



Environmental Discourse at the Margin: A Case in Mizoram

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There has been limited academic work done on Environmental discourse when taking Mizoram as a subject of study. Their culture is deeply rooted on land and forest but however the Mizos have also passed through several courses of change and development that led to a change in the social system. This paper will examine the factors that are responsible for the alarming decline of forest covers in Mizoram in the recent years (according to ISFR report) - which recorded the most net decrease in forest cover within the country in 2017 ie. 531 square kilometers.

The need to reconstruct Environmental discourse from the margin is of great significant. According to J.B. Foster in his work titled 'Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology' concluded that, "...we enter the 21st century- a century that is bound to constitute a turning point for good or ill in the human relation to the environment". Therefore, it is pertinent to conduct a study on the interrelationship between society and the environment which will be the main objective of this paper.

Key words: Environment, Forest, Forest Loss, Change.

Introduction

The inclusion of environment within sociological discourse brought a new chapter for the subject growth. So also to have a sociological analysis of environment on the state of Mizoram will be a great contribution for the growth of the subject. Environmental discourse and awareness has gradually gained its momentum in the state when compared with its traditional society. Presently, the state has few Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) which are registered under Mizoram society registration act, like;

Save Environment Association (SENVVA), The Centre for Environment Protection (CEP), Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Network (BIOCONE), Association for Environmental Preservation (ASEP) and Green Mizoram Network (GMN). In the past society, Mizo's have a traditional chief who was the ultimate authority in terms of forest management and its utilization. Each year, the chief along with his associates decides on the management of forest. Later, when the new political system was established in the state, forest was administered by Mizoram Autonomous District Council since 1952 headed by Additional District Commissioner as DFO and one ACF with other staff. When Mizoram attained U.T. status in the year 1972, the Forest Department became full fledged department headed by Director of the rank of Conservator of Forest. The post was then upgraded to Chief Conservator of Forest in 1983 and was later renamed as Environment and Forest Department with the creation of one Principal Chief Conservator of Forest (PCCF) in the year 1987 (<https://forest.mizoram.gov.in/page/mizoram-forest-at-a-glance>).

The forest type in Mizoram has been classified differently by different researchers among which the most popular classification is the one made by Singh et al. (2002); which are as follows (SOER, 2016 pp.28-30):

- (i.) Tropical Wet Evergreen and Semi-evergreen Forests: usually occur below an altitude of 900m and form one of the major forest types of the state.
- (ii) Montane Sub-tropical Forests: are usually found between 900m and 1500m altitude in the eastern fringes bordering Chin Hills of Myanmar and places of cooler and less precipitation.
- (iii) Temperate Forests: occur above the elevation of 1600m.
- (iv) Bamboo Forests: usually grow as an under storey to the tree species in tropical evergreen and sub-tropical mixed-deciduous forest.
- (v) Quercus Forests: are usually found intermingled in sub-tropical and temperate areas.
- (vi) Jhumland: are very common and are classified as current jhumland, old jhumland and abandoned jhumland.

Theoretical Approach

Catton and Dunlap in their work *Environmental Sociology: A New Paradigm* (1978), displayed how environmental sociology attempt to understand the recent social change that are difficult to comprehend from the traditional sociological perspectives which made them proposed a shift from the anthropocentric viewpoint known as Human Exemptionalism Paradigm (HEP) to the new paradigm what they termed as New Environmental Paradigm (NEP), their main points are as following:

- (1.) Human beings are but one species among many that are interdependently involved in the biotic communities that shape our social lives.

(2.) Intricate linkages of cause and effect and feedback in the web of nature produce many unintended consequences from purposive human action.

(3.) The world is finite, so there are potent physical and biological limits constraining economic growth, social progress and other societal phenomena.

The main attempt is to illustrate the utility of the NEP on *social stratification* for it is believed that it will be one of many aspects of society that will be significantly affected by ecological constraints. They have further stated that in the short run it is expected a reverting to economic growth synthesis at the cost of environment which cannot last indefinitely and led to the necessity of choosing between managed scarcity and ecological synthesis. The achievement of a truly ecological synthesis will require achieving a steady state society which will be a very difficult goal.

Another profound work on theoretical approach to Environmental Sociology is the work done by J.B. Foster titled *Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology* (1999). Foster argued about the marginalization of environment or social ecology in the tradition of the subject saying that "One result of this problem of theoretical dissonance is that environmental sociology, despite important innovations, has continued to have only a marginal role within the discipline as a whole" (Foster 1999, pp. 368-9). He further argued that Marx in his work *Capital* talked about the 'rift' in the metabolic interaction between man and the earth" or in the "social metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life," through the removal from the soil of its constituent elements, requiring its "systematic restoration" (Foster 1999, p. 380). He also contend that another essential aspect of Marx concept of metabolism is the notion of *Sustainability* by saying that for Marx, the "excrement produced by man's natural metabolism," along with waste of industrial production and consumption, needed to be recycled back into the production, as part of a complete metabolic cycle (Marx 1981, p.195).

