



Exploring The Rich Tapestry And Cultural Significance Of Flowers In The Socio-Cultural Context Of Mizoram

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Abstract

Flowers have been connected with mankind since time immemorial. Flowers, with their variety of hues, patterns, and shapes, have long been used as a universal language that transcends national and cultural barriers. People and flowers have an unusual bond. These vivid and beautiful wonders of nature possess the ability to surpass linguistic obstacles and unite individuals from other cultures, thereby playing a crucial role in fostering societal unity. This paper explores the intricate relationship between flowers and human beings in a cultural setting. The paper seeks to delve into the rich tapestry of flowers. It also seeks to study the cultural importance given to flowers in areas such as funeral rites and church in the modern context of Mizoram. The paper will examine and analyse how flowers have gained prominence in the socio-religious life of Mizoram.

Keywords: flowers, cultural setting, Mizoram.

Introduction

Throughout history, flowers have been largely grown for their visual attractiveness and social functions, as well as for extracting essential oils and manufacturing perfumes. Flowers have always been an essential part of human society, serving a vital function in social, cultural, and religious occasions throughout history because of their intrinsic essence and fragrance. Flowers hold significant importance in numerous cultural traditions worldwide. The use of flowers has long been a common practice, representing love, beauty, and spirituality in both traditional rituals and modern occasions. Flowers serve as both artistic offerings from nature and integral components of society, bearing profound symbolic significance and fulfilling crucial functions in ceremonies and customs. For thousands of years, flowers have been a part of human civilization because people have appreciated their beauty, scent, and symbolic meaning. Flowers have long been used to mark important occasions and convey feelings.

The present paper makes an attempt to explore the rich tapestry of flowers in a cultural context. The paper will also delve into how utilizing flowers have become a widespread practice in the social, cultural and religious events in the society. It also seeks to analyse and understand the importance gained by flowers in specific cultural areas such as funeral rituals and church in the context of Mizoram.

Methodology

The nature of the study is exploratory and descriptive. The population of the study is Aizawl, the capital city of Mizoram. Interview schedules have been administered to 153 floriculture entrepreneurs who are purposively selected from each of the three florist associations namely Mizoram Florist Association, Pangpar Zuar Association and Zo-Anthurium Growers Co-operative Society. The nature of the data is both qualitative and quantitative but focus is more on the qualitative data which have been collected from the sample.

Exploring the rich cultural tapestry of flowers

Flowers are the reproductive organs of flowering plants or angiosperms, typically organized as a cluster of lateral structures that emerge from a limited axis of growth. Flowers exhibit several differences compared to the reproductive structures of other seed plants, known as gymnosperms. However, there are several exceptions to the typical characteristics of flowers, which makes it challenging to create a comprehensive definition of what a flower is (Scutt &Vandenbussche, 2014).

Culture, defined as the collective knowledge and practices passed down from generation to generation, greatly influences several aspects of human existence. Flowers have been connected with mankind since time immemorial. They are used for religious offerings and other important social events like weddings and birthdays especially in India. They have social and economic significance, generating income and used for decorations in social gatherings and important functions. Bouquets and floral ornaments are important socially as gifts and adornment in India. The aesthetic value of flowers in our daily life cannot be overemphasised because they symbolise purity, beauty, peace, love and passion. In fact, no social function in India is complete without flowers.

Despite their inability to provide physical sustenance for humans, flowers have long captivated human beings with a peculiar attraction. The physical labor of human beings has been essential in cultivating flowers for their aesthetic attributes (Huss et.al, 2018). For instance, 120,000 years ago, flower-themed stone carvings were discovered in Egyptian tombs. Flower festivals were held in ancient Rome as a tribute to the god Flora. In China, silk flowers were created more than 2,000 years ago (Huss et.al, 2017). Roman festivals included floral designs.

Since ancient times, flowers have been grown and used in a variety of ways across various cultures. People have been cultivating flowers for almost 5000 years, even though there is no proven benefit to this expensive activity. Although flowers in the spring are helpful as an indication that there was enough rain in the winter so that there will be food in the summer, man grows flowers even if they do not directly offer sustenance. The majority of

flowering plants cultivated for the flower industry nowadays are planted primarily for aesthetic and emotional purposes, with the exception of some basic survival uses, such edible or medicinal flowers (Ibid, 2017).

The concept of flower symbolism was established by ancient cultures. Flowers were connected to gods and goddesses in Greek and Roman culture. Flowers were used as a medium of communication during the Middle Ages, when many emotions and messages could be expressed through floral arrangements. Flowers are still widely employed in religious ceremonies, festivities, and adornment today, and their meaning is an integral part of our society.

Flowers exert a significant impact on our emotions and overall state of being, in addition to their symbolic significance. Studies suggest that the presence of flowers can evoke positive emotions, reduce stress levels, and enhance feelings of satisfaction. Flowers have the potential to enhance one's mood and uplift one's spirits. Presenting flowers to an individual can cultivate closeness and a feeling of affiliation, regardless of whether it is a solitary blossom or a collection of flowers. There is a strong correlation between flowers and happy feelings. Research has demonstrated that plants and flowers can significantly improve one's mood.

