
Indigenous Education in Mizoram: A Study of *Zawlbuk* (Bachelor's Dormitory)

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Abstract: *This paper makes an attempt to highlight an important aspect of the traditional Mizo society – the bachelor's dormitory called the 'Zawlbuk' and discuss how it has evolved and changed in the present time. The Zawlbuk provided an adequate educational structure which shaped young boys into responsible adults who were educated in the social norms and ways of life thus ensuring healthy and peaceful social life. Women were not allowed in the Zawlbuk and it was a completely male domain. Boys as young as 9 years old were sent to the dormitory to learn skills which were considered necessary to be a man in the traditional Mizo society. The teaching was rendered by elders who told stories of valiant men, wars and the custom of the people. The young men in the Zawlbuk provide community service like defending the village, building of houses and any help that a family in the village might need. With the changes in the structure of the Mizo society due to the works of foreign missionaries, the concept and idea of Zawlbuk has also undergone a change.*

Keywords: *Indigenous, Education, Mizo, community*

Before the advent of modern education brought about by foreign missionaries, the traditional Mizo society had indigenous means of educating or instructing the young. The indigenous education made use of folktales and proverbs as a means of transferring knowledge and values to the next generation. This paper makes an attempt to highlight an important aspect of the traditional Mizo society – the bachelor's dormitory called the '*Zawlbuk*' and discuss how it has evolved and changed in the present time. The *Zawlbuk* provided an adequate educational structure which shaped young boys into responsible adults who were educated in the social norms and ways of life thus ensuring healthy and peaceful social life.

In the traditional Mizo society, every village or cluster of villages has a chief who was the political head as well as the secular head. The chieftainship was hereditary. The Chief or the 'Lal' was very powerful and exercise dictatorship over his subjects. The Chief's house was located at a prime place in the village and opposite to the chief's house was a bachelor's dormitory called *Zawlbuk*. The Chief's house and the *Zawlbuk* thus form the heart of the village and all celebrations or community feast would take place there. The *Zawlbuk* was a system of bachelor's dormitory where all the young men of the village had to spend sometime in order to be educated in the ways of their people. In the *Zawlbuk* young men would indulge in activities like wrestling, telling of stories, learning folk songs etc. The customary obligations, respect for elders and social duties were taught in the *Zawlbuk*. The Mizo term '*tlawmngaihna*' stands for a code of selfless service rendered to those in need, this was an important aspect of the education and learning which was received in *Zawlbuk*. The *Zawlbuk* functioned as an effective means of social control as well as a power structure.

In the absence of a formal system of education, the *Zawlbuk* was the only way to educate the youth of the next generation. The strategic location of the bachelor's dormitory ensures that the young men were available for any emergencies relating to the security of the village or when the Chief needs them for errands. The young men defended the village during enemy assaults and offered protection from wild animals. They were additionally the willful town workforce that helped develop houses for the poor, fix the main's home, and carry out various undertakings relating to the welfare and security of the villages. The society and the families in the villages thus, work in tandem with the *Zawlbuk* making a community of people who are co-dependent. Thus, *Zawlbuk* was accordingly a foundation that kept alive the idea of *tlawmngaihna* in its most flawless shape.

The dormitory was a place of learning and the storehouse of indigenous information. It was here that the elders through discussions and narrating sessions transmitted oral conventions and society information, history of the past, stories of valiant warriors, and essential exercises of life that ingrained pride and an aggressive soul in the

hearts of the audience members. *Zawlbuk* form the link between the old and the new generation. The young men were educated about various life skills and instructed on how to interact with various age -groups and live harmoniously.

The *Zawlbuk* had an elaborate system of functioning. The *Zawlbuk* members consisted of young boys who haven't reached puberty and young men. A boy could become a full member only when he reaches puberty and passed certain skill tests. Young boys from the age of nine would be divided into groups to collect firewood for the dormitory. Some had to fetch water for drinking in a bamboo container. Others would be delegated the task of sweeping and cleaning the dormitory. The sharing of responsibility and tasks taught the young men about team work, co-operation and obedience to elders. The young men develop discipline and good habits which inculcated in them a strong work ethics while teaching them self-governance and the ability to live and adjust with different kinds of people.

The *Zawlbuk* was specifically male domain and the women had no such system or provision of learning and community living. Likewise, when the foreign missionaries introduced formal education to the Mizo traditional society, only boys or men were sent to schools. In the traditional patriarchal Mizo society, men dominate women who were considered to be inferior in every way to men. For this reason, girls were not encouraged to go to school or even considered to be capable of learning when formal education was introduced by foreign missionaries. The missionary teachers were often told, "Oh, no! we can't send our girl to school; she is too useful at home. Take my boy" (Hawla 13-14). What deter parents from sending their daughters to school was also the fact that girls were required to learn household skills so that they can be good wives and such skills were not taught in schools. Therefore, the missionaries planned female education in such a way that the useful skills like needle work, sewing, hygiene, cooking, caring for the sick etc were introduced in the school curricula. Thus, school became for the Mizo women a sort of *Zawlbuk* where they learn various life skills apart from reading and writing.

Unfortunately, the advent of Christianity and the introduction of modern education resulted in the liquidation of the *Zawlbuk* system. N.E.Perry, an English administrator tried to revive the *Zawlbuk* system in 1926 by issuing an order that compelled the villages of the then Lushai Hills to rebuild and re-establish the Bachelor's dormitories. But it was not possible to sustained the traditional *Zawlbuk* system with the advent of modern education. Thus, a need was deeply felt within the Mizo society to establish an institution which would be like the *Zawlbuk* in spirit but relevant to the modern society. Church leaders and Christian Missionaries deliberated on the issue and came up with the idea of a social organization called Young Lushai Association in 1935 (Vanlawma, 35). The name of the association was ultimately changed to Young Mizo Association in 1947 to make it more inclusive. (27). The core value of the *Zawlbuk* '*tlawmngaihna*' or selfless service was incorporated within the Young Mizo Association. In the present time The Young Mizo Association play the role of *Zawlbuk* to uplift and serve the society. But the indigenous education structure of *Zawlbuk* has been replaced by schools and colleges where the younger generation are trained, molded and taught to be useful to the society they lived in.

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