



## PRESERVING A LEGACY: EXPLORING MIZO INDIGENOUS SPORTS AND THEIR CULTURAL AND LEGAL SIGNIFICANCE

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### ABSTRACT

Indigenous or Traditional sports deeply embedded within the socio-cultural fabric of communities worldwide transcend mere physical activity. They function as potent traditional cultural expressions (TCEs) embodying the history, values, knowledge and identity of their originating cultures. This article explores the critical role of traditional sports in preserving cultural legacy in an increasingly globalized world. These unique sporting forms act as living heritage, transforming ancestral knowledge, social customs and spiritual beliefs across generations. Their practice often involve specific rituals, music, attire and storytelling, further enriching their cultural significance. The importance of traditional sports in cultural preservation lies in their capacity to foster community cohesion, reinforce identity and provide a tangible link to the past. This research paper explores the rich tradition of Mizo indigenous sports and the challenges they face in the modern world. It discusses the importance of legal protection for preserving these cultural treasures. Mizo indigenous sports, rooted in the community's values and skills, include Inbuan, Insuknawr, Saihruipawh, Chawilung, Arpa Sual and Kalchhet. These sports are disappearing due to the decline of traditional practices and the influence of modern sports. Legal protection is crucial for preserving cultural identity, promoting tourism, encouraging well-being, and offering educational value. Potential legal frameworks include defining traditional sports, establishing governing bodies, recognizing player rights, and exploring intellectual property protection. By prioritizing preservation and fostering cultural pride, the legacy of Mizo indigenous sports can be secured for future generations.

### I. Introduction

Nestled in Northeast India's lush greenery, Mizoram (literally "land of the *Mizos*") is a state bordered by Assam, Tripura, and Manipur. Its beauty lies in its evergreen hills and towering mountains. The people of Mizoram are predominantly from various sub-tribes who came together to form the *Mizo* identity. "*Lusei*" is a more accurate term for the original tribe, hinting at their origins.<sup>1</sup> Aizawl serves as the capital of this state, which officially became the 23rd state of India

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<sup>1</sup> Lalrimawia, *Mizoram History and Cultural Identity, 1890-1947*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 1995.

in February 1987. While details about the *Mizos* ancient past remain unclear, archaeological evidence and oral traditions suggest they migrated from the Tibeto-Burman region, similar to other Northeast Indian communities.

Unlike their professionalized counterparts, traditional games are deeply embedded within local cultures. These athletic expressions, specific to ethnic or folk traditions, often weave fierce competition with playful elements.<sup>2</sup> More than just winning, these games hold deeper meaning, connecting participants to their heritage through strong ritualistic significance.<sup>3</sup> It has been seen by some researchers that traditional games differ from mainstream sports due to their flexibility and local adaptation.<sup>4</sup> Unlike games with standardized rules overseen by international bodies, traditional games empower local organizers to set regulations that reflect the customs and traditions of their communities. This emphasis on local control allows for a rich tapestry of variations, with the same game potentially taking on different forms across regions. Dr. Jagadeesh Pillai<sup>5</sup> further emphasizes the significance of these games, arguing that they function as a cornerstone of symbolic patrimony for indigenous peoples. India boasts an ancient lineage of traditional games, tracing their roots back to the Vedic period (1500 BCE to 500 BCE). Notably, India is considered the birthplace of several games popular worldwide today, including *Kabaddi*, *Kho-kho*, Polo, and Chess (*Shatranj*).<sup>6</sup> These games demand a holistic approach, requiring both technical and tactical skills alongside physical attributes like speed, strength, stamina, agility, and coordination.

The *Mizos* of Mizoram exemplify the vibrant spirit of traditional games. Renowned for their love of fun and strong social bonds, the *Mizos* possess a rich tradition of indigenous sports passed down through generations.<sup>7</sup> These games not only showcase physical prowess and honed skills but often reflect the challenges faced in daily life. Despite limited resources, the *Mizos* passion for sports shines through in these diverse activities.<sup>8</sup> Some particularly famous examples

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<sup>2</sup> Mibang Tamo and Chaudhari Sarit K (ed.), *Folk Culture and Oral literature from North East India*, Mittal Publication, New Delhi, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Blanchard, K., *The Anthology of Sports*, Bergin and Gravey, Westport, Connecticut- London 1995

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Jagadeesh Pillai, *The Indian Traditional Games: A Study of the Significance and Evolution of Indian Traditional Games*, Notion Press (2023), p.2

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Sharma, A.K., Chandra Shekhar & Sharma, O.P. (2007). *Encyclopedia of sports, health and physical education*. New Delhi: Khal Sahitya Kendra, 2007. Vol. I. p.21.

<sup>7</sup> *Supra* note 2.

<sup>8</sup> Lalram Chhana & V. Ratnamala, "Social Media & Sports in Mizoram: A Case Study of Inkhel.com Facebook"

include *Insuknawr* and *Inbuan*, recognized by the Indian government for their cultural significance (Draft of Comprehensive National Sports Policy, 2007)<sup>9</sup>. Other well-loved traditional sports like *Saihrupawh* (*Inhrupawh*), *In Arpa Sual*, *Inbah*, *Kalchhet*, *Khanchhuakatangainvuakthlak* continue to be played, with ongoing efforts to preserve them for future generations.<sup>10</sup>

While colonial records and Welsh Missionaries offer glimpses into *Mizo* life their documentation of indigenous sports remains scarce.<sup>11</sup> This lack of historical detail makes preserving these traditional games even more critical. *Mizo* culture is deeply intertwined with these sports.<sup>12</sup> Many games, some still practiced, others fading from memory, embody the values and challenges faced by the *Mizo* people.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, these traditions are on the verge of disappearing. The modern world, with its abundance of technology and global influences, has led to a decline in exposure to traditional ways of life.<sup>14</sup> This is not just an urban phenomenon; children in rural villages are also impacted. The very essence of these games – fostering unity, brotherhood, strength and physical prowess and cultural identity – is at risk of being lost.<sup>15</sup> This paper aims to explore a specific selection of *Mizo* indigenous sports. This article examines both those still recognized and those being revived by the state government. Understanding these games and their profound influence on *Mizo* culture offers a glimmer of hope for reigniting this vital aspect of their heritage for future generations.

