

Impact of Colonialism on the Traditional Beliefs and Practices of the Mizo

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Abstract

Traditionally, the Mizo society was dominated by blind faith and superstition. For example they believed that committing suicide, social mischief, cruelty to pet animals, greed and cruelty to disabled person etc., were against the will of the Creator. Actually, the early Mizo society surrounded by many superstitions somehow enforced restriction in their daily life but the entry of Christianity ended all such superstitions. The Zawlbuk (one of the social institution) was the main centre for youth recreation particularly the bachelors. Disciplines, bravery, the art of wrestling and good manners were taught in the Zawlbuk. It also act as a defence mechanism of the village. It can be said that Christianity changed the social life and ended many social practices. Also formal education introduced by the missionaries had a big impact on the social and cultural life among the Mizo. The traditional beliefs and practices of the Mizo and the impact of colonialism will be examined in the paper.

Keywords:- Blind faith, Christianity, Zawlbuk, Formal Education, Missionaries.

The British occupy the Lushai Hills in the early 1890's. During the time people in the Lushai Hills were still primitive and backward. In the pre-British period the cultures and traditions of the Mizo had its own unique feature. Their cultures and traditions had its own beauty and distinctiveness and also they were hardly mixed with the outside world. After the advent of the British many cultural traditions and practices were changed. It can be said that many cultural and social practices of the Mizo faced a threat because of the colonial influence. According to Rev. Li-

angkhaia, the term Mizo consists of five major tribe and many clans. The major tribe of the Mizo are- Lusei, Ralte, Hmar, Pawi, Paihte.¹ It is important to note here that there are many clans under these major tribes. Therefore, it can be said that the term Mizo consists of all those people who are under these major tribes including all the clan and sub-clan. It is believed that majority of these Mizo tribes started inhabiting the present Mizoram around 1700-1750 AD.²

In the traditional Mizo society different clan and different village had their own

way of practicing their cultures. But it is important to know that there are also common practices among them like the institution of *Zawlbuk* and the practice of *Bawi* (Slave) and the use of *Zu* (Rice beer). The colonial encounter changed many cultural practices of the Mizo. The efforts of the Welsh and English Missionaries had a positive impact in the Lushai Hills. Before Christianity reached the Lushai hills as early as 1890's, the belief system of the Mizo was dominated by nature worship, fear of demons (*ramhuai*) and superstitious beliefs.³ The social life was bound by many superstitious beliefs, social rules and regulations. For example, a normal person cannot construct a house with a window because of superstition or omen.⁴ It was also believed that all the sickness was the mischievous work of the demons. So in order to cure the sickness they had to make sacrifices to the demon. Also the Mizo believed that if members of the same family travel towards east and west on the same day one would meet an accident. This clearly highlighted that the social life of the Mizo before the missionaries was dominated by omens and superstitious beliefs. So, it is clear that colonial encounter had many changes in the traditional Mizo society which still have its impact till the present Mizo society. This paper however focuses only some of the major impact of colonialism on the traditional beliefs and practices of the Mizo.

SOCIO - CULTURAL CHANGE

With colonial encounter the Lushai Hills experienced a gradual socio-cultur-

al transformation, from primitive lifestyle to a more sophisticate and modern lifestyle. Actually it was the work of the missionaries that brought changes among the Mizo. The society, culture, religion, politics, traditions, customs and standard of living took a great leap towards modernization because of the efforts of the missionaries. The pioneer missionaries introduced not only a more advanced and sophisticated lifestyle, but they also promoted education among the Mizo. The history of education among the Mizo started in 1894 with the efforts of two Christian Missionaries—Rev. F.W. Savidge and Rev. J.H. Lorrain.⁵ The Mizo had no written form of language before the arrival of the missionaries and they had only oral communication. The devoted efforts of the missionaries invented the Mizo alphabets. Also the missionaries introduced formal education at the lower level and set up the first school in 1894. The result of the efforts of the missionaries was evident as the first Mizo book 'Mizo Zir Tir Bu' (A Lushai Primer) was published on 2nd October 1895.⁶ It is clear that regarding some issues the efforts of the missionaries showed quick results. The missionaries established the first middle school in 1906 and the first high school was set up in 1944 in the Lushai Hills.⁷ It is true that in the pre-British era the Lushai Hills lack formal education with compare to other societies. It can be mentioned here that the result of the efforts of the missionaries in education among the Mizo had a positive outcome which is evident till date. Slowly and gradually, the number of primary

