



“The Zawlbuk Institution In Hmar Traditional Education: Its Role And Contemporary Relevance”

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ABSTRACT:

The Zawlbuk institution, that was once central to the community life of the Hmars served as an informal yet structured educational space. Young men were trained to impart cultural values, practical skills, discipline and communal responsibilities. It functions not only as a dormitory also as a hub for moral instruction and knowledge transmission through oral traditions and mentorship. The study aims to examine the historical and educational functions of Zawlbuk institution, analyse the specific values, skills and cultural knowledge imparted, and compares the traditional Zawlbuk-based education system with contemporary learning system. By exploring the pedagogical relevance of the Zawlbuk practices, the study intends to contribute to the discussions on indigenous education and its potential role in enriching modern education, especially in preserving cultural heritage as well as fostering community engagements.

Keywords – Zawlbuk, institution, Hmar, education, tlawmngaina

INTRODUCTION

Northeast India is home to several ethnic tribes and sub tribes rich in distinct culture, customs, language, identity, traditional institutions, traditions, beliefs and way of life. They co-exist in peace and harmony despite of having diversified culture (**Khawbung, 2021**). The Hmars are amongst the oldest hill tribes/communities in Northeast India. The indigenous community's origin and history could be traced from the oral traditions, songs, stories, legends and folklores. The historical origin of the Hmars can be traced back from 'Sinlung' a cave in Central China (**Dena, 2014**). Traditional tales, folklores, songs, poems and

legends of the Hmars orally claims to have generationally passed down traditions and civilization of their origin began from a cave called Sinlung (**Parate, 2024**).

The Hmars are an indigenous tribe that belongs to the Kuki-Chin-Mizo group of the Sino-Tibeto-Burman family of the Mongolian race (**Vanrammawi, 2020**). Found in Cachar, North Cachar hills of Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura in India and Bangladesh and Myanmar (**Dena, 2018**). Traditionally, there were no formal systems of education practiced in the Hmar society. Before the advent of Christianity and introduction of formal system of education, knowledge was imparted informally through indigenous teachings and practices (**Lalengkimi, 2018**).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

1. To examine the historical and educational functions of Zawlbuk in Hmar society.
2. To analyse the values, skills and cultural knowledge transmitted through the Zawlbuk system.
3. To assess the relevance of traditional Zawlbuk-based education in comparison with contemporary educational practices focusing on content, objectives and community involvement

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE:

Parate (2024) '*Revisiting the Origin of the Hmars through Oral Literature*' highlights the importance of oral traditions in tracing the historical origin and beginning of the Hmars who have no written historical records as such. The study found that the study or oral traditions unveil the historical facts and rich cultural heritage having their own uniqueness. The Hmars in India, although scattered across the country, having common features of socio-cultural, administrative systems, economic and religious life are descendants of Sinlung.

Khobung (2023) conducted a study on the '*Youth Dormitory for learning in Traditional Hmar Society*', the study discusses on the significant role of Zawlbuk being an important social institution among the tribes of Hmar and Mizo. The author found the social values, morals and discipline taught through the youth dormitory is what holds the society closer together. Education that evolved through the various traditional teachings in Zawlbuk remains invaluable among the Hmars.

Borthakur (2022) '*Study of Dormitories as a Social Institution among Tribal People in Northeast India*' looks into the different types of dormitories practiced by the tribal people in Northeast India. The dormitories' features, functions and relevance in tribal culture were looked into. The finding of the study revealed that even though social institutions like tribal dormitories play an important part in the culture and society of the tribals, its relevance in the present times have declined.

Khawbung (2021) '*Traditional Institutions of the Hmar Tribe in Northeast India*' discusses on the Hmar tribe's ethnicity, cultural institutions and village administrations. The findings of the study revealed that just like every other society the Hmar society is not static and had undergone changes with the coming of Christianity after the colonial rule. The values which were once traditional have become more materialistic

and consumeristic embracing the modernisation. The institutions of the village authority, customary laws, clan structure and kinship institutions continue to serve the needs of the Hmar society at present.

Lalengkimi (2018) studied on the '*Indigenous Education in Mizoram: A Study of Zawlbuk (Bachelor's Dormitory)*' highlighting the educational evolution of the dormitory through which indigenous education was imparted. The study revealed that, Zawlbuk provided the necessary educational skills, such as, values, knowledge, social skills and norms to young men, considered essential in the traditional tribal society, preparing them to ensure a healthy and peaceful social life.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY:

The study is descriptive, exploratory and analytical in nature. Purposive sampling method had been used. For this particular study, data has been gathered using primary source such as interview schedule and secondary sources like books, journals and articles. Stakeholders and authors were interviewed for this particular study.