## II. Mizo Indigenous Sports: A Legacy of Innovation and Community

The arrival of the British and Christian missionaries during the colonial period marked the first significant interaction between the *Mizos* and outsiders. This era also saw the initial

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[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360865217\\_Social\\_Media\\_Sports\\_in\\_Mizoram\\_A\\_Case\\_Study\\_of\\_In\\_khelcom\\_Facebook\\_Page](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360865217_Social_Media_Sports_in_Mizoram_A_Case_Study_of_In_khelcom_Facebook_Page) (Last visited on June 3, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Draft Comprehensive National Sports Policy 2007, available at: <https://yas.nic.in/sites/default/files/File371.pdf>. (Last Visited May 3, 2025).

<sup>10</sup> Mizo Infiamna, Tribal Research Institute (Directorate of Education, Mizoram, 1984), available at: <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.467316/page/n5/mode/2up> (Last Visited June 3, 2025).

<sup>11</sup> Sangkima, *Essays on the History of the Mizos* (Guwahati, Spectrum Publications, 2004) p 60.

<sup>12</sup> *Supra* note 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Supra* note 8 at 171.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

documentation of *Mizo* social and political life.<sup>16</sup> However, *Mizo* traditions of play and community entertainment extend far beyond this period. Evidence suggests a rich history of indigenous sports, some likely adopted from neighboring cultures, while many others were ingenious creations developed by the *Mizo* community itself as it evolved.<sup>17</sup> Sports have been deeply woven into the fabric of *Mizo* culture since time immemorial, seamlessly integrated into the social structure of the past. These activities went far beyond mere entertainment, serving crucial purposes related to rituals, warfare, and economic needs.<sup>18</sup> Unlike the view of sports primarily as leisure, games and sports in pre-colonial *Mizo* society played a particularly practical role. They served as training grounds for warriors, honing the strength and physical prowess essential for survival.<sup>19</sup>

*Mizo* society fostered a diverse range of traditional games. Some catered specifically to children, while others were enjoyed by men or women.<sup>20</sup> Information regarding these activities remains limited, but the *Mizos* know many served purely recreational purposes.<sup>21</sup> Notably, there were few games traditionally played by both genders, suggesting a focus on male participation.<sup>22</sup> The arrival of the British and Christian missionaries ushered in a period of social change.<sup>23</sup> New games and sports were introduced, often integrated into school curriculums as co-curricular activities. Unlike traditional practices, these new activities encouraged participation from both men and women, fostering a more inclusive approach to sports.<sup>24</sup>

Traditional *Mizo* society offered a distinct experience for young girls and boys. Without formal schooling, girls typically assisted their families with household chores suited to their age.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Lt. Col. J. Shakespear, *The Lushei Kuki Clans*, Macmillan and Co. Ltd, St. Martin's Street, London (1<sup>st</sup> edn., 1912) available at: [https://www.academia.edu/36387178/Lushei\\_Kuki\\_Clans\\_by\\_Lt\\_Colonel\\_J\\_Shakespear\\_The\\_Library\\_of\\_University\\_of\\_California\\_Riverside](https://www.academia.edu/36387178/Lushei_Kuki_Clans_by_Lt_Colonel_J_Shakespear_The_Library_of_University_of_California_Riverside) (Last Visited June 3, 2025).

<sup>17</sup> *Supra* note 10 at 37.

<sup>18</sup> *Supra* note 16.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Nicky Lalrinsanga Lotlai, V. Ratnamala and Mangchungnunga Hangsing, "Representation of Women Athletes in *Mizo Dailies*" 12 (2) *Journal of North East India Studies* 27 (2022) available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/371491205\\_Gender\\_and\\_Sports\\_Representation\\_of\\_Women\\_Athletes\\_in\\_Mizo\\_Dailies](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/371491205_Gender_and_Sports_Representation_of_Women_Athletes_in_Mizo_Dailies) (Last Visited June 3, 2025).

<sup>21</sup> *Supra* note 17.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Malsawma, *Sociology of the Mizos* (Spectrum Publications, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> A.G McCall, *The Lushai Chrysalis* (FIRMA KLM PRIVATE LTD. Calcutta, On behalf of Tribal Research Institute, Mizoram 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 1949) available at: <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.461697/page/n5/mode/2up?view=theater> (Last Visited June 3, 2025).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

Boys, meanwhile, received training at the *Zawlbuk* (Bachelor's dormitory) and were generally exempt from such duties.<sup>26</sup> The *Zawlbuk* functioned as a comprehensive training institute for young *Mizo* boys.<sup>27</sup> Here, youths honed their skills in hunting, wrestling, and developed respect for their elders. The curriculum also instilled in them courage, artistic expression through dance, and the necessary abilities for warfare<sup>28</sup>. Evenings brought a time for shared enjoyment. After dinner, children would gather outdoors to play a variety of games. These playful evenings, often accompanied by folksongs or lullabies, were known as *Pawnto*.<sup>29</sup> These gatherings fostered a sense of community and provided a cherished outlet for children's energy and creativity.<sup>30</sup> Despite facing decline due to societal changes, several traditional *Mizo* sports, practiced for generations, offer a window into the cultural evolution and enduring values of the *Mizo* people.<sup>31</sup> These enduring sports have persevered despite external forces, and understanding them provides valuable insights.

