

YOUTH DORMITORY FOR LEARNING IN TRADITIONAL HMAR SOCIETY

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Abstract

Any society (organized or rudimentary) has institutions for passing information and knowledge considered to be useful and significant for its survival as society. The Hmars are one indigenous group in India residing mostly in the state of Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura and Assam. The community has many institutions of learning which are essential and instrumental for understanding the society in the past and present context. Buonzawl also known as Zawlbuk, a youth dormitory is one such institution in traditional Hmar society that caters to the educational requirement for the security as well as social, economic and political sustenance of the society. This paper attempts to explore the organizational structure of Zawlbuk and its educational significance in the traditional Hmar society as well as its relevance and implications in present context.

Keywords: Society, Mizo, Dormitory, Zawlbuk, Security, Social, economic, Political etc.

INTRODUCTION

India has one of the largest concentrations of tribal population in the world. According to the 2011 census, tribal groups of India consisted of 8.6% (104,281,034),¹ who are found mostly in North-Eastern region, Sub-Himalayan region of North and North-West, Central and Eastern region, South Indian region and that of the Western Indian region. These communities - organised or otherwise, usually have a channel of passing knowledge and information from yore to the younger generations. Tribal community does not have written script for a long time for passing on information, knowledge and practice to the younger generation. To understand the history, culture and society, it is necessary to look into their oral traditions. It is the one main means through which information are passes down from generations to generations. Tribal's society mainstay of information and knowledge remains oral traditions even today. A part from this, there are various social institutions that help in sustaining societal life among the tribals of North East India that can serve as a conduit for constructing knowledge for tribal society in general and the Hmar tribal community in particular. The present paper is an attempt to look into one such institutions i.e., Buonzawl youth dormitory of the Hmar tribal community as a centre of learning from yore. Though the Buonzawl is no longer seen in its physical form, but the continuation of its spiritual presence is undeniable among the Hmar tribal community.

One of the most prominent social institutions among the tribals of North East India is the Youth dormitory system. They were established to maintain socio, economic, political and administrative needs of the people of the village. In this place the youth spent major part of their adolescent life. It is considered to be the most valued house amongst the community because it serves as a centre where culture, education and custom create uniformity.² Youth dormitory represents the knowledge system developed by a community as opposed to the scientific knowledge that is generally referred to as 'modern knowledge'. It serves as a conduit for indigenous knowledge which is the basis for maintaining social cohesion and sustenance as well as ensuring internal and external security of the society for many tribal communities. The system of bachelor's dormitory was prevalent among many tribes of north east India. The Karbis, Tiwa, Dimasa of Assam, Nagas of Nagaland and Manipur and the Mizos in Manipur and Mizoram, all have a youth dormitory system. It is known by different names such as Baan for boys, Morung Ywo for girls (Konyak), Kichuki (Angami), Khangchiu (Liangmai Naga), Jirkedam (Karbi), Nodrang (Dimasa Kachari), Pinta-khek (Singpho), Nokpante (Garo) etc. Many of these tribes no longer have the dormitory physically but its spiritual presence is magnanimous in the society.

¹ Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Statistics Division, Government of India Statistical profile of scheduled tribes in India 2013. P.1. www.tribal.nic.in

² Lalchhanhima, A Study of Youth Dormitories in Northeast India. Mizoram University Journal of Social Sciences, Vol. VI, Issue 1. June 2020. p. 95.

INSTITUTIONS AND ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM OF THE HMARS

The Hmars are indigenous tribal people in Northeast India. They are one of the major tribes of Mizoram and earliest settler in the present Mizoram.³ They also live in the southern region of Manipur, Cachar and North Cachar districts in Assam; Jowai districts in Meghalaya and in villages bordering Mizoram and Tripura. The Hmars also move and settle in towns and cities of the different states of the north east and across India. Although these areas are within different administrative divisions, many areas of their settlements are geographically knit together. More than their geographical connections, their cultural connections are strong. They are knit together by the strongly established socio-political and cultural foundations and practices of the society.

Their settlements from the historical perspectives are difficult to trace due to the primitive nature of their culture. They were without a written script until the late 19th century. Their history of settlements, life and society before the advent of British into their territory could be constructed only through their oral traditions as written documents about their life and culture were not available for a long time. The advent of the British in their habitat made the accounts of their life and society available in a written form. Since then, oral traditions along with written documents became the main source for constructing accounts on the history and society of the Hmar tribal community. According to Thiek, oral traditions still remain the main source of information in constructing history of the Hmars and their society.⁴ This may be also true for all the tribal community of Manipur.

