Maras have been crying foul over the step-motherly treatment meted out to them (a recent instance being the budget allocation for the District Councils), the Chakmas still harboring vision of a greater autonomy for themselves and it would be utter foolishness on the part of the state to put them in the backburner for they are sure to boomerang if the circumstances are allowed to made conducive. And, like the Mautam of 1950s acted as fuel to the fire, there is every chance that this Mautam will lead to similar dissenting voices among these minority tribes of the state.

Add to it another man-made disaster brought about by the Indo-Bangla international border fencing undertaken by the Indian government that displaced thousands of families, mostly belonging to the Chakma tribe who have till very recently been the victims of apathy shown by the builders, contractors and the state government machineries. It required more than a number of protests by the affected families in the affected areas and media attention before the administration came out with a face-saving compensation package. Questions such as whether those displaced were adequately compensated or shortchanged or whether their lands have been legally acquired can best be answered if a proactive civil society takes notice and seeks information and details through instruments such as the Right to Information Act.

Whether these man-made fences will lead to the easy solutions that the government of India seeks to achieve is a debate best left to policy makers. Is it merely a tool at the hands of the state to curb the liberty of individuals in the garb of national security? I can't

help myself but wonder how does the international fence not curb the autonomy of the very people whose interest the state seek to protect. It fails to convince me for one! On one hand we talk about the world being a global village, and romanticise terms such as 'free trade', 'borderless world', and on the other hand we as a nation are busy building fences that we know would not in any way whatsoever contribute to the first one.

Like Dispur was unaware of the woes of the people of the Mizo hills then, isn't it visibly possible for Aizawl to show a blind eye to sparse media reports of starvation, especially among the populace of these backward minority tribes in the state?

The Central and State government urgently need to step up the response to meet the food crisis. Nothing short of a concerted effort is being called for to deal with the prevailing situation. More food for the hungry, seeds funds for the next harvests and a swift government response to rein in the growing food crisis are some of the immediate needs of the hour. An integrated approach to tackle hunger, and health care needs may not be too bad an option either.