

**LAL THANHAWLA** completed 20 months as the Chief Minister of Mizoram this August. He had been in the opposition for a decade and regained his earlier seat with a thumping majority in the last elections. In an interview with **NAMASKAAR**, he discussed at length about his achievements, dreams and various shortcomings that still exist in his state. Excerpts:

**You have gained fame due to The Peace Accord.**

**Could you tell us how it came into being?**

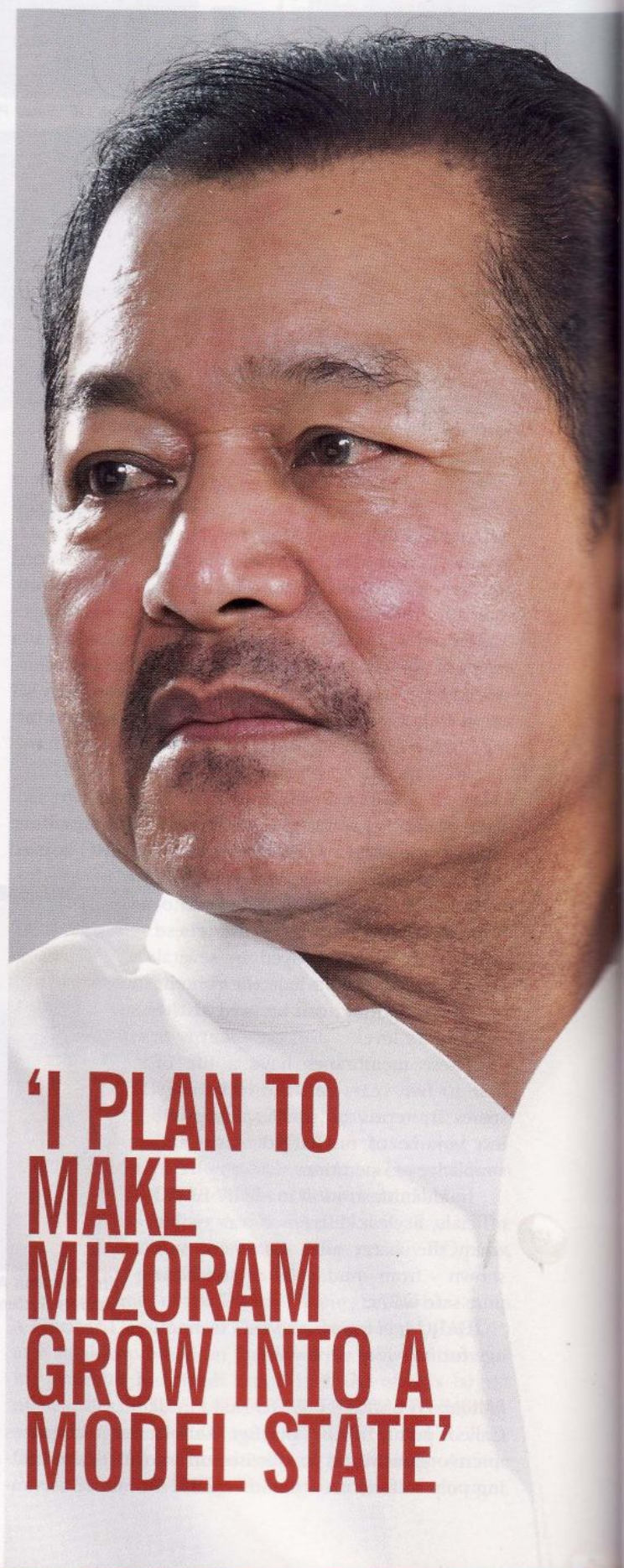
The Mizoram National Army staged insurgency in March 1966, claiming that they are fighting for the Sovereignty of (erstwhile) Mizoram outside India. The state then suffered severe hardships and miseries for almost a year.

In December 1967, the Congress with the help of different local groups, worked single-mindedly towards the peace for Mizoram. I used to then move around trying to educate people here that ours is a political problem which can never be solved through guns. I realised that with the right and meaningful policy it would be possible to get the two warring parties to a negotiation table. I made several rounds to Delhi and ultimately the Late Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi was ready to talk to the rebel group.