### **Inbuan: A Mizo Tradition Enduring Through Time**



**Fig.1 Inbuan<sup>32</sup>**

According to Mizo tradition, “*a inbuan*” or “to wrestle” referred to any activity where participants were equally matched. *Inbuan* stands as the most celebrated and enduring Mizo indigenous sport.<sup>33</sup> Unlike many others, it has captivated audiences for generations. Historical

<sup>26</sup> N.E. Perry, *A Monograph on Lushai Customs and Ceremonies* (FIRMA KLM PRIVATE LIMITED, Calcutta on Behalf of Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl, Mizoram, 1<sup>st</sup> edn.,1928), p.8.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Supra* note 23 at 59-60.

<sup>29</sup> *Supra* note 17 at 171.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Supra* note 8 at 182.

<sup>32</sup> Figure available at: <https://lenkaw1.khampat.com/2024/02/> (Last Visited May 3, 2025).

<sup>33</sup> *Supra* note 8.

records<sup>34</sup> suggest *Inbuan* was a staple night-time activity for young men from 1871 to 1940. This tradition continues to this day, with *Inbuan* remaining the most popular sport among Mizo youth. No *Mizo* festival is complete without this vibrant activity.<sup>35</sup>

While the exact origin of *Inbuan*, which translates to “wrestle,” remains shrouded in mystery, much like other traditional Mizo sports, oral traditions offer a glimpse into its possible beginnings.<sup>36</sup> These stories<sup>37</sup> suggest *Inbuan* may have emerged during the time the Mizos settled in the plains. Legend has it that during this period, Mizo ancestors lived in houses built directly on the ground. The Fanai clan, according to these stories, were the first to construct elevated houses. The narrative goes on to describe the Fanai chief's dissatisfaction with a particular pillar used in his house's foundation. Though the reason for his discontent is unknown, he decided to rebuild the entire foundation, requiring the house to be dismantled. However, during the demolition, one pillar proved exceptionally sturdy, refusing to budge. Legend tells of two mighty men who encountered a stubborn pillar during the dismantling of a house. The first man, renowned for his strength, strained against the pillar but could not dislodge it. Undeterred, the second man, equally powerful, stepped forward. With surprising ease, he managed to pull the pillar free. Triumphant, the second man declared his superiority. However, the first man countered, arguing that his initial efforts had loosened the pillar, making it easier for the second man to remove it completely. This disagreement, perhaps, sparked the competitive spirit that became the foundation of *Inbuan*. The spectacle of the two strong men grappling with the pillar sparked a debate among the villagers. To settle the question of who was truly stronger, they suggested the men try lifting each other, similar to their attempts with the pillar. In a display of strength and camaraderie, the men locked arms, each attempting to lift the other. However, neither gained the upper hand, proving their equal prowess. This display of strength, perhaps inspired by the pillar incident, is believed to have laid the foundation for the indigenous sport known as “*Inbanphawi*,” literally translating to “lifting up the pillar of the foundation of the house.” Over time, this term evolved into the word “*Inbuan*” Mizo know today. The legendary struggle between the two strong men, where they tightly grasped each other in an attempt to overpower the other, mirrored the effort of pulling a stubborn pillar

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<sup>34</sup> *Supra* note 10 at 32.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Supra* note 34.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid* at 1-7.

from the ground. This act of grappling became known as *Inbuan*, a sport that has since held a prominent place in Mizo society. The term “*inbanphawi*,” the original name for the sport, also serves as a reminder of fair play. Unlike many cultures, Mizo history relies heavily on oral traditions passed down through generations. This rich tradition serves as the primary source of information about *Inbuan*'s origins and development, since written records are scarce. Understanding this oral tradition is crucial. They reveal that *Inbuan* emerged from a strong sense of community, a cornerstone of Mizo culture. The skills and competitive spirit inherent in Mizo society likely played a role in the sport's development.

*Face-to-Face: The Rules of Inbuan*<sup>38</sup>

*Inbuan* is a two-player sport, unlike some games played individually or in teams. Even with multiple participants, matches are one-on-one. Winners from each pairing then face off against other victors in a single-elimination style tournament. Traditionally, *Inbuan* involved wrestlers tightly hugging each other in an attempt to lift their opponent. During a match, the shout “*inban phawiin aw*” serves as a warning to participants who might be using excessive force or gripping their opponent too tightly. This phrase emphasizes the importance of sportsmanship within *Inbuan*. However, with the development of cloth-weaving in Mizo society, a more comfortable practice emerged. Today, wrestlers wear a thick cloth belt tied around their waists to

The competitors lock arms in an unusual way. Each grabs the thick fabric tied around their opponent's waist with their left hand, reaching under their armpit. Their right hand reinforces their grip on the opponent's cloth, securing it near their navel for better leverage. After a synchronized three-part chant of “aw, aw, aw,” they dig in their heels and unleash all their strength to begin the tug-of-war. To maintain balance and prevent their opponent from gaining an advantage, players wedge their right arm between their bodies. This creates a point of reference to gauge their opponent's position and resist being pulled off-center. Skilled players excel at maintaining this stable posture while applying constant pressure. This translates to a significant difference in effort compared to unskilled players, who may struggle to balance and exert force effectively. In *Inbuan*, raw strength is not everything. A skilled player can overcome a significant size, strength, or energy disadvantage. Even against a powerful opponent, a skilled *Inbuan* player, once able to manoeuvre and “cross-step” them, can gain a decisive advantage. This often involves lifting the opponent off-

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<sup>38</sup> *Supra* note 34 at 8-11.

balance, rendering their strength irrelevant. Ultimately, skill in *Inbuan* reigns supreme over brute force. The stronger wrestler, often the one who controls the fall, is declared the winner. Lifting the opponent is not necessary; simply controlling them on the ground secures victory. The goal is to take down your opponent without resorting to kicks, stepping out of the designated area, or bending your knees. Matches consist of three rounds, *Inbuan* is typically played in three rounds, each lasting 30-60 seconds, or until one player is lifted off the ground.