Objective of the paper

The paper will study the reasons for the alarming decline of forest cover in Mizoram according to ISFR 2017- 531 square kilometer of forest loss was recorded.

Findings and Analysis

According to the Indian State of Forest Report (ISFR) the term 'Forest Cover' refers to all lands more than one hectare in area with a tree canopy of more than 10 per cent, irrespective of land use, ownership and legal status (ISFR 2017 Introduction p. 5). The Forest Survey of India (FSI) classify forest cover into three density classes namely; Very Dense Forest ie. canopy density greater than 70 per cent, Moderately Dense Forest- ie. canopy density between 40 per cent to 70 per cent, Open Forest- ie. canopy 10 to 40 per cent since 2001. The total forest cover of the country as ISFR 2017 report is 708273 sq km which is 21.54% of the geographic

area. In terms of percentage of forest cover Mizoram recorded the second highest having 86.27% of total area forest cover after Lakshadweep having a record of 90.33% (ISFR 2017, Forest Cover p.25).

The forest cover record of Mizoram according to the ISFR during the year 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2021 can be seen in the following table:

Table 1. Forest Cover in Mizoram

Sl. No.	Year	Forest Cover (in sq. kms.)	Change in Forest Cover (sq. kms.)
1.	2013	19,054	-
2.	2015	18,748	-306
3.	2017	18,186	-562
4.	2019	18,006	-180
5.	2021	17,820	-186

Source: ISFR 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2021

From the above data we can observe that, the alarming decline in forest cover of Mizoram according to ISFR 2017 report is not a sudden incident; in the year 2013 Mizoram experienced forest loss of 63 square kilometers and from 2015 it experienced a massive loss of forest upto 306 square kilometers and then continued to increase its loss to 531 square kilometers in 2017 (which recorded the highest forest loss in the county). When comparing the data of 2013 with 2017, we can find that within four years Mizoram has experienced forest loss of 868 square kilometers which means that if the momentum of forest loss continues at the same rate within the coming ten years Mizoram will experience forest loss of 2,170 square kilometers.

From the data we can also observe that it is the Open Forest (forest canopy of 10 to 40 per cent) that are most prone to deterioration. This may be because of the predominance of the Open Forest within the state, and being an open forest it is less protected when compared with the other types of forest. In recent years ie. 2019 and 2021 report though forest loss is still observed, the rate of loss is declining which shows a little positive sign. This may be attributed to the states action towards forest protection, compensatory afforestation program and general awareness towards forest conservation and gradual change of attitudes towards forest and its products especially among the younger generations.

