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Exploring the Role of Flowers in the Socio-Religious Context of Mizo Tribal Community

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ABSTRACT

Flowers are universally intertwined with religious and spiritual beliefs. The present study explore the relation between religion and flowers communicating feelings and emotions more profoundly than spoken words. The paper will delve into the indispensable role played by flowers in the social and religious context of Mizoram as well as the effort made by the government and Non- Governmental Organisation to support the floriculturists. Samples were taken from 153 floriculturists and 8 concerned government authorities using a purposive sampling technique, and a semi-structured interview schedule was administered for data collection. The research findings reveal that 63.4% agreed that bride price distribution and payment rituals should continue to include floral arrangements and venue decoration in the pre-nuptial ceremony. 86.9% states that churches in Mizoram sanctions funds for fresh flowers to adorn the church altar for the Sunday church service. The paper also looks into the role of the state government and the florist associations as Non-Governmental Organizations who acts as catalyst in augmenting entrepreneurship in floriculture in Mizoram.

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, religious ceremonies and customs have included flowers. They represent spirituality, purity, and the divine realm. The role of flowers in celebrations and festivals has been of great importance throughout history, representing happiness, aesthetics, and the essence of unity. Flowers have become an indispensable component of cultural traditions and social connection, spanning from traditional rituals and ceremonies to contemporary celebration of festivals. Various societies and religions attribute symbolic significance to certain flowers and incorporate them into rituals, celebrations, and sacred art. The arrival of Christian missionaries in Mizoram in 1894 brought about significant changes in terms of religion, culture, and way of life. The missionaries disseminated education and Christian principles, hence facilitating the advent of modernity in the Mizo tribal community. Christianity facilitated the overall adaptability of people into Western society.

The present paper makes an attempt to explore and comprehend the relationship between religion and flowers. It also seeks to understand and analyse the findings on the significant role played by flowers in the socio-religious context in Mizoram and the contribution of government and Mizo Hmeichhia Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP) or the Mizo Women's Organization for the promotion of the floriculturists. In order to provide a conceptual framework that bolsters the notion those NGOs have a substantial impact on entrepreneurship, the current study will also identify an interaction pattern that explains the influence of NGOs on entrepreneurship. The relation between the existing florist associations in Mizoram as NGOs and entrepreneurship among women is an area which is largely understudied and literature on the subject scanty.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse the view point of floriculturists and concerned government authorities on incorporating floral decoration in pre wedding rituals and functions
2. To find out whether the church sanction money for floral arrangement at the altar for Sunday church services
3. To examine the contribution made by the government and NGOs to support floriculture entrepreneurship in Mizoram
4. To investigate the relationship between government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and florists to promote floriculture entrepreneurship in Mizoram

Research Questions

1. Is the use of flowers in pre-wedding rites and celebrations valued by concerned government officials and floriculturists?
2. Does the head of the church sanction money for the purchase of flowers for the altar during Sunday services?
3. What are the factors responsible for the development of floriculture entrepreneurship in Mizoram?
4. Are the florist associations acting as catalysts in fostering an atmosphere that is conducive for entrepreneurship to the people?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Coser (2015) asserts that Emile Durkheim defines religion as communal rather than individual; a religion is an integrated set of beliefs and practices about sacred things, or those that are set apart and forbidden that unites all followers of the religion in a single moral community known as the Church. Bottomore (1975) asserts that Durkheim's theory on religion highlights the communal dimensions of religion; the purpose of

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religious rituals is to reinforce the moral superiority of society over its individual constituents, hence sustaining societal cohesion.

Geertz (1973) and Tomalin (2007) characterises religion as (1) a system of symbols that (2) results in profound, widespread, and enduring sentiments and motives in individuals by (3) articulating concepts of a universal order of reality and (4) adorning these. Conceptions possessing an atmosphere of factuality that renders the moods and impulses distinctly lifelike. This functional definition of religion has been among the most often utilised.

Devrani *et al.* (2023) believes that flowers possess a substantial cultural and emotional significance and serve an essential function in several social and religious rituals. Weddings, religious ceremonies, funerals, and festivals all necessitate the presence of flowers as integral components in décor and offerings. Furthermore, in the realm of business, there is a growing inclination towards using flowers to augment the atmosphere of gatherings, hotels, and public areas, hence establishing visually captivating and inviting surroundings. With the increase in disposable incomes and the expansion of urbanisation, individuals are becoming more inclined to invest funds towards enhancing the memorability of their important occasions through the use of sophisticated flower arrangements.