ZAWLBUK (Youth Dormitory):



Picture: ZAWLBUK

Zawlbuk is a youth dormitory, also known as the bachelor's dormitory of the Hmars. It is a combination of the two words, '*Zawl*' which means a flat ground and '*Buk*' refers to a temporary hut or shelter. The word '*Zawlbuk*' literally means a "House on a flat ground". Built near the village Chief's residence. The institution is square in shape unlike the other rectangular tribal houses. The house is built on a gentle slope with a raised floor using 'timber posts, bamboo tarza wall and a thatched roof' (**Thiek, 2013**).

It is regarded as one of the most important traditional educational institutions of the Hmar and their kindred tribe of Mizo. An institution where the youths are trained to become responsible members of the Hmar traditional society (**Khobung, 2023**). The younger boys over the age of nine years in the village gather firewood that is to be used in the Zawlbuk. The older ones were responsible for cleaning and keeping the Zawlbuk neat (**Northeast Bullet, 2023**). The village youths who are above 15 years of age are required to sleep in the house and receive rigorous trainings to join the life of society (**Pudaite, 1963**). In the absence of formal system of education, Zawlbuk was only the institution available for imparting education and skills to the youth of the generation (**Lalengkimi, 2018**).

Among the Hmars the term Zawlbuk is synonymously known as Buonzawl. Buonzawl is a combination of two words - 'Buon' meaning wrestling and 'Zawl' meaning flat surface or an open space or area. It literally refers to an open area or space used for the purpose of wrestling and performing dances. Zawlbuk is where the heroic tales of their forefathers and folktales were narrated. Educational values, such as, discipline, code of conduct, bravery, *tlawmngaina*, etc., were taught in the institution (**Khawbung, 2021**).

Educational function

Zawlbuk was a social institution known for its educational teachings and practices provided to the young men in the society. The intention is to prepare them to become better leaders and members of the community. **Thiek (2013)** in his book "*History of the Hmars in North East India*" has discussed the functions of Zawlbuk as –

Centre of training: Zawlbuk was a place for bachelors to receive training in mastering the art of hunting and wrestling. The acts of courage and obedience were significantly inculcated. They were trained for tribal wars to protect the community in the village from attacks of the neighbouring villages. Along with that, the art of singing and dancing were also inculcated.

Information centre: Zawlbuk leaders enlighten the people concerning the current events and affairs in their village. The bachelors would receive the appropriate guidance and instructions provided by the dorm leaders and elders to convey the messages.

Learning centre: The village elders and other authorities knowledgeable in customary rules, social disciplines, moral laws, social practices and its applications provided instruction to the young men. It was a place where indigenous knowledge and skills were taught and passed down to the younger generation.

The community's watch tower: The men of Zawlbuk would remain alert at all times for the occurrence of any event of natural calamities like, wildfires, storms, earthquakes, animal attacks, etc. In times of emergencies such as carrying of sick person or death bodies from one village to the other village, the bachelors from the dormitory would be responsible to provide help. They were also responsible for displaying the act of kindness to the sick, needy, bereaved and also for digging graves.

Tlawmngaina

One among the most important and exalted educational values imparted in Zawlbuk institution was '*Tlawmngaina*'. It is a peculiar term that is used to convey an expression of the extraordinary qualities of a person in any given situation (**Thiek, 2013**). A custom that is unique and commonly practiced among the Hmars and their kindred tribes of Mizo is '*Tlawmngaina*', an act of selfless service (**Lalengkimi, 2018**). It is an ethical code of teaching one to be selfless, hospitable and helpful to others. The Hmars believe it as a means of expressing one's kindness voluntarily by selflessly putting the interest of others before one's own (**Khobung, 2023**). *Tlawmngaina* entails selfless service to the society, an act of helping others without expecting any reward in return, to do whatever situation demands as well as an act of sacrificing for a good cause.

What core values, skills and cultural knowledge were transmitted through Zawlbuk?