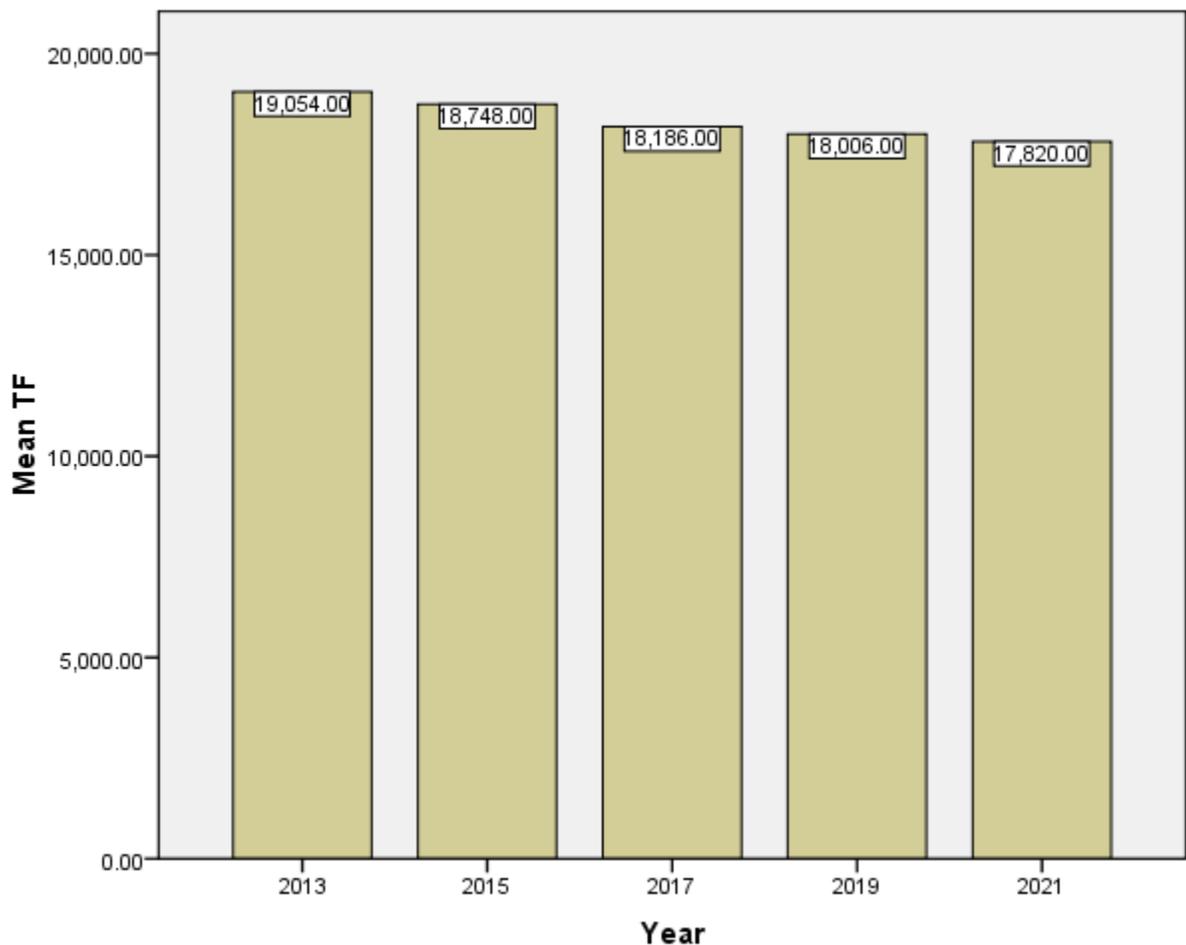


Fig. Bar chart of Mizoram forest covers for the year 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2021.

There may be several factors for the rapid decline of forest in Mizoram. According to interview conducted with the State Forest Department officials; forest cover is monitored by the Forest Survey of India (FSI), Dehradun therefore, firstly the state Forest Department does not take part in the survey, so it does not have much justification for the reason of forest loss. Secondly, the season when the FSI conducted the survey is mostly during the dry season which may display the areas as less forested since the data are collected by satellite / remote sensing system. The other reasons of forest loss in the state according to the officials are; huge developmental projects in the state such as Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, railway projects etc., the illicit felling of trees and the continuous practice of shifting cultivation within the state.

Another reason for massive loss of forest may be implicitly related to the growth of GSDP of the state. According to the Economic Survey 2017-18 report of the state government, Mizoram is among the four high growth states namely; Gujarat, Jarkhand, Mizoram and Tripura (Economic Survey 2017-18 p. 3). The contribution of Environment and Forest Department in terms of economy or revenue during the last financial year and current year according to the Economic Survey 2017-18 is substantial amount. The revenue receipt during the year 2016-17 is Rs. 28,703,259/- and during 2017-18 (as on October 2017) is Rs. 74,52,063. This

growth in the state economy can also be another factor for the gradual and increasing decline in forest area of the state.

Conclusion

The importance of forest cannot be neglected in the study Social Ecology. Among the various environmental elements, forest occupies a crucial value especially when studied from the social angle. It has been recognized as the very basis of our survival and have been identified as a necessary resource which plays a significant role both in social and economic development of a community and can improve the quality of life in general (Bajwa 1987, p.210). Apart from the economic contribution, the existence of intimate relationship between forest and society through human culture is of great deal. The cultural interrelatedness of the Mizo with their forest is noteworthy; the foundation of the traditional Mizo society is based on its forest which forms the essence of their social system. However, it can be assumed that the massive loss of forest of the state in the present day will not only cost material loss but also substantial amount of intangible loss which was once the very essence of their identity and existence.

The positive sign that shows in the data table is the decrease in forest loss in recent years, there can be several factors for this result. The state forest department took several measures to conserve and protect forest with all its products; timber and non-timber forest products (NTFP) as well. This restoration of trees and timbers also led to the influx and increase of birds and animals. The role of environmental NGO's within the state that work hand in hand with the government is also noteworthy, the protection of forest, afforestation and awareness campaign among the masses done by these NGO's greatly contributed to the favorable outcome in the present day. The biggest NGO in Mizoram ie. Young Mizo Association (YMA) which has its unit and branch all over the state has made abundant contribution in terms of environmental disaster like control of forest fires, announcement of a particular river as protected river, control of poaching and illicit felling of trees, seizing of smuggled wildlife items etc. The long line traditional practice of shifting cultivation although it cannot be totally undo/ abolished as of now, however the local administration department along with the Village Council made certain control in terms of the plot site selected for shifting cultivation, such that shifting cultivation has been conducted only on unclassed forest of the state. Therefore, although the state faced drastic forest loss yet it has shown a positive record in recent years and can continue to improve better in the years to come.

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