Anca and Cantor (2015) argue that flowers, revered symbols, function as the representation of the fundamental concepts of faith and the historical development of faith. Flowers are potent instruments for solidifying religious commitment and faithfulness, factors that facilitate the growth and concentration of religion. Furthermore, flowers serve as a means of communication that surpasses the limitations imposed by language, nationality, or culture around the world. Throughout history, flowers have been symbolically represented. The significance and linguistic meaning of flowers may be traced back to the societies of early civilisation and subsequently to Christianity. Floral arrangements are integral to the most significant events in individuals' lives. Throughout weddings, baptisms, birthdays, funerals, and other significant occasions, flowers consistently serve as a symbol of people's emotions.

Ingram (1887) states that the affection for flowers is universally recognised and appreciated across all cultures; it serves as a common theme that resonates with everyone, from the refined European to the unrefined Australian, and from the philosopher to the primitive, all are inclined to respect and extol their beauty. A feeling so universal—likely coeval with humanity's existence on this planet—could not help but be exploited and subordinated to the passions of mortality; thus, it seems entirely natural to us that flowers have been rendered emblematic and communicative agents of our ideas. Throughout all nations and eras, flowers have been utilised for symbolic and decorative functions.

Saunders (2018) opines that flowers hold great significance in numerous rituals and events that shape and uphold

society in different cultures. As humans, we are always looking for ways to incorporate aspects of our natural surroundings into sacred spaces. Flowers and plant life, as significant entities, provide a connection between us and the concept of nature and the living. These things are renowned for their aesthetic appeal and fragrance; they possess the ability to intensify positive feelings while one indulges in their presence. Flowers serve as mediums for expressing emotions and are imbued with the essence of an institution and the established norms and regulations that are inherent in a well-organised system. This is demonstrated in various rituals such as weddings, christenings, and funerals. Consequently, flowers might be characterised as 'institutionalised props' that help to establish the living or ritual areas. The usage of flowers to convey emotions is well recognised throughout many historical periods.

The evolution and impact of floral arrangement in Japanese history have been accompanied by the recognition of flowers as emblems of spiritual enlightenment in Zen Buddhism. This has further emphasized the essentiality of flower symbolism in Japanese culture (Yuan, 2023).

The topic significant role of flowers in the socio-religious context of a tribal community is a relatively untouched area of study and there is dearth of literature on the topic not only among the Mizo tribal community but also on the whole of the North Eastern part of India and India as a whole. The findings of the research may in some way encourage and inspire other scholars to indulge in further research as floriculture as an art has gained importance as symbolic objects and has been incorporated into religious rituals and festivities of different cultures.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The current study employs a descriptive and exploratory research design. The research design is both qualitative and quantitative in character, with a greater emphasis on the qualitative elements. The population of the study consisted of 430 floriculturists from the three existing florist associations in Mizoram namely, Mizoram Florist Association, Pangpar Zuar (Pangpar Zuar which means Florist) Association and Zo-Anthurium Growers Co-operative Society and 10 concerned government authorities from Department of Horticulture. From the total population, 145 floriculturists and 8 concerned government authorities in Mizoram were selected as sample using purposive sampling technique. For this research, a semi-structured interview schedule was employed to each of the 153 respondents for 50 to 80 minutes in order to collect data for this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Objective No. 1: Analyse the View Point of Floriculturists and Concerned Government Authorities on Incorporating Floral Decoration in Pre-Wedding Rituals and Functions

Data has been gathered employing interview schedules from 145 floriculture entrepreneurs and 8 concerned

government officials in Mizoram in order to comprehend the growing significance of flowers in the socio-religious context of the Mizo society. The Mizo society being a tribal society follows traditional as well as Christian marriage system where payment of bride price to the girl's parents is held before solemnization of marriage. The bride's price is handed over as a pre-nuptial ceremony organised by the bride's parents. The venue of the ceremony in the past years was the bride's home, though this practice is still followed, the trend is holding the ceremony at church halls or other venues to accommodate more people. The modern trend of payment of bride price ritual is conducted with floral decoration of the church halls or other hired venue with decorated stage and backdrop. Pre-nuptial payment of bride price and distribution of bride price, and also the send-off of bride to be rituals are usually held simultaneously and organized by the bride's family. People's view and idea with regard to the trending floral arrangements and decoration of the venue of such ceremony vary.