schools increased to 230, and also there are as many as 6 middle schools and 2 high schools in the entire Lushai Hills by 1947.⁸ Besides efforts were also made by the Missionaries at the higher level. They even sent Mizo youths outside the Lushai Hills to receive higher education because of the absence of higher education in the Lushai Hills. The British Missionaries also promoted the social structure of the Mizo through Christianity. Other than education, health and sanitation was another challenge for the Missionaries; the tribal lifestyle of the Mizo lack a hygienic daily lifestyle. The Missionaries while teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, also taught cleanliness and hygiene among the Mizo. It is evident from the fact that the efforts of the Missionaries was the beginning of modernity among the Mizo particularly in the field of education.

Zawlbuk was the most important social institution in the pre-British era for the Mizo society. *Zawlbuk* can be defined as a 'Bachelors dormitory' or a club house for men in the village. *Zawlbuk* was the largest building in the village and it was usually located at the centre of the village near the Chief's house.⁹ Normally it was square in shape and there was hardly any window in the *Zawlbuk*. It was the place where the bachelors of the village spent most of their night. The leader of the *Zawlbuk* was called *Val Upa*. He was the one who conduct the administration of the *Zawlbuk*.

Zawlbuk was also the defence department of the village. It was the place where

men sleep in group and are ready to counter any emergency. It is important to note here that men sleep in the *Zawlbuk* to protect the children and women from village raids and against the attack of wild beast which was common in the traditional Mizo society. Not only the bachelors but also the newly married men continued to sleep in the *Zawlbuk* at night so that they could react quickly at emergency situation.

Zawlbuk was also the main recreation centre for the bachelors of the village. The inmates normally created competition between themselves regarding who was the best hunter and who was the most industrious.¹⁰ A number of indoor games such as wrestling were also organised. It was also a place where the elder inmates narrated tales and stories about history, culture and traditions of their ancestors. *Zawlbuk* was also an information centre of the village. Information brought by travellers were received in *Zawlbuk* and later spread throughout the village. It was also an educational centre of the village. Formal education or day school was never experienced in the traditional Mizo society. *Zawlbuk* was the place where the inmates were trained to furnish their skills and talents. The inmates were well trained in the art of hunting, crafting, wrestling, singing etc. these clearly highlighted the importance of *Zawlbuk* during the time. The teaching and learning in the *Zawlbuk* helped the inmates to become useful members of the society. Thus, the *Zawlbuk* was one of the main learning centres for the bachelors of the village. It can be said that

it was also an important agent of socialization in the traditional Mizo society. So, *Zawlbuk* was the main education centre for the inmates. All of the above clearly shows that in the traditional Mizo society *Zawlbuk* occupied an important place and it was one of the most influential social institutions during the time. With the introduction of formal education in the Lushai Hills, parents opted for formal education rather than the *Zawlbuk* for their children. Thus, the importance and relevance of *Zawlbuk* decline rapidly. It is believed that by the late 1930's to the early 1940's there were hardly any *Zawlbuk* in most of the Mizo villages.¹¹ Although there were several attempts to revive the *Zawlbuk* from the British administrators the task becomes an impossible goal because people choose formal education rather than the *Zawlbuk* education. As a result *Zawlbuk* that was once the main social institute of the village was on decline.

