CHAPTER - III
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Origin and Meaning of the term ‘Hmar’

On the origin and meaning of the term ‘Hmar’ there are two versions. The first version suggests that the term might have originated from the word ‘hmar’ which happened to mean ‘north’ in Hmar dialect. The supporter of this version argue that the Hmar people live in the north from the position of other Mizo tribes and are therefore called Hmar (northerners). This implies that the term came into use only after the Hmar has settle down in Mizoram. It should however be pointed out that all the Hmar do not necessarily live in north Mizoram. As a matter of fact, majority of them live outside Mizoram and yet have been called Hmar. Therefore, the assumption that they live in the north Mizoram and were called so does not have substantial historical evidence.

The second version which is based on Hmar traditions contends that the term was originally derived from the word ‘hmarh’ which means ‘tying of one’s hair in a knot on the back of one’s head’. The local tradition maintains that there were once two brothers – Hrumsawm, the elder one and Tukbemsawm the younger one. It is said that Hrumsawm tied his hair in a knot on his forehead because of a sore on the nape of his head during his childhood. After his death, his descendants continued the same hairstyle and the Pawis who now live in south Mizoram are believed to be his progenies. However, Tukbemsawm ties his hair in a knot on the nape of his head. The Hmars who adopted Tukbesawm’s hairstyle are believed to be his progenies and were called Hmar (Songate 1977: 1-3).

Again, equally controversial is the exact time the term ‘Hmar’ come to be in use to refer a particular tribe. Colonial writers often used ‘Mar’ or Mhar” interchangeable to mean Hmar. J Shakespear (1912: 185) used the term ‘Old Kuki’ and ‘Khawtlang’ interchangeably to mean Hmar. Suoka Pudaite holds the opinion that the term’ Hmar’ had been in use while they were in Shan state (Burma) settlement. According to him that even the names of
different clans and sub-clans had already emerged. He cited a poem in support of his contention as follows:

*Taite (Tryte) Pa’n changsi a zeuva
Ruifur ah lan hre de ning.*

In English –

Taite (trite) man fried a seed of millet
Whether spoil or not will be known only rain falls from above.

From the above poem, it can be concluded that the Hmar people identify each other by clans or sub-clans while they were in Shan state in Burma. The supporters of this version concluded that the term had already been in use when the Hmars settled in Burma. Whatever may be the truth, this much is clear to us that the term as a common nomenclature had only gained popularity and wider acceptance among the Hmars living in different parts of North-East India with the down of political consciousness by the beginning of the twentieth century.

**Original Home of Hmar**

Even though the Hmar do not have written records in the past, yet it is not impossible to reconstruct their history. In the absence of written records of their past events oral traditions are used extensively. Traditional practices, songs, folklore, folktales, legends, etc. which are handed down from generation to generation contain sufficient sources of information for the reconstruction of a meaningful history of the Hmar tribe.

(a) Tradition of Jewish Connection:

The first tradition traces the Jewish origin of Hmar. According to this account, their first known ancestor was called ‘Manmasi’ Wherever they move and settled they used to say that they were the descendants of Manmasi or Manmasi’s men. Could this Manmasi be perhaps one of the children of Joseph in the Old Testament ?. It is therefore, quite possible that the word ‘Manmasi’ could be a corrupted form a “Manasea”, the elder son of Joseph in the Old Testament. If so, the Hmar could be one of the ten missing tribes of Israels in the Old Testament.

Again, perhaps the most surprising yet interesting tradition is that one of the oldest festival of Hmar is called ‘Sikpui Ruoi’ (Winter Festival) where the festival songs (Sikpui Hla) for this important occasion referred to some similar events as in the Bible occupied such
as sacred place that the festival could start only after they sang with rapt attention. The song goes as follows:-

\[
\text{Sikpui inthang kan ur lai a,} \\
\text{Chang tuipui aw, Senma hrili kang intan.}
\]

\[
\text{Ke ra lawn a, ka leido aw,} \\
\text{Sunah sum ang, zanah mei lawn invak e.}
\]

\[
\text{An tur a sa, thlu a ruol aw,} \\
\text{In phawsiel le in ral feite zuong thaw ro,}
\]

\[
\text{Sun ra zul a, ka leido aw,} \\
\text{Ke ra lawn a, mei sum ang lawn invak e.}
\]

\[
\text{Sun ra zul a, ka leido aw,} \\
\text{Laimi sa ang chang tuipuiin lem zova}
\]

\[
\text{A varoul aw la ta che,} \\
\text{Sounglung chunga tui zuong put kha la ta che (Keivawm, 1980:2)}
\]

In English:

While we are preparing for the Sikpui festival,
The big red sea becomes divided.

