

The Institution of Bawi (Slave): Retrospection on the History of the Abolition of Slavery among the Hmars in North-East India

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Abstract: *In the traditional Hmar society, the practice of slavery was very common. However, with the advent of the British colonial power along with Christianity, the institution of bawi (slave) system was finally abolished in 1927 by the British Parliament, which had a far reaching impact upon the socio-economic and politico-jural domain of the Hmar society.*

Keywords: Bawi, Bawichhuaka, British, Dohnuna, Chief, Fraser, Government of Assam, Hmar, Lushai Hills, Parliament

1. Introduction

In the traditional Hmar social hierarchy below the Vantlang (commoners) was a class known as Bawi (Slave). The practice of Bawi system used to be very common among the indigenous Hmar society. There were various forms of becoming a Bawi or, to obtained a Bawi who were further classified as below, according to the manner in which they become Bawi.:

1. Inpuai Bawi (Suok): Widow, orphans and others who were unable to support themselves, and have no relatives willing to do so would take shelter in the house of the Village Chief as Bawi. These Bawis were known as Inpuai Suok. They were looked on as part of Chief's household and do the entire Chief's works in return for their food, clothing and shelter. On reaching a marriageable age, they were allowed to marry and set up a house of their own, but were still in some respects a Bawi for some more years. The price of a girl, upon marriage, went to the man who kept her at the time of marriage (Pudaite, 1963:54).

It may be mentioned that the inpuai bawi are by no means badly off, and the usual way practice seems in every way suited to the circumstances of the case. According to Shakespeare (1912:48), many a clever young man rises from being a bawi to being the Chief's most trusted adviser, and it is by no means unusual for a chief to take a favourite bawi into his own 'saphun' (adoption of another's clan). The custom of inpuai bawi seems well suited to the people and provides for the maintenance of the poor old, and destitute, that it took several years to disappear.

(ii) Chemsan Bawi: They were criminals who took refuge in the Chief's house to escape from the consequence of their evil deeds. Murderers, to escape from the avengers and public trial rushed to the Chief's house and saved their lives at the expense of their own or their children's rights and privileges. The avenger who tried to take revenge against the criminal or the murderer who, after taking refuge to the Chief's house would be counted enemy of the Chief. However, their safety were limited only within the premises of the Chief's house : in such a situation, the

murderer and his family members usually became and remained slaves of the Chief. Protection of the criminal or the murderer cease the moment he left the Chief as a slave. Debtors, thieves and other vagabonds avoided punishment on condition that they and their children became bawi.

Chemsan bawi does not necessarily live in the Chief's house. A couple may sets up a house of their own, but all their childrens are still in some respect a bawi to the extent as their parents. With few exceptions, the Chief's takes the marriage price of the daughters of such bawi.

(iii) Tuklut Bawi: These were the poor and the needy people who voluntarily sought shelter in the Chief's or richman's house during famine or intra-tribal war. According to Shakespeare (1912:49), Tuklut Bawi were those who, during war, have deserted the losing side and joined the victors by promising that they and their descendants would be Bawi. A Tuklut Bawi and his family can be freed after paying a Siel (mithun) to the master who was entitled to keep them as long as he liked. Usually the daughters of tuklut bawi are not taken into account.

(iv) Sal: Persons captured in tribal wars are known as Sal. They were bond slave without any status. As soon as they became Sal they also became the personal property of their captors. The captors used to exchange their Sal for food and guns, one strong sal being worth two guns. They could not dine out on at the same place with the commoners. However, the children of bond slave grew up in the captor's house as his children, and as a rule were always well treated with amazing kindness that they seldom wished to return to their former homes.

2. The Abolition of Bawi (Slave) System

The question of bawi became controversial when Dr. Peter Frazer, M.D. (Edin) came to the erstwhile Lushai Hills in 1908 and reminded the District authorities that the bawi systems as practiced in the Lushai hills was no better than the slavery which had been abolished by the Slavery Abolition Act, 1833 by the British Government. He strongly argued that the bawis were treated in the same

nature with those of the slaves under the British Empire and, moreover, it was hereditary. He was led to believe that the bawis were oppressed and they were deprived of liberty which belonged, of right to every British subject. The administration, on the other hand, refused to recognize that there was an institution of bawi which needed abolition. The fact was that a number of individuals and families were indeed bonded. They could seek freedom only by paying Rs.40/- to the ruling chief failing that their children's children would continue to be bonded. If one could have a belief that there was no bawi, it was only because the system was in a mitigated form due to characteristic lack of servility among the Hmar people and the peculiar kindness shown to them, by their master.

