

Runner System: Delivering messages during Mizo National Front uprising in Mizoram: 1966-1988

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Abstract

Wars and armed conflicts all have one thing in common: fight for Information. Information plays a vital role in conflicts. The actors involved in the conflict ensure that information of the daily operations, its plan of attack and the whereabouts of the individuals remain secret from the other parties. Information is power and lack of information could have serious effects on the operations, therefore, passing information requires a proper and safe channel. This article explores the communication channels adopted by the Mizo National Front (MNF) during the twenty years of the Mizo uprising. It gives insights into the implementation of a system called 'Runner System', an underground system of using runners to deliver information from one place to its destination amidst the tight security. It traces the early communication method of the MNF at the genesis of the uprising and how it had successfully operated from underground using 'Runner system'.

Keywords: Mizo, MNF, Uprising, Runners, Information

Introduction

On the night of 28 February 1966, the Mizo National Army (MNA), an armed wing of Mizo National Front (MNF) launched 'Operation Jericho' and attacked security posts of the government of India, wiping out the rudimentary police force except for Assam Rifles headquarters in Aizawl. The outbreak of violence was just a beginning of many attacks, deaths and chaos in what was once a peaceful society. The next day, on 1 March 1966, MNF declared 'Independence' declaring India as unfit to rule the people of Mizoram. It replaced Indian Tricolour flag with MNF

flag (Hluna, 2012). An underground Government of the MNF called 'Mizoram Sawrkar (Government)' was formed. The revolt took the Government of India by surprise, resulting in extreme counter-insurgency measures.

The Government of India declared the Mizo Hills a 'disturbed area' under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and rushed security forces to Mizoram. Troops moved in and retook all the army posts (District Gazetteers, 1989). On March 6, 1966, Aizawl came under air-strikes, the one and only time when Government bombed its own people. The

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MNF rebels went underground, leaving behind their families and loved ones. The fight for independence continued from the jungle. The uprising went on for twenty years until the bitter chapter of conflict was ended with statehood under the constitution of India. The MNF stepped down from their demand for 'Independence' and settle for 'Statehood'. An agreement was signed on 30th June 1986. Upon the agreement, Mizoram was conferred statehood and became the 23rd State of India on 20th February 1987. The 'Mizo Peace Accord' today stands as a model for many rebel groups in India and the neighbouring countries (Prasad, 1987).

The MNF on its first step towards its fight for 'independence' began by attacking the security posts to cut off the communication, paralysing communication channels of the armies across the state and with the rest of the country. Knowing full well that securing enemies communication lines would be a severe blow to its counter-attack operation, MNF aimed at taking over the communication channels. At the initial stage, they succeeded in disrupting all communications with the outside world. The link from Aizawl was maintained only by wireless (District Gazetteers, 1989). Indian army's communication system remained paralysed for a few days before it was taken back from the rebel forces. The MNF rebels were forced to move to the jungle and ran their operations from underground. The first and foremost action taken up by the MNF during the conflict was to set up a good communication system. 'Runner system' is a system that

employs an individual or a group of people to ferry message from one place to another.

Early Communication Method

Much before telephones, mobile phones, wireless telegraph and internet were developed; people used very archaic ways of communicating. Communication is an exchange of information and messages. Our early ancestors communicated through nonverbal gestures and an evolving system of spoken languages. Before the emergence of the printing press, several old world societies were recording economic transactions through the use of fired clay tokens one to three centimetres in size (Schmandt-besserat, 1992). The Incas of Ancient Peru used series of cords of different length, thickness and colours that was knotted and braided which constituted information to record crop production, taxation, a census and a variety of other kinds of information (Ascher, 1981). Ancient Egyptians used stone, papyrus and fine clay made into biscuits or tablets for writing (Innis, 1986). In ancient days, cave drawings and messages carved on stone pillars were communicated very well across time, down through the centuries.