#### *Fading Echoes: How the Decline of the Zawlbuk Impacted Inbuan Wrestling*

Traditionally, young Mizo boys honed their skills in communal dormitories called *Zawlbuk*. Upon reaching puberty, they entered these dorms to learn essential life skills. *Inbuan* wrestling was a nightly staple at the *Zawlbuk*. Not just young boys, but even married men participated in evening matches. Hospitality played a big role too. Visitors staying overnight at the *Zawlbuk* were expected to partake in an *Inbuan* match. Even young children were encouraged to learn the sport, both within the *Zawlbuk* and amongst themselves. A quick game with friends was a regular part of their day, fostering both camaraderie and a connection to tradition, before they shouldered the responsibility of collecting firewood. With the end of the *Zawlbuk* tradition, regular *Inbuan* practice dwindled. *Inbuan* consequently became a traditional sport played by young people in the funeral grounds during gatherings to bury the deceased.

#### *The Evolving Face of Inbuan Wrestling in Mizoram*

As Mizoram became a state, *Inbuan* became primarily a festival sport or played locally for special occasions. However, state championships organized by the government have helped revive its popularity. As Mizo culture evolved, so did *Inbuan*. Formal rules<sup>39</sup> were developed, likely alongside a rise in competitive tactics aimed at exploiting loopholes. The traditional chant “aw, aw, aw” has been replaced by a single whistle blow, prompting players to immediately crouch low, almost scraping the ground, while firmly gripping their opponent’s waist. The low crouch is a critical moment. Wrestlers waste no time, immediately pulling each other backward in a sudden tug-of-war. They hit the ground together, each aiming to leverage their position to pin their opponent. However, a skilled opponent is difficult to overpower from a prone position. There is a growing concern that the spirit of *Inbuan* has changed. While *Inbuan* wrestling traditionally

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<sup>39</sup> Mizoram Wrestling Association: Mizo Infiamna Dan Bu (2008).

emphasized skilful manoeuvring and footwork, a recent shift towards aggressive tactics threatens to overshadow the sport's finesse and strategy. This focus on brute force, some fear, diminishes the very aspects that made *Inbuan* a revered cultural treasure. Fortunately, the importance of safeguarding cultural heritage through traditional games and sports is recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This presents a valuable opportunity for *Inbuan's* revival.

### From Zawlbuk to Today: The Enduring Legacy of Insuknawr



**Fig 2. Insuknawr<sup>40</sup>**

*Insuknawr*, a traditional *Mizo* sport, dates back to the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>41</sup> It thrived in *Zawlbuk*, a communal living dormitory for young *Mizo* men. In those days, *Insuknawr* was a popular pastime. *Insuknawr*, though less common today due to the decline of *Zawlbuk*, remains a way for young *Mizo* men to connect. It is a two-person contest that tests strength, and even today, it played wherever young *Mizo* men gather.<sup>42</sup> Traditionally, *Insuknawr* was not just a game, but a social event during harvest season. As young people (both boys and girls) set out to collect crops, girls would gather and tie husks. Meanwhile, boys waiting for them would use *Insuknawr* for friendly competition. It might have even served as a way to determine who would be the most

<sup>40</sup> Figure available at: <https://mizohss.edu.in/insuknawr>. (Last Visited May 3, 2025).

<sup>41</sup> *Supra* note 15 at p.19.

<sup>42</sup> Lalthangliana, Culture and Folklore of Mizoram (Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2005)p.238. available at: [https://archive.org/stream/culturefolklore00lalt/culturefolklore00lalt\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/culturefolklore00lalt/culturefolklore00lalt_djvu.txt) (Last Visited May 3, 2025).

desirable match for the girls. This community sport fostered strong bonds, even among those who were not previously close.<sup>43</sup>

In *Insuknawr*, competitors wield a large pestle, traditionally used for grinding grains, tucked under their right arms. Their left hand often acts as a stabilizer, finding a nearby object for support. The goal is not to push the opponent completely out of the playing area, but rather to disrupt their stance. There is no specific distance requirement; any shift caused by the pestle's pressure signifies a successful move. Safety is paramount, with the pestle remaining securely under the right arm throughout the contest. While brute strength plays a role, skillful technique is the real key to winning *Insuknawr*.<sup>44</sup> A skilled competitor can easily outmaneuver a stronger opponent, strategically shifting their stance by just two or three steps due to the well-placed pressure of the pestle. Traditionally, a large pestle was used, but these days, thick bamboo can also be used as a substitute.<sup>45</sup> This heritage sport, passed down through generations, is a prime example of clean competition and deserves to be revived and promoted among today's youth.

### ***SaihruiPawh*: A Tug-of-War Rooted in Mizo Tradition**



**Fig 3. SaihruiPawh<sup>46</sup>**

<sup>43</sup> *Supra* note 10 at 18.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> See figure 2 at 40.

<sup>46</sup> Children in the village in Mizoram playing SaihruiPawh, *available at*: [https://www.instagram.com/mizoram\\_tourism/p/CSdmjhLMZBh/](https://www.instagram.com/mizoram_tourism/p/CSdmjhLMZBh/) (Last Visited May 4, 2025).

*Saihrui pawh* is deeply ingrained in Mizo heritage, a sport enjoyed by ancestors even before encountering similar games outside Mizoram.<sup>47</sup> It is important to acknowledge, however, that while many sports claim ancestral roots, the frequency of play often diminishes with changing times. *Saihrui pawh* is no exception. Traditionally, this tug-of-war was not confined to designated fields. Villagers played in groups outside the *Zawlbuk* (Bachelor's dormitory) using the strongest tree roots they could find in the abundant forests.<sup>48</sup> These were not competitive matches, but rather a pastime enjoyed by those gathered at the *Zawlbuk*. It is possible that the practice honed their skills in manoeuvring ropes, potentially useful for hunting bison.<sup>49</sup>

### ***Chawilung*: A Stone Legacy of Mizo Strength**

*Lung Inchawisiak*, a Mizo strongman competition, thrived during the *Zawlbuk* era and was known across *Luseitribes*. This traditional sport, essentially Mizo weightlifting, involved lifting a heavy boulder called a "*chawilung*" (literally translated as "lifted rock").<sup>50</sup> Weighing around 50 kilograms, the *chawilung* was a common fixture outside *Zawlbuks*, often placed in busy areas for challengers, even those from neighboring villages passing through. The enduring presence of *chawilung* stones in many villages today stands as a testament to the sport's past popularity. Lifting the hefty *chawilung* was not for everyone. Only those with proven technique could attempt it. Successfully lifting the boulder above your waist was a mark of true strength, and the smoothest, most effortless lift determined the winner. Modern times have brought changes to *Lung Inchawisiak*.<sup>51</sup> The sport has embraced international weightlifting regulations, marking a significant departure from its traditional form. This shift reflects the evolving Mizo society.