Zu (Rice Beer) occupy an important place in the traditional Mizo society. *Zu* was an essential element in all the socio-cultural and religious ceremonies in the pre-colonial Mizo society. Almost all the ceremonies and festivals of the traditional Mizo included *Zu*, and even some feast lasted three to four days depending on the availability of *Zu*. It is important to mention here that in the pre-British period the Mizo used *Zu* only for sacrifice, marriage, birth, death, festival and for celebration of successful hunting and harvesting. It was firmly believed that drinking *Zu* was

only for special occasion. Normally, if an individual drank too much and create problem in the village the *Val Upa*¹² along with some bachelors warned the culprit not to repeat his actions and repetition of his actions resulted in severe punishment to that individual. This simply means that in the traditional Mizo society *Zu* was used moderately and positively and it was also regulated.

The prohibition of *Zu* in Mizo society was no doubt the impact of British colonialism and the efforts of the missionaries. But some historians believed that it was not the missionaries that actually prohibited *Zu*, rather it was the early Mizo Christians that prohibited the drinking of *Zu*.¹³ Slowly and gradually drinking of *Zu* was regarded as an evil act because of the influence of Christianity among the Mizo. The Government of Mizoram even passed liquor prohibition act in 1997 because of the efforts of many social organizations.¹⁴ As a result of development and modernization in Mizo society a number of powerful social organizations like the Young Mizo Association (YMA), Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP) etc. emerged in the Lushai Hills. Even these social organizations supported the prohibition of *Zu* among the Mizo which was once an integral part of the culture and traditions of the Mizo. As a result *Zu* an important element in the traditional Mizo society was regarded as the main source of a number misconduct in the society.

Slavery at any form is always a negative and bad practice. It can be mentioned

here that slavery was also practiced in the traditional Mizo society in the form of *Bawi* (Slave).¹⁵ The chief of the village had complete control over the *bawi* family. But the *bawi* system in the traditional Mizo society was different and unique from slave system in other parts of the world, the *bawi* system among the Mizo was not meant to suppress someone. The missionaries regarded the *bawi* system incompatible with the teachings of the bible and wanted to abolish it. The missionaries encouraged the Christian chiefs to free their *bawi* (Slaves) and even request the British administration to end the *bawi* system. But they cannot arrive at a mutual consensus since the *bawi* system was different and was not against the social norms of the Mizo. At the end the system of *bawi* was ended and many *bawi* were liberated from their masters. The end of *Bawi* system amongst the Mizo was also a result of the impact of colonialism in the Lushai Hills.

The changes in dress and lifestyle may not be the direct influence of the British but it is clearly a result of colonialism in the Lushai Hills. The missionaries in the Lushai Hills encouraged formal dress code among the Mizo. Before the advent of the missionaries the dress culture of the Mizo represent typical Mizo dress code. Formal shirt and pants were hardly experienced by the Mizo. The British encourage a western form of dress code among the Mizo which have a huge impact till today. Also the traditional pattern of housing gradually changed and modern materials and

equipments became more useful than the traditional way of using bamboo for construction of houses. Moreover, colonialism also had its impact on the music culture of the Mizo. In the post-colonial period traditional musical instruments were hardly used by the youths. The music culture of the Mizo that was once dominated by *Khuang* (Mizo Drum) and other cultural musical instrument was replaced by modern and western musical instruments.

CHANGES IN RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

In the early Mizo society omen, superstition and blind faith was common. The early Mizo believed in the existence of Pathian (God) in the form of Sakhua. Sakhua is a combination of two words *Sa* and *Khua*. Therefore, *Sakhua* simply refers to a form of Supreme Being who had control over nature and the humanity in the traditional Mizo society.¹⁶ Sacrifices to *Sa* was made with pigs and sacrifices to *Khua* was done with gayal. These sacrifices can be performed only by *Sadawt* (Priest). It is important to know that these sacrifices were made to please the creator so that they could excel in agriculture throughout the year and also for good fortune.