In traditional Hmar society, each village remain and function as a republic entity. There was hardly any contact between villages. The institution of Chieftainship was prevalent for the administration of villages. This institution has the Chief (Lal) at the helm of the affairs, assisted by Elders and Council of Advisers (known as Khawnbawl Upa, Khawnbawl, Pachawng or Siehmang) in the overall administration of the village. In this system, the Lal, Khawnbawl Upa and Khawnbawl plays a crucial role in formulating and laying down of rules and regulations for the administration of the entire village.⁵ The Chief is the head of the village and also the owner of all the resources within the boundary of the village. But in practice, he administers the village on the advice of the elders and council of advisers who are selected by him. A wise Chief usually selects his council members from among different clans dwelling in the village. They are selected according to their talents, merits and wisdom. As such, they represent all the clans within the village. Theoretically all powers were vested in the hands of the chief, yet in practice he would never try any case without consulting his council. A chief who govern strictly according to custom could do almost everything he liked without losing his followers, but a weak chief who tried petty tyrannies soon found himself without any subjects.⁶ A part from this, other institutions and personnel such as Val Upa (Youth leaders), the Priest (Thiempu), Village Crier/Messenger (Tlangsam), Blacksmith (Thirsu) and Youth Dormitory (Zawlbuk/Buonzawl) also perform specific functions and are extremely significant for the overall functioning of the villages.

Administrative system of the Hmar community has evolved over the years. Many of the afore-mentioned institutions still exist and they continue to play a vital role for administration in Hmar villages and society. However, their functioning and significance has undergone changes. Many institutions have been discontinued with and rendered redundant as society evolved and also with the onslaught of modernization. Buonzawl or Zawlbuk is one institution that has undergone tremendous changes in this respect. Nevertheless, its significance as a site of learning and its legacy in the form of various social mores and valued social conduct like *tlawmngaina*⁷ still has immense contemporary relevance in maintaining social cohesion and unity in the society.

YOUTH DORMITORY - BUONZAWL

The Hmars' youth dormitory is known as Buonzawl. The term Zawlbuk is also use synonymously with this term. Few other kindred tribes of Mizos also used the same nomenclature i.e., Zawlbuk. Buonzawl or Zawlbuk is a large house where all young men are expected to spend their time at night. It is usually located in close proximity with the house of the chief (Lal). Buonzawl is an important institution in the Hmar traditional society. It has a prominent role in shaping the youths into responsible adult members of the society. In the organization and functioning of Hmar village, it occupied a central position. It functioned as the most potent institutionalized mechanism of social control.

³ Hranchnuana, H.B, H.B. Hmar Chanchin (Hmar Hostory). Hmar Students Association, Jt Headquarter, Aizawl, 1987. Pp. 29-30.

⁴ Thiek, Hrilrokhum. History of the Hmars in North East India. Bhabani Offset Private Ltd: Guwahati, 2013.

⁵ Dena, Lal, In Search of Identity: Hmars of North East India, Akansha Publications, New Delhi, 2008. p. 19.

⁶ Khobung, V, Local Self-governing Institutions of the Tribal in North-East India: A study of the Village Authority/Council, 2nd International Conference on Social Science and Humanity. IPEDR vol.31 (2012), IACSIT Press, Singapore.

⁷ *Tlawmngaina* is the unique customs of the Hmars and their kindred tribes of Mizos. According to this, one is duty bound to help others, to put other's interest before one's own. It may be described as being kind, unselfish and helpful to others irrespective of one's own inconveniences.

A form of wrestling, known as inbuon in Hmar language is one of the popular recreational activities in the youth dormitory. This is one such activity that attracts a lot of attention and interest of the youth and other citizens of the village alike. It is an activity through which the youth are inducted into adulthood. Also, inbuon is used as a means of getting acquaintances with each other when you meet for the first time. Travellers and guest often engage in friendly wrestling bouts in the youth dormitory 'Buonzawl' and that is how the place acquired its name – Buon means wrestle and zawl means arena or space.

Every Hmar village has a Buonzawl in those days. Big villages tend to have more Buonzawl – each colony (Veng) having their own. The structure of the Buonzawl is constructed in such a way that it can accommodate the maximum youth from the village. There is a place for making fire in the centre which is kept burnt round the clock. All the sides of the dormitory (inside) have elevated platform for resting and sleeping. The Buonzawl is usually made of timber and bamboo with a thatched roof. The entrance of the Buonzawl/Zawlbuk has rough and big logs. Boys as young as six years old are recruited to collect firewood to keep the hearth alight throughout. They are free from their duty once they reach puberty, around 15 years of age and joined Buonzawl as a male youth.



Pic.: Zawlbuk/Buonzawl.

Buonzawl/Zawlbuk: A site for learning

Security - The security (internal and external) requirement of any state or any form of organized political community rests on the time and space a political community or state occupies. Traditional society or community settings requirement differs from the modern state. The basic characteristics and value composition of traditional villages, including artistic value, etiquette value, social value, historical value, spiritual value as well as its landscape and any tangible and intangible elements of the village comes into picture when security is concern.

The traditional setting of the Hmar villages is mostly in the hilltop or top of mountain ranges. They usually build their village at the most vantage point in any area of their settlements. As they organized themselves into republic villages with a defined territory, there is a strong spirit of ownership and protection among the villagers. With a little or no interaction among different village republic, anybody they come across who is not a member of their village is alien and a potential enemy. In this way, security of the village from their fellow being and also wild animal becomes crucial for their survival and sustenance as a society.