### ***Arpa Sual*: A traditional Mizo game mimicking rooster fights**

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<sup>47</sup> *Supra* note 10 at 20-23.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Supra* note 47.

<sup>50</sup> *Supra* note 7 at p.75.

<sup>51</sup> *Supra* note 10 at 41.



**Fig 4.Arpa Sual<sup>52</sup>**

*Arpa Sual*, a traditional *Mizo* game mimicking rooster fights, has existed for generations, though its exact origin remains unclear. Inspired by scuffles among their domesticated fowl, *Mizo* ancestors created this entertaining sport for boys and young men.<sup>53</sup> *Arpa Sual* demands strength, focus, and stamina. Players hop on one leg, aiming to strike their opponent's body with force. The key is to maintain a single-leg stance while gripping the opposite foot's upper part. The letting go of this grip results in disqualification. This physically demanding game provided amusement and a workout for young *Mizo* boys. *Arpa Sual*, a *Mizo* game mimicking rooster fights, is experiencing resurgence. Traditionally a rural pastime, it is finding its way back into festivals like *Chapchar Kut*, particularly among young boys.<sup>54</sup>

### **The Mizo tradition of Kalchhet**

<sup>52</sup> Figure 53 Arpa Sual available at: <https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.vanglaini.org%2Fthalai%2F2864&psig=AOvVaw3-BVniGTb>. (Last Visited May 4, 2025).

<sup>53</sup> *Supra* note 10 at 36.

<sup>54</sup> *Supra* note 8 at 174.



**Fig.5 Kalchhet<sup>55</sup>**

*Kalchhet*, a vibrant *Mizo* sport, translates to “walking/running with bamboo.” This energetic team competition is a popular pastime among many Mongoloid communities, bringing people together for friendly competition and shared experiences. While the exact origins of *Kalchhet* remain shrouded in time, its deep integration into *Mizo* culture suggests it has been around for generations.<sup>56</sup> The widespread popularity of *Kalchhet* among Mongoloid communities across Asia hints at a shared ancestral origin.<sup>57</sup> Some theories suggest it might have originated as a practical skill for traversing difficult terrain or dense forests. Over time, it may have evolved into a social and competitive activity.<sup>58</sup>

*Kalchhet* is typically played as a relay race. Teams of two to four participants compete, using long bamboo poles to propel themselves forward. Each team member races a designated distance and then passes the bamboo pole to the next teammate in a baton-like fashion. The first team to complete the course with all team members finishing their leg wins the race.<sup>59</sup> Variations of *Kalchhet* might exist in different regions. Some versions might involve individual races instead of teams. The length of the bamboo poles and the distance covered in each leg could also vary.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Figure 55 Kalchhet, available at: [https://www.instagram.com/mizoram\\_tourism/p/CSdmjhLMZBh/](https://www.instagram.com/mizoram_tourism/p/CSdmjhLMZBh/) (Last Visited May 4, 2025).

<sup>56</sup> *Supra* note 10 at 106-109.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Supra* note 23 at pg.106.

<sup>59</sup> *Supra* note 56 at 108.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

Although potentially facing competition from modern sports, *Kalchhet* remains a cherished tradition in *Mizo* communities.<sup>61</sup> It continues to be played in villages and during cultural festivals, providing a fun and energetic way to connect with friends, family, and community. The shared experience and friendly competition foster a sense of belonging and cultural pride.<sup>62</sup>

### III. Legal Protection Of Mizo Traditional Sports

*Mizo* traditional sports are an integral part of the rich cultural heritage of Mizoram. They embody the physical prowess, agility, and strategic thinking of the *Mizo* people.<sup>63</sup> However, like many intangible cultural assets, these sports face the risk of erosion due to various factors such as globalization, urbanization, and the increasing popularity of modern sports. To preserve these invaluable traditions for future generations, legal protection becomes imperative.<sup>64</sup>

Traditional sports and games are unique to specific places and reflect the culture of those areas. They are often enjoyed by groups and follow established rules. These games are popular and beneficial for health. Protecting and promoting traditional sports and games helps different cultures and communities understand each other better. They offer insights into current cultural, social, and sporting trends and can help us predict future changes. Traditional sports and games give people, communities, and governments a chance to show off their culture and be proud of it.<sup>65</sup>

The world is full of different kinds of physical activities and sports, and this variety is what makes them interesting. Traditional games, dances, and sports, both old and new, represent the amazing cultural heritage of the world and should be valued and supported.<sup>66</sup>

#### Traditional Sports as Traditional Cultural Expressions (TCEs)

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<sup>61</sup> *Supra* note 8 at 171.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Akoijam Rima Devi, Samiran Chakraborty “Heritage to harmony: the social impact and health benefits of traditional sports” 11(1) *International Journal of Applied Research* 212-216 (2024) available at: <https://doi.org/10.22271/allresearch.2025.v11.i1c.12285> (Last Visited June 3, 2023).

<sup>64</sup> Nita Bandyopadhyay & Tuhin Das (2025) “Indian Traditional Games: An Intangible Cultural Heritage to Promote Good Life among Children” 8(3) *J Adv Sport Phys Edu* 36-40 available at: <https://doi.org/10.36348/jaspe.2025.v08i03.002> (June 3, 2023).