However, the problem did not remain silent for long; the crack was soon widened when Frazer personally collected evidences to prove that the bawis were ill-treated. He then requested the District authorities to direct that an enquiry should be made with the object of proclaiming all the bawis free and if necessary, providing compensation for the chiefs. At the same time, the district authorities as well as the missionaries were aware of the danger involved in the interference in an indigenous social institution. They felt that the intervention would do more harm than good to the chiefs and they did not want to alienate the chiefs from the administration either. These factors prevented the authorities from doing anything to abolish the bawi system for they knew that the chiefs were instrumental in effectively running and administering the hill territory. The authorities, therefore, adopted a policy of silence in regard to bawi. Indeed, the administration, and, at later stage, even some of the missionaries made subtle efforts to hinder the spread of education beyond the primary level in this area. To them, good administration could exist on the basis of static social order.

In the meantime, majority of the ruling chiefs did not support the move made by Frazer, Lt Col. H.W.G Cole, the District Magistrate was perturbed fearing that the chief would not take lightly because under the suggestion by Dr. Frazer, the chief were to be suddenly deprived of their domestic servants and part of the price of the marriage of the daughter of the bawis. The situations thus deteriorate and the matter was placed before the Assam Government which ensured a long process of discussion. Frazer, who in the opinion of the Government exceeded the purpose of his being there, was also called on either to leave the Hills or sign an agreement which Frazer flatly refused to accept this approach by the Superintendent of Lushai Hills, which the Government was compelled to order his withdrawal from the Hills, which ultimately led to his expulsion from the country in 1912.

However, even after Frazer's departure the matter does not come to a close; the bawi became a matter of great concern both to the Government of Assam and India. Accordingly, the Government of Assam proposed a change for the future status of bawis as follows:

- a) A date should be fixed after which the bawi contract could not be entered into.

- b) The Government would pay the customary ransom of Rs.40/- if the bawi was freed.
- c) Government should recover ransom from persons in whose behalf the same was paid.
- d) Persons so redeemed and released be at liberty to leave the chief's house or to remain there as they wished.
- e) Let the chiefs know that they would be liable to bring to the court when need arose (Lalrimawia: 1982).

In 1927, the Government of Assam replaced the word 'bawi' by a new term 'sunghai' or 'umpui' meaning 'relatives' or 'inmates'. The term 'bawi' was thus no longer allowed to be used.

It may be said that Frazer left the Lushai Hills with a heavy heart after being defeated in his attempt for the abolition of bawi with a strong determination of filing the case against what had happened in the Hills. He submitted a petition to his regents to discuss the question of bawi in the British Parliament in which the Parliament finally passed the matter in favour of the abolition of bawi in the Lushai Hills in 1927.

The disappearance of bawi system among the Hmar people was also due to the gradual growth of public consciousness brought about by sincere efforts of the missionaries to fulfill the ethical demands of Christian faith on the one hand and the abolition of chieftainship on the other. Moreover, when the chief accepted the new religion, there was difficulty in rooting out the notorious bawi system among the people. In the words of Watkin R. Roberts (the pioneer missionary among the Hmar people), "...the village chiefs who embraced the Lord set their slaves free on their return to their respective village. Even many families enslaved by others were freed free in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Before the Government of India and the Parliament at London declared slavery and its redemption price illegal, slavery pained and saddened some of us very much; but now I think there is no more slavery. I think Lalbawichhuaka was also born by this time !" (Roberts, 1960, Dec 7th).

3. Conclusion

On 12th March, 1985, one of a great public figure passed away. "He was a man who used to choose to act according to his principle: a dignified man in dress, manner and in conversation. A public man, but too urbane to be a politician. Always calm and composed, yet he never bothered to be agreeable at the cost of principles. At times self-opinionated to the point of being stubborn. His name was Hmar Khawbung Bawichhuaka, meaning he was of the 'Khawbung family of Hmar clan Slave Emancipated' (Lalkhama, 1985:21A). It may be noted that Dohnuna, father of Hmar Khawbung Bawichhuaka happened to be the first Christian among the Hmar (as well as the Mizos) who could free himself by paying Rs 40/- to the chief which is not a small amount at that time. He became important activists in the bawi liberation movement. He was one of the delegate who went to Shillong to submit a memorandum to the Lt. Governor of Bengal and Assam for the abolition of the bawi system in the early 1910s in

which a son was born to him and later named his son as “Lalbawichhuaka”, a name that encapsulated time and tide.

Thus, the abolition of bawi system is historical achievements where freed bawis have attained a number of good positions in the society. In the history of bawis’ emancipation among the Hmar people, we cannot but forget the names of Dohnuna in our minds and his son Hmar Khawbung Bawichhuaka will always be remembered.

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