For centuries, flowers have conveyed messages to us, surpassing the limitations of words and effectively expressing emotions and ideas. Floriography, the language of flowers, has gained worldwide recognition and usage, with each culture assigning distinct meanings and symbolism to various blooms. Flowers can also be used as a nonverbal way to express feelings and ideas. Floriography, was a common way for people to subtly convey their emotions in Victorian England. Because each flower had a distinct meaning, people could communicate covert messages by arranging various flowers in a certain way. Charlotte de Latour's publication of "Le Langage des Fleurs" in 1819 in France was considered one of the catalysts for the immense popularity of floriography (Venkatesh et.al, 2023).

Jack Goody in his ethnographic and historical study in 1993, provides an overview of how flowers are used across cultures and historical periods, with sections devoted to the language of flowers in Europe and America. He discusses the language of flowers' enduring appeal, social significance, and wide-ranging appeal in his work, pointing to the ways in which it gave rise to several social practices. Additionally, Goody notes that people have assigned symbolic meanings to flowers throughout history and across cultural boundaries, spanning from Renaissance Europe to twentieth-century America, as well as ancient India and China (Kopcik Rhyner, 2012).

In many cultural traditions across the world, flowers have long been considered important. Utilising flowers has always been a widespread practice, symbolising love, beauty, and spirituality in both traditional ceremonies and contemporary events. These vivid and delicate works of nature are vital for fostering social cohesion because they have the ability to bridge cultural divides and break down linguistic barriers.

Floral designs are popular in art all over the world. In a similar vein, Indian architecture uses flower motifs in many forms, regardless of whether the buildings are national, regional, or the result of previous dynasties. Flowers have always been a crucial part of cultural narratives and history, showing up in paintings, sculptures, drawings, stories, folklore, and more. There are also floral patterns and cultural references to flowers etched into stone. Their patterns and motifs are architectural wonders that have endured the test of time and are now widely used in structures all around the country.

Floral motifs are widely favored in art across the globe. Indian architecture incorporates flower motifs in various manifestations, irrespective of whether the structures are of national, regional, or historical origin. Flowers have consistently played a crucial role in cultural narratives and history, manifesting in various creative forms such as paintings, sculptures, drawings, stories, folklore, and other mediums. These vivid and delicate works of nature are vital for fostering social cohesion because they have the ability to bridge cultural divides and break down linguistic barriers.

The interpretation of flower colors and arrangements might differ based on the culture and circumstances in which they are employed. Gaining knowledge about the symbolism of flowers and arrangements enables us to better communicate, convey our feelings, and demonstrate respect for diverse cultures and customs.

In India, flowers hold both cultural and religious significance. The Lotus, revered as sacred, is the national flower of India and holds significant importance in the ancient mythology of the country. It serves as a distinctive symbol of Indian culture. Flowers symbolize grace, strength, and purity. Their aesthetic appeal greatly attracts people, to the point where Indian women decorate their hair with fragrant flowers to enhance their beauty. They are utilized throughout various religious holidays and wedding parties. Flowers are frequently presented as birthday gifts, wedding presents, and are now commonly utilized as a gesture of goodwill when visiting loved ones in hospitals.

Flowers are tremendously used at funerals as an expression of sympathy, grief and respect, as a mark of condolence to the deceased in different cultures in India. Throughout history, flowers have consistently served as a universal emblem of love, beauty, and spirituality, connecting ancient rituals to contemporary celebrations. Garlands indicate joy and are used in celebrations, weddings and religious ceremonies. The circular form indicates oneness.

They show honour and respect, sometimes placed around someone's neck as a gesture of appreciation. Offering garlands to guests demonstrates gracious hospitality (Venkatesh et.al, 2023).

Cultural significance of flowers in the context of Mizoram

With advancement in urbanization and standard of living in the urban areas, demand for cut flowers have increased for indoor decorations. Events like marriage, social functions and state official events are adorned with floral arrangements and are increasingly becoming an indispensable part.

To examine and understand the cultural significance gained by flowers in the socio-cultural life of the Mizo society, interview schedule has been administered to 153 floriculturists in the capital city of Aizawl, Mizoram. The research findings on the importance gained by flowers in the socio-cultural context of Mizoram in the field of funerary practice are shown in the following tables. Funeral rituals mark the presence of flowers in the form of wreaths and bouquets, and floral arrangement adorn the coffins. On the occasion of death in a locality, people are normally reluctant to go to the bereaved family's house empty handed. Table 1 shows respondents' preference to give as a mark of condolence to the bereaved family.

Table 1: Preference to give as a mark of condolence

Preference to give as a mark of condolence	Frequency	Percentage
Flower bouquet/wreath	89	58.2
Traditional puan	64	41.8
Total	153	100

The table above illustrates the fact that respondents preferring to give flower bouquet as a mark of condolence to a bereaved family is higher in number and the percentage is 58.2% compared to those 41.8% who still prefer to give the traditional lungi/puan as a mark of condolence. Giving puan (puan is a traditional wrap-around) to bereaved family on the occasion of death is a tradition of the Mizo people which have been passed down generation to generation. This tradition though still kept intact and followed by the people, numerous changes have occurred with rapid urbanization and tremendous western influence, not only younger generations but older generations too have shown preference in giving fresh as well as artificial flowers to bereaved families to show their sympathy. People prefer gifting flower bouquet as a mark of sympathy or grief due to a number of reasons as presented in the table below.