<sup>65</sup> *Supra* note 63.

<sup>66</sup> International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport, Art.1.5. available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000235409> (Last Visited May 4, 2023).

Traditional Cultural Expressions (TCEs)<sup>67</sup> also often called “expressions of folklore” encompass a wide array of artistic and cultural forms deeply rooted in the heritage and identity of communities. These expressions are passed down through generations and are integral to the social and cultural fabric of indigenous and local populations worldwide. Traditional sports is deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of a community.<sup>68</sup> TCEs serve as potential markers of identity, distinguishing one community from another. They embody the unique history, values, beliefs and worldview of a group providing a sense of belonging and continuity across generations. Beyond aesthetics TCEs often encode traditional knowledge accumulated over centuries.<sup>69</sup> This can include ecological understanding reflected in songs about nature, medicinal practices embedded in rituals or agricultural techniques demonstrated through festive dances.<sup>70</sup>

Learning and participating in traditional sports often involves direct interaction between older and younger generations. This facilitates the transmission of cultural knowledge, language and social skills alongside the physical aspects of the game. They often involve unique movements, skills and physical conditioning that are specific to their cultural context. They showcase diverse forms of human athleticism and ingenuity, contributing to the richness of global sporting heritage. Some traditional sports are intertwined with spiritual beliefs and rituals. They may be performed during ceremonies, festivals, or other important cultural events holding deep symbolic meaning and reinforcing the community’s connection to its traditions and beliefs.<sup>71</sup>

Well- preserved and promoted traditional sports can attract cultural tourism, providing economic opportunities for local communities and further incentivizing their preservation. In essence,

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<sup>67</sup> The indigenous communities across the world have sought for the protection of their folklore or expressions of folklore which is being taken up by the World Intellectual Property Forum (WIPO). The WIPO Intergovernmental Committee or IGC on Traditional Knowledge, Traditional Cultural Expressions and Genetic Resources has tabled several documents till date to safeguard, preserve and protect TK, TCE and GR. The WIPO- UNESCO Model Provisions For National Laws on the Protection of Folklore Against Illicit Exploitation and Other Prejudicial Actions was the first document whose aim was to strike a balance between protection of folklore and dissemination of it. There is no uniform protection yet to these expressions of folklore or TCEs. It is still an ongoing effort with WIPO taking the lead.

<sup>68</sup> Traditional sports and games, available at: <https://www.unesco.org/en/sport-and-anti-doping/traditional-sports-and-games#:~:text=Traditional%20Sports%20and%20Games%20%7C%20UNESCO> (Last Visited June 3, 2025).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Soraia Chung Saura, Ana Cristina Zimmermann, “Traditional Sports and Games: Intercultural dialog, Sustainability and Empowerment” *Front Psychol.* (2021), available at: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7873946/> (Last Visited June 3, 2025).

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

traditional sports are far more than just games; they are dynamic expressions of cultural identity, history and social fabric. Their preservation and promotion are crucial for safeguarding cultural heritage and ensuring its transmission to future generations. UNESCO recognizes Traditional Sports and Games (TSG) as intangible cultural heritage, highlighting their significance in fostering intercultural dialogue, social cohesion and sustainable development.<sup>72</sup>

### **Legal Protection of Traditional Sports as Traditional Cultural Expressions**

Legal protection for traditional cultural expressions (TCEs), also known as expressions of folklore is a complex and evolving area of law. There is no single, universally accepted international legal framework dedicated solely to their protection. However, various legal mechanisms and ongoing international discussions aim to address the misappropriation and unauthorised exploitation of these valuable cultural assets.<sup>73</sup>

Existing legal mechanism to afford protection to traditional sports is in the form of Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) such as copyright, geographical indications, trademarks and collective marks, related rights (performers' rights). However, as traditional copyright law focuses on originality and individual authorship, it often falls short in protecting collectively created or community owned evolving TCEs. Under the copyright law, it may be possible to protect certain aspects of TCEs like contemporary adaptations or fixed artistic expressions derived from tradition. Geographical Indications (GIs) protect the link between a product and its geographical origin, which may be relevant for traditional handicrafts or products with a strong cultural association. Communities can also use trademarks and collective marks to distinguish their authentic traditional goods or services. The Beijing Treaty on Audiovisual Performances (2012) grants performers of folklore certain rights.

Several countries have developed or are considering specific laws also known as *sui generis* legislations, tailored to the unique characteristics of TCEs, often drawing inspiration from the WIPO-UNESCO Model Provisions on the Protection of Expressions of Folklore.<sup>74</sup> These laws often focus on community rights, the prevention of offensive or derogatory uses, and the fair

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<sup>72</sup> *Supra* note 68.

<sup>73</sup> *Supra* note 67.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

benefit-sharing arising from commercialisation. In many indigenous and local communities, customary laws and protocols govern the use and transmission of TCEs. Recognising and respecting these traditional systems is crucial for effective protection. Some countries protect TCEs under broader cultural heritage legislation, focusing on their preservation and safeguarding. Certain unfair competition laws can sometimes be invoked to prevent misleading or unfair commercial exploitation of TCEs such as false claims of authenticity.<sup>75</sup>

At the international fora, the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) has been actively engaged in discussions through its Intergovernmental Committee on Intellectual Property and Genetic Resources, Traditional Knowledge and Folklore (IGC). The IGC has finalised a treaty related to Genetic Resources in 2025, but TK, TCEs or Folklore continue to be discussed as there is no possibility yet of finalising a treaty on protecting traditional knowledge or folklore.

### **Challenges in Legal Protection to Traditional Sports as TCEs**

There are many challenges in protecting traditional sports. The diverse and evolving nature of TCEs makes it challenging to create a universally accepted legal definition. TCEs are not frozen in time. They are living, dynamic expressions that evolve within communities through ongoing practice, adaptation and transmission. Unlike most intellectual property, which emphasizes individual authorship, TCEs are often the result of generations of collective creativity. Identifying a specific author or owner in the traditional sense is usually impossible.