Gandhi's sudden death, however, never saw the meeting happening. Later Rajeev Gandhi understood my intention and after 10 long years of insurgency, the Peace Accord was signed on June 30, 1986. To facilitate the occasion, Rajeev Gandhi demanded that a political agreement should be made between the rebel leader and Arjun Singh. This was finally signed at Arjun Singh's residence. We took the Mizos into confidence and things have been good so far.

**What are your major thrust areas now?**

We hope to achieve substantial progress in the New Land Use Programme (NLUP). This aims at helping the farmers increase their productivity and help them acquire additional income through non-farming activities. The Union government as well as distinguished economists have well-appreciated this scheme. If the NLUP works out well, it will be a model for the other similarly placed states of the country.



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**Please elaborate on the NLUP.**

It aims to replace the traditional slash-and-burn method of cultivation (*Jhum*) with more sustainable land-based means of livelihood. About 80 per cent of the state's farmers still practise this traditional method of cultivation which has resulted in degradation of forest lands and worsening of the soil condition. The NLUP aims to support 1,20,000 families in the first five years. The department of agriculture, horticulture, veterinary, industries, forest, fisheries, sericulture soil and water conservation will be involved in the scheme. The NLUP aims to restore ecological balance by providing the farmers sustainable and permanent land-based livelihood. It intends to keep 60 per cent of the state's total geographical area under forest cover and the remaining for land-based development. The main strategies would include accelerating the growth in agricultural sector to around four per cent and larger investment of private sector through farming. The NLUP will ensure ample plantation and orchards of kiwis, passion fruits, grapes, strawberry, pineapple and ginger.



**With such exotic vegetation, do you have any marketing strategy?**

Different MNCs like Global Line Inc, USA, have been approaching us for some time now. This company has taken a keen interest to export our pineapple and other passion fruits in a tin can. Even popular winemakers have contacted us from Shimla. The MoU has already been drafted and we are waiting for the final meeting to sign it.

**What plans do you have regarding tourism and culture?**

We are planning to begin with eco-tourism for which we have identified many places like Phawngpui — the Blue Mountains, which is the highest peak here. Reiek is yet another village on the western side from Aizwal.

There is a plan of opening another airport and more helipads in south Mizoram. We are working on the agreement between the Government of India and Myanmar regarding both land and sea routes for which Sittwe Port has been identified by which it will soon turn into a Gateway of the East.

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While trade and tourism seem to be taking a lot of time, literacy in your State has reached almost 89 per cent.

Christianity has not only socially transformed the Mizos but has introduced the concept of adult literacy. We had expected 100 per cent literacy but because of two districts in southern Mizoram, we failed to achieve this goal.

**What are the measures that you are taking to introduce better quality of (vocational) education?**

We all know that IT industry is synonymous with development. We are encouraging this sector and our youngsters have taken a keen interest in the same. We have already made a humble beginning with NIT and DOEACC. Besides IT sector, polytechnique colleges are set-up which also include fashion technology. We keep trying to improve the quality of education. We have constituted an Education Reforms Commission with renowned educationists of our country. We are planning to set up institutes of management, media studies and agriculture. At the same time we have included mass communication and engineering in our university curriculum.

**You are well-known for your keen interest in sports. What are the steps that you are taking to bring your state into the global scenario?**

These days we are following the philosophy of 'Catch Them Young'. Youngsters here are full of energy and

are quick learners. They have a keen interest in football, hockey and boxing. To promote sports we are setting up a stadium — Rajiv Gandhi Sports Stadium. I have ordered for a boxing ring to be constructed in all eight district headquarters out here.

These boys have an inherent talent for football and there are a number of them representing many important football clubs despite the fact that they have had no formal training. In the same way, Mizo girls are extremely good in hockey. For the last many years, the Mizos have been winning medals in various sports like kick-boxing, Wushu, Taekwando at both the national and international events.

**What are your dreams for the State?**

Mizoram of my dream is a happy, prosperous state where peace and brotherhood prevails. I dream of a corruption free society with educated, and enterprising people. I plan to have Mizoram grow into a model state.