

**PROCEEDINGS OF
NORTH EAST INDIA
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

NINTH SESSION

GUWAHATI ; 1988

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on behalf of

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PREFACE

The ninth session of the North East India History Association at the Gauhati University was indeed the fulfilment of a long cherished objective of the Association to hold a session in the premier University of the region. In fact, there had been efforts on the part of the Association ever since it came into existence in 1979 to hold a session at the Gauhati University. We are thankful to the authorities of the Gauhati University for inviting the ninth session and organising it in an excellent manner.

Shri Bhisma Narain Singh, the Governor of Assam, inaugurated the session. Professor D. P. Barooah, Vice-Chancellor, and Professor J. N. Phukan, Head, Department of History, Gauhati University did the Association a great honour as Chairman of the organising committee and Local Secretary respectively for the session. It was presided over by Professor Bhupen Qanungo of the North-Eastern Hill University. More than one hundred and fifty delegates attended the session in which eighty-five research papers were presented and discussed.

The present volume is the proceedings of the ninth session of the North East India History Association held at the Gauhati University on November 3-5, 1988. I am thankful to my colleagues Dr. J. P. Singh, Dr. O. P. Kejariwal, Dr. M. S. Sangma and Dr. D. R. Syiemlieh for the help in selecting and editing the papers and publishing the volume. We are also thankful to the Indian Council of Historical Research for the generous financial assistance extended to the Association.

J. B. Bhattacharjee

General Secretary,

North East India History Association.

Shillong

The 25 August 1989

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Position and Status of women in the Traditional Mizo Society

Sangkima

Every society, however primitive, has a social organization. Within the framework of this organization there are different levels formed by different classes of people like men, women, children and others. Each of these different strata having specific responsibilities and united for some purpose has to perform different functions in various capacities in the society. With the exception of the matriarchal society, every society treats women as an inferior lot to men. Therefore, we may say with evidence that everywhere in the world, primitive or civilized, the way the society treats women is more or less similar in all respects. This holds true even in today's so-called 'advanced society'.

This social view on woman has coincided with the view held by the Church on women in the early Christian era. In the early church, women were not credited as equal to men. From the church point of view, women should not enjoy the same status with men in matters relating to powers and responsibilities in the church organization. Nor should they preach in and outside the church. Instead, they should remain silent listeners. Thus, St. Paul (c.AD. 5-67), one of the fathers of the early church wrote with command: "The women should keep silence in the church. For they are not permitted to speak.... If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in the church"¹. It is not definitely known why St. Paul pronounced such a dictum. But what we find from this statement is that even in the Christian community where individual freedom is advocated women were discriminated. Almost an identical view is found in an old Mizo saying which reads: "woman and crab do not have religion". This saying implies, it seems, what Paul dictated to the Corrinthians as indicated above.

The Mizo society is a patriarchal society where male dominance is prevalent. As such, in the period under review women were not treated as equal to their male counterparts. In spite of this fact, women occupied a comparatively high position in the family in terms of responsibilities particularly in matters relating to household affairs. At the same time, their responsibilities in the family and participation in social obligations were markedly differed from at different stages. With this background in view, an attempt is made in this paper to throw some lights on the position and status of women in the traditional Mizo society. The study is divided into two heads, women in the family and society.

Women in the Family

In early Mizo society there were two agencies which moulded the social life of the people. They were the family and the *Zawlbuk*. The family as an agency of the society played a very important role in moulding the social life of the Mizos. In one sense, the family surpassed the *Zawlbuk* in terms of importance because the family acted as an institution where all the family members were taught manners whereas the *Zawlbuk* administration dealt only with its male inmates. Therefore, the family occupied a high place in the Mizo society.

In spite of certain prerogatives recognised in the society the husband, being head of the family, exercised unfettered and autocratic dominance over his wife and other members of the family. The wife, being second in order of preference, and purchased by price, however, had no legal right to claim in the family. Her status was so wretched that while submitting herself to her husband she should endure and execute all the responsibilities in the family but without authority². So the demand by the family only enabled the woman to exert her place in the family.