In the pre-British period sacrifices occupied an important place in the religious beliefs of the Mizo. Sacrifices were believed to be the major sources of all kinds of blessings, good harvest, and health from *Pathian* (God). The Mizo believed that the offerings they made to

Pathian would avoid them from misfortune and bad luck. Also the early Mizo society was dominated by blind faith and superstitious beliefs. Because of these blind faiths there were many social problems. For example if two members of the same family take a journey in north and south directions in the same day it is believed that misfortune and bad luck will fall upon them.¹⁷

The impact of colonialism upon the Mizo was not only cultural and economical but it was also religious. As a result the first Christian Missionary Rev. William Williams reached the Lushai Hills on 15th March 1891.¹⁸ Later two Missionaries F.W. Savidge and J.H.Lorrain reached the Lushai Hills on the 11th January 1894. The missionaries created the Mizo alphabet “A,AW,B”, translated the Bible, introduced formal education and preached the gospel of Jesus Christ among the Mizo.¹⁹ The missionaries changed the belief system of the Mizo which was based on superstition and blind faith. Finally, Christianity dominated the religious sentiments of the Mizo and the fear of evil spirits and demons were substituted by inner peace, happiness and faith in Jesus Christ. Moreover it is true from the fact that Christianity along with colonialism completely changed the belief system of the Mizo society which had its impact till date.

POLITICAL CHANGES

In the traditional Mizo society, village chiefs and the *Zawlbuk* occupy a central

figure. The system of chieftainship and *Zawlbuk* was the main administrative institutions in the traditional Mizo society. However the system of chieftainship was abolished in 1954 and the village administration among the Mizo vested upon the village council.²⁰ The chief was a generous ruler and did a lot of good work for his people. Hardly, no one died of starvation during their reign and the chief had his main concern for his people. But there was no unity between different chiefs and village raids were still very popular. These raids blocked all kinds of infrastructural development for a particular village and it was a burden for British administrators. Also there were some chiefs who reject formal education for their people. Bloodshed continued because of village raid as a result of order given by the chief. As a result there were many concerns among the administrators about the status of the chief, because they were somehow an obstacle for community development and modernization in the Lushai Hills. As a result the system of Chieftainship that is believed to start around 1600 AD was finally ended in 1954.²¹

Moreover, as a result of colonialism political consciousness developed among several educated individual as a result the first Mizo political party Mizo Union (MU) was established on 9th April 1946. After the birth of the first Mizo political party many other Mizo political party like United Mizo Freedom Organization (UMFO) on 5th July 1947 was established and also the Mizo National Front (MNF)

on 28th October 1961. Moreover the political awakening even started freedom movement from the Indian Union.²²

The above points highlighted some of the traditional and contemporary impact of colonialism in the beliefs and practices of the Mizo. It can be noted that the impact of British colonialism in the Lushai Hills had many positive changes on the culture and social practices of the Mizo. The decline of *Zawlbuk* was clearly a result of the emergence of the missionaries and day schooling. The formal education introduced by the missionaries completely changes the outlook of the Mizo society and make way for modernization in the Lushai Hills. Moreover the prohibition of *Zu* was also another impact of colonialism among the Mizo. It is important to mention here that the efforts of the British led to the decline of *bawi* (Slave) system among the Mizo. It generates awareness regarding human rights and its issues among the Mizo. Furthermore the efforts

of the missionaries ended the traditional belief system of the Mizo which was dominated by blind faith and superstition. Christianity completely changes the social practices of the Mizo, a sense of brotherhood and positive communal feeling was generated by Christianity among the Mizo. These changes also resulted to a drastic transformation on the lifestyle and practices of the Mizo. It is important to mention here that the efforts of the British resulted in modernization of the Mizo society. Moreover formal education introduced by the missionaries completely changes the outlook not only of the society but above all the youths. Finally, it is a fact that colonialism was the main reason for modernization of the culture and society of the Mizo. But it is equally important to note that the impact of colonialism had ended many cultural events and practices which are impossible to revive today and even in the near future.

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