As we march forward fighting against foes,
We are being led by a cloud during day and by a pillar of fire during night.

Our fierce enemies are multitude,
Come out with your shields and spears.

Fighting our enemies all day,
We march along as fire goes before us like a cloud.

The enemies we fight all day,
The big sea swallowed them like beast.

Collect the quails,
And fetch the water that spring out of the rock.
The Hmar people claim that the above song is self explanatory and it vividly refer to their liberation from the Egyptian bondage under the leadership of Moses and the events that followed after they crossed the Red Sea (Exodus: Old Testament, Chapter 13, 14, 16 and 17). From which sources they could compose this peculiar song is difficult to trace out. Nevertheless, the Hmar continued to celebrate this festival even after they had settle in different part of North-East India.

Further, the Hmars have assumed a kind of affinity with the Jews. It is based on the fact that certain points of contact had been established by them especially with reference to the Old Testament of the Bible. Like the Jews the Hmars also had three important festivals in a year. There are some similarities in the religious sacrificial rites and practices of the Hmar with those of the Jews in the Biblical times. They claim that like the Jews, in the traditional religion and rituals, the Hmar erected an altar having four corners in the worshipping place and sprinkled the blood of the sacrificial animals over the flour on the platform of the altar (Zarzolien, 1987:81-82).

Besides these, there are other traditions weaved to support the version of this Jewish connection. They recount that in one of the Hmar folklores mention is made about the Great Deluge as found in the Old Testament known as Tawng Semzawl meaning the valley of the distribution of languages resulting from an unsuccessful attempt to build exceptionally high tower beyond the reach of great flood and providential intervention leading to the confusion of the language among the people involving in it.

The Hmar people assume that either the forefathers of the Hmar people have once lived together with the Jews in the remote past or came from one of the branches of Jewish race.

(b) **Sinlung Settlement:**

Inspite of the fact that the Hmar lack written records, there are several traditions about their origin and their settlement which are handed down from generation to generation. One tradition maintains that the original home of Hmar is called Sinlung, which is frequently mentioned in their traditional song, which says:

*Kan siengna Sinlung ram inthang,*
*Ka nu ram ka pa ram ngai.*
**Chawngzil ang kokir thei changsien**  
*Ka nu ram ka pa ram ngai (Pudaite, 1963:21)*

In English”

My motherland, famous Sinlung,  
Home of my ancestor.

Could it be called back like Chawngzil.  
Home of my ancestors.

The above stanza clearly describe the feeling of Hmar people on Sinlung after they left it. The song depicts their deep attachment to the place and wishes that they could go back there.

Under what circumstance that the Hmar left Sinlung is not known. Hranglien Songate (19977:13) argues that the Hmar must have been one of those people who migrated from Central China to South China to avoid severe punishments from their cruel rulers like Shih-Hwang-Ti whose repressive policy forced them to rigorous labour in constructing the Great Wall of China about 2500 miles in length. One of their folk songs relevant o this may be cited:

**Khaw Singlungah kot siel ang ka zuong suok a,**  
*Mi le nel lo tam e, hriemi hraiah*

In English:  
Out of city Sinlung, I jumped out like a mithun,  
Innumerable were the encounter, with the children of men.

The above cited song claims that they hurriedly left Sinlung like a mithun jumping out of the cage, perhaps, due to their inability to repulse their enemies. Whatever might have been the reason, there had been some compelling factors for which they had to leave Sinlung. Some local scholars like Rochunga Pudaite (1963:22-23) assumed that the Ch’in dynasty absorbed many of the tribes that were already in China. Those who refused to be absorbed were pushed out and the Hmar people could perhaps be one among them. Whatever may be the truth, it appears that oral tradition claims the Hmar people originally come from Central China.
(c) Shan State Settlement:

After Sinlung, the next known settlement of Hmar was at Shan state Burma (Myanmar). When and by what route the Hmar made their journey from Sinlung is not known. One thing is, however, certain that they move southward as their traditional songs repeatedly inferred the names of Himalaya and Kachin as their song goes as such:

_Tiena Kachin lei, ka pu leilung Himaloi (Songate, 1977:17)_

In English:

My ancient land Kachin, land of my forefathers, Himaloi

It may be mentioned that they might have passed through Kachin and the Himaloi (Himalayas) on their way down by crossing the Mekong river and the Salween river into the upper part of modern Shan state, the same routes followed by the Karens from Yunan to Burma (Marshall 1922:17). It appears from their account of migration that they did not remain long at any place on their southward journey until they met a friendly tribe called ‘Misim’ (Mishmi of Arunachal Pradesh) where Sura, the well know character among the Hmar got married with a Mishmi girl called Thaironchong and live for over a generation. From Mishmi land, the next move made by the Hmar was Dimphai (present Dimapur). From Dimapur they proceed further to a place Thingtintlang. It was from here that the Hmar finally entered and made their settlement at Shan state in Burma (Songate, 1977:17).

