

THE TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS OF THE KUKIS LIVING IN THE DIMA HASAO DISTRICT OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT :

The system of administration in the tribal society has of late caught the interest of many researchers especially in the field of social science. In this regard, the Kukis living in the Dima Hasao district of Assam have their own set of administration system from a very long period of time. The Kukis are one of the earliest inhabitants of the region and they follow a simple and systematic form of governance. Although their societies had undergone transformation in various forms the Kukis still maintain their age old conventional form of traditional governance. The village chief along with his counsellors manages and supervises the village administration in the best interest of the villagers.

INTRODUCTION:

The present century saw the threat of extinction of many tribal cultures due to the emergence of various factors like modernisation and development in all spheres. The importance of maintaining and preserving the unique traditional set up has been overlooked at the cost of emerging socio-political changes. Also the sophisticated life of modern society hardly could afford room to nourish the age old administrative system and negligence of which often lands in the midst of stranded crossroads. Moreover, the contemporary Kukis have to conform themselves with the changing political scenario in the post independence period.

In this backdrop, the present study tries to explore and understand the tenets as well as the various norms and structures that existed in the traditional Kuki society. In fact, the study is an

honest attempt to identify and evaluate the traditional structures that persisted in socio-economic and political spheres in the Kuki society.

TRADITION AND TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS:

Before analysing the traditional institutions of the Kuki society, let us very briefly understand and ponder over the emergence and meaning of tradition. A 'tradition' in the anthropological literature often means time honoured customs, respected beliefs, seen as an ideal type of construct, stultifying force that engendered and enforced cultural homogeneity. In *Division of Labour in Society* (1964), Durkhiem emphasized that tradition was given its force by those people who transmitted it and acted as the intermediary between the present and the past because of their prestige and authority¹. The word tradition is derived from the Latin *tradere* which literally means to transmit, to hand over or to give for safekeeping. Thus, tradition can be briefly summarised as the handling down of information, beliefs or customs from one generation to another².

In the widest sense of the term, tradition should mean all that one inherits from the past. All the elements of social life should be regarded as traditional, except, those few actions which are absolutely novel, which people of a particular generation performs to give new direction to social progress. As a matter of fact, only a few of the inheritance are regarded as traditional. Therefore, there is a distinct process of selection and much would depend on the orientation, outlook and intent of those making the choice. The demands of the social contract will also be an important influence. Regularity is another essential condition of a minimum social living one actually learns to adjust to different types of regularities, which result in a continuum that shapes lives. Such regularities in behavior are largely guided by traditions. Tradition thus provides a common platform for different individuals of a certain group so that these individuals may significantly regulate their activities in an orderly manner. What turns an inheritance, therefore, into tradition is a faith in its value. In Eliot's language, a tradition is not only the vastness of the past, but of its presence. Tradition, thus, is not merely a custom passively received, but something which is actively entertained with admiration.

The traditions and traditional institutions in tribal societies of Northeast India and elsewhere may be easy to identify although to define them and locate their historical accounts is difficult to deal

with. Moreover it is also a complex issue to classify them into social, cultural, political and economic institutions precisely because traditions in any society exist as a composite whole. Additionally, most of the tribal societies have changed throughout the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial, and in many cases it is also not an easy task to access and determine what remains from the pre-colonial period. Therefore it is possible to have a society that has changed over to a modern and industrialized society, while still having traditional leaders that execute power or perform a major function in the lives of the people. The opposite is also possible where a society maintains its basic form of tradition and traditional institutions but traditional leaders have lost their importance or have disappeared.

TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS OF THE KUKIS

The Kukis mainly settled in the two hill districts namely Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao in Assam. Dima Hasao was previously known as North Cachar Hills. Both districts are a homeland of different ethnic tribes and races who maintain their respective languages, cultures and customs. From traditional to contemporary times, village is the most important political unit among the Kukis of Dima Hasao. The chief of the village and his council of ministers function within a territorial jurisdiction and wielding its political authority and prerogatives over the village in absolute terms. The chieftainship was an integral part of it. The chieftainship as an institution evolved in the historic past. Later in course of time it became a hereditary institution. This Haosa Inpi or village administration is called 'kuki traditional government' which acts as a parliament for the Kukis.

