



## **A Study of Youth Dormitories in Northeast India**

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### ***Abstract***

*The system of dormitory, especially among the youths seemed to be a very common and important system among various tribes of India, mainly in the tribal areas. These dormitories are more or less communal living space for the youths, particularly the unmarried men and also women in certain tribes. It is also believed to have been practiced since ancient period. It is an undeniable claim that the dormitory plays a central and significant role in shaping social and cultural life of the people and acted as the main institution for learning important traditional customs and necessities. This paper focuses on the two tribes in the Northeast India, Mizos and KonyakNagas. Mizos called it Zawlbuk and was limited only to the unmarried men while the Konyak Nagas have two types called Morung (Baan) and Ywo for unmarried men and women respectively. It also highlights the significances and roles of the system of youth dormitories between these two tribes along with their comparisons.*

**Keywords:** *Dormitory, Mizo, KonyakNaga, Zawlbuk, Morung (Baan), Ywo.*

### **Introduction**

An institutionalised mechanism which occupied a central position in most of the tribes in North East India was their dormitory or community home. These dormitories were established to maintain socio, economic, political and administrative needs of the people of the village. India has one of the largest concentrations of tribal population in the world and according to the 2011 census tribal groups of India consisted of 8.6% (104,281,034). These tribal groups are mainly divided into five territorial groups – North-East region, Sub-Himalayan region of North and North-West, Central and Eastern region, South Indian region and that of the Western Indian region. More than 80% of tribal population are found in each state of *Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya* and the entire eastern Indian region and these regions have the largest concentration of tribal population in India.

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These dormitories played an important role in the society of each tribal group. The transitional period from that of childhood to adulthood took place here and so did the development of tribal youth identity as they have begun to enter the real life of society. 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. Also these dormitories are where the elders of society have imparted their knowledge, norms, etiquettes and their value system to the younger generation. Each society have their own music and dances, songs and folk tales, myths of creation and the story of migration of their forefather and by doing so they have created a feeling of belonging to the tribe. Following the models and practices of any other group of people these tribal have their own natural boundaries which they used to fight over regularly.

So, certain qualifying terms have existed in these dormitories depending on the tribal group. However, admission to the dormitory may sometimes be casual, on the attainment of a certain age, or it may have to be accompanied by some rituals or rites whereas married people are restricted from becoming a member of the dormitory.

The *Mizo* youth dormitory was known as *Zawlbuk* while the *Konyak Naga* calls boys' dormitory as *Baan* and that of the girls' dormitory as *Ywo*, the *Memi* calls boy's dormitory *Ikhouchiand* and the girl's dormitory as *Illoichi*. The *Ao* tribe refer their dormitory as *Areuh*, the *Angami Naga* states it as *Kichuki*; the *Bhotla* of the sub-Himalayan region in north Uttaranchal call it *Rang-Bang* and the *Munda* and *Ho* tribes call it *Gitiora*; *Oraon* call it *Dhunkuria*; the *Bhuiya* call it *Dhangarbasa*; and the *Gond* call it *Ghotul*. In South India, there also existed an evidence of dormitory system amongst the *Muthuvan* the *Mannan* and the *Paniyan*. *Kottil* is the bachelor's house which serves the purpose of accommodating bachelors and visitor or guest by the *Kunika*.

So in order to understand the role of dormitories in the life of these tribal groups we will look into the *Mizo Zawlbuk* and the *Naga Konyak Morung*.

### **Zawlbuk - Origin**

The origin of *Zawlbuk* may be traced from the two different types of houses – Long Houses or Communal House which were found to be evident among the tribes of people settled in the Southern provinces of China. It is believed that the youth dormitories or house custom was brought down by those tribes who migrated to different parts of Southeast Asia including India among different tribes of Tibeto-Burman speaking people. This type of house was mainly found among the patrilineal tribes and became a practice even among the matrilineal Indonesians. *Mizo* historian *B.Lalthangliana* said, "It is difficult to know when the *Mizo* began using the *Zawlbuk*, its beginning are lost in antiquity".<sup>1</sup> The old folks used to say that before the *Mizo* migrated west and crossed the river *Tiau* in the year 1700, they were residing east of the river *Tiau*.

