

Traditional Self-governing Institutions of the Hrangkhoh Tribe living in Dima Hasao District of Assam

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Abstract

India is the country of unity in diversity. Indian democracy is strengthened through the local self-government represented by the local communities. During the pre-independence era, the tribal of Northeast India were administered by their own traditional self-governing institutions. The Chief control all affairs of the village community. The chief is the supreme administrators and guardian of his villagers. Although there is lack of democratic norms in the traditional self-governing institutions, it still exists today and receives popular support from various sections of tribal community. In the Hrangkhoh society, the Chief system doesn't exist; however, the village council headed by the Gaonbura control and regulates all the affairs of the village community. The present study deals with the traditional political institutions of the Hrangkhoh tribe living in Assam and further highlights the administration of justice prevailing in the Hrangkhoh society.

Keywords: *Traditional institutions, ADCs, Hrangkhoh tribe, Dima Hasao, Northeast India.*

1. Introduction

Governance and administration are integral part for social welfare. Traditional self-governing institutions were the only known administration among the tribal during the pre-colonial era. In India's North-eastern states, namely, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland, the chief control and regulate all aspects of village lives in accordance with the prevailing customs since time immemorial. The Chief's is the supreme administrators and guardians of his villagers. However, the introduction of modern political institutions in the form of Autonomous District Council has brought several changes in the administration of the tribal society. In the process many of the powers and functions of the traditional institutions were transferred to the district council. Nowadays, many of the traditional self-governing institutions in Northeast India are no more in existence. The present study deals with the traditional institutions of the Hrangkhoh tribe living in Assam. In the Hrangkhoh society, Chieftainship institutions don't exist, however, the village administration was control and regulated by the village council headed by the village Gaonbura and eight elders appointed by the villagers. In order to have a better grasp or understand the present topic, it will be appropriate to begin by highlighting the historical background of the Hrangkhoh tribe.

The Hrangkhoh are one of the hill tribes of Northeast India. The Hrangkhoh belongs to the Chin-Kuki-Mizo ethnic groups. They are believed to have been migrated to the present state of Tripura, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Assam and Manipur from 'Khurpuitabum' also known as 'Sinlung' which means a big cave in China. Although, the exact period of their migration is not known due to lack of written records during that time, many historians believed that their migration took place in and around the 10th century. They migrated to Burma and settled down there for a number of years. However, in search for a better livelihood and fertile land for cultivation, the Hrangkhoh migrated from Burma to Lushai Hills (present day, Mizoram). In the Lushai Hills, the Hrangkhoh stayed for about three

hundred years. But due to the threat or pressure by the stronger clan, they move to Tripura, Assam and Meghalaya. According to Jagadis Gan Chaudhuri (1980:12), a large number of Rangkhals (sic. Hrangkhol) community left Tripura for Haflong in Assam because of the intra-tribal feuds". In continuity, Tanmay Bhattacharjee (1995:26) also asserted that the Hrangkhawls had their hamlets in Haflong for a long time." So, it is believed that the population of the Hrangkhol tribe is scattered in most part of the Northeastern states. The term 'Hrangkhol' is spelled by different writers in different way. Some writer spelt as 'Rongkhol' 'Rangkhol' 'Rangkhal' 'Rankhal' Hrangkhawl' and 'Hrangkhol'. However, all the given words give the same connotation. The term 'Hrang' literally means courageous and 'Khol' or 'Khawl' means to win over enemies. Hence, the two combination words form 'Hrangkhol' or 'Hrangkawl' which means courageous warrior.

2. Objectives of the Study

- To investigate the role played by traditional institutions in the functioning of the Hrangkhol society
- To study the administration of justice among the Hrangkhol tribe

3. Research Methodology

The present study is conducted in Harangajao and New Sangbar Development block of Dima Hasao district of Assam. Within the two blocks, there are around 10 villages of the Hrangkhol tribe. Primary and secondary data are used for the study. Primary data is collected through interview schedule and questionnaire. Purposive sampling method is used to collect the data. The interviewee and the persons to whom the questionnaire are distributed is purposively selected (50 persons from Urban and 50 persons from rural) population. Some of the villages visited during the field survey are, Zion Mualpong, Lungkhok, Dolaichunga, Boro Robi, Buangkung, Chaptuk, Paiza, Bualjol and Tangpui. Besides, the interviewer interviewed the village headman/gaonbura during the field survey on the functioning of the traditional institutions and its impact on modern political institutions. Secondary data is collected from Published books, Journals, Articles, Unpublished Thesis, Internet and Newspaper.

