

Influence of Modernity and Christianity on the Status of Tangkhul Women

Dr. Shangpam Kashung

Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University

Abstract: *Till the last quarter of the 20th century, the Tangkhul culture was indigenous in its characters. Modern influence began once they started interacting with the outsiders. For the Tangkhul modern period begins with the coming of Christianity in the 1890's (years after the imposition of British administration). In other parts of North East India modern period begins with the imposition of British administration. Ultimately, their culture change and thus change the status of women. The present paper is an attempt to understand the changing status of women under the influence of modernity and Christianity.*

Keywords: Christianiy, Modernity, Status, Tangkhul, Women.

1. Introduction

'Modernization' according to M. N. Srinivas (Upadhyay and Pandey, 2002: 438) is a popular term for the changes brought about in a non-western country by contact, direct or indirect with a western country. In the light of this meaning on modernization, the present paper will be based on studying the changes taking place concerning the status of Tangkhul women. Modernization in Tangkhul society began when they first came into contact with the western Christian missionaries (few years after the imposition of British administration). In other parts of North East India modern period begins with the imposition of British administration. For the Tangkhuls, Christianity played the most important role in the process of modernization. Thus it is more appropriate to bring modernity and Christianity together (than to take either modernity or Christianity alone) in understanding the changing status of women. The last quarter of the 20th century marked the period between pre and modernity/Christianity. Tangkhul culture was indigenous in its characters before the introduction of Christianity along with modernity. Ultimately, their culture change and thus change the status of women. The status of Tangkhul women under the influence of modernity and Christianity will be discussed elaborately in the present paper.

2. Materials and methods

The most meaningful way to measure the status of women in a society is through a comparison of their status with that of men in the same society. Thus the status of Tangkhul men and women is compared. In order to understand the changes on the status of women, an in depth study was done based on the pre and post modern /Christian era.

The data were collected on the basis of secondary and primary. Secondary data consists of published and unpublished materials in the form of books, reports, journals and periodicals, related to women. Primary data were collected with the help of a comprehensive questionnaire along with interview schedule and by making observations.

3. Pre-modern/Christian status of women among Tangkhuls

In Pre-modern/Christian Tangkhul society the status of women was low. The Tangkhul family system is patrilineal. They trace their descent through the male lineage exclusively which gives in the patrilineal character. The rule of residence after marriage is based on patrilocal (a woman leaves her parental home and joins the husband's family after marriage) principle. Thus the women after marriage live with the husband's families. The basic family structure of the Tangkhul Nagas remains unchanged.

4. Attitudes towards Women

The preference for male children is apparent in patrilineal society. A male child is perceived as a continuator of the lineage. Besides, another reason is that, in the olden days when war and hunting were the essential aspects of communities survival, physical strength and courage were essential and therefore preferred a male child over a female child.

Tangkhul view woman as a perilous creature in many ways that can bring ill luck to the entire society. A Tangkhul woman cannot live a life she wants. Her life is bound with a bundle of taboo/restrictions. For instance, a woman is restricted to sit cross-legged. She is not allowed to eat sacrificial meat. She should not yell in the public. She should not climb over roofs, trees etc. She should not go for hunting games. A woman should not visit her parents' house at particular times etc. Her movement is restricted in several ways. In the past, it was considered inauspicious for men setting out on wars to have any contact with women before leaving. Women were considered polluted at particular times. Woman's life is compared with mist because her life is short in a family. A family that has many sons is regarded as a good family and a family without a son is look down by the society. (Kashung, 2012)

Division of Labour

In traditional Tangkhul society all the household chores were done women. Agricultural works were done together by both

(male and female). A Tangkhul woman is busy from dawn to dusk. She is the first one to get up in the morning. Before leaving for the fields in the morning, she draws water from the water source (river or streams) for the entire family, husk the grain, cooks and feeds the family, animals and poultry. After a busy day at the fields, she must collect firewood from the jungle; gather all the livestock continue the process of cooking, feeding etc. She is fully responsible for caring child, aged person, and for supplementing inadequate food by growing vegetables, collecting edible roots and tubers from the forests, and by raising poultry, dogs and pigs. It is her responsibility to take care of the food grains and if any person in the family goes hungry, it is treated as her lapse. In addition to households' chores and heavy involvement in cultivation, she should provide clothing for her entire family. Besides, it is her duty to groom her daughters to become responsible persons.

Contribution of Christian missionaries on the status of women

Among the Tangkhul it was Christian missionaries who introduced education as they felt it necessary to impart Christianity. One of my informants said, "the Christian missionaries were the pioneers in giving the modern type of education to Tangkhul. They felt the need for education while propagating Christianity. They felt that unless they were educated they might not be in a position to understand Bible and encourage their children to embrace Christianity." Basically, the first converts were all educated and gainful employed.