Table 1: Incorporating floral decoration in pre-wedding payment and distribution of bride price

Continuing incorporation of floral decorations in pre-wedding payment and distribution of bride price	f	Percentage
Yes	97	63.4
No	56	36.6
Total	153	100

Table 1 shows the overall picture of the respondents' view point on continuation of incorporating floral decorations in pre-wedding rituals and functions. 63.4% of the total respondents supports and feels that floral arrangements and decoration of the venue for payment and distribution of bride price rituals should be continued and incorporated in the pre-nuptial ceremony as they believed that floral and other decorations of the church halls or the venue adds beauty and elegance to the whole ceremony. On the other hand, the rest of the respondents accounting for 36.6% do not support incorporating floral decorations of the venue in pre-wedding rituals. These 36.6% of the respondents opine that floral decoration should consist of one or two vase floral arrangements and should be minimal. Spending money on flowers for pre-wedding rituals is not supported and some hold on to tradition and prefers the traditional practice where such pre-wedding rituals are conducted without any decoration at the bride's residence with a small feast.

Objective No. 2: Sanctions of Fund by the Church for Floral Arrangement at the Altar for Sunday Church Service

Over 87% of Mizoram's population is Christian, per the 2011 census. There is a church in every part of the state,

and Sunday services are held at every church. On Sunday, a day of worship and prayer in the state, stores were closed, and even political parties and candidates chose not to participate in the campaign or host any official events or programs.

Table 2: Sanctions of fund by the church for floral arrangement at the altar for Sunday church service

Whether the church sanctions fund to purchase flowers	f	Percentage
Yes	133	86.9
No	20	13.1
Total	153	100

Table 2 illustrates whether the churches in which the respondents are affiliated to sanctions fund to purchase fresh flower for floral arrangement at the altar for Sunday church service. 86.9% of the informants representing the majority of the sample state that their churches sanctions money for Sunday floral arrangement. The amount sanctioned for the purchase of flowers may vary from church to church and from denomination to denomination. If the sanctioned fund is not sufficient to purchase flowers, the appointed flower arrangers of the church willingly contribute the required amount. On the other hand, 13.1% of the respondents' churches do not sanction money for fresh flowers for Sunday service. Such churches are normally small in size in terms of membership and have to depend on artificial flowers which are arranged in place of fresh flowers.

The importance flowers have gained in the religious context in Mizoram is evident from the fact that the churches of different denominations sanctions fund for the purchase of fresh blooms to adorn the church altar with floral arrangements. The church gives importance to the presence of floral arrangement at the altar which adds beauty to the space and glorifies the creator. Extra effort is given to adorn the sacred altar with flower arrangement to add more beautify on festive occasions and conferences with the church sanctioning extra fund on such special events.

Objective No. 3: Contribution of Government and Non Governmental Organisation to Support Floriculture Entrepreneurship in Mizoram

The officials of Horticulture Department, Government of Mizoram and the leaders of MHIP consisted of the key informants in relation to the present study on floriculture among the tribal community in Mizoram. Floriculture is one of the areas taken up by the Horticulture Department and the newly established department in 1993 started to take interest in developing floriculture in the state. The department had taken steps to develop floriculture through Centrally Sponsored Schemes like the Technology Mission in 2001 and at present Mission for Integrated Development of Horticulture (MIDH) where the Government of India contributes 90% funds for North East India for a holistic development

