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Transformation among the Tangkhul Women through the Ages

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Abstract: ***The Tangkhul belong to the larger Naga tribe inhabiting the present-day Manipur East district. It is only in recent times that scholars have taken a keen interest in studying women's issues from a fresh perspective, leaving aside the stereotypical feminist and male chauvinist approaches. Gender has become a category of social analysis. The study of gender and women's empowerment has generated considerable debate and interest. It is difficult to assess with precision the status of women as high or low in any given society, but it was assumed that Tangkhul women enjoy a higher social status and privileges vis-à-vis their counterparts in the rest of the country, as the Naga women have fewer restrictions. Despite enjoying certain freedoms and privileges, the present generation faces many pressing issues that need to be addressed. This study examines the traditional status of Tangkhul women and the changes they have undergone over time, including improvements in their lifestyles. It also explores their increasing participation in social, political, and religious spheres and how they balance the multiple roles and responsibilities of their lives. This study adopts a multidisciplinary approach using descriptive, analytical, and qualitative methods based on both primary and secondary sources, including published and unpublished literature, journals, seminar reports, and oral narratives. It focuses on young educated Tangkhul women and elderly women with knowledge of traditional Tangkhul practices to examine their changing status and experiences.***

Keywords: Tangkhul, Empowering, Women, Transformation, Inheritance.

1. Introduction

In Northeast India, Manipur has been historically viewed as a region with empowered women and strong feminist traditions. The Tangkhul are one of the major Naga tribes of Manipur. They are mainly inhabited in the Ukhrul, Kamjong, and Phungyar districts of Manipur. For more than a century, the status of Tangkhul women has undergone a tremendous transformation. The Tangkhul women seem to enjoy greater mobility and visibility than women of other communities in India. Christoph Von Fuerer Haimendorf [1] writes that "many women in more civilized parts of India may well envy the women of the Naga Hills, their status and their free and happy life, and if you measure the cultural level of the people by the social position and personal freedom of its women, you will think twice before looking down on the Nagas as Savages". Traditionally, Tangkhuls had a patriarchal society. Men are considered the heads of their families. They are the representatives of the family and make important decisions for it. Men are always given the title of householder, while women are acknowledged in society only as daughters of their fathers or wives of their husbands.

1.1 Status of Women in Traditional Tangkhul Society

The structure of the traditional society itself sanctions men and women with different statuses. In Tangkhul society, the ethos is based on community participation, irrespective of gender. Women held a prominent place in the community and participated in various social, cultural, religious, and economic activities. Besides cooking, feeding, and caring for the family, she is also engaged in agricultural work and weaving. Women feel safe and free to move, whether in groups or alone, without fear of harassment. Even after their marriage, they are not forgotten by her family.

Despite the immense role women play in society, gender-based practices appear deeply rooted in Tangkhul culture, as evidenced by taboos, folklore, and folktales passed down through oral tradition. However, this does not mean that girls are not welcome in the family. R.R. Shimray [2] writes, "A mother in Naga society is considered lucky if she has a baby girl as the first child, and of course, the more girls she has, the more relief she gets in doing the odd jobs in the house." Children are taught to help their parents in doing household work as well as agricultural activities. In the early days, because of inter-village feuds, when menfolk engaged in warfare and village defense, most cultivation was done by women alone. [3] The practice of foeticide and female infanticide is unheard of and totally absent in Tangkhul society.

Although women actively participated in production and helped maintain the economic continuity of their societies, they did not have the opportunity to accumulate wealth. Women were not allowed to participate in decision-making, and they were not given any leadership roles in political and socio-religious matters. Political decisions in the village councils in Tangkhul society lie with the men, and no women are admitted to the councils.

1.2 Property Rights

According to the customary law in Tangkhul society, descent was traced through men, and women were not entitled to inherit any ancestral property. If a person does not have sons, then the right to inherit goes to the next kin. Men were considered the upholders of the family's traditions, while women were considered temporary members of their natal families and attained permanent status only upon marriage. Today, despite the restrictions of traditional customary law, other than ancestral property, any lands or property bought by a girl's parents can be handed down to her.

1.3 Social and Cultural Role of Tangkhul Women

From the traditional headhunting era to the present, the role of Tangkhul women in socio-cultural, political, and religious spheres has been immense. Every Tangkhul Young girl, upon reaching puberty, becomes a member of *Ngalalong* (a traditional girls' dormitory), which serves as a significant social, cultural, and economic institution. It is at this institution that she receives an education in various disciplines, including agriculture, weaving, traditional dance, folksongs, folk dances, and folklore. Having learned this art every year during the *Luira Phanit* (a seed-sowing festival and the New Year festival of the Tangkhuls), they perform a dance called *Laa Khanganui* (virgin dance), which modern Tangkhul writers have called the "Beauty pageant" of the Tangkhuls. [4] In this dance, all the unmarried girls participate to prove their virginity. Staying away or refusing to participate in this contest is an indication or admittance of losing one's virginity and casts aspersions on the moral conduct of that girl. Therefore, this dance serves as a test of morality and demands that every unmarried girl lead a rigid, absolute moral life. In choosing a life partner, the Tangkhul women enjoyed complete freedom. M. Horam states that "the young choose their partners and then marriage negotiations are conducted through an elderly lady". [5] Although the Tangkhul women were given various freedoms, the gender ideology of the Tangkhul society shows that the structure and customary laws of the society are in favour of men. They view women as perilous creatures in many ways, capable of bringing ill luck to society. A woman's life is bound with a bundle of restrictions and taboos. For instance, women cannot sit cross-legged; women cannot loosen their hair before the village *Awunga* (king) and the village elders; women should not climb over trees or roofs; women were not allowed to go hunting. They cannot go to war and cannot even touch war materials, as it was considered taboo. A.S.W. Shimray states that "when people are victorious in war, or catch wild game in hunting, it is natural for the Tangkhuls to howl as a sign of victory, but it is absolutely prohibited for their women". [6]