HAOSA (VILLAGE CHIEF) :

Haosa is the office of the village chief. It is hereditary, passing from father to son. The office is occupied only by the 'Upa' or senior person except among the Lushai in which the right to inherit goes from father to the youngest son. Among the Kukis and unlike the Nagas, Haosa has the absolute right of ownership over the entire land of the village. According to the Kuki customary law, a daughter cannot become an heir to the father³. However if the eldest son was found incapable of holding such responsibilities due to physical or mental inability, the next eldest son would automatically succeed his father. It is always essential that this institution of the

haosa or the village chief, which has been sustain social solidarity maintained the social mores of a kuki village. The Haosa system has come to stay as a perennial source of custom and tradition, in spite of the onslaught of modernism and advancement in all walks of life. The system has enabled the Kukis to inherit a unique cultural and traditional heritage on matters relating to economic, political, religious, judicial etc., which has its bases on the proper interpretation of the customary law and tradition

British writer W.W. Hunter aptly describes the duties and responsibilities of the Chief as a commander-in-chief of the village army as follows⁴:

“He shall direct in war, he is the last in the advance and rearmost in the retreat. The message and errands of a *Haosa* are done by the favourite slaves; they are his ambassadors in war. To collect his people or, in fact, to authenticate any order, the chief spear is sent by a messenger from village to village. Should a message be a hostile one, the messenger carries a fighting dao(hill knife) to which a piece of red cloth is attached”.

LIMITATION AND CHECKS ON THE CHIEF’S POWER:

The Chief enjoyed enormous power inside the traditional Kuki society. The villagers did not have the right to oppose their chief individually as well as collectively. However the power of the chief has its own limitation. For example, if a chief became too tyrannical, then the villagers could migrate to other villages deserting the chief. In that case, the chief had no right to stop them as it was a practice sanctioned by the tradition. This served as some sort of limitation on the power of the chief.

But then it was a very difficult thing for the villagers to do so. Because, even then, the chief had the right to confiscate the movable as well as immovable property of the villagers who decide to desert him. This means the villagers had to lose all their property if they decided to migrate without the chief’s permission. Thus it was extremely difficult for the villagers to desert their chief and migrate to another village.

It was also not possible for the chief to always accept the advice of his council or counsellors. At the same time, it was very difficult for a chief to disregard the opinion or advice of intelligent

and able counsellors. In fact, there were instances when able and wise counsellors reduced an incompetent chief to almost a puppet.

SEMANG PACHONG (COUNSELLOR) :

In order to run the village administration effectively, apart from the village chief, the traditional kuki village '*semang pachong*' or counsellors help and advise the chief in the due discharge of his functions. The most important qualification for semang pachongs was possession of tact and wisdom. Besides, he is also supposed to be well versed in the customary laws and usages of the people. They were all selected from among the elders of the village from different clans so that every section of the society was represented in the chief's council. It was done mainly to ensure proper administration in the village. While selecting the semang pachongs, the chief took into consideration the opinion of his villagers by way of enlisting popular support to the council.

In this connection, Lalkhawlien Pulamte writes, "Although the chief had a free hand to choose his semang pachongs he normally selects a man who carried the confidence and support of the people and who had a good reputation in the village⁵. The chief was empowered to dismiss any semang pachongs if he is found incapable of performing his duties or if there is any misunderstanding between him and the chief. As such for all practical purposes, the counsellors continue to be in office as long as they acquire the confidence of the chief. As such most of the time, the semang pachongs did not dare to go against the wishes of the chief.

Regarding the number of semang pachongs, there was no hard and fast rule as to the composition of the semang pachong in the chief court. It largely depended upon the chief's decision to appoint as many semang pachongs as he considered necessary. However the usual practice was to have about five to fifteen.

POWER AND FUNCTION OF SEMANG PACHONG :

The semang pachong or the village counsellors occupied an important place in the village administration. The main duties of the village counsellors were to aid and advice the chief in the village administration. They act as a legal adviser's to the chief and were expected to be familiar with the customary laws of the people. The chief assisted by the counsellors decided all matters pertaining to village administration. In this regard, Mohan Lal Sharma in his *Dynamics Of Rural*

Power Structure, 1984 notes: “these counsellors extended their help to the chief in the smooth running of the administration”⁶. Though theoretically all powers were in the hand of the chief, yet in practice he tried cases in consultation with his councillors. Besides, it may also be noted that in the absence of the village chief, the semang pachongs or the chief counsellors acted as the village chief. It must also be remembered that both the chief and his counsellors discharge their functions as per the established customary laws of their society and could not go against it.

THIEMPU (PRIEST) :

The word thiempu is derived from thiem which literally means knowledge and pu means an elderly person. Thus thiempu signifies an aged person who has much knowledge and wisdom. The thiempu or the priest was another important official inside the traditional kuki society. He occupied a very high status in the social hierarchy. In fact his status was next to that of the village chief and his counsellors. He was the person who played a most important role in the religious life of the society as he performed all the religious rituals. His religious service was required in almost all walks of life⁷. In religious matter, his power was even more than that of the village chief. Literally speaking, he is the chief counsellor-in-charge of public health in the truest sense of the term⁸.