TCEs manifest in an incredibly wide range of tangible and intangible forms. These include verbal expressions such as stories, epics, myths, legends, proverbs, songs, chants, rhymes, oral histories.<sup>76</sup> Musical expressions are in the form of songs, instrumental music, rhythms, musical instruments.<sup>77</sup> TCEs cover performances like dance, theatrical performances, rituals, ceremonies, games and

<sup>75</sup> Siddharth Mahajan, "Ownership of the game: IP in sports business" India Business Law Journal (2025), available at: <https://law.asia/intellectual-property-sports/#:~:text=IPRs%20play%20a%20crucial%20role,delivering%20maximum%20benefit%20through%20monetisation>. (Last Visited June 3, 2025).

<sup>76</sup> Brigitte Vezina, Traditional Cultural Expressions: Laying Blocks for an International Agreement, CIGI Papers No.169-2018, available at: [https://www.cigionline.org/static/documents/documents/Paper%20no.169\\_1.pdf](https://www.cigionline.org/static/documents/documents/Paper%20no.169_1.pdf). (Last Visited May 5, 2025).

<sup>77</sup> Benjamin A Botkin (1938), available at: <https://folkmyth.fas.harvard.edu/secondary-field> (Last Visited May 5, 2025).

sports.<sup>78</sup> Tangible expressions recognized as TCEs are artworks, crafts, textiles, architectural forms, tools, medicines, culinary traditions.<sup>79</sup>

TCEs are deeply intertwined with cultural identity, spirituality, and social practices. They are not merely aesthetic objects or performances but carry profound cultural and spiritual significance. Legal definitions that focus solely on their artistic or commercial aspects may fail to recognize and respect this deeper significance. Since TCEs embody traditional knowledge, such as knowledge about medicinal plants, ecological practices, or craftsmanship techniques. Drawing a clear line between the expression and the underlying knowledge can be challenging for legal purposes.<sup>80</sup>

Another legal challenge lies in variations in TCEs which exist within a single community across different sub-groups, families or regions. Defining which specific variations should be protected and who within the community has the authority to decide can be complex.<sup>81</sup> TCEs are shared and adapted by others which may lead to legal difficulties in distinguishing between authentic expressions originating within the community and later interpretations or commercialisations. TCEs are often considered “living heritage” constantly being recreated and reinterpreted. Legal frameworks designed for fixed works may struggle to accommodate this dynamic feature.<sup>82</sup>

### Potential Frameworks in Protecting Traditional Sports

Crafting an effective legal and practical framework for protecting traditional sports as traditional cultural expressions requires a multi-faceted approach that goes beyond conventional intellectual property law.<sup>83</sup> The primary step involves empowering communities to document their traditional sports. This includes detailed descriptions of rules, playing areas, equipment, historical context,

<sup>78</sup> Traditional Cultural Expressions, available at: <https://www.wipo.int/en/web/traditional-knowledge/traditional-cultural-expressions/index> (Last Visited May 5, 2025).

<sup>79</sup> Traditional craftsmanship article by UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage International Day of the Intangible Cultural Heritage 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Convention, available at: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/traditional-craftsmanship-00057> (Last Visited May 5, 2025).

<sup>80</sup> *Supra* note 23.

<sup>81</sup> Traditional cultural expressions and fashion, available at: <https://www.wipo.int/en/web/traditional-knowledge/fashion> (Last Visited May 6, 2025).

<sup>82</sup> Harvard Art Law Organisation Preservation or Protection the Intellectual Property Debate Surrounding Traditional Cultural Expressions available at: <https://orgs.law.harvard.edu/halo/2025/03/13/preservation-or-protection-the-intellectual-property-debate-surrounding-traditional-cultural-expressions/> (Last Visited May 6, 2025).

<sup>83</sup> Shivam Singh, Sports Law in India (1<sup>st</sup> edn, Thomson Reuters South Asia Pvt Ltd, April, 2025).

cultural significance, associated rituals and variations within the community. Oral histories, video recordings and ethnographic studies would be crucial.<sup>84</sup>

Instead of a rigid legal definition, a flexible, descriptive approach that acknowledges the diverse forms and evolving nature of traditional sports may be adopted. The definition should emphasise their connection to cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and community identity.<sup>85</sup> The nature of the traditional sports may comprise of elements such origin in a specific community or region over a specific period of time; transmission through generations, often orally or through practice; holding cultural, social or spiritual significance for the community; potentially involving unique skills, materials or playing environments tied to the local context.<sup>86</sup>

There is a need for the establishment of a national (and potentially regional or international) inventory or registry of documented traditional sports. This would serve as a record of their existence and cultural significance, although registration would not necessarily confer ownership in the traditional IP sense. Communities would have the right to register their sports.<sup>87</sup>

The communities from which the traditional sports originate must be recognised as the collective owners and custodians. They may be empowered to define protocols for their practice, transmission and any potential commercial or representational uses. The communities right to govern the use of their traditional sports according to their customary laws and practices must be respected. Legal frameworks should aim to support and complement these existing systems.<sup>88</sup>

A free and Prior Informed Consent (PIC) of the concerned community must be followed for any external use, adaptation, or commercialisation. This includes clearly outlining the intended use,

<sup>84</sup> Yung-Cheng Hsieh, Tzu- Han Chen “Digital Archive Use in Physical Education and Sports Culture” 16 Society for Imaging Science and Technology” available at DOI : [10.2352/issn.2168-3204.2019.1.0.28](https://doi.org/10.2352/issn.2168-3204.2019.1.0.28) (Last Visited June 3, 2025).