With regards to birth, both male and female children were treated with equal joy. In fact some parents felt happier to have a female child

for the fact that the prospects of getting supports from female child were more promising than that of the male one who would soon leave the house for the *Zawlbuk*. When a male child was born he was hailed and blessed by the *Upa* (elder) as *Mipa huaisen Sai kap tur* which means "a valient, the would-be elephant killer". At the same time the birth of a female child was greeted with the words, *Se man tur* meaning "one who would cost a mithun"³.

Right from her childhood girl made themselves available to the parents. She assisted her parents as much as she could. She had to take care of her younger brothers and sisters, draw water, cook and do any other works whatever the family needed. Sometimes accompanying her mother she fetched firewood. In this way, the girl helped her parents when she was still young.

When she attained adulthood she was assigned with different nature of works. She had to accompany her parents in the *jhum* thereby doubling her responsibilities in the family. Working the whole day at the *jhum* along with others she found no time for taking rest even when she reached home late in the evening. She had to spend the whole night with various engagements. It was customary among married and unmarried women to engage themselves with cotton works. Besides, the unmarried women had to perform a well-established social custom by receiving youngmen who came to spend time in amusing themselves after toiling the whole day at the *jhum*. This custom is called *Inleng* (courting). When the next day dawned she had to rise early to start life afresh for the whole day. In the early morning she proceeded to the spring (waterpoint) to fill an empty bamboo tubes with water, finish unhusking the rice by pounding in a mortar and cook the breakfast. She should have finished all these tiring jobs before sun rise while the husband and the other male members were still asleep. Then after the meal the real work for the day began. All these pre-day engagements were performed by the young

woman and the mother in the house. If the mother had no daughter she had to single out these duties.

As a matter of fact, woman in normal time hardly took rest. When weeding season was over, then Autumn season set in. This was the season when men engaged themselves with hunting. Those who did not go hunting remained in the village but gave no help to the family. But for womenfolk it was the busiest season of the year. During this pleasant season the Mizo woman set her daily routine in two features. The first part of her work in a day was to fetch firewoods from the jungles. It was her duty to stock firewoods for the next rainy seasons. The other part included making of clothes for the coming winter. So it was no wonder to hear the mother shouting at her children who were playing around her for help. In this way the woman in the family managed the whole household affairs without fatigue.

In spite of all this tireless sacrifice rendered for the family the wife still found herself very insecure in the family for her membership was likely to be terminated at any time by her husband by saying *Ka ma che* meaning "I divorce you". As pointed out earlier, by custom she had no rightful claim over the properties in the family except those properties being brought along with her as *Thuam* (dowry) at the time of her marriage. The children belonged to the father and even right to inheritance was denied to her. Further, it may be noted that the wife was customarily bound not to call the husband by name in the presence of others.

The position of woman in the family could be elevated for some reasons. In the first place, it was a common practice among men to go for hunting whenever they were free. They had been away from home for months. During the long absence of the head of the family, the mother took overall charge to manage the home affairs. Her words were to be obeyed. Even after his return from hunting the husband could manage to adjust himself with what was going on at home. In the second

place, the wife's influence was increased in the family should the husband become handicapped by some accidents. In the third place, the wife assumed charge in the family when the husband died. If such situations in the family happened it confined itself within the family alone.

Women in the Society

Like in the family, woman took active parts in the community life of the society. However, her participation had a limit confined within a certain areas only. As the society was community-based, therefore, each section of the people had a part to play in it according to the duty assigned to each section. As such a boy had a role to play, a girl had to perform other duties. Likewise, man and woman had to act in different manner.

For instance, the boy rendered compulsory services to the community by supplying firewoods to the *Zawlbuk*. But the girl was free from this service. Her services were confined only in the household affairs. During festivities and other community feasts held in a village only the boys of *Thingnawifawn* (supplier⁵ of firewoods to the *Zawlbuk*) could participate.