There was a village called *Selesihsangsarih* in which we find the first clear evidence of the existence of *Zawlbuk*. There was seven *Zawlbuk* in the *Selesih* village in which all the young men used to sleep in it.<sup>ii</sup> These dormitories system was common to almost all the clans of the *Mizo* but one of the clan which did not have the dormitory system is the *Thados*<sup>iii</sup> which may be explained by the fact that they were constantly on the move, looking for a permanent settlement at the time of the advent of the Britishers.

### **Features of Zawlbuk**

The term *Zawlbuk* is used for a ‘community home’ or ‘dormitory’ mainly for bachelors. *Zawlbuk* literally mean ‘flat hut’, where *zawl* means flat, and *buk* is used for a hut.<sup>iv</sup> It was built entirely by the community and it was particularly for young men<sup>v</sup>. The youth and dwellers of *Zawlbuk* had to roll over the log in order to go inside of it. This log is called ‘*bawhbel*’ and was placed for a defence purpose. *Zawlbuk* floor had to be strongly built as one of the most frequent pastimes of them was to engage themselves in wrestling and other various gymnastics feats.<sup>vi</sup> *Zawlbuk* was not only the physical abode of the youth of *Mizo* but had much more deeper meaning to the society as it helped *Mizo* youth in shaping them into a responsible adult member of the society.<sup>vii</sup> The size of the *Zawlbuk* was big enough to accommodate all the young men of the village.<sup>viii</sup>

### **Administration**

In a *Mizo* village the supreme and absolute power was held by the chief. But he does not interfere in everything that happens in the village. So the next authority of the village was ‘*Val Upa*’ who was the leader of the *Zawlbuk*. He was elected by the inmates of the *Zawlbuk* amongst themselves who was respected and was considered to have an undisputed quality. As he had commanded *Zawlbuk*, he was basically commanding the chief’s army. His words were the law and he was assisted by his trusted friends chosen amongst the *Zawlbuk* inmates.<sup>ix</sup>

The inhabitants of the *Zawlbuk* were divided into two classes – *tlangval* or young men and *naupang* or boys. The *tlangval* had to do the harder work like digging graves, carrying of the wounds and the sick or any other needs that may arose while the *naupang* who were known as *Thingnawifawm* had to collect firewood from the forest and supply it to *Zawlbuk*.

### **Admission**

In order for one to be admitted into the *Zawlbuk* they have to follow a queer test after claiming for membership. This claim have to be verified by trusted personal of *Val Upa* who will pulled out the pubic hair of that person and that hair have to be long enough to circle round the established size of a bamboo pipe. If found qualified, then he will be member of the *Zawlbuk*.<sup>x</sup>

### **Function**

The *Zawlbuk* acted as the club house for the young men where organized recreational activities had been taken up by the council for undertaking important matters and function simultaneously as public house. The main function of *Zawlbuk* defines the significance of

welfare of society and for educating the youth in the traditional functioning of the society.<sup>xi</sup> On the other hand, security, peace and harmony serve as a pivotal part in the society for youth as they are the backbone of the society in protecting the villages and its people. Due to lack of formal education during this period, *Zawlbuk* act as an instrument for best educational institution among children.

One of the most important training of *Zawlbuk* and what the *Mizos* had valued the most in the society was *tlawmngaihna*. 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.<sup>xii</sup> It is the code of ethics that guides the *Mizos* to be unselfish, hospitable and helpful to each other.

### **Abolition of Zawlbuk**

Along with the degradation of some of the tribal dormitory system in India, religion played a role in the abolition of *Zawlbuk*. When Christianity reached *Mizo* society Christian virtues slowly eradicated the practices of *Zawlbuk*. Setting up of formal education in *Mizo* society through British missionaries led to the abolition of *Zawlbuk*. Thus, formal education enlightened the status of *Mizo* society and shaped better prospect in their socio-economic sphere. In this regard, *Kipgen* states that the missionaries were not the one who opposed *Zawlbuk*, rather they found it useful for missionary work and used it for preaching station and he further states that it was the *Mizo* who decided for the real abolition of the system.<sup>xiii</sup> And since there were people who took part in the war service of the World War I, modern outlook had reached *Mizo* society and slowly changes for better living life style paved the way for abolition of *Zawlbuk*.<sup>xiv</sup>

