

Changing Gender Roles And Stratification In Social And Economic Dimensions Of Tangkhul Naga Society

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Abstract: This paper aims to look at certain socio-economic spheres in the lives of the Tangkhul to assess the gender roles and stratification in contemporary times. It also attempts to understand the changing roles and stratification of gender due to the influence of Christianity and the subsequent introduction of formal education.

Keywords: Patrilineal: Determining the transmission of name, property, or authority through males.

Patrilocal: Referring to the practice of a married couple's living in the husband's community or of a wife's settling in the home of her husband.

Patriarchal: Controlled by men rather than women.

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender has been the main interest of study in contemporary times. Kottak (2002) defines 'gender' as the cultural construction of sexual differences. Male and female are biological sexes that differ in their X and Y chromosomes. Culture takes that biological difference and associates it with certain activities, behavior and ideas. Gender roles are the activities a culture assigns to each sex. Gender stratification describes an unequal distribution of rewards (socially valued resources, power, prestige, and personal freedom) between men and women, reflecting their different positions in a social hierarchy.

Tangkhul Naga, the focus of the present study settled predominantly in Ukhrul district of Manipur, covering an area of 4544 sq. kms. Ukhrul district is surrounded in the north by Nagaland and the Mao hills of Manipur, in the south by the Sadar hills and Imphal valley, in the east by the Kabo valley of Burma and in the west by the Tengnoupal hills. Tangkhul is one of the major tribes of Manipur. "Tangkhul, (phonemically *tankhul*), belongs to the Naga sub-group of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family" (Arokianathan 1982: x). According to IHA (Immanuel Hospital Association), the Tangkhul population in the year 2010 is 1,42,000.

Tangkhul Naga society is patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal. The head of the family, clan, village, and priest are all exclusively male. They worshipped several deities but there was no female deity except for one. The Tangkhul belief, rituals and practices in pre-Christian era is known as *hau*. Historically, it is seen that only with the advent of Christianity the religious influence that the *Hau* had on its adherents began to dwindle gradually. Over the years, the conversion to Christianity has accelerated and this tribal religion crumbled mainly under the impact of Christianity. Today, all Tangkhuls are Christians.

The earliest pioneer Christian missionary of Manipur was Rev. William Pettigrew. The work of Christian missionaries started in the last quarter of the 19th century among the Tangkhuls. The Tangkhuls were illiterate and thus he felt the need of educating them for the effective propagation of Christianity. He introduced the Ukhrul dialect as the common media of all the Tangkhul Naga through his writings of Tangkhul primers, translation of Gospels, hymns, Bible and other books in Ukhrul dialect, which later on became the linqua franca of the Tangkhul Naga. Thus Christianity and education have been the most important force in the life of the Naga tribes in general and Tangkhuls in particular.

II. SOCIAL DIMENSIONS

FAMILY

The Tangkhul family system is patrilineal. The rule of residence after marriage is based on patrilocal principle. Thus the women after marriage live with the husband's families. The basic family structure of the Tangkhul Nagas remains unchanged.

GENDERED DIVISION OF LABOUR

A division of labour linked to gender has been found in all cultures. However, the particular tasks assigned to men and women vary from society to society. Among the Tangkhuls there is a sharp differentiation of activities between domestic and public spheres. They considered that public activities have greater prestige than domestic ones do. This promotes gender stratification, because men are more active in the public domain than women. Women's activities tend to be closer to home than men's are. Tangkhul Naga women perform the role of a wife, mother, child-bearer and food producer. Women have a greater range of responsibilities, starting from household maintenance to various agricultural activities (Shimray 2004: 1704). The Tangkhuls assigned the arduous tasks of carrying water and firewood and pounding grain to women. Knitting and weaving, childcare, care for sick and elderly persons and household chores are considered to be women's work. They work alongside men in tilling soil, seed sowing, path clearing, reaping and threshing, winnowing the rice and then transporting it to the granary. Besides, agricultural activities such as weeding and plantation are done by women but they are isolated from the public domain which men control. Certain agricultural techniques, particularly clearing jungle, ploughing, constructing and repairing of fence, shed and house, collection of housing material and agricultural implements, were assigned to men. They think of the house as the female sphere and the fields as the male domain. Men grow or sow prestige crops and prepare food for rituals. For instance in *Luira phanit* (New Year or seed sowing festival of the Tangkhuls), *awunga* (village headman, who is also the head of the priests) sow seeds and perform rituals, offer prayers for the protection of the crops and bumper harvest. No one is allowed to sow seeds ahead of *awunga*. It is their belief that if anybody violates the rule, the whole village might face famine (Ruivah 1993).