Table 2: Reason for giving flower bouquet to the bereaved family

Reason for giving flower bouquet	Frequency	Percentage
Flowers are the right gifts to give/bid farewell to the departed	45	29.4
They symbolize love and affection	28	18.3
Because flowers have been given as a mark of condolence for a long time	16	10.5
Traditional puan	64	41.8
Total	153	100

The number of respondents showing preference of gifting funeral flower bouquets are 89 in total representing 58.2% of the total sample of respondents. Out of these 89 respondents, 29.4% opine that flowers are the right gifts to bid farewell to the departed. While 18.3% are of the view that flowers symbolize love and affection for the departed soul as well as for the bereaved family members. Whereas 10.5% thinks that flowers are gifted because they have been given as a mark of condolence for a long time. As mentioned earlier, those preferring to give traditional puan represents 41.8% of the respondents. Such varied views and opinions regarding gifting of flowers in funeral service is of recent development, it can be said to have gained prominence with the recent upsurge in floriculture and floristry as a means of livelihood in the society.

Floral arrangement adorns the coffins of the departed in Mizoram. This practice is however, an influence of the Western society where coffins/caskets are beautifully decorated with fresh flowers and artificial flowers. In the present project respondents are asked if they support decorating coffins with flowers. Their response is presented below.

Table 3: Decorating coffin with fresh flowers

Is decorating coffin with fresh flowers a good practice?	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	133	86.9
No	20	13.1
Total	153	100

The table no 3 clearly shows respondents' inclination towards decoration of coffin with flowers. Majority of the respondents that is, 86.9% support adornment of coffins with floral arrangements. While only a small portion 13.1% do not support decorating coffins. Such a support is usually accompanied by views shared by respondents that decorating a coffin with fresh flowers looks beautiful and presentable than does a bare undecorated coffin.

Some of the respondents opine that decorating the coffin with flowers is the last best thing the bereaved family could do to please and glorify the departed, psychological satisfaction of the grief-stricken family is considered valuable at this juncture. Besides, decorating coffins and giving funeral flower bouquets have been incorporated as a part of the Mizo culture as opined by 96.1% of the respondents.

Cut flowers have become an indispensable part of the culture and religious life in Mizoram. Every Church has a separate Committee responsible for upkeeping the Church decorations. Church altars are decorated with arranged flowers every Sunday, the responsibility of which is bestowed upon the women's wing of the church too. Extra efforts are particularly given on important religious festivals such as Christmas, Easter, Good Friday, Palm Sunday, and church conferences. Celebrating birthdays and other events like anniversaries, Valentine's Day without flowers is unthinkable today. The view of respondents regarding flower arrangement at the church altar is presented below.

Table 6: Consideration of flower arrangement at the altar of church as necessary

Consideration of flower arrangement at the church altar as necessary	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	141	92.2
No	12	7.8
Total	153	100

The above table clearly indicate that 92.2% of the respondents support flower arrangement at the church altar every Sunday. They opine that floral arrangement at the church decorates the sacred altar and the beauty of the flowers add to the sanctity of the church altar and they believe that flowers glorify the creator. Majority of the respondents do support the presence of flowers at the church altar every Sunday. While a meagre 7.8% of the respondents do not consider flower arrangement at the church altar necessary. The respondents are often appointed to arrange flowers in the church, and most of the churches especially Presbyterian churches in the state sanction money to buy fresh flowers, the amount however, differs from church to church, and from denomination to denomination.

Conclusion

The majority of flowering plants cultivated in the contemporary flower industry provides visual enjoyment and emotional gratification. An extensive business dedicated to cultivating and marketing decorative plants has emerged, paving way for self-employment and livelihood for many floriculturists.

Flowers with its rich cultural tapestry adds meaning and symbolism to many aspects of life. Not only are they artistic gifts from nature, but they are also deeply ingrained into societies, carrying deep symbolic meanings and playing important roles in rites and rituals of many cultures.

The present study concludes that flowers have found a steady niche in the socio-cultural and religious life of the people of Mizoram. Flowers have gained tremendous significance in the culture of Mizoram. In fact, funeral rites are incomplete without flower bouquets and wreaths in contemporary Mizo culture. Flowers have been incorporated and accepted as a part of the funeral practices of the Mizo society. Marriage ceremonies are also inadequate and incomplete without floral decorations, be it in the church or at the wedding reception venue. Flowers occupy an integral part of the whole ceremony of marriage and rituals in Mizoram. People are willing to spend money on flowers in order to keep up with the trend in different celebrations. People do not hesitate to contribute more money besides the sanctioned amount by the church, to buy fresh flowers for the Sunday church flower arrangement in Mizoram. Changes are witnessed in terms of floral designs and art in every cultural aspect of the society, paving the way for income generation in the field of floristry.

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