

The Forgotten Institution of Dormitory Practices in Tangkhum Naga Tribe of Manipur


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This article introspects into the social and cultural fabric of the Tangkhum Naga tribe in Manipur, India, focusing on their rich traditions and the profound impact of social changes, particularly on the forgotten institution of the Tangkhum dormitory practices—its importance and impact in contemporary society. Our modern education system, where competition has become cut-throat, often overlooks the practical lessons of life. When we examine the roles and responsibilities of youngsters in today's world, the practical lessons that are supposed to teach life lessons like social responsibilities, etiquette, and communal values seem to be decaying at an alarming rate. For this very reason, this article offers a comprehensive examination of this critical issue. The Tangkhum, predominantly settled in hilly areas with agriculture as their primary livelihood, possess a unique blend of cultural practices passed down through generations. This article aims to provide valuable insights into the Tangkhum way of life, contributing to a deeper understanding of indigenous cultures in the region. The dormitory institution, which was once the backbone of Tangkhum Naga society, now faces challenges of relevance and sustainability. Its survival and cultural preservation depend on adapting to modern education while maintaining its essential character.

Keywords: tangkhum dormitory practices, importance, relevancy, tangkhum society, longshim, cultural transformation, indigenous education, social cohesion

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1. Introduction

Social change is the primary lens through which the development and shifting patterns of a society's lifestyle are determined. A society is often motivated by constant internal and external forces to become more self-reliant and independent. The Tangkhul Naga community has witnessed profound transformations over the past century: from a barter system of exchange to a modern commodity economy based on printed currency; from traditional thatch-roofed dwellings to concrete structures with contemporary designs; from subsistence agriculture to wage labor and urban employment. These changes are not merely architectural or economic; they reflect a deeper shift in the nature of socio-cultural life. The impact of these transformations on traditional educational institutions, specifically the dormitory system, cannot be ignored.

According to the 2011 Census, tribal populations account for approximately 8.10% of India's total population, scattered across various regions. Each tribe possesses its own distinct cultural and traditional practices. Among these, the Nagas occupy the strategic tri-junction of India, China, and Myanmar. The Naga community comprises more than 50 tribes and clans, with the Tangkhul Naga being one of the major tribes residing in the northeastern part of Manipur. They possess a unique and rich heritage passed down through generations. The shift from a society of head-hunters to a Christian community involved leaving behind many practices of animism, traditional festivals, and rituals. While formal education spread, leading to changes in lifestyle and social structure, and participation in Indian politics altered local governance, the dormitory system remained a vital anchor for cultural identity.

In Naga society, the dormitory system is considered the backbone of the community. Every village, regardless of its size, traditionally maintained these institutions. They served as crucial social, cultural, and educational centers where life skills such as hunting, handicrafts, cultural traditions, discipline, and community values were imparted. These institutions, known as *Longshim* in Tangkhul, functioned as informal schools where elders passed down customs, songs, and responsibilities, ensuring cultural continuity and community cohesion.

The dormitory was not merely a physical structure; it was an institution that shaped the moral, social, and intellectual development of the entire community.

2. Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this research are as follows:

- a) To probe into the relevancy of Tangkhul Naga dormitory practices in the contemporary era and assess their potential for adaptation and revival.
- b) To highlight the importance and impact of the practices of the Tangkhul Naga dormitory institution on social character development and community cohesion.
- c) To study the shifts in the socio-cultural aspects of the Tangkhul community resulting from the decline of these traditional institutions and identify the consequences for modern society.

3. Methodology and Study Area

3.1 Methodology

This study is based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected through structured interviews with village elders and community leaders who possess firsthand knowledge of the dormitory system. Secondary data were sourced from books, academic articles, historical records, and government census reports related to the Tangkhul Naga people, focusing on their educational, social, economic, and political backgrounds. The research employs a qualitative approach, combining ethnographic observation with historical analysis to understand the institution's role in society.

3.2 Study Area

The majority of the Tangkhul people are settled in the hilly terrains of Manipur, primarily concentrated in the Ukhrul and Kamjong districts. Ukhrul is bounded by Myanmar to the east, Kangpokpi and Senapati districts to the west, Nagaland state to the north, and Kamjong district to the south. The region is blessed with an abundance of natural wealth and a rich cultural heritage governed by customary laws since time immemorial. According to the 2011 Census, Ukhrul has a population of 183,998, with a literacy rate of 81.4%.