Men are the usual hunters and warriors. Tangkhul Nagas were once a mighty warrior. The Tangkhuls practice head hunting (*mikui-kharang*) and decorate their houses with human skulls, which had a great significance, for the number of skulls reflected the degree of the owner's merit or honour (Singh 1996). Village disputes which generally led to war and headhunting arose out of breach of sexual sanctions, assault and injury, theft, failure to keep the agreement and offences of similar nature, encroachment on land etc. They strongly believed that only the righteous would attain victory. To prove their bravery, courage and honesty, heads were collected and made known to all people.

In times of war a man avoid having sexual intercourse with his wife. They think that sexual contact with women will

weaken them. Indeed, it is a taboo for woman to destroy her husband's spear or anything which is used for warfare. It is also a taboo for men to eat meat hunted by women. In other words a woman should not go for hunting games. Tangkhul view female as polluting, at particular times. The concept of pollution is established for women during her childbirth, menstruation etc.

FATHER'S ROLE

The Tangkhul family, being patriarchal, the father assumes the headship of the family even today. The father continues to carry the greatest authority. The father is expected to provide all basic necessities including food, cloth and shelter for the whole family. He voluntarily helps his wife in her household chores like cooking, agriculture work, splitting firewood, fetching water etc., which was once considered as purely women's work, out of love and care for his wife. The husband is also expected to take care and look after his wife whenever she becomes sick.

With the coming of Christianity and the subsequent introduction of formal education the role of the father is also assumed different kinds of responsibilities. Today the duty and role of the father towards his children has taken a new direction. The father has geared his interest and priority towards providing education to his children unlike the traditional fathers who emphasized more in training his children on how to become good agriculturists. Today, the greatest concern of the father is searching economic resources since his top most priority is his children's education.

Today, the fathers may know or may not know the works of arts, crafts or basketry. Some of the fathers also take their children for fishing, hunting, etc., and all these are done only during leisure times. However, today in spite of their busy schedules help their children with their lessons in school impart social and moral values on them. He is also expected to teach his children the land demarcation of their field with their neighbours or with other village. Even today he is expected to teach the social and moral values. As the father owns the family property whether self-acquired or ancestral property he has absolute power over them. Therefore, the father continues to discharge the responsibility of dividing all his properties to his children (sons) during his lifetime.

Even today the main occupation of the father is agriculture in general in spite of the fact that a good number of fathers are government servants, businessmen, carpenters etc.

The traditional role of the father as a performer of rituals for the family is no more practiced. This has been replaced by the Christian way of life.

MOTHER'S ROLE

In the Tangkhul society, the mother continues to play an important role in the household chores, childcare, agriculture and animal husbandry. Some mothers also supplement family through their earnings as daily wages, weavers, business, clerks in offices or schools and teachers etc. Many mothers have taken up more than a single occupation, to meet the need of the family. However, the main occupation is agriculture and the mother is the one who does most of the agricultural work.

The mother has the authority over the disposal and consumption of the agricultural products. A man owns and controls the use of dwelling and inheritable properties, but men and women have equal rights in utilization of their fruits of labour. In the case of an agriculturalist the mother's role slightly differs from that of the working women. For a working mother the responsibility is more than in the olden days, because they are involved in many other activities both inside and outside the house. In other words, she works at home, helps in agriculture, goes to office or school or does some other businesses.

Till today the mother has the obligation of teaching her children, especially the daughters the art of keeping their homes and surroundings neat and tidy, the art of weaving, cooking and besides this, works of embroideries, stitching, knitting, maintaining gardens are also to taught. Not only the father but also the mother teaches the social and moral values including biblical teachings about the Christian ways of life to their children. As all of them are now Christians they do not perform any rituals, rather they pray before any work is undertaken.

Like in the past women do not inherit ancestral properties though she gets sizeable movable properties during her marriage known as '*shimlam*'¹.

CHILDREN'S ROLE

At present the role of a son has changed to a great extent. Instead of only helping their parents in the field, they have taken up education as their main priority, and spend most of their time in schools, colleges and universities. But during the holidays they also help their parents in the field. However the son is not expected to help his mother in the household chores. He rather spends his free time in carpentry or simply socializes with friends. At present when the son is old enough he sleeps in a different bedroom. The introduction of Christian mission and the subsequent introduction of formal education among the Tangkhul led to the replacement of *Longshim* (youth dormitory) with that of the Christian schools, colleges and hostels in its place. As a result the youngsters do not sleep in the youth dormitories like before.