Security of the village was always perceived (by nature) to be precarious due to the mode of settlement and living. In case of emergency, the Buonzawl serve as a mobilization centre for the village. Any kind of emergency, attack from other villages or natural calamities are handled by the youth in Buonzawl under the leadership of the Val Upa (Youth leaders) who also takes the leadership role in the Buonzawl. The Val Upas and the elder members of the Buonzawl would narrate the heroic exploits, adventures of their forefathers and folk tales. Through these narrations and other activities in the Buonzawl, traditional value systems like Tlawmngaina, bravery and other social mores are sought to be imparted to the youth. Youths in the Buonzawl are also given training in the skill and arts needed for tribal war and its administration. In this way, the resources required for village security is made accessible in times of need. As such, Buonzawl can be considered as a defence wing of village administration.⁸

Physical training - Wrestling (Inbuon) is also one important activity through which the skills required for ensuring security of the village are imparted. It strengthened one's physical ability which is required for the

⁸ Khawbung, Margaret L., Traditional Institutions of the Hmar Tribe in Northeast India. Kanchioli - Journal of Humanities and Social sciences. Vol. 1, Issue 1. June 2021. P. 49

defence of the village. It provides opportunity for demonstrating one's ability and strength in the community. Physical strength is accorded considerable adulations in the traditional Hmar society considering the primitive way of protecting villages from attacks from outside. Through this, men try to showcase their physical strength and their ability in tackling problems and fighting skill and spirit. The skill necessary for sustaining the society such as hunting, survival skill under different circumstances and in forests, skill of foraging and gathering foods from the forests and administrative skill for village government are taught in Buonkaw.

One of the most important value the Buonkaw/Zawlbuk imparted was **Tlawmngaina**. This unique custom continues to be what the Hmars and their kindred tribes of Mizos valued the most in their society. According to this, one is duty bound to help others, to put other's interest before one's own. It may be described as being kind, unselfish and helpful to others irrespective of one's own inconveniences. J. H. Lorrain defines tlawmngaihna as, to be self- sacrificing, unselfish, self-denying, preserving, stoical, stout-hearted, plucky, brave, firm, etc.; to be unwilling to lose one's good reputation, prestige, etc. to put one's own inclinations on one side and do a thing which one would rather not do with the object either of keeping up one's prestige etc.⁹ It is the code of ethics that guides the Mizos to be unselfish, hospitable and helpful to each other.¹⁰

Youth dormitory of the Hmar i.e., Buonkaw in its original form is a centre of learning for the traditional society. Learning is for life as the common adage in our today's society. Various policy documents on education increasingly give prominent emphasis on holistic approach to learning that does not confine in the modern site of learning. The focus on life skill education is reflected in various policy documents including the including the National Education Policy, 2020. The involvement of community and the community life itself as a site of learning is also focused upon. As a corollary to all these concerns, Buonkaw/Zawlbuk can be seen as a site/arena providing necessary requirement for sustaining the traditional society and imparting a lifelong skill and the core values associated with it which are especially relevant for the Hmar society in both traditional and modern times. It can be considered as the guardian of ethics and values required for society's survival. Buonkaw signify one social institution of the Hmar tribal community that impart education for life needed to sustain their societal life in traditional setting.

Social mores and values - In Zawlbuk, the age-old social mores and values were projected before the youth. It was the only institutions that prepare the Youth for education before formal education system was established among the Hmars. The society functions in tandem with Zawlbuk. It is symbiotically linked with each other. The whole society functions in sync with what is taught in the Zawlbuk. And the society supplying the needs of the society for learning to the Zawlbuk. It is an institution where discipline and moral code of conducts were imparted. It tries to instil a sense of responsibility in the youth and values like respect for elders, carrying out one's own responsibility in the society.¹¹ The simple forms of education for life, as evolved in Zawlbuk through their various activities, code of conduct and mode of living, ensured a healthy reciprocity between the different age groups and the elders as also between the claims of the family as a social unit and the wider society as an organic whole.

CONCLUSION

Buonkaw/Zawlbuk was one of the most important social institutions among the different tribes of the Mizo including Hmar. It was the nerve centre for the society and shaped youths into responsible adult members of the society. The Hmars and their kindred tribe of Mizo consider it to be the most useful institution and stressed its importance in their society. Even in today's society, the various disciplines and values that were taught in the youth dormitory continue to remain the thread that holds together the social fabric of the society. Though, youth dormitory physically no longer exists, the significance of the values taught remains invaluable forever among the Hmars. It has been taken forward by the various social organizations and institutions established for the same purpose.

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⁹ Lorrain, J.H., Dictionary of the Lushai Language, The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1940. P513

¹⁰ Lalchhanhima.Opcit. p. 98.

¹¹ Lalengkimi, V., Indigenous Education in Mizoram: A Study of Zawlbuk (Bachelor's Dormitory). International Journal of Innovative Studies in Sociology and Humanities (IJSSH). Volume 3, Issue 12. December 2018. www.ijssh.org

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