The thiempu occupied an important place in the administration of the village also. All cases which the council could not decide for lack of evidence were referred to the priest⁹. In fact in the past, many of the culprits disclosed their hidden crimes for fear of the oath or ordeal and the cases were settled.

The priest also attended all the villagers in the time of sickness and used to prescribe the kind of sacrifices that were required to be made and the kind of animal or animals to be offered to the gods and goddesses so that he could get rid of a particular kind of sickness. The sacrifices were offered in the name of the evil spirits which the priest believed were responsible for the sickness and the sufferings of the patient.

Thiempu was regarded as the representative of God on earth. He acted as intermediary between the people and god or gods in the society. In his priestly capacity, when he performed sacrifices on behalf of the whole community, even the chief would bow to him for blessings. Furthermore

he could according to Laldenna's *The Christian religion and Hmar culture* (1982), reverse the decision of the chief and his counsellors¹⁰. To become a priest, one has to undergo long years of apprenticeship. He had to combine in himself all the qualities of a sorcerer, a diviner or seer, a prophet etc. T.S Gangte, in his *The Kukis of Manipur* 1993, a person for this office is chosen from among those who knows the 'them-thu' (the secret word of medicine). This office is very often regarded as hereditary because the secrets of the medicine are not revealed to each and every person. Thempu generally prefer to teach their sons and grandsons the secret of the words". Therefore very few persons bother to learn this knowledge since it needs a lot of time and money.

THIHKHENG (VILLAGE BLACKSMITH) :

The occupation of most of the traditional kuki villagers is agriculture and the service of the village blacksmith in making and repairing of tools is essential. The thihkheng or the village blacksmith is another important official of the village. The chief may appoint any villager who is skilled in this field. The number of village blacksmith differs from village to village. It depends on the size and population of the village where a big village had many while the smaller villages had fewer blacksmith. Usually there were three to four blacksmiths in the village

There are normally two types of blacksmith in the village. They are namely public blacksmith and private blacksmith. The difference between the two types of blacksmith was that while the chief did not appoint the private blacksmith the other was appointed by the chief. As being appointed by the chief, public blacksmith was known as the official village blacksmith whose service could be utilized by all the villagers.

He used to be a professional blacksmith who had to spend his entire energy and skill in practicing the trade alone. But the private blacksmith used to be a part time worker of the village. Anyone who wanted to engage the private blacksmith could do so at his own will. The public blacksmiths were entitled to certain privileges but the private blacksmith were not entitled to any except the wages they earned.

CHIEFTAINSHIP IN THE PRESENT CONTEXT:

As stated, the office of the chief is the most powerful power structure in the traditional kuki society of Dima Hasao district of Assam. However, the contemporary kuki society has witnessed a transition in the power structure of the erstwhile traditional kuki society. There are modern structures on the one hand, and the indigenous political institutions on the other. This reality has sparked intense and ongoing debate among the policymakers, politicians and the academicians. This calls for a focuses on the relevance, role and place of these indigenous institutions in the modern democratic set up. In this aspect, one of the most important concerned is the growing perception that there are many academicians who considers the traditional chieftainship institution as irrelevance which has no valuable role to play in the democratic process¹¹. Such a position believes that such institutions should not be accorded any recognition by the modern state, and must be abolished. However, a counter position asserts that these institutions are still relevant and legitimate, particularly in the rural areas where majority of the people reside and that they should not be abolished. The reality is that among the various Kuki tribes this traditional institution exists in juxtaposition with the modern state structure at the local level. Secondly, the constitutional provisions of the hill district too have greatly affected the authority of the chief. The chief who draws his authority from the customs and usages is now subjected to be subordinated by provisions of the 6th schedule of the Indian constitution. Most of the developmental activities and schemes of the government has to be undertaken by the Autonomous District Council and the chief acts as an agent in the process.

On the other hand, there are various factors that brought changes in the position and authority of the chief in the contemporary Kuki society. The impact of christianity constitutes to be one the most important since it brought significant changes in the way of life of the kukis. The church leaders has began to play a vital role in the village affairs and enjoys an important say in the decision making process.

From the above discussion it appears that the power of the chieftainship has dwindle with the passage of time. However, it would be wrong to assume that the influence of a chief has been insignificant and the traditional institution has very limited role in the contemporary Kuki society. Unlike the Mizo community where the chieftainship met with an opposition from the

Mizo Union that favoured and aided for the abolition of the system, the Kuki society do not have such political opposition from within. As a result the Kuki chiefs got a safe passage to fight for the restoration of their traditional status. The power and authority of the chief still remains intact in the contemporary Kuki society of Dima Hasao district of Assam. Most of the important matters of the village are still under the prerogative of the chief.

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