While the literacy rate is high, the nature of this education is predominantly formal and Western-oriented, differing significantly from the traditional indigenous systems. The terrain, characterized by steep hills and valleys, has historically influenced the social organization and cultural practices of the Tangkhul community, making the dormitory system an essential institution for maintaining social order and cultural transmission.

4. The Tangkhul Dormitory Institution: Longshim

The Tangkhul society has witnessed a wave of change that has brought both negative and positive impacts across various sectors. The *Longshim*, or dormitory, was an informal schooling institution where all essential life activities were taught. It was the center around which the activities of the village's young people revolved. The institution served multiple functions simultaneously: it was a school, a social club, a training ground for leadership, and a repository of cultural knowledge.

4.1 Structure and Organization

The *Longshim* was usually established in the house of the village chief (*Awunga*) or a prominent, wealthy couple, particularly those who were childless and could dedicate their space to the youth. There were two distinct types:

a) Mayar Longshim (Boys' Dormitory): This institution served as a training ground for young males, typically from ages 7 to 18. The boys learned warfare, hunting, agriculture, and the responsibilities of community leadership. The dormitory was organized hierarchically, with older boys serving as mentors to younger ones.

b) Ngala Longshim (Girls' Dormitory): This institution served young females during the same age range, focusing on domestic skills, artistic traditions, and the responsibilities of motherhood and community participation.

A unique practice known as *Ngala Long Kaka* involved groups of boys visiting the girls' dormitories for social interaction. This practice was carefully regulated by the community elders and served as a controlled environment for young people to interact and eventually select life partners. The dormitories featured gigantic wooden beds made from a single log, known as *Samkhok* or *Bedkhok*, which could accommodate twenty to thirty

individuals sleeping in a row. Each *Longshim* was managed by its senior members and the owners of the house, who acted as mentors and guardians. These managers, often respected elders, maintained discipline and ensured that the educational objectives of the institution were met.

4.2 Educational and Social Functions

The *Longshim* was not merely a place to sleep; it was a training ground for life and warfare. It also functioned as a social club for entertainment and a forum for discussing community matters. Boys would visit the girls' dormitory bringing food or engaging in debates and discussions. Through these interactions, the community would identify future leaders:

a) Yarkhok: The wise, strong, bold, and handsome boys selected as leaders. These individuals were expected to take on responsibilities in village governance and defense.

b) Lakhokva: The all-round wise and beautiful girls selected as leaders. These women were expected to become mothers of the community and guides for younger generations.

The *Mayar-Ngala Longshim* came to life after the evening meals in their respective parental homes. At daybreak, the youth would return to their parents' houses to assist with household and agricultural activities. Thus, during the day, they belonged to their families, but at night, they belonged to the community. This dual belonging ensured that the youth maintained connections with both their nuclear families and the broader community, creating a balanced social structure.

5. Ngalongshim: The Training Ground for Women

The *Ngalongshim* (girls' dormitory) was a specialized training school for young women. It focused on essential skills such as:

a) Handicrafts and Weaving: Mastering the intricate designs of Tangkhul textiles. Young women learned the traditional patterns and techniques that had been passed down for generations, each pattern carrying symbolic meaning related to the tribe's history and values.

b) Embroidery and Design: Learning the symbolic motifs that represent tribal identity. These designs were not merely decorative; they communicated social status, family lineage, and cultural values.

c) Morality and Ethics: Imparting values that parents might find difficult to teach directly. The dormitory provided a space where young women could learn from older women about respect, responsibility, and community service.

Both boys and girls learned social behavior, manners, and obedience from their seniors. As the renowned scholar M. Horam noted, "Singing comes as naturally to the Tangkhul as breathing." The dormitory was the primary venue where folk songs and oral histories were preserved and practiced. These songs served as repositories of tribal knowledge, encoding information about history, agriculture, social norms, and spiritual beliefs. It shaped the moral character of the youth, taught social etiquette, and imparted a profound sense of social responsibility. Furthermore, it was within the *Longshim* that young people often selected their life partners. Upon marriage, a girl would leave the *Ngalalongshim*, and her mates would give her a ceremonial send-off as part of the wedding celebration. This ceremony, known as *Khamatem*, was a significant social event that marked the transition from youth to adulthood.