Regarding inheritance, as a tradition till today, the eldest son gets the lion's share of the ancestral property such as land, terrace fields, forest etc. as he is the head among all the sons. He takes the responsibility to teaching his younger brothers and sisters in many areas. After his father expires he is considered to be the head of the family who takes all the final decision. Moreover, the eldest son will be given the first privilege to get married. When there is family problem, other sons will always consult the eldest brother for his advice and suggestions. The eldest son is also entitled to inherit his parent's house as it is his duty to look after his parents when they become old.

At present the role of daughters have changed since girls are also given the opportunity for education. Even then during the holidays she helps her parents more than her brothers. In olden days it was a disgrace for a woman who could not weave. But at present most of the daughters do not even know the art of weaving, perhaps they are rather interested in knitting, stitching and embroidery works. All these are

expected from the girls. She also helps with the household chores, gardening, looking after the guests, keeping the surrounding neat and tidy. All these create an atmosphere where the daughter becomes closer and attached to her mother in all respects.

The eldest daughter is expected to look after her younger brothers and sisters in many aspects. She looks after them, teaches them their lessons and also trains them how to wash, cook etc. And it is her utmost duty to look after her parents when they are sick. But unfortunately, daughters are not entitled to inherit immovable property, once they are married they become more attached to their husbands and their families. Interestingly nowadays there are few cases of daughters receiving immovable properties.

DECISION MAKING

In a traditional Tangkhul family, the men take almost all the major decisions. Issues such as whether the children should be sent to school or engaged in household activities, which boy should be a match for a marriageable daughter etc. are decided only by men. Women are rarely or never consulted on these important affairs. However, this scenario has undergone some changes in the modern times. Men seem to have understood that their decisions are not always perfect and women seem to have gained in confidence and information about various issues. This has led to a greater possibility of arriving at decisions through consultation and discussion between men and women in the household (Kashung, 2012).

In short, changes have come about even in the family due to factors like education, Christianity and changing economy.

MARRIAGE

Marriage is one of the important social institutions among the Tangkhul. It is an important event not only in the life of the persons who are married, but also for the household that are drawn together in matrimonial alliance. Marriage ceremony takes place in the groom's residence. On the wedding day, a grand feast with a good flow of liquor is held for the villagers and the relatives from outside the village. This is followed by dance, song and wrestling. The young men of the bride's clan wrestle with the bachelors of the groom's clan to determine the prosperity of the couple. In the wrestling if the groom's party wins it is believed that the life of the couple would be a prosperous one and vice versa (Ruivah, 1993).

In the traditional Tangkhul society children did not enjoy the freedom to choose their partners. Nowadays they are given immense freedom. In the case of children who did not get married on time, parents take great responsibility to arrange the marriage of their children and are considered as the foremost obligation of the parents. They consider leaving children unmarried blameworthy. But they never resort to force, and cases of children marrying against their inclination are exceedingly rare. It was earlier a general practice to perform marriage of their children at an early age. However today, with formal education the age at which boys and girls get married is delayed.

For a Tangkhul, marriage with a person from one's village is encouraged. Marrying outside the village was not discouraged though. The Tangkhuls practised head-hunting (*mikui-kharang*) as part of their culture. Consequently, each village was perennially at war (*rai*) with other villages due to issues of sexual harassment, assault, theft, failure to keep the agreement, encroachment on land etc. The headman of a particular village with the help of other village authorities took decisions pertaining to inter-village disputes. If his decision was unacceptable to other concerned villages, this would imply the onset of war and the associated headhunting. When the war was too heavy and either party retreated then it was the duty of the *phukreila*² to stop it. No warrior could touch her and she had to be obeyed. Therefore she had all the privilege to live a safe and respected life. She was safe and secure in both the warring villages. She was the ambassador of peace and was free to move around in these villages without arousing any suspicion (Kashung, 2012).

The Tangkhul people are monogamous. Any adultery between any two persons is regarded as a serious crime in Tangkhul society. The term *suikhangarui* is used by Tangkhul to denote adultery. The village elders in the past used to declare such judgement in public after hearing the cases. If a man had sufficient reasons to believe that his wife had been involved in a voluntary sexual intercourse with another person she would be excommunicated from her husband's clan and would have to leave the house empty handed. In the same way if the husband commits adultery he should leave the house empty handed. A social stigma is attached to a woman having a premarital sex whereas there is no one to judge for a man.

It is sometimes a perplexing mix to understand the status of Tangkhul women. Some scholars must have accorded a high status to the Tangkhul women with reference to the practice of phukreila as peacemaker and the existence of bride price in contrary to dowry. The role of phukreila is no more in existence due to the discontinuation of the practice of head hunting. On the other side of the bride price there is '*shimlam*' which is brought on the wedding day by the bride. Woman with a better *shimlam* enjoys higher status in her husband family. Similarly, an educated woman with a capacity of good earnings enjoys higher status.