4. Discussion

In the Hrangkhol society, the village council (Kho Devan) is headed by Gaonbura. He is assisted by eight village elders (Tar Ulian) and they are the active members of the village council. They along with the Gaonbura settle all kind of disputes; make rules and regulation for the welfare of the society. Apart from these eight village elders, one member is selected as Secretary (Sazom) to assist the Gaonbura in running the administration. If any problem arises in the society, he is to inform the Gaonbura. Tangva Ulian (mature youth) is selected from the village youth. He looks after the welfare of the youth and village development. Tangva Bop (couple of minor youth) is also selected by the village council (A. Brahma, 2016:65). They are to announce the important matters to the villagers by walking up and down of the village. They give information of the proceeding of the village council to all the head of the families in the village.

Administration of Justice is divided into 3 (three) categories in the Hrangkhol society, namely, *Village Court*, *Pafong Court* and *Halam court*.

Village Court: At the bottom trial is dispensed at the village court headed by Gaonbura in his residence along with the prominent village elders and the next elder most. Cases like minor hurt, theft, defamation, intimidation, compensation disputes were dealt in the village court. The complainant has to complain his grievances to the Gaonbura. On hearing the grievances, the Gaonbura may permit him/her to call for trial in the village court. If a woman has illicit relationship with many men and conceives without entering into wedlock with any of them, her case may be place in the village court. The girl's parents/clan will request to the village court to find out the father of the unborn baby. There will be charged and counter charged among the men involved in the affair. If the girl cannot ascertain the father of the baby, the last man to have sexual intimacy with the girl is considered the father of the baby (Hnung inta kel kot khar) and all fines would be paid by him. If he refuses to accept the baby as his own, the girl parents can keep the baby and bring him up as their own family or clan member (Handbook, NCHAC 2006:20).

Pafong Court (Clan Court): Pafong court is a court in which the cases are solved within the clan. The case like Juarruk (punishment and fined for those who married without fulfilling traditional rules and customs), Nujuar (punishment and fine imposed on women) and Irchonlua (inheritance of property) etc. are solved within the Pafong court. The adult male members of both the clan will be the chief of the court. If a boy and girl divorce and failed to re-marry after obtaining parenthood, such cases were dealt within the Pafong court. And sometime when a lover elope and the parent try to bring back their daughter by force, this kind of cases is also dealt before the Pafong court. Besides the accused party, the other clan members are also invited to witness and assist in solving the cases.

Halam (Supreme Court): Halam is the apex court of the Hrangkhol tribe. Kalim is the chief of the Halam court. He has the power to exercise law and order of the Halam court. Kalim is assisted by two other officials namely, 'Kabur' and 'Chapia'. A person who is well verse in customary laws and whose personality is pure and blameless are selected as Kalim, however, the Kalim should be an adult male. The term of Kalim, Kabur and Chapia are not fixed, unless they break a social law, they can hold the post until death. When the official seat (Kalim, Kabur and Chapia) is vacant on death or any circumstances, traditional oath taking ceremony i.e, 'Parhruilak' ceremony were held and the Halam Devan have to decide the next clan candidate. The appointed clan will select the clan candidates in their Pafong court. Then the selected person has to become Kalim and has to perform 'Parhruilak' ceremony. During Parhruilak, offering of Pujas to Naran Kalakhi (Bishnu) is also important. It is called 'Telmalri-inring' in the community. In this ceremony all kinds of Pujas were performed by the chief priest. If any of the office bearer (Kalim, Kabur and Chapia) abstain from his dignity due to physical disabled, old age, mental disorder or by other unavoidable circumstances, the clan members of the existing officials have to perform the 'Parhruilak' ceremony. The term of treasurer and secretary is normally fixed for five years or may be removed by impeachment at any moment for violation of Halam rules and regulations (T.S. Hrangkhol, 2000:113). Further, in case of failure of settlement of any disputes occur in the village court and Pafong court, the final judgement is done by the Halam court. Some of the important customary rules and regulations mentioned in the Halam constitution are as follows:

Luangman refers to the punishment in a murder case. In this murder case, the Apex Court (Halam) played an important role. Although, there are no fixed and limited rules and regulations in this regard, a person found guilty may be imposed a heavy fine.