When the Hmar people arrived at Shan state, the place was already occupied by other tribes (the Shans). These Shans or Tai were called Maitay Kabo (Kubo) by the people of Cussay (Manipuri) (Gogoi 1968:40). The folksongs sung but the Hmar suggest that their entrance in Shan met strong opposition or fighting from these tribe, finally which they could mastered over their enemies. The verse below related to such feuds:

“ _Ka pa lam tlak a tha’n dang,_
_Sinlung lam tlak a thn’n dang_
_Shlan khouah tha phoin vang,_
_Tuoichongin hranlu a tlunna;_
_Thlomu sieka ke min hrilh,_
_Zaihawngah hranlu bak kan sal_”. (Songate 1997:18).

In English:

Singlun’s steps were remarkable good,
Few are the good men in Shan state,
Where Tuoichong brought the enemy’s shed;
You are boasting of the eagle’s paw you wore,
We are proud only for we held the enemies head hanged up high”.

A constant fighting between the Hmar and Shans was common occurrence. Their success was so great that they composed song praising their victories over the enemies in the following verse:

“Shan khuo thlangfa pa tling tleng e,
I do thlunglu bak in salh;

Ka sawmfa thlaw, ka lami tha,
Thal khatin lan eih de ning “. Songate, 1997:21).

In English:

“You people of Shan, how proud you are,
Boasting of only your enemies head;
With my enemies’ head
I will make you a springtime festival from my harvest”.

The above song undoubtedly showed that apart from a successful encounters against the enemies, they lived a life of better and more prosperous than they had in Sinlung.

Inspite of several feuds, by coming into contact with the Shans, the Hmar people had learnt many things including self sufficient and religious attachment to their new festivals such as Lung Lak (Autumn festival), Sesun (solemn celebration), Butu Khounglam (Spring festival) etc,. The practice of using hoe and axe probably originate during their Shan settlement. They also learned how to produce and consume tea. They started celebrating new festivals in connection with their agriculture prosperity and victory over the enemies.

This was the first real Hmar settlement since they left Sinlung but had to leave perhaps, due to the outbreak of a severe famine where even a prized gong usually sold for a hundred bushels of rice was exchanged for a handful of rice. One of their songs mournfully relates the famine:
“Shan khuoah lenpur a tla,
Mi raza tlan thiera e” (keivom, 1980:7).

In English:
“Sever famine struck Shan village,
Hundreds of people fled away”.

Inspite of fleeing Shan state due to severe famine, their sad plight is chanted longingly in the following verse:

“Chung Patheinnin* Shan zuk siem a,
Shan khuo lung ang ngir na” (Keivom, 1980:7)

In English:
“God built Shan.
Where Shan stood like a rock”

The occurrence of famine caused them to move westward in search of fertile land. In course of their journey they must have wandered across the plains of Kawlphai and reach Khampat in the Kabaw valley of Chin Hills of Burma (Myanmar). On the basis of folksongs sung by the Hmars it can be gather that Chief Chawnhmang who rule over the Hmar communities divided his territory into three divisions, Luopui of the Thiek clan rule the town Khampat and planted a banyan tree known to them Khampat Bung, about fifty (50) miles from Kalemyo on the road to the border town Tamu and this tree continues to survive and grow till today. Zingthloh, the other Chief ruled in the north believed to be Khamti area. In the south Lersi ruled at Kale town which is now identified as Kalemyo. The Hmar people sung about this:

Simah Lersi, hmarah Zingthlo,
Khaw malaiah Luopui;
Luopuiin lengbun a phun,
Thalanga puolrangin tlan e.

Luopiin lengbun a phun,
Lai unah kur intang e;
A ra til hei sar maw le,
Naufain chen inbuol e.  (Keivom, 1980:7)

In English:
On the South is Lersi, on the north Zingthlo,
Luopui in the middle;
Luopui planted a banyan tree,
Whereon the horn bills feed on its fruits,

Luopui planted a banyan tree
Bearing fruits abundantly;
The fallen fruits we picked up,
Where children merrily enjoyed with it.