### **Critical Evaluation**

The *Mizo* society, as it then existed was a male dominated society and women were discriminated and are underprivileged. The women were considered only as a property belonging to the men rather than a complementary unit. Their accepted place in the society was in the home to rear children, perform various domestic tasks and offer such physical assistance to the male folks as demanded by them in their jhum cultivation.<sup>xv</sup>

*Zawlbuk* under no circumstances could a woman enter or visit it. It was exclusively for men and the exclusion of women from *Zawlbuk* and the women's subservient role along with their acceptance of the same without any question reflects the relationship of men and women in *Mizo* society and has a lasting consequence that resulted in the exclusion of women from decision making bodies in both church and society.<sup>xvi</sup>

### **Konyak Morung (Meaning and Significance)**

One of the earliest definitions of the word "*Morung*" is found in the *Ao-Naga* dictionary compiled in 1911 by Edward Winter Clark, the first American Baptist Missionary

to the North Naga Hills.<sup>xvii</sup> The same concept of dormitory system for girls was operated which played an important role in socializing and as a training centre for motherhood for the girls.<sup>xviii</sup>

The Naga valued *Morung* so great that without *Morung* they did not considered a village to be completed. *Morung* is a word used to refer to a house or hall where all the bachelors of a clan sleep and sometimes used it for performing important ceremonies. It is known by different names depending on the clans – e.g. *Kechuki* in *Angami* tribe, *Apuki* in *Sumi*, *Chumpo* in *Lotha* and so on.

Every household have to contribute the best materials like bamboo, wood and *Saru* that they have for the construction of *Morung*. A notable thing here is that even old women and men were not exempted from contributing the materials as failure of contributing was considered to be disrespectful towards the community.<sup>xix</sup> But construction of the *Morung* was done only by the man folks and women were prohibited to even come near to the site of construction. The completion of the construction of *Morung* is followed by a grand feast which was then followed by cutting of mithun and *zutho* (local wine).

### **Morung (Baan) and Ywo**

*Konyak* calls *Morung* ‘*baan*’ which means ‘Listening’ or ‘Obeying’. The authority of *Morung* is absolute and had to be obeyed without asking question. The main purpose of *Morung* was to maintain law and order and to discipline oneself just like *Mizo Zawlbuk*.<sup>xx</sup>

A notable feature of the *Konyak* dormitory system which make them stand out amongst the tribes of the North East was that it consisted of two types of institution – *Baan* (boys’ dormitory) and *Ywo* (girls dormitory). Female dormitory system is a very rare thing in a tribal administrative setup as almost all of them are patrilineal and does not considered women as a complimentary unit. These two institutions were the centre of the *Konyak* life which helped them to shape their socializing skill and built them to become a responsible adult of the society.

### **Baan (Boys’ Dormitory)**

*Baan* is an institution of the *Konyak* where the bachelor’s sleep and learned different types of works, their culture, customs and beliefs system. It was the place where the youngster learned how to become a responsible adult in the society. The art of blacksmith, carving, construction, agriculture, forest clearing, hunting, the art of war, wrestling, folk dance, games and various other sports were all being taught at the *Morung*. Besides these youth learned good manners, discipline, customary laws of the clans, traditional value system and showing respect for the elders.<sup>xxi</sup> Also, *Baan* used to serves as the Council Hall where meeting are call upon for discussion of important matters.<sup>xxii</sup>

### **Ywo (Girls' Dormitory)**

*Ywo* was a place where young girls of the village were trained by the elders. Unlike *Baan*, *Ywo* was not constructed separately but rather the girls of the same clans slept together in the house of the opposite clan.<sup>xxiii</sup> At *Ywo*, girls of the village learned the art of spinning cotton thread, weaving, knitting, cleaning house, cooking and making cotton balls. Learning of folk songs, dances, moral education and other activities were carried out here.<sup>xxiv</sup>

### **Features of the Morung (Physical Features)**

*Morung* were usually placed at the entrance of the village or may be at a spot where the village could be guarded from enemies or animal attack. When it comes to size, *Morung* varied from tribe to tribe and also from village to village but what certain was that it was the biggest building in the village and the tall post that erected in the middle of the *Morung* indicate that *Morung* is the highest institution. *Morung* is more or less same with the *Mizo Zawlbuk* in this regard. But the differences can be seen in the decoration of the dormitory like carvings of mithun, tiger, hunters, hornbill, etc. which were placed in the *Morung* and also head of the mithun or tiger signified the bravery of the bachelors and the hornbill indicated the status of the *Morung*.