Flames, beacon, torches, smoke and drums were used to send a message over a long distance. There are forms of long-distance communication not based on words. Chinese first used the smoke signals in 1800 BC to communicate with soldiers stationed at Great Wall of China and smoke signals were used as a threat

warning system along China's Great Wall (Lovell, 2006). The Native American Indians also used smoke signal to communicate messages. One of the primary uses of the smoke signal was during wartime, smoke signal coding tended to be specific to each tribe so that enemies in the area would not be able to decipher the encoded message (Tomkins, 1969). Thus, there was no standard signal code. Messages that were commonly sent via smoke signals might communicate the number of horses retrieved from a successful raiding party, the number of enemy scalps won in battle, the success or failure of a game hunt, or a call for help. One of the earliest dated uses of the Indian smoke signal was in 1542 AD (Debo, 1970)

Another method of communication in ancient days was using pigeons. Domesticated pigeons are first developed in ancient Egypt. In Baghdad in the 11th century, by selective breeding of suitable birds, the homing pigeon was developed. Windell Levi (1977) in his book 'the pigeon' wrote traced Pigeons with tumbling ability existed in India before 1590, massively used for sending messages.

The invention of paper by the Chinese as early as 105 AD contributed to the spread and development of civilization. From its point of origin in China, the idea and technology of paper-making spread throughout the world (Williams, 2011). The invention of the printing press by Gutenberg in the early 1450s invented a device that combined the use of paper, ink

and a printing press that allowed for books to be mass-produced (history of communication from cave drawings to the web). The invention of printing press led to the rapid and widespread dissemination of messages to the masses.

One of the world's oldest forms of communication is the use of runners for sending messages. In many early civilizations young men called "running messengers" were the only way to send letters and packages. Pheidippides, who died of exhaustion after running 26 miles from Marathon to Athens in 490 BCE, is the earliest known runner carrying the military information (Sterling, 2008) There are few records of these runners, but there is evidence from cultures all around the world, including the Greeks dating back as far as 400 B.C., and many Native American and South American cultures. As a means of communications, the Inca used fast roadrunners to relay messages. The roadrunners were the mailmen of the Inca Empire (Grahl, 2016). In Namibia, runners were used to send messages, they covered hundreds of kilometres on foot, in the murderous heat of summer and bitter cold of winter and they were able to carry up to 17 kg of mail. The mailbag was tied to a stick that they carried on one shoulder and a bag carrying their provisions was attached to the other end of the stick (Grahl, 2016). Runners used horses or other modes of transport to deliver the messages. The British Army introduced courier use of military bicycle in 1881 and the French did likewise in 1896 (Sterling, 2008).

A similar form of communication method was used by the Mizos for a long period of time before communication and transport systems were improved. In hilly terrain like Mizoram, hilltop was an ideal place to send signal messages to the neighbouring villages. In times of death, 'Zualko' (delivering messages of death) was conveyed by means of smoke, torches and fire.

Runner System; An underground communication system

Harold D Lasswell, a communication theorist found a simple communication model where communication begins with a sender, message and ends with a destination. Every communication process begins with a sender and a message that reach its destination through a medium. The medium of the communication evolves and changes with the invention of new technology. With the development of technology, the communication channels change from word of mouth to telephones to wireless telegraph to the internet. Earlier, before the invention of mobile phones, telephones, internet and radio, people relied heavily on letters, paintings, word of mouth, smoke, drums and fire to pass information from one place to another. Information is passed from one generation to another through story-telling and oral history, and what is popularly known as traditional means of communication. In earlier civilization, messages were sent through runners, who either carried letters or through word of mouths. The MNF relied heavily on the

runner system to communicate and mobilize the public. Under the heavy scrutiny of the Indian Army, the MNF had to find ways to communicate and pass information without getting caught. The runner system was found to be the most effective method of communication. Morse code was initially adopted to pass messages, however, it was easily detected and interpreted by the Indian Army as the MNF personnel who adopted Morse code were trained out of former Indian Army personnel, therefore, it was soon dropped and an alternative method was used. Smokes and torches method of passing messages attracted an unwanted attention, radios were not accessible to the masses, wireless telegraph was expensive and telephones were available only in Government offices, therefore the need for an alternative method of communication leads the MNF to adopt 'Runner System'. A runner system involves a person or group of people who relayed the message from one destination to another. Runners acted as postal servicemen, delivering messages to its destination. Runner system was widely adopted by ancient civilization as a means of communication. As the messages were vital for the concerned person, the road runners had to deliver accurately.