With the adoption of Christianity and the advent of modernity, many changes occurred in Tangkhul society, particularly among Tangkhul women. Acquiring modern education initiated the radical transformation. It empowered both men and women to participate in the modern world in all arenas. Having the ability and skills to read and write in another language beyond one's village language brought opportunities to venture beyond one's village. Encountering Christianity ushered in an enormous transformation for the Tangkhul Naga society, including the lives of women, from childbirth to education and professionalization, among other areas. Women today are more educated, more open, and more assertive than their predecessors. The winds of change have entered among the Tangkhul women. She is no longer content with the confines of the walls of her house. The adoption of modern education and the rapid development of society have compelled women to shed their traditional shackles and venture into the world of men.

1.4 Religious role of Tangkhul women

In the traditional Tangkhul religious activities, women have no role except in the *Champhu* festival. Males took an active part in rituals such as house construction, agriculture, rites of passage, and festivals. In all these activities, it is the male's responsibility to take care of various rituals. The Champhu Phanit festival was performed by women. In this festival, all the rites of opening the granary were performed by housewives alone. *Champhu* is held for nine days after *Khaikap* (keeping away all agricultural implements), shortly after the harvest. During this festival, all male members have to leave the village for the fields, while the women perform rituals to propitiate the spirit for blessings so that the stock may last throughout the year. According to traditional custom and belief, if a man sees his wife performing the *Champhu* ceremony, ill luck will come to the house, and there will be a shortage of grain before the next harvest.

The advent of Christianity, along with the introduction of modern education, has heightened awareness among the Tangkhuls regarding women's traditionally inferior status. Education enables a person to know their rights and duties towards their family, society, and country. Christianity influenced the position of women and initiated changes in their roles in society. Religion has become one of the areas where the Tangkhul women actively participate. They are eager in the practice of the faith. Women have always overcome barriers to contribute to religious activities. They are gifted, capable, talented, skilled, passionate, and have always worked to bring about social transition.

1.5 Tangkhul Women in Politics

As descent is traced from the male line, it is an established fact that the important decisions in the Tangkhul village council and tribal parliament in patriarchal society lies with the men, and no woman is permitted to be a member of the council or take part in decision-making. Such observation about women not being given leadership roles in religious or political matters is not peculiar to the tribal society. However, a traditional unique institution, *Pukreila/Yorla* (goodwill ambassadors), clearly indicates the role of women in negotiating and bringing peace between two rival villages. In the Tangkhul tradition, women married to men from another village are called *Pukreila*. She is also called the "Ambassador of Peace" who cannot be harmed by either of the villagers as per customary law. During the war between the two villages, Pukreila from both the vanquished and the victorious sides would come out and prevent either side from advancing. During the war, *Pukreila* remains neutral. She was highly respected for her neutrality and sincerity, for she is related to both the villagers. Nobody can touch or defy

her intervention. This role is bestowed on her even today, although the situation has undergone tremendous change.

Today, Tangkhul women have indeed experienced significant changes in their lifestyles and roles. A number of organisations have emerged right from the village level to the apex women's union. The Tangkhul Shanao Long (TSL) is an apex body. It tackled various issues and was actively involved in negotiating and mediating for peace and justice in society. It also addressed women's interests and welfare; the eradication of social evils; the promotion and encouragement of women's active participation in socio-political life; raising a voice against domestic violence; and the maintenance of self-identity, culture, and tradition. Women's organisations also organised rallies and demonstrations against any injustice. They conduct workshops and seminars on anti-drug trafficking, women's rights, climate change, health, nutrition, and related topics. The participation of women has been looked at in a positive form.

2. Conclusion

Despite the transformations taking place in Tangkhul society with the advent of Christianity and modernization, the values that define masculinity and femininity seem to be controlled by the traditional system, which is grounded in men as the dominant figure. Despite various opportunities and improvements in the lives of Tangkhul women, they still have a long way to go before achieving equality in society. Issues of wage disparity, Inheritance rights, greater opportunities for women's representation in village councils and church organizations, and a larger number of women participating in the political field need to be discussed and addressed. The traditional patriarchal mindset needs to be shed to provide equal opportunity on the basis of merit rather than gender. Today, we witness growing efforts and focus on women's education, women's empowerment, women's reservations, and women's participation in politics, but we still have a long way to go before women achieve equity in society. Empowering women in no way demeans women's position; rather, it is a judicious and positive step towards the overall growth and progress of society.

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