### **Baan and Ywo as Centre of Education**

*Baan* is an institution where all young men above the age of 15 attained their skills and learned all the necessary things to become a responsible adult. Since it is a male dormitory, children and women are not allowed to enter the *Baan*. Work ethics and vital things like discipline, customs and tradition, military tactics – offensive and defensive, hunting, fishing, etc, and also folk songs, war dance, poetry and sports were all being taught at the *Baan*. Most importantly, young men were trained to be brave and one such training was by letting them go in the graveyard at night.<sup>xxv</sup> For *Konyak Naga*, the *Morung* is an institution of learning as they were taught the ways of life.<sup>xxvi</sup>

When young girls reached the age of adolescence there is a dormitory for them in which they sleep together known as *Ywo*. It was here that the young girls learned the art of weaving, pottery, knitting, cooking, embroidery, singing folk songs, dances and make love affairs.

### **Activities**

Apart from education and teaching the various arts of the clans and other important matters, they used to have various games and recreational activities. Usually children played in group which was divided by sex and one such toys was tops which boys used to spin and try to dominate the other players by hitting their tops while girls played with dolls made usually of rags.<sup>xxvii</sup>

As we have already mention *Morung* is not the only place for bachelor to sleep but was also a platform to pass on knowledge from generation to generation through folk songs, folklores, dances, legends/oral tradition, myths, etc. Apart from all of these admissions into



the *Morung* denotes the stepping stones from childhood to the adulthood and makes young boys and girls to become more aware of their rights and duties in the community.<sup>xxviii</sup>

### **Decline of Morung**

Christianity was brought by the British to the *Konyak* and it became one of the biggest and greatest significance that destroyed *Konyak* tradition and culture which was same in the case of the *Mizos* where Christianity destroyed their old tradition and valued system. Then gradually they realized that the old tradition like head-hunting trophy was not the best option for them if they wanted to survive.<sup>xxix</sup> And apart from these there were many social evils like disposal of dead body, drinking of rice beer, gathering of young men and women to show their love for each other by expressing it through singing, dancing, etc. were all abandoned.<sup>xxx</sup> Until 1930s there were no schools and the literacy rate was nil according to *Haimendorf*.<sup>xxxi</sup> But then the introduction of school in 1933 at *Wakching* village and the second primary school at *Oting* village in 1938 and the third one at *Wanching* village in 1939 had paved the way for education in the life of the *Konyak Nagas*.<sup>xxxii</sup> Thus with the coming of education into the life of the *Konyak* the significances of *Morung* amongst *Konyak* have degraded greatly which lead to the abandonment of the *Morung*.

### **Conclusion**

The institution of youth dormitory that both *Mizos* and *Konyak* had was indeed the backbone of the community as it support and acted as the major pillar in keeping up the standard and values of their society. Not only have the institution maintained peace and harmony in their society by creating uniformity amongst the people but had occupied an important place in the society by being the sole protector.

There were lots of similarities between the *MizoZawlbuk* and that of the *Konyak Naga Morung* as both *Zawlbuk* and *Morung* were the places where education and all kinds of knowledge had been passed on from the elders to the younger generation. It was the place where they learned their traditional customs, culture, values and belief system and also the art of war, hunting, etc. Also the administration of the village and all the important meetings were held at these institutions.

But one of the main differences between them was that the *Mizos* had dormitory only for the young men whereas the *KonyakNagas* have dormitory for both the young men and women. *Mizos* treated women like a property whereas *KonyakNagas* give them a place to train for the art of socializing and for the development of various skills like weaving, knitting, cooking, etc. Apart from this the *Konyak* decorated their *Morung* with wood carving of mithun, tiger, hornbill, etc. whereas at *Zawlbuk* there were no such kinds of decoration.

The advent of the colonial power and that of the Christian missionaries aided by force of education thus played an important role in the degradation of both the *Zawlbuk* and the *Morung*. Mass conversion to Christianity was easy on the *Mizos* and the *Konyak* as all members of the village followed the religion of the chief and this hit a striking blow at their

indigenous faith and believes systems which lead to the loss of relevance of *Zawlbuk* and *Morung* values to the *Mizos* and the *KonyakNagas*.

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