RELIGION

The traditional Tangkhul religion is known as *Hau*. There are different deities for different places like the deity of house, field, jungle, river, stone etc. and rites are performed accordingly. Tangkhuls worship several deities but all the deities are male except *phunghui philava*³. In the same way women have no role in religious activities except in *Chumphu*.⁴ The religious specialists like *khanong* (Exorcist, Prophet and Medicine man are categorised under *khanong*), *sharva/sharwo*⁵ (priest) etc. are all male. They perform various rituals in different activities like construction of houses, agriculture, rite of passage ceremonies, festivals, etc. In all the religious activities, it is the male responsibility to take care of various rituals (*ibid*: 12). While performing rituals and ceremonies domestic animals like cow or buffalo and egg or chicken are sacrificed. It is taboo for women even to eat sacrificial meat. After becoming Christians, women

have started taking part in religious activities though not equally with their male counterparts.

EDUCATION

Prior to the introduction of formal education the Tangkhul had an institution called *longshim* (youth dormitory). It was a place where the young people were very strictly disciplined and trained for traditional art and crafts, religious and social activities. Here the young boys and girls learned the culture and customs of the Tangkhul. Every Tangkhul boy and girl on reaching adolescence moved into the *longshim* and remained there until his or her marriage. In case the marriageable age is over and could not get married, he or she can leave at their middle age. It plays a very important role for Tangkhul. The Tangkhul *longshim* can be divided into two categories- *mayarlong* and *ngalalong*. *Mayarlong* means young boys' dormitory and *ngalalong* means young girls' dormitory. Boy's dormitory was strictly tabooed to women. They have a belief that ill luck might befall them if women entered boy's dormitory. On the other hand boys can enter girl's dormitory. But occasionally they restrict themselves from entering before undertaking important activities- such as hunting, waging war etc. (Ruvah 1993:95).

But when the Christian missionaries entered the Tangkhul terrain, they discouraged the idea of *longshim*. They considered it as an expression of paganism for its association with drinking, free mixing and warfare. With the replacement of *longshim*, the Tangkhul culture has been considerably modified. The discontinuation of *longshim* has both merit and demerit. What they did not realize was that a culture was at stake as it was this coming together of young people that oriented them to the structure of their own society. The art of weaving, hunting, oral stories etc., which were taught at the *longshim*, ceased to be a part of a young person's life when he/she listened to the "Christian" norms and stayed away from the *longshim*. On the other hand the youth could now give more attention to their affairs at home. The introduction of Christianity and the subsequent introduction of education made church and school or college the most common meeting places. Thus, it can be said that gradually church and school became the center of social and cultural life of the Tangkhul.

Among the Tangkhul it was Christian missionaries who introduced education as they felt it necessary to impart Christianity. The first task taken up by William Pettigrew (a Christian missionary) was to start constructing school building and to learn the language of the people. A lower primary school was accordingly opened at Ukhru in the month of February 1897 with an enrolment of 20 boys. Thus, modern education had its root in Ukhru under the guidance of Pettigrew. He continued as the headmaster of the school for a long period after its establishment (Singh 1996).

When modern education was introduced, the parents sent some of their boys to school without knowing its importance, but girls were not given the opportunity for the simple reason that boys had more leisure time.

"A girl in the family is indispensable among these hill people [hill people of Manipur]. For years Mrs. Pettigrew fought against this conservative attitude. The idea of a female going to school, to leave the home and

give up the work in the fields and in the home was another of those almost impenetrable walls that took long to batter down..." (Pettigrew 1996: xiv).

However, the education of girls began with the night school. It took Mrs. Alice Pettigrew fourteen years to persuade the parents, mainly husbands, to send the girls to school like boys (Byrne 1996).

There was a wide gap of literacy rates between men and women. Gradually however, the female literacy rate is rising, pointing to the fact that the Tangkhuls have realized the importance of educating women. At present a good number of Tangkhul women have become educated but not to the point of being egalitarian (Kashung, 2012).

III. ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS

The Tangkhul are mainly agrarian. There is a good population of potters among the Tangkhul of the southern side. Earlier the Tangkhul practiced shifting cultivation, but today they started the cultivation of land or field with modern farming methods. Almost every family have their own field and all members of the family except the disabled and the old, work in the fields. They grow paddy along with other vegetables like cabbage, potato etc. Dogs, pigs, and buffaloes are also domesticated. Small poultries are also kept in the houses (Arokianathan 1982). Hunting and fishing are also practiced. Cotton weaving is also prominent in Tangkhul.