On 22 December 1966, Lalmangaiha, a resident of Khatla in Aizawl was arrested by the police and in his confession, he stated that he joined MNF in 1964 as a volunteer without any proper rifle training and he was attached to Unit at Bawngkawn of V.Battalion. He

was posted as a 'runner'. His service entailed delivering messages from one post to another, maintaining secrecy and rushing against time. He used to deliver Mails to Zemabawk, Tachhip, Sateek, Zokhawmuang and Luangmual and mails generally handed over to the Village Council present of the respective villages. There were times he carried mails to MNF leaders, however he could not recall the names of those MNF cadres to which he delivered the mail. When his service was not required, he remained at home like any other civilians and thereby escaped the suspicion of the police. For his good service as a runner, he was promoted to the rank of Captain. There were many runners who were not credited enough for their role during the insurgency. Much as the volunteers who took arms and fight with guns in the jungles, runners risked their life to deliver mails. Information is crucial at times of conflict; the message has to reach its destination. The role of the runners was extremely important as the whole operation relied on their efficiency. When MNF declared Independence on 1 March 1966 and set up 'Mizoram Sawrkar', the administration included postal service, a service that serves MNF throughout the insurgency period by delivering messages from the MNF leaders to it's the rest of the volunteers and vice versa.

BZ Renthlei recalled, "In 1968, I witnessed an incident at Maite village where a runner`s walking stick was thrown off by the Indian army at the check gate. I was afraid that the armies would

check the inside of the stick because I knew that the mail runner had stack MNF mails inside the stick and if found, he could be arrested or killed. Much to my relief, he was let off. Later, when the armies closed the check gate, the runner returned to the area and retrieved his stick and moved along to his destination".

During the Mizo uprising, efficient circulation of mail or letters was essential for mobilising the rebels. The whole administration of Mizoram Sawrkar depended on the regular delivery of mail to the concern people. Writing letters to pass information was the much preferred and the most effective method of communication for the MNF and the people during the uprising. The most effective method of communication of the MNF throughout the uprising was letters using runner system. The runner system was a system adopted by the MNF to communicate and pass on information within them, from the Capitol to headquarters, from one battalion to another and from MNF to other parties. It involves stacking important letters inside the walking sticks to hiding the letter inside the tiffin box to avoid detection of Indian Army. Each battalion appointed runners among them to carry the letters from one battalion to another and to the headquarters and vice versa. The runner system is similar to the postal system where letters are dispatched from the sender to the destination, except in case of MNF the courier was a person. There were times when older people were favoured to carry the letter because they could hide the letters

inside their walking sticks and they were seldom suspected and stopped by the security personnel. The runners would often take days and months to reach their destination. In case of emergency, letters were dispatched through runners who would travel by horse or by jeep. In a normal case, they would travel by foot going through the security check in every village until they reached their destination. After the MNF went underground, the runner system continues to be the most efficient system to communicate. The Indian Army spread throughout Mizoram by the end of 1966 and the security was tight. The Indian army was strictly vigilant of the movement of both the civilians and the MNF volunteers. They often held random checking of the house to detect MNF volunteers. At the entry of each village, the army posted a security check gate, and checked every person that passed through the gate both adults and children. While the MNF went underground, they needed basic amenities to survive. The nearby villagers supplied them with necessities right under the nose of the Indian Army. The higher the security, the more creative the MNF gets. MNF would also post its own personnel as a civilian inside the village to pass information and to mobilise the underground movement with the help of the villagers. The duty personnel would take the task of arranging supplies for the underground armies and smuggling the goods to the jungle. Sometimes, they would send letters, passed information about the status of Indian Army by stacking letters inside the walking

sticks, water carrier (made from bamboo) and inside the tiffin box.

The official letters of MNF were dispatched from the Capitol (The Civil Administration) to the Headquarter (Mizo National Army Headquarter) by using runner system. The official letters were identified as authentic and trustworthy if only it was stamped with a round seal of 'For God and Our Country'. There was no official letterhead as such; all letters were written in white paper with the official stamp. K. Vanlalauva states that the letters were addressed formally to each battalion like 'The Commanding Officers' or 'The Commanding Officer of Eastern Area or Deputy Commissioner', 'Chief Commissioner Western Area', 'Director, Food and Civil Supply' and so on. "We bought round seals from the central Government, the round seal had prescribed words that read 'For God and our country' and 'Government of Mizoram', every unit knew that the instructions on the letters were authentic if it was stamped with this round seal" said K. Vanlalauva. C. Zama also recalls the unique ways of sending letters hiding it inside tiffin boxes, water carrier, hay stocks, walking sticks etc.