Mâktha refers to punishment done in the case of divorce. According to the Halam constitution, a sum of Rs. 200/- has to be paid by the husband at the time of divorce. Nowadays, the amount has been changed, but it is not fixed yet. The factors behind the case of divorce may be of infertility of the women or else adultery done by both the husband and the wife.

Deltha refers to the fine or punishment imposed for those persons engage in having extra marital sexual relationship. The accused has to pay a heavy fine. Although the amount has not been fixed, he/she should be punished according to the weight of the cases.

Bazarmitha refers to the case where the boys and the girl's love's each other and willing to get marry through Biak Zu ceremony. However, if girls are found having sexual relations or elope with another man, then the accused person has to pay a fine of one fourth of the Pabi Pui to the Halam court on the trial day.

Zâinai refers a fatherless child. If a woman had sexual relation with more than one man and got pregnant before marriage and unable to find out the father of the baby, then the case is dealt in the village court. The court will investigate the father of the baby and if no one confesses, the last man who had sexual relation with the girl is considered as the father of the baby. However, if the men deny the judgment made by the court, then the baby will be taken care by the girl's family and recognize him/her as their clan member.

Although, Halam is the apex court of the Hrangkhoh community, minor cases which occur in the Hrangkhoh society are dealt by the village court and Pafong court. Some cases like Deltha (divorce), Mithat (murder case) are mostly place in the Halam court. On the day of the judgement in the Halam Tungkung, the accused party has to pay a heavy fine. Fine may be imposed according to the cases of the accused. Normally four-footed animal, especially Pig along with a pitcher of Zu (wine) has to be paid by the accused as a mark of fine or punishment. All those persons engage in solving the cases will eat the feast by killing the animal. The decision taken by the Halam court is final as it is the highest authority of the community. Nowadays many people are dissatisfied with the judgment done by the Halam court, as there is no proper written constitution in the traditional judiciary system. For instance, there are one or two cases where the accused party approach the district court for the final judgement.

The Name of Kalims of the Hrangkhoh tribe till date are mentioned in the below table:

SL. NO.	Name of the Kalim's
1.	Neitonkha Cholkha
2.	Kholsimsiak Pena
3.	Baungtinhang Pena
4.	Densuangngir Bangkheng
5.	Darchungthang Phirpu
6.	Lalningsuan Pena
7.	Saipaisiam Cholkha
8.	Ngirchuantong Bangkheng

9.	Suidarthang Phirpu
10.	Neivansong Bangkheng
11.	Bulthoiher Phuoitong

Source: Field Survey

The above mentioned are the list of Kalim's among the Hrangkhol who headed the Halam court since time immemorial. Sri. Suanneilian Pena is the present Kalim of the Hrangkhol community. In spite of religious differences, the entire Hrangkhol community is integrated through the respect and honour accorded to the Halam. However, the seat of Kalim is occupied by the followers of traditional religion (Sonong) and none of the Christian Hrangkhol becomes a Kalim till today. The introduction of modern democratic institutions after India's attained Independence has not only transformed the socio-political structure of the Hrangkhol society but provide equal opportunity to both male and female. Women are given right to suffrage in the modern democratic system, whereas in traditional institutions, no women have right to take part in the village council.

5. Conclusion

Traditional institutions played an important role among the hill tribes of northeast India since time immemorial. The implementation of Autonomous district council has reduced the power and functions of the traditional village administration. However, there are no changes in regard to village administration of the Hrangkhol community. Till today, the Gaonbura is the head of the village council. The Gaonbura decides all the important works of the village community and solve all the minor cases like theft, defamation, compensation disputes etc. In regards to the administration of justice, the role of the Halam court headed by Kalim, Kabur and Chapia was still appreciate and admire by the Hrangkhol community. All the cases which cannot be solved in the subordinate court were placed before the Halam court. The judgement made by the Halam court is final. But in case of murder, the accused persons and the victim family are allowed to approach the district council court for final judgment.

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