6. Social Cohesion and the Philosophy of Education

Since time immemorial, Tangkhul society has been a closely-knit community characterized by unity and oneness (*Khangasung*). Whether in the fields or at the workplace, the sense of collective identity remains paramount. The dormitory system reflected this ethos, emphasizing life ethics and values that fostered self-reliance and self-sufficiency. The institution embodied the principle that education is not merely the transfer of knowledge but the formation of character and the development of social consciousness.

6.1 Traditional vs. Modern Education: A Comparative Analysis

The traditional dormitory system shares certain similarities with modern education, such as the separation of pupils by age groups. However, the weightage and objectives of the two systems differ significantly.

Aspect	Traditional Education (Longshim)	Modern Education (Formal Schools)
Objective	Character building, survival skills, community responsibility	Career advancement, individual success, academic achievement
Teaching Method	Experiential, hands-on, mentorship-based	Classroom-based, textbook-oriented, standardized
Content	Practical life skills, oral traditions, cultural knowledge	Academic subjects, standardized curriculum, theoretical knowledge
Community Role	Central to the process; elders as teachers	Peripheral; parents as supporters
Evaluation	Demonstrated competence in real-world situations	Standardized tests and examinations
Duration	Continuous throughout youth (ages 7-18)	Segmented into grades and levels
Social Outcome	Strong community bonds, collective identity	Individual achievement, social mobility

Traditional Education: The dormitory system focused on survival skills, resilience in the face of natural disasters or wars, and communal responsibility. It matured the individual through practical life lessons. Young people learned how to cultivate crops, hunt game, construct houses, and resolve conflicts. They also learned the history of their people, the customs that governed social interaction, and the spiritual beliefs that gave meaning to their lives.

Modern Education: The formal education system provides unlimited avenues for career advancement and individual success but often fails to address the majority of local occupations or the social needs of the community. While it has enabled some individuals to achieve economic mobility, it has also created a disconnect between educated youth and their communities. Many young people, after receiving formal education, migrate to urban areas in search of employment, leaving behind their villages and their cultural heritage.

6.2 The Legend of the Lost Script: Oral Tradition as Educational Foundation

The Tangkhul elders maintain a fascinating oral tradition regarding the origin of their educational methods. It is said that the Naga script was originally written on animal skin. However, a dog ran away with the skin and ate it, leading to the loss of the written word. Consequently, the Tangkhul had to adopt alternative methods of schooling—the *Longshim*—where all practical lessons, habits, and manners were shaped through oral transmission and physical practice.

This reliance on oral tradition made the dormitory the indispensable repository of the tribe's collective knowledge. This legend, while perhaps mythological in origin, reflects a profound truth about the Tangkhul approach to education. Without a written script, the community developed sophisticated oral traditions and experiential learning methods. The dormitory became the primary institution for preserving and transmitting knowledge. Stories, songs, and practical demonstrations were the primary tools of education. This system proved remarkably effective, as evidenced by the fact that the Tangkhul maintained a coherent and vibrant culture for centuries without written records.

7. The Impact of the Decline: Challenges and Consequences

The social revolution brought about by the introduction of Christianity and Western education played a vital role in the decline of the dormitory institution. As young boys and girls were sent to formal schools and colleges, the *Longshim* gradually died out. While the new systems brought benefits, they also left a vacuum that has yet to be filled. The decline was not sudden but gradual, accelerating during the twentieth century as formal education became more accessible and valued.

7.1 The Emergence of Social Problems

The loss of the dormitory has led to significant social problems. In the past, the *Longshim* acted as a support system where the youth could share their worries and find solace in the company of their peers without any financial cost. The institution provided a sense of belonging and purpose, helping young people navigate the challenges of adolescence. Today, modern forms of entertainment—clubs and parties—often serve as temporary escapes from depression and anxiety but lack the deep-rooted social support of the traditional system. The absence of this institutional support has contributed to rising rates of depression, substance abuse, and suicide among young people in Tangkhul communities.