of horticulture sector. The commercial cultivation of anthurium flowers was initiated under the Technology Mission scheme in 2002, where the government is the main facilitator providing necessary inputs for anthurium cultivation to beneficiaries free of cost. Under MIDH scheme, the government has taken steps to augment floriculture sector not only in anthurium cultivation; by selecting beneficiaries the government has introduced the cultivation of curcuma flowers, leather-leaf plants and Israeli ruscus plants to meet the local demands. The government select beneficiary who are actual floriculture entrepreneurs and distribute incentives at a subsidized rate such as greenhouse material, flower seeds, planting material, shade nets and distributes insecticides and pesticides under Integrated Pest Management Scheme to needy floriculturists. Depending on the availability of funds, the government too conducts training at floriculture farmer's field and packaging practice training is also imparted to the farmers. The government organizes Horticulture Fair annually for farmers to exhibit and sell their products and florists too are given an opportunity to participate. Besides this, the government normally sponsors florist fairs organized by florist associations within the city to develop floriculture. The Mizo Hmeichhia Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP) or the Mizo Women's Organization leaders consist of the key informants in the research. It is one of the biggest voluntary organisations in Mizoram and was established on the 6th of July 1974 and registered under Registration No. 5 of 1977, Society Act 1860 (Act XXI of 1960). It's headquarters is located at Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram. It is devoted solely for the welfare and upliftment of women, and aims to empower women and support women's rights. The MHIP as a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) does not have any collaborative roles or work with the florist associations in the state. But, as a women organization is having interest in women's welfare and development supports floriculture entrepreneurship, where Mizo women are involved generating income and livelihood. MHIP leaders are members of florist associations and as such functions side by side supporting and promoting each other. In some localities in Aizawl city, on the occasion of death, MHIP of the local branch rent out ready-made artificial floral arrangement to adorn the coffin and retrieve it back after the funeral rites are over. This act on the part of MHIP is to help poor bereaved families save money for coffin flowers. However, the MHIP headquarters, though they support floriculture entrepreneurship does not work together with the florist associations for the promotion of floriculture, and it does not contribute for the decoration of coffin on the occasion of death except those local branches of MHIP who rent out ready-made floral arrangement to adorn the coffin to needy bereaved families.

Objective No. 4: Relationship between Government, Non-Governmental Organizations (Ngos) and Florists to Promote Floriculture Entrepreneurship in Mizoram
Encouraging young people and unemployed women to

become entrepreneurs is essential to foster economic development on a local and national level. To combat the high women unemployment rate in Mizoram, unemployed women having aesthetic interest in flowers prefer to embark upon entrepreneurial activities to generate self-employment in the region. Having traced the trajectory, the development of floriculture as an entrepreneurship is a relatively new phenomenon in Mizoram. The study reveals that most of the women involved in floriculture come from a disadvantaged section of the society who are not highly educated and with scanty knowledge of entrepreneurial skill. Hence, the role of NGOs is significant to promote their entrepreneurial skill and also to find ways to collaborate with the Government to develop their entrepreneurial skill and provide subsidies to these unskilled entrepreneurs.

In order to promote entrepreneurship and provide a platform for the expansion of floriculture, three prominent NGOs the Mizoram Florist Association (MFA), the Pangpar Zuar Association (PPZA), and the Zo-Anthurium Growers Co-operative Society (ZAGCS) have organised florist fairs at least three or four times a year, occasionally with funding from the Department of Horticulture. Florist fairs encourage entrepreneurs to showcase and exhibit their creations, their propagated young flowering plants and also provide a platform to make significant sales of their products and thereby generate sufficient income. To promote entrepreneurs in floriculture, the Mizoram Florist Association also tries to work in tandem with the government, lobbying the Government to provide necessary inputs to these entrepreneurs to help them promote and augment their small businesses. Mizoram Florist Association plays a crucial role as a non-profit driven organization in representing and meeting the needs of its members and supporting entrepreneurship. Being the first registered florist association in Mizoram, the state government also acknowledges and tries to meet their needs and demands as far as possible. Mizoram Florist Association leaders occasionally submit written appeals to the Horticulture Department, Government of Mizoram to obtain essential good quality inputs such as greenhouse material, good quality flower seeds, potting media like cocopeat and other incentives that are out of the price range of small florist entrepreneurs and distribute them to needy entrepreneurs at a subsidized rate. In response to MFA's request, the government provides accessible inputs for the Association's members through the Mission for Integrated Development of Horticulture (MIDH) and Integrated Pest Management (IPM) schemes. Mizoram Florist Association's request to the government to initiate cultivation of curcuma flowers to meet the high local demand has materialized into reality. Curcuma flower rhizomes have been imported from Thailand and as a pilot project the Horticulture Department have started to distribute them to twenty selected beneficiaries.