In the festivals like *Pawlkut* and *Chapcharkut*, however, both male and female children participated with the same enthusiasm. The *Pawlkut*, meant for the children, was occasionally celebrated in the beginning of the year. Children of all ages would come out at the open ground and held a public feast called *Chhawngnawt* which took place at the outskirts of a village. Men and women also joined them. When the feast was held each participant tried to put the food into each other's mouth. The same thing was repeated when the *Chapcharkut* was held. On this *Pawlkut* occasion both male and female babies were adorned differently. The female baby was attired with a red feathers fixing them with her hair by beewax on her crown head. The male baby was also dressed in the same way but with a red tuft of goat's hair⁶.

Girl experienced another stage of life when she was novitiated into adult responsibility.

She therefore, began to live an independent life but under the protection of the parents. At this stage she had nothing to worry about because she could take active parts in the social activities without any inhibition. But in this transition she found her life quite changed for the simple reason that her participations in the social life was in bad need. Here whether or not she liked to be involved in the social activities she was bound by social obligations. If she failed to perform these social functions she would be nowhere in the society. She would be disdained as social a outcast. However, she became self-contented when she was treated socially on equal footings with her male counterpart.

As mentioned earlier, the girl was the hope of her parents. As long as she remained unmarried her parents left everything to her care. Since the livelihood of the community wholly depended on agriculture-based cultivation the success in life rested chiefly on intensive labour. Therefore, it was customary for the girl to have a working partner called *Lawmpa* throughout the year. In such partnership, the girl held the rein in order to make the partnership a lasting one. If the male partner left her it would have been a great shame on the part of the girl bearing all blemishes by her and a great loss too to her for physically he was more preferable to her in terms of working ability. So, in order to maintain a long lasting partnership the girl should keep up all sorts of courtesy-like manners towards her male partner. Mutual appreciation had to stay between them. In order to do so the girl was customarily bound to take all the belongings of the man under her care. Thus she had to wash his dirty cloths, mend the work-day attire, carry all his working tools to and fro along with the food for mid-day meal. She had to supply him *tuibur al* and *Meizial* (cigarettes). By doing all this the girl performed only one part of her social obligations.

After the day's toil at the field, as already pointed out, the girl had to find time in meeting

the courting party. As it existed, the Mizo society was a free society wherein the opposite sexes were allowed to mix freely. Such permissiveness sometimes had resulted in social laxity which ended in a doom for the girl. In such cases, it was she who would lose her reputation and prestige in the society.

The married life of a woman was another aspect which clearly revealed the status of woman in the Mizo society. In those early days, the parents were very careful in selecting partner for their daughter. They looked into the family history as far back as they could trace. In case the boy felt like taking the girl in marriage, he would testify the worthiness of the girl by intensifying his courting methods. At the same time, it was the duty of the girl to preserve the sanctity of her woman nature. This courting period normally took not less than three lunar years. Even if the girl found him acceptable as a husband, she would not yield to him before the lapse of the said period. If no serious lapses occurred on either side then marriage would take place. In any case, the parents should have taken the consent of the girl before the process of marriage was finalised.

The girl was purchased by price and the price was distributed among the relatives of both paternal and maternal lines. The bride came to the husband's house with *Thuam* (dowry) which consisted of *thival* (bead with 3 strings) or *Thifen* (bead with one string) or an amber bead worth not less than Rs.20/- or cash not less than Rs. 20/-. If *thuam* was not brought forth her price would be increased by Rs. 20/-. Besides *thuam* the bride was expected to bring along with her a *Pawnpui* (quilt) and a *Thul* (a basket container or box). But these were not counted as *thuam*. Provided these symbolic properties were even prepared at her husband's house the price would be less by Rs. 20/-.

As *thuam* belonged to the bride the husband had no right to dispose it of without her consent.

It could be disposed of only in time of famine or otherwise but with the consent of the bride¹⁰.

In case of long and precarious illness the bride was entitled to give away all her properties during her life time. Divorce or separation on any reason was a serious matter which badly affected the social life of the divorced. In case the bride was divorced she had no claim but her own properties. If the divorce was however due to adultery she had nothing to claim including her own properties. The marriage price was also to be given back to the man. It so happened that a husband sometimes abandoned his wife and children. In such event, a social protection was provided to a wife. She could retain all the properties and it was upto her to accept him back in case he returned. As already referred to elsewhere all the children legitimate or illegitimate belonged to the father. The mother was however, entitled to receive the price called *Numan* (price for being the mother of Rs. 4/-) or an article or animal of that value¹².