7.2 Erosion of Discipline and Values

With the decline of the *Longshim*, the old discipline has eroded. The Western lifestyle has made inroads into the society, and traditional values of human dignity and respect for elders are becoming a thing of the past.

The nature of courtship has also changed; instead of the regulated interactions of the *Longshim*, youth now meet in private study rooms or individual fireplaces (*Meisum Kapam*) under the pretext of studying, often staying late into the night. This lack of traditional supervision has contributed to the "teenage headache" faced by modern parents and the broader society. Parents report increasing difficulties in controlling their children's behavior and choices. The absence of community-based mechanisms for socialization has left families to manage adolescent development alone, a burden that many find overwhelming.

7.3 Urban Migration and Cultural Loss

Urban migration and the pursuit of modern jobs have further reduced the relevance of the dormitory. Many youths now prefer individualistic pursuits over traditional community training, leading to a steady loss of indigenous practices, handicrafts, and oral history. Young people who migrate to cities often lose connection with their cultural roots. Their children, growing up in urban environments, may have little knowledge of their ancestral traditions. This represents a profound loss, not just for the Tangkhul community but for humanity as a whole, as centuries of accumulated cultural knowledge disappears.

8. Reformative Moves and the Path Forward

Despite these challenges, recent years have seen a surge in reformative movements aimed at reviving the Tangkhul heritage. Various organizations have begun promoting indigenous music, festivals, folk dances, and storytelling. Efforts to build heritage houses, such as the one in Sihai village, serve as reminders of the architectural and social brilliance of the past. These initiatives represent a growing recognition that modernization need not mean the complete abandonment of traditional culture.

Some communities have attempted to revive modified versions of the dormitory system, adapting them to contemporary contexts. These efforts have shown promise, particularly in maintaining cultural identity and providing youth with a sense of community belonging. However, cultural revival cannot be achieved through festivals alone. The society as a whole must understand and educate the younger generation on the importance of social and cultural values and ethics.

Without a conscious effort to integrate traditional wisdom with modern knowledge, the society risks becoming stagnant or losing its unique identity entirely.

8.1 Potential Models for Integration

Several approaches show promise for integrating traditional and modern education:

a) Community-Based Learning Centers:

Establishing spaces where young people can learn traditional skills alongside formal education. These centers could teach handicrafts, oral history, and cultural practices while maintaining connections to modern knowledge.

b) Mentorship Programs: Reviving the mentorship aspect of the dormitory system through structured programs where elders guide young people in both traditional and contemporary skills.

c) Cultural Curriculum Integration:

Incorporating Tangkhul history, language, and cultural practices into the formal school curriculum, ensuring that young people maintain connection with their heritage.

d) Digital Preservation: Using modern technology to document and preserve oral traditions, folk songs, and cultural knowledge, making them accessible to future generations.

9. Conclusion

The informal schooling institutions—the *Mayar* and *Ngala Longshim*—may be gone, but the vacuum they left behind remains. The forgotten Tangkhul dormitory practices now reside largely in the realm of legend. Yet, there is hope. Conscientious young people and scholars must take the lead in ensuring that the essence of the old system is adjusted to the changing world. We must find ways to preserve our basic interests and cultural freedom while embracing the benefits of modernity. The *Longshim* was not just a building; it was a philosophy of life that taught us how to be human within a community.

The decline of the dormitory institution represents a critical juncture in the history of the Tangkhul people. The choices made in the coming years will determine whether this unique cultural heritage survives or becomes merely a footnote in history. The challenge is not to reject modernity but to find ways to preserve the wisdom of the past while adapting to the realities of the present.

This requires commitment from community leaders, educators, policymakers, and young people themselves. It requires recognition that indigenous knowledge systems have value not only for the communities that created them but for humanity as a whole. The Tangkhul dormitory practices, with their emphasis on character development, community responsibility, and the transmission of cultural knowledge, offer valuable lessons for contemporary education systems that often prioritize individual achievement over collective well-being. By learning from the past and adapting its lessons to the present, the Tangkhul community can create a future that honors both tradition and progress.

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