To develop the entrepreneurial skill and to create awareness on the profit of taking up floriculture and

floristry, the Mizoram Florist Association frequently organizes seminars and trainings on various aspects of floriculture management such as method of flower seed germination, management and care of flower seedlings. Besides these seminars, training on flower arrangement and floral arts are frequently organized by Mizoram Florist Association and Department of Horticulture, Government of Mizoram for the benefit of its unemployed participants interested in floristry to encourage entrepreneurship in this field. The NGOs are instrumental in encouraging unemployed aspirants to take up floriculture as their primary or supplementary source of income. The Mizoram Florist Association has published five books, two as commemoration of its 10th and 25th anniversaries and these souvenirs consists of articles on various issues on flower cultivation. Two manuals on flower arranging called 'The Florists- Pangpar Khawi Bu' with visual pictures have been published. A significant publication called 'Pangpar Chingtute Thian' contains different tips and articles on flower cultivation. These publications have been instrumental in assisting beginners and inexperienced floriculture entrepreneurs. Besides, Mizoram Florist Association does benevolent works by planting and beautifying with flowers the state's airport surroundings, hospitals, state government office front yards and orphanage homes, motivating and inspiring possible aspirants. The functional aspects of Mizoram Florist Association are manifested along these lines which have promoted flower cultivation increasingly in the state.

The Department of Horticulture, government of Mizoram introduced a commercial scale cultivation of Anthurium flowers in 2002 under the Technology Mission for Integrated Development of Horticulture in north-eastern states of India. Anthurium was initially cultivated by 24 farmers in 2002, and the number of growers increased over the years. Zo-Anthurium Growers' Co-operative Society (ZAGCS) was formed by Anthurium plant growers in 2002 with 80 active members currently in Aizawl, the capital city of Mizoram. The society is registered under Mizoram Co-operative Society. Unlike the other associations, members of Zo-Anthurium Growers' Co-operative Society export their Anthurium cut products to other metropolitan cities like Bangalore, Delhi, Kolkotta and others, export rejected products are vended in local markets.

Zo-Anthurium Growers' Co-operative Society organizes Anthurium fair once annually which serves as the platform for members to exhibit their potted anthurium plants and anthurium foliage. Zo-Anthurium Growers' Co-operative Society members participate in the annual Anthurium festival organized by the Tourism Department, Government of Mizoram, and an opportunity to showcase their products generating income at the same time. The Zo-Anthurium Growers' Co-operative Society works in collaboration with the government, and the department of Horticulture provides the initial planting materials and other necessary inputs free of cost to

beneficiaries. Leaders of the Society often approach the Government to provide necessary inputs at subsidized rates to needy Anthurium farmers. In collaboration with the State's Horticulture Department, Horticulture Awareness Campaign is conducted often in other districts to promote entrepreneurship in Anthurium cultivation.

Suggestion for Further Studies

Literature review on the significant role played by flowers in the socio-religious life of a community or for that matter in the cultural context of the Mizo tribal community as a whole reveals a huge gap. The researcher's area of study on the significant role of flowers is an under explored issue in existing and previous researches. Whatever previous studies could be detected are mostly the works of scholars from other countries and from other parts of India. In the context of the Mizo tribal community of Mizoram, situated in the North Eastern part of India, there is little or lack of holistic study on floriculture and its social implications. Dearth of literature and this relatively under explored area of study may challenge and encourage scholars to indulge in further studies and add new knowledge, ideas and perspectives on this particular problem.

CONCLUSION

The present study concludes that flowers are an indispensable in the socio-religious life of the Mizo tribal society. So much so that the pre-nuptial payments of bride price ritual and the distribution of bride price ceremony and the solemnization of marriage in the church in Mizo society is incomplete without floral decorations. Churches too regularly funds to purchase fresh flowers for Sunday church service indicating the significant role played by flowers in the rituals. Flowers will continue to find and establish firmly a niche for themselves, being incorporated and indispensable in the socio-religious cultural life of the Mizo society. Despite being a relatively new phenomenon in Mizoram, floriculture entrepreneurship has progressed organisations with government and several non-governmental organizations serving as catalysts to create an atmosphere that supports its ongoing expansion. The problem of unemployment has been one the biggest challenges of the country. Development of entrepreneurs has been a necessity to combat the problem of unemployment. Mizoram Florist Association constantly collaborates with the state government to promote entrepreneurship amongst unemployed not highly educated disadvantaged women in the region. Such entrepreneurs involved in floriculture opine that with hard work, determination, and entrepreneurial skills, entrepreneurship in this field is viable for self-employment and generates. Despite the infrastructure deficiencies, the bureaucratic hurdles and delays it faces in operation, one cannot ignore the important role played by NGOs in nurturing entrepreneurship in floriculture. Nevertheless, the growth of entrepreneurship in Floriculture in Mizoram is because of the distinguished roles played by

three actors: the NGOs, the government and also the aspiring and enthusiastic disadvantaged entrepreneurs.

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