The above song refers to the three Chiefs – Lersi, Zingthlo, and Luopui. It also describes that the Hmar stayed along enough to reap the fruits of the banyan tree.

The movement from Shan state must have resulted in dispersion of sub-groups, while some tribes remained in Khampat, sub-groups like Hmar, the Lushais etc, continued their westward movement until they settled down along the river Run (Imphal river). The Hmars and the Lushais “….were related and lived very close together somewhere in the centers of the hills on the banks of the Tyao (Tiau) and Manipur rivers (Run rivers/Imphal rivers)” (Shakespeare, 1912:143). As they moved westward again by following the Run river, they moved along with the Raltes. This is testified by one of their song as:

Run tui kawi e,
Raltenu leh Raltepa leh kan inkawi a,
Run tui kawi e (Keivom, 1980:8)

In English:
Meandering Run river,
Along with the Raltes we moved,
Meandering Run river.

Under what circumstances did this movement took place have never been clearly told. Probably quarrels with their neighbour, couple with a desire for better land might have cause
the movement. Continuing their movement through the Run river, they passed through the Lentlang (a mountain range running from north to south and the offshoots of the Himalayas) and settled into the hitherto unoccupied areas of Champhai in the present Mizoram. The probable date for this was placed at around 1540 by a theologian, Rev Liangkhaia (1976:35).

After the death of Luopui, the Hmars under the overall chiefship of Chawnhmang Hrangkhawl finally migrated to Tipera (Tripura). And since then. Tripura came to be known as “Rengpuriram” (land of the supreme king) to the Hmar people. Before Chawnhmang migrated to Tripura, he presented gifts to his six territorial chiefs – a golden plate and a copper pot to Tusing Saivate, gong and horse to Lawipa Hrangchal, pure silver pot to Neilal Thiek, copper plate and copper gong to Fiengpuilal Biete, gong set and tripper horse to fathers of Demlukim Hrangchkhawl, and the royal cloth or robe and necklace to Tanhril Saivate. The copper pot that was given to Tusing Saivate is still in Retzawl (Halflong, North Cachar Hills) with the Buongtes. Later, the great chief Chawnhmang Hrangkhawl eventually became a Hindu convert. It is said that Chawnhmang continued to collect taxes from these chiefs for some years and this fact is collaborated J.W Edgar’s report on 3rd April 1872 which runs thus:

“The Rajah of Tripura indeed claims supremacy over all the villages west of the Tipai (Tipaimukh), but practically his authority was never acknowledged east of the Chatterchoora (Chatachura) range, up to which he used to exact a partial and probably fitful obedience. Neither the Cachar nor the Manipur chief had the slightest authority in the hills south of Tipaimuk, and it is evident from all the early Cachar traditions that they did not claim any” (Mackenzie, 1979:437”.

The historicity of Hmar migration either from Middle East or Asia that is reconstructed from oral tradition and cultural survival cannot be studied in isolation and must therefore be juxtaposed with the general movement of the people from inner Asia or mainland China to South East Asia and North East India. According to Lal Dena it is quite probable that the Hmars must have lived together with the Chiang tribe which lived in the present day provinces of Szechaun and mountainous regions of Kansu and Shensi in China. The Chiang was the ancestor of the Tibeto-Burmans. (Gangmumei Kabui, 1993 Genesis of the Ethnoses of Naga and Kuki Chins, publish by the Naga Students’ Federation P.28). According to the earliest Burmese inscriptions, the Burmans were in upper Burma in the (9th century A.D. Before them, the Mon and Pyus established their kingdoms but did not rule in
Kabaw valley and surrounding regions which were perhaps occupied by Luopui and other Hmar chief as mentioned before. Then came the Shan invaders in upper Burma and started conflicts with the Burman rulers during the 12th century onwards. They penetrated into the Kabaw valley and occupied several township like Kale, Khampat, Tamu and Thandut. It was from here that the large-scale migration of Hmar people and the other so called ‘Old Kuki’ tribes had started around 400 A.D. (Songate 1977:23) C.A. Soppit, (1887:11) however, puts it between the 8th and 11th century. Professor G.H Luce (1959:109) of Rangoon University, contends that it might be between the 4th and 8th century A.D. This question needs further historical scrutiny and closer re-examination.