Operation Jericho, one of the most important operations of the MNF that will forever be remembered as the night that changed the history of Mizoram; the beginning of the uprising and the Declaration of Independence was carried out with proper planning and dissemination of information to each

concerned battalion through runners. The MNF headquarter instructed each battalion Commanding Officers with its plan of actions and the proposed attack area by sending letters through runner reaching the destination on the scheduled time. C. Lalkhawliana wrote in his diary that on the night of 28 February 1966, MNF had decided to attack the security posts of the Indian Army. There were only 23 hours left before the big battle began. With no proper communication, the MNF leaders needed volunteers to inform the proposed simultaneous attack to its team in Champhai and Lunglei. At 4:30 am on 28 February 1966, MNF volunteer Thankhuma travelled to Lunglei to inform the volunteers about the attack, while Darkhuma travelled at the same time to Champhai to relay the very crucial information. Special messengers informed and passed information all day and night for the success of the operation.

The MNF left Mizoram and settled in Pakistan from 1966 to 1971 until the fall of East Pakistan and the birth of Bangladesh. The MNF moved to Arakan, Myanmar and lived until the peace Accord was signed. During all those time, the strong communication system provides them with easily access with one another. Mr Chalmawia talks about the adoption of runner system to give instruction to each battalion from the Army headquarter “During that time, the forces living on sites and the leaders living in the Capital communicated by sending runners who instructed us on what steps to take, and also the local people like the Chakmas and

the Pakistan people also informed us about the situation through words of mouth”.

All through the peace talks, runner system was efficiently used to communicate with the church, the NGOs, the MNF leaders and the Government of India. No doubt, runner system was the most trusted communication systems of the MNF. They relied heavily on the runner, who was selected from within the family members of MNF, who they trusted to keep the secrets of whereabouts even if captured. The Indian Army, the Indian Intelligence, and many foreign intelligence agencies were at all times hunting for the MNF and the information of their hideout was crucial. Therefore, the MNF was secretive and careful about passing information within themselves or to the others. The runners were not even allowed to open the letters under any circumstances. The unopened letter had to reach the concerned person and it was to be opened only by the concerned person. They put their trust in the runners on top of any other communication systems. C. Zama said “Runners were not allowed to open the letter until it reached the concerned person, so the runners carried the letters day and night safely hidden in their possession. There were many times when the letter reached the destination and it turned out to be absolutely insignificant; while some were urgent, some were love letters but that truly showed the competence and trustworthy characters of the runners”.

The MNF also followed strict rules and regulations on the postal letters. The

volunteers were permitted to send letters to their family but the address of their hideouts could not be mentioned under any circumstances. The MNF adopted a very systematic postal office where each and every letter was scanned and dispatched only after thorough security check. The letters were censored and any information that posed danger to their organisations were either removed or returned to the sender.

Conclusion

The uprising in Mizoram that began in 1966 was before radio and television were available to the masses. Radio was accessed by few people and controlled by the Government, Television had not entered the region and newspaper circulation was limited. The public had limited access to print and electronic media. The MNF with its declaration of independence on 1st March, 1966 drew the people of Mizoram into twenty years of conflict. The MNF had limited access to media. In order to mobilise the people, the MNF needed to have direct access to information and circulate information that

was reliable and accurate. The MNF personnel were scattered across the state and information was vital to give or take directions from top to bottom. In order to send messages to each battalion, the runner system adopted by the MNF proved to be the most efficient system. The early communication method such as using mirrors, smokes and fire proved to be unreliable as the other party could easily detect and decode the message. Hence, MNF adopted the runner system; a system where trusted individual or group of men were used to relay the message by from one place to another. A runner was assigned to deliver messages to its destination without getting caught and as fast as possible despite the weather, bad roads or other problems. The operations of the MNF relied heavily on the runners. The heavy security measures undertaken by the MNF during its operation from underground stations involve censored letters and curbing the free movement of postal service. Runners were sworn to protect the information even if caught. The success of the MNF operation could be credited to the successful adoption of the runner system.

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