The first task taken up by William Pettigrew was to start constructing school building and to learn the language of the people. A lower primary school was accordingly opened at Ukhrul in the month of February 1897 with an enrolment of 20 boys. Thus, modern education had its root in Ukhrul under the guidance of Pettigrew. Moreover they helped them to raise their standard of living by teaching them various other skills. He was, later on, assisted by Major Maxwell (the then British administrator) by all possible means (Singh, 1996). In an account of the work of Rev. And Mrs. William Pettigrew prepared by Mr. Pettigrew, it is written, "There was no written language, almost every villages had its own dialect, and not a soul in the whole tribe knew anything of even the rudiments of education. Any old piece of paper was grabbed and looked upon as a curiosity. The majority of the people had never left their mountain in fastnesses, even to visit another tribe or the people of the valley. They were completely ignorant of the outside world... The Pettigrews' first task was to win the confidence of the people, to convince them that they were not the paid agents of Government, planning to remove their young men to the outside world. Mr. Pettigrew set about learning and reducing to writing the dialect used at Ukhrul." (cited in Solo and Mahangthei, 1986)

In regards to education of girls, he writes, "If the people looked with suspicion upon any attempt to educate their sons, how much more strongly did they oppose the education of girls. Girls were meant for a life of drudgery in the home and in the rice fields. It took Mrs. Pettigrew fourteen years to make any appreciable impression upon that attitude of mind,

even when the parents had become Christians. Later Mrs. Pettigrew persuaded nine girls to come in from the villages to Ukhrul. Here they were not only taught to read and write, but living in small dormitory, learned to keep a home sanitary and clean, to sew and knit; they did gardening, worked at cultivation, weeding and harvesting in the rice fields in short all the things that they would have to do when they returned to their own homes." (ibid.)

Until recently, most Tangkhul parents were quite apathetic towards their daughters' education and often withdraw them from schools after completing the primary stage. When there were 57 boys enrolled in school in 1903, there was not a single girl allowed to go to school. (Keishing Byrne, 1996) Mrs. Alice Pettigrew persuaded the parents to allow the girls to read and write in night schools after the girls had done their daily chores. The parents yielded to this arrangement and ultimately Mrs. Pettigrew persuaded some girls to come and stay in dormitory where they were taught not only how to read and write, but also the home sanitary, cleanliness, how to sew and knit and kitchen gardening. The first batch consists of nine girls from different villages. And so by 1910, there were 9 girls enrolled as students who stayed in the dormitory.

Here, I have the privilege to quote Shining Keishing's (Ex-M.L.A) narration, who knew Mr. and Mrs. Pettigrew. She was small and young when she first met them. She was one of the students of the school started by William Pettigrew's students. She wrote, "She was never tired of talking to children. She would explain to us how to wash our face, how to clean our mouth and teeth. In those days, our hair was full of lice. She would tell us to wash our head once in every two days. To keep the children clean was her first lesson to us. Then Mrs. Pettigrew would visit our houses. Our mothers would follow her as she visited from house to house. She would instruct the mothers to wash the utensils and plates before cooking and serving food. She told the mothers to sweep the house every morning.

Mrs. Alice Pettigrew was also a medicine lady- a lady doctor like. She would attend to all types of sickness in the village, treated their cuts and wounds and scabies. She instructed them how to look after the patients and so on.

Another remarkable thing about this lady was that her hands were always busy. This was the first time we saw what knitting was. Even if she was talking to someone, her hands were busy knitting wools. During such a short stay at Bungpa, she demonstrated how to use knitting stick to the womenfolk." (ibid.)

The contribution of Christianity is therefore massive to women's development in particular and community's development in general in the field of education, health care, economy and literature prior to the present day governmental (state and central) efforts.

5. Perception of change and the influence of Christianity and modernity

Women's position in Religion

The adoption of Christianity and spread of modern education are believed to have created greater awareness among the Tangkhuls regarding women's inferior traditional status. Traditionally, women played no role in religious activities except in *chumphaphanit*¹. The priests are always men and sacrifices can be performed only by men. Women started participating in religious activities after their conversion. When we go to Church we can see women taking choir seat, reading Bible, preaching from the pulpit, conducting service, song presentation and so on. Some mothers take the lead in family prayer, women service etc. This way, everybody gets a chance to participate and get exposed to social activities. Camps, seminars, revival crusades, conference, etc. are organized every year to expand their horizon. Such a practice sharpens one's personality. It widens a person's worldview, changes her/his way of thinking and is more exposed through different programmes and activities of the church. The church trains a person to become a leader through its programme of leadership training. The church services and the weekly family worship service give various spiritual lessons from the Bible. But not all the Christians are sincere and committed. There are many who have converted just in the name only. There are many young girls and adult who live lives that are against the norms and doctrines of Christianity.