Regarding social participation, the unmarried woman and the small girl, enjoyed a wide range of freedom. In social festivities like *Khuang Chawi*, *Chawngchen* etc. the woman took active part. It will not be an exaggeration to say that no festival could be held without the participation of a woman. On such occasions no restriction was imposed upon her even to the extent of indulging in drinking *Zu*. The *Surdeng Zu* was the drink prepared specially for both the unmarried man and woman¹³.

At normal time woman did not indulge in drinking for it was considered as a shameful practice. The wives of a chief and his elders were however, free to take drink side by side with their male counterparts. On certain occasions when gathered together amusing themselves they consumed *Zu* without any restraint. When they were under the influence of the drink their family life was sometimes affected which ended in divorce.

Smoking was also found very common among the Mizos. Children of both sexes began smoking very young. Women of all ages smoked much. A

pipe smoked by a woman was called *Tuibur*. As a good wife she should possess *tuibur al* (nicotine water) all the time. In those early days, *tuibur al* was used in their daily life as we now commonly use tea in welcoming visitors. The diligent and active bride was ought to keep it in her possession at all time in order to supply all the family members and the visitors when needed. Otherwise she would be considered as unworthy wife¹⁴.

In performing religious and other sacrificial rites woman did not have a part to play. All these rites were performed by male member only. A woman could not become a priest called *Bawlpu* or *Sadawt*.

Woman and death are said to have a connection in some ways. In those early days, when a woman died while giving a birth she was said to have died of *raicheh*. On such event, all the villagers should stay at home believing that the spirit of the death woman would enter their houses causing death. In case a husband died it was the duty of a wife to perform a rite called *thlaichhiah* for a period of three lunar months. Only after this rite was observed for the said period the wife was custom bound free from any marital restrictions. She was free to leave the house or to remain a widow if she choose. If she choose being a widow she had a right to stay on in her husband's house as long as she pleased. When a spinster died, like a bachelor, a special grave was prepared as show of respect and honour to her.

Conclusion

The various accounts described above bring out only certain important aspects of women's position in the Mizo society as found in the period under review. The study may impress us to form an idea that women were discriminated in the family life as well as in the social life of the Mizo's. If one looks at the society of that period from today's society and judges accordingly one would definitely concieve many discrepancies against women. But a careful examination reveals that no sign is seen against maltreatment

of women in the society on ground of sex. In a male dominated society like that of the Mizo's, One cannot expect women to enjoy equal status with men in all respects because the division of labour had already demarcated the lines where both men and women should limit their respective responsibilities. This means that both of them were accordingly assigned duties in the society separately without disturbing each other. If women were considered as having more workload than their male counterparts in and outside their home then they only carried out their responsibilities in the family and the society. This characterised the nature of the society in which the Mizos lived.

In accordance with the natural phenomenon, women were socially restrained from certain obligations. No single woman was allowed to visit the *Zawlbuk* which they presumed as a bad omen for the *Zawlbuk* dwellers. This was justifiable on the ground that the *Zawlbuk* was not used as a common dwelling place or both men and women; it was reserved for men only.

Unmarried woman was free to choose her life partner under the system of civil contract soluble at the will of both the parties. As indicated earlier her position was that she could be divorced by her husband for a simple reason but in such case she was found by a social protection by allowing her to have claim on properties if the ground was not adultery. But in divorce, she had nothing to claim for the property. This is still in force.

It may therefore be summed up that women in the Mizo society held respectable responsibilities without any social discriminations, and were placed in a respectable place. As a matter of fact, women were the backbone of the society. Therefore, Mrs. Chettarji was right when she wrote : "...the status of women in their society was in no way inferior to that of man and she suffered none of those derogatory and discriminatory treatment as may be found in some of the more advanced societies" 15.

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