<sup>85</sup> Jike Gao, Constructing digital path for intangible cultural heritage of ethnic minority traditional sports: Take Tibetan traditional sports as an example *Journal of Sociology and Ethnology* (2023) DOI: [10.23977/jsoce.2023.050905](https://doi.org/10.23977/jsoce.2023.050905) available at: [http://166.62.7.99/assets/default/article/2023/09/22/article\\_1695396882.pdf](http://166.62.7.99/assets/default/article/2023/09/22/article_1695396882.pdf) (Last Visited June 3, 2025).

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Thomas Margoni, “The Protection of Sports Events in the EU: Property, Intellectual Property, Unfair Competition and Special Forms of Protection” 46 *IIC- International Review of Intellectual Property and Competition Law* 386-417 (2016).

<sup>88</sup> *Supra* note 82.

potential benefits, and how the community's cultural integrity will be respected.<sup>89</sup> A mechanism for fair and equitable sharing of any benefit arising from the commercialisation or broader use of traditional sports, ensuring the originating communities are the primary beneficiaries must be established. This could be in the form of royalties, licensing fees, or investments in community development.

Legal and policy measures include enacting a specific legislation tailored to the unique characteristics of traditional cultural expressions, including traditional sports. This legislation should recognise community rights and custodianship; establish PIC requirements for external use; outline benefit-sharing mechanisms; prohibit disrespectful or derogatory uses; provides avenues for redress in case of misappropriation. The protection of traditional sports can be incorporated within broader national cultural heritage laws recognising their intangible cultural significance.<sup>90</sup>

The promotion and awareness of traditional sports can be achieved through inclusion in educational curricula and public awareness campaigns. This can help in the safeguarding of traditional sports through increased understanding and participation. The transmission of traditional sports to younger generations can be accomplished through workshops, festivals and community events so it is important to provide resources and support to communities to fund these activities.<sup>91</sup>

Due to the nature of traditional sports unauthorised commercialisation, misrepresentation or disrespectful use may take place both offline and online. Therefore legal sanctions and mechanisms for redressal of such issues may be implemented. It is important to foster international collaboration and information sharing on best practices for the protection of traditional sports advocating for their recognition within international cultural heritage frameworks.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> *Supra* note 84.

<sup>90</sup> *Supra* note 85.

<sup>91</sup> Zenghong Li, Lei Zhang, Lin Li "National Traditional Sports Culture Elites and the Inheritance and Protection of National Traditional Sports Culture" Proceedings of the 2016 7<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Education, Management, Computer and Medicine (EMCM 2016) available at: <https://www.atlantispress.com/proceedings/emcm-16/25870524> (Last Visited June 3, 2025).

<sup>92</sup> *Supra* note 84.

As far as the practical implementation of protecting traditional sports is concerned, it is important to develop a framework in which there is full participation of the concerned communities.<sup>93</sup> The communities must be trained and provided with resources to document, manage and protect their traditional sports. It is equally important to establish mechanisms for monitoring the use of traditional sports and for enforcing community rights and legal protections.<sup>94</sup> We need to recognise that the framework may need to evolve over time to address new challenges and opportunities. Therefore regular review and adaptation in consultation with communities are essential.<sup>95</sup>

By adopting a holistic framework that combines community empowerment, tailored legal measures, educational initiatives, and international cooperation, it is possible to create a robust system for protecting traditional sports as vital expressions of cultural heritage. The focus should be on recognizing community rights, ensuring their self-determination, and promoting the respectful and sustainable safeguarding of these invaluable cultural assets.<sup>96</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

Many *Mizo* sports honed skills are crucial for survival. Games like *Insuknawr*, which involved throwing a spear-like object, developed hunting prowess. Others like wrestling or log pulling enhanced strength and stamina, essential qualities for warriors and farmers alike. *Mizo* indigenous sports were social events. Often played in village common areas, they fostered interaction, camaraderie, and a sense of belonging. These games provided a platform for young people to showcase their talents and gain respect from elders. *Mizo* indigenous sports offer a captivating glimpse into the cultural heritage and values of the *Mizo* people. These games, some practiced for generations and others undergoing revival efforts, stand as testaments to *Mizo* ingenuity and adaptability. They transcended mere entertainment, serving as training grounds for warriors, fostering social cohesion, and promoting physical prowess. However, the decline of the *Zawlbuk*

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<sup>93</sup> Han Bin, Liu Lanjuan “The Important Role of Traditional Sports Culture in Promoting the Development of Sports Population” 2019 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Education, Technology, Management and Humanities Science available at: [https://www.webofproceedings.org/proceedings\\_series/ESSP/ETMHS%202019/ETMHS19099.pdf](https://www.webofproceedings.org/proceedings_series/ESSP/ETMHS%202019/ETMHS19099.pdf) (Last Visited June 3, 2025).

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *Supra* note 91.

<sup>96</sup> *Supra* note 93.

tradition and the growing influence of the modern world threaten the future of these unique sports.

While *Inbuan* remains popular, concerns arise over a growing emphasis on brute force over the traditional focus on skill and strategy. Other games like *Insuknawr* and *Saihruipawh* face diminishing play, and *Chawilung* continues to evolve, potentially losing its traditional essence. Despite these challenges, there are glimmers of hope. The *Mizo* government's efforts to revive traditional sports, the resurgence of *Arpa Sual* in festivals, and the continued popularity of *Kalchhet* showcase the enduring spirit of *Mizo* traditions. The recognition of *Inbuan* by the Indian government further highlights the importance of preserving these games. Moving forward continued efforts are crucial. Organizations like the Mizoram Indigenous Games Association (MIGA) are working to raise awareness and organize competitions, ensuring these cultural treasures are not lost. Educational programs can raise awareness about the significance of traditional sports. Integrating these sports into school curriculums or cultural events can expose younger generations to their rich heritage. Additionally, documentation of these games, both through written records and audio-visual formats, is critical for future generations. By prioritizing preservation and fostering a sense of cultural pride, the legacy of *Mizo* indigenous sports can be secured. The sports can continue to serve as a bridge between generations, connecting the *Mizo* people to their vibrant past and ensuring their cultural identity thrives in the years to come.