Several studies have linked aspects of gender stratification to economic roles. Peggy Sanday (op. cit. Kottak 2002:462) found that gender stratification decreased when men and women made roughly equal contributions to subsistence. Cross-culturally, women's cultural value rises when they contribute about as much to subsistence as men do.

As agriculture developed into mixed economy, gender roles of males and females have changed.

One of my lady informants said that, her grandfather was engaged in agricultural whereas her grandmother worked with grandfather in the field and besides she did almost all the households chores. Her father is a government servant and her mother a stay-home mom. Both she and her husband work outside the home. They shared child care and domestic responsibilities.

Today the Tangkhuls have ceased depending only on agriculture for economy. The gift of education from Christian missionaries enabled them to take up various employments. As a result it leads men and women to make roughly equal contributions to subsistence.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it is seen that Christianity and formal education have been acting as a catalyst of changes in the realm of ideas and attitudes about the gender roles and stratification. The gendered division of labour began to dwindle gradually in changing contexts. The basic family structure of the Tangkhul Nagas may remain unchanged but there are some changes in the roles of the father, mother and children. Today, it is found that women too occupied the

public domain which was once considered as men's. Traditionally the Tangkhuls consulted medicine man or priest (which are all male) in times of sicknesses. They regarded sickness as probable consequences of breaches of taboos (*sharra*).⁶ Therefore, the deity (*kameo*) is approached by sacrifice when men are ill. Today patients are no longer treated by the traditional priest but by modern physician. There are female as well as male physician. This is one of the indications that women are now in the public domain. Thereby the differentiation between the home and the outside world reduced. The investigation on the division of labour of traditional Tangkhul economy system is a proven fact that men are assigned with hard physical labour due to their greater average body size and strength. Today's jobs aren't especially demanding in terms of physical labour. With machines to do the heavy work and the various kinds of job opportunities, the smaller average body size and lesser average strength of women are no longer impediments to employment. Besides, there are quite a lot of taboos for women despite women playing important roles in various spheres of life. Tangkhul women are now liberated from the taboos imposed on them after their conversion into Christianity. They take part in religious activities. Educated women even get the platform to preach. Education further raised the status of women in all dimensions such as, family, marriage, politics etc.

Tangkhul women had no place in the field of traditional administration. Today, the trend has changed and with the introduction of a modern political system, the Tangkhul women along with their male counterparts have equal political rights and freedom guaranteed under the Indian Constitution. Tangkhul women now enjoy adult franchise and participate in the voting process for election of the members of the District Council, Legislative Assembly, Parliament etc. Consequently changes in socio-economic and cultural spheres in the lives of the Tangkhul Naga lead to changes in attitudes toward and about women and thus reduce gender stratification.

NOTES

- ✓ *Shimlam*: The presents taken by the bride to the groom's family at the time of marriage.
- ✓ *Phukreila* Any girl who gets married outside her village is known by the term *phukreila*, which means an ambassadress of peace. She played an important role during the period of war and head hunting. During this period *phukreila* acts as the mediator for her father's and her husband's villages.
- ✓ *Phunghui Philava* (deity of wealth) is associated with the fertility of the paddy field. It is considered to be different from other deities for the simple reason that it has feet unlike other deities. The Tangkhul religious notion says that if *Phunghui Philava*, a deity with a long flowing hair down the feet, passes through a paddy field, the place receives a good harvest in that year. It is counted a harbinger of fortune if her footprints are found stepped-in, in the granary. Therefore, rites and rituals are performed for the fertility of paddy.
- ✓ *Chumphi* is a festival in which the womenfolk play the important part and it is spread over for four days. It is the festival to mark the beginning of taking out newly

harvested rice from the granary. This new rice eating festival begins with a taboo for the male members and they spend their night outside the village gate. At the time of taking out the paddy from the granary the women offer prayer to the Supreme Being, so that she may have enough food for the whole year round. While taking out the paddy, if she happens to meet malefolk, ill luck would befall for both of them throughout the year. Thus everyone tries their best not to meet any member of the opposite sex on that day.

- ✓ **Sharva/sharwo:** *Awunga* (village headman) is the head of all *sharva* (priest) of the village and he is called *sharwo*. *Sharva* can be acquired by anyone who has the requisite qualification, one who is well versed in customary laws, religious practices, medicinal knowledge and possessing magical power (Ruivah 1993)

The term *sharra* is taken from the book ‘*Hau (Tangkhul) Customary Law (Hau Shiyan Chikan)*’, written by Ankang Stephen.

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