Women's position in Education

With the coming of Christianity and the subsequent introduction of formal education the role of the parents is also assumed different kinds of responsibilities. Today the duty and role of the parents towards their children has taken a new direction. The parents have geared their interest and priority towards providing education to their children unlike the traditional parents who emphasized more in training their children on how to become good agriculturists. Increasing number of parents is giving equal opportunity in regards to education to their sons and daughters. Literacy rate of women therefore increased. According to the government of Manipur census 2011, the literacy rate of male and female in Ukhrul district is 85.52 % and 76.95 % respectively.² The status of women raised with the adoption of modern education.

Women's position in Economy

Furthermore adopting Christianity kept them away from ritualistic demands of *Hau* involving "unprofitable" expenditure of time, labour and money. Today, wealth is invested for other things like children's education.

The introduction of education by Christian missionaries also paved away the economic burden to a large extent. Traditionally, their economy was purely based on agriculture. Now they take up salary jobs (employed in professional and higher administrative positions). Some mothers also supplement family through their earnings as daily wages, weavers, business, clerks in offices or schools and teachers etc.,

One of my aged lady informants who is well educated said, "If we look at the traditional days, when the Tangkhul were not educated, they were mostly confined to agricultural works and household chores. Because of modern education and changes that are taking place in the society, many of us have gradually stopped doing work in agricultural fields and have engaged in government and private jobs."

Women's position in Decision making

The Tangkhul family, being patriarchal, the father assumes the headship of the family even today. The father continues to carry the greatest authority. In any decision making the men take almost all the major decisions. However, this scenario has undergone some changes in the modern times due to women gaining confidence and information about various issues with the help of modern education. Qualified women and employed in respected jobs have a greater say in important family decisions, e.g. those related to children's education, marriage and men tend to be more favourable towards sharing household and child care tasks.

6. Findings and Conclusion

Among the Tangkhuls it is the Christian missionaries who introduced modernity. With the adoption of Christianity and modernity a lot of changes have been taken place among the Tangkhul in general and Tangkhul women in particular. Today, the position of Tangkhul women has risen to such an extent that they become part and parcel in the various aspects of society. They take part in religious activities though not equally with men³. It has been found that a large number of Tangkhuls today are aware of the importance of women's education. This has increased the number of educated women. The status of an educated woman is found higher than that of an uneducated one. They made better homes than those with no education. Education prepared women to take a more active role in the leadership of society. To some extent educated women are discussed and consulted in decision making. With the increase of qualified and employed women, the negative attitudes towards women receded and consequently their economy enhanced as they no longer depend only on agriculture for economy. Division of labour is not as distinctive as in the olden days. There is a change in division of labour. For example, the more intellectual parent teach lesson to children. Meantime the spouse whether the husband or wife takes up household chores. Women have more leisure time.

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.

But the question of gender equality remains, and it will continue to do so until the family structure of the Tangkhul remains unchanged. They remain patrilineal, patriarchal and patrilocal. 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. There is no picture of women inheriting immovable properties. There are very few lucky women inheriting the immovable properties but those are outside the Tangkhul domain (such as in Imphal). Despite gender inequality, the influence of Christianity and modernity proved beneficial in many ways.

Note

- 1) *Chumphu* phanit: It is the festival to mark the beginning of taking out newly harvested paddy from the granary. On this day women offer prayer to the Supreme Being to have sufficient food throughout the year. It was considered inauspicious for women performing rituals to have any contact, even accidental, with men. Therefore, male members spend their night outside the village gate.
- 2) It is the Ukhrul district census as there is no tribe wise census available. Tangkhuls are predominantly settled in Ukhrul district and thereby it is considered reliable.
- 3) So far women are denied their ordination as a priest.

References

- [1] **Government census of Manipur.** 2011.
- [2] **Kashung, Shangpam.** 2012. Continuity and Change on the Gender Relations of the Tangkhuls of Manipur. *Global South (SEPHIS e-megazine)*. Vol. 8, No. 1.
- [3] **Keishing Byrne, Shining.** 1996. Rev. William Pettigrew as I knew him. In Gangmumei Kamei *et al.* (eds.), *Rev. William Pettigrew (a pioneer missionary of Manipur)*. Imphal: Fraternal Green Cross.
- [4] **Singh, Leiren.** 1996. Reverend William Pettigrew and Modern Education in Manipur. In Gangmumei Kamei *et al.* (eds.), *Rev. William Pettigrew (a pioneer missionary of Manipur)*. Imphal: Fraternal Green Cross. Pp. 7-13.
- [5] **Solo, Jonah M and K. Mahangthei.** 1986. *Forty Years Mission in Manipur*. Imphal: Christian Literature Centre.
- [6] **Upadhyay, V.S and Gaya Pandey.** 2002. *History of Anthropological thought*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.

Author Profile

Dr. Shangpam Kashung is Post Doctoral Fellow in Gauhati University, Guwahati