In the Zawlbuk system, there was no such thing as formal teachings. Besides respect for those older than yourself, honesty, bravery and the spirit of *tlawmngaina* were some of the core values emphasized. Only the young men in the society were allowed to sleep in the dorm. They would listen to the discussions and talks of the 'Val-upa' (village leaders and youth commanders) and elderly men in the dormitory. The elderly men would tell stories on the history of their forefathers and show the young men the benefit of upholding those values and knowledge, thereby passing down history from one generation to the other even though they did not know the art of writing. The physical art of hunting, wrestling and fighting war were taught by the youth commanders. Skills of craftsmanship was also imparted to the young men.

The women of the society, however, were responsible for staying at home and learn how to cook, clean, maintain and take care of one's home. Weaving of cloth was the most important skill for them to learn. Dancing and singing were enjoyed by the Hmars. It was the community's way of transmitting cultural values and knowledge to the next generation. Through the Zalwbuk system the members of the society acquired the skills of hunting-gathering, fishing, arts, dancing, singing, craftsmanship, agriculture and many other social skills. They perform their duties respectfully in helping one another within the community. Young men were also taught customary laws, social discipline, moral laws and social practices. From the values learnt in the Zawlbuk institution the young men strive to be behave nicely in the society. For those who commit crime or those who have committed something against the social norm were punished befitting their crimes. Thus, the behaviour of the individuals tends to be good which beautifies the communal identity.

The Zawlbuk institution were in fact training centre for young men in the society to learn almost anything outside the family life. They were trained for adult responsibilities. Young men learnt comradeship and therefore help in the process of social integration. Although Zawlbuk system has been abolished way back in the mid-20th century, the system of having Val-upa is still practiced among the Hmars. The teachings of the Val-upa in the erstwhile zawlbuk system with regard to gathering of youths to console the bereaved family when a member of the family dies, is continued by social organizations like the Hmar Youth Association in the present generation by calling for gatherings to inculcate such social norms among young men and women. Thus, most of the values and spirits taught in the Zawlbuk institution persist.

Relevance of traditional Zawlbuk-based education in comparison with contemporary educational practices –

The traditional Zawlbuk institution did not have any formal or written curriculum. However, it had many values and social norms which were being taught to the young people by the Val-upa (youth commanders) and village elders in the society. In the present education system, subjects like moral science inculcated in Christian schools has lessons that emphasises on values relevant for the time and of ethical values required for the society to maintain. Core values like *tlawmngaina*, respect and obedience taught in Zawlbuk system are not that different from the basic social norms and values inculcated in today's education systems. The

only difference would be modern education curriculums elaborating a little more by covering wider curriculum to nurture the younger minds.

The Zawlbuk system contributed effectively towards moral and ethical development. This was mainly because lessons were firmly concentrated on the teachings on discipleship, morals and ethical values compared to students in the modern education system. The teaching provided were more practical and experiential rather than those in contemporary schools. The core lessons taught in Zawlbuk such as the act of selfless service to the needy and society at large, paying of respect towards older members of the society, courage, integrity and honesty tends to get lost among the younger generation in the modern world village. The spirit of expressing the values and teachings in Zawlbuk culture with its practical application in life has been lost by the present generation. The Hmar society downslides in maintain such values and ethical morals that were once effectively practiced in the Zawlbuk system. Therefore, it is important to re-inculcate and maintain the intrinsic value of the cultural practices and lessons instead of commercializing it. A revival or hybrid model of Zawlbuk based education system at an appropriate level of education would likely be suggested for the introduction and inculcation of basic core values and moral-ethical values for the newer generation who has kept themselves abreast from the practice of such.

CONCLUSION

Thus, Zawlbuk based education was completely oral and community based. The youths were trained to become leaders and perform their communal duties effectively. The indigenous knowledge where transmitted through the art of dances, music, ritual practices, etc. At present, the Zawlbuk institution of the traditional Hmar education institution is no more and no longer considered convenient as the society leans towards cultural modernization and advancements. The introduction and expansion of formal education has improved literacy but also heightened cultural marginalization often leading to young learners' disengagement from indigenous knowledge and cultural roots. The Hmars, however, despite the continuation of the Zawlbuk education system have established cultural community halls and associations with the intention of holding members of the tribe closer and deepen their knowledge of their culture, the spirit of tlawmngaina along with the social values of the Zawlbuk institution is practiced till date. The standard of discipline and teachings of the past may not be the same with the generational paradigm shift towards formal education. Although the advent of Christianity and introduction of modern formal education systems has resulted in liquidation of the Zawlbuk institution system the Hmar society continues to transmit the generational customs, traditions and moral values taught in the earlier times to the coming generation of youths.

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