

STATUS AND ROLE OF WOMEN: (A Case Study of Tangkhul Women)

*Lucy Thomas Vashum**

This paper makes an attempt to refer to the major aspects of the status and role of women as a) the time frame and b) different facets of the life of a woman. In terms of the temporal reference, this paper deals with the status of women in the new and emerging situations. With reference to the facets of a woman's life, it has attempted to refer to some of the following aspects, both economic and social.

Economic factors include a) Property rights, such as the right to own and manage property; to inherit property and the ability and right to follow occupations and earn a livelihood. Consideration is also taken of the distribution of work in the family. Social matters include consideration of marriage, divorce, family inheritance including rules of inheritance.

An attempt was also made to deal with certain religious matters and the underlying references to the status of women as daughters, wives, sisters and mothers which delineate the various facets.

The differing roles of women as daughter, wife, sister and mother determine the status of women.

This is a rather challenging assignment, for two reasons. Firstly, there is hardly any substantial written information available about the Tangkhul women, and hence the writing about them has to depend mainly on personal observations and some references from available writings on the subject. The assignment is all the more challenging because the theme, 'Status of Women' has by now

* Prof. Lucy Thomas Vashum, teaches in the Department of Anthropology, NEHU, Shillong.

attracted an unusually complex range of attention, from the academicians as well as from the activists. The result has been that the theme has at times become a very emotive subject. I will try to do justice both to the theme as well as to the Tangkhul women in describing their "status". In this connection I will confine my attention to the status and achievements of the Tangkhul women in the fast emerging urban setting. As we know, the Tangkhul are concentrated in the Ukhrul district of Manipur, and till the Census of 1971 this district did not have any urban area. This means that the Tangkhul traditionally have a rural background.

The Tangkhul are one of the Naga group of people. They inhabit the Ukhrul district of Manipur. Like all other Naga groups of people, the Tangkhul are also patrilineal, and hence the male holds, for all practical purposes, a more decisive position in the society. In the Tangkhul family, the father is considered the head of the family. However, like all other Naga people, the Tangkhul are democratic in attitude, and egalitarian in interpersonal relations. In the family, a woman is as independent in her field of activity as her husband. In the family, like the father, the mother plays an equally important role. "Apart from growing vegetables and educating the children particularly the daughters in weaving and handicrafts, the mother performs the entire family work such as feeding not only the children but also the domestic animals like pigs, poultry and cattle." (Shimray, 1985, p. 167).

According to another account,

The mother plays the main role in running the households. Indeed the position of women in the Naga society is far from being inferior. The majority of domestic affairs are in her hands.....All her life a woman enjoys considerable freedom. She participates freely in singing and dancing during festivals and entertains the guests. She is never made to feel that she belongs to the weaker sex. Most marriage negotiations are conducted through an elderly lady. A girl is free to choose her life-partner and rarely is any pressure brought upon her in this matter. The wife is consulted by her husband in all domestic and family affairs. She helps him make decisions, performs domestic duties, and shares household responsibilities with him. (Horam, 1977, p. 61).

The Tangkhul customary law permits only males to inherit property, females have no right to inherit property. "Widows are well provided for and girls may receive property as gifts from their parents at the time of their marriage, otherwise they have no legal share." (Horam, *op. cit.*). This to a great extent brings out the economic status of the Tangkhul women. She has to toil and work, but she is not allowed to own or inherit. Such a social rule is quite natural for a patrilineal tribal society. If we recall that the Tangkhul, like other Nagas were feuding communities, we find that in the Tangkhul society, the women were assigned some responsibility of critical importance. In an account on "head hunting among the Naga" a special section has been assigned to 'women's role'. It is mentioned there that

When a party was pressed back very far killing a warrior or two, and the verdict was known, a neutral force came in. The neutral force belonged either to the neighbouring villages or the neutral ladies (Phukhareila)..... The Pukhareila could not be harmed as a rule. She was highly respected for neutrality, and they were called as the Ambassadors of Peace. In the bygone days, when headhunting was practised, these Pukhareila played a vital role in saving lives of men.

This presents to us another aspect of Tangkhul women in the traditional society. We find that she is entrusted with responsibility of a very high order and crucial nature. It is mentioned that "in politics and diplomacy also, women could influence in many ways directly or indirectly through the village Councillors or at least through their husbands. As Pukhareila (neutral lady) she had the right of her own to intervene in war." (Shimray, *op. cit.*, p. 169).

In marriage, and so also in divorce, the woman was not bound by any constraints of social inferiority. She was free to make her own decisions, in fact, in marriages there was a latent form of bride-price which had to be paid in consideration for marriage. There was, however, one practice which gave some indication of an adverse status of a woman: on the death of a woman's husband, his younger brother had the right to marry her. In traditional Tangkhul society the woman had to accede to this.

Today life is changing fast in the Tangkhul society, and this is reflected in the achievements of the women as well as their changing status. Before we turn our attention to examine the details in relation to these, there are a few conceptual questions which need to be mentioned.

The Tangkhul society, like other traditional societies in India, is under the influence of fast change. The reasons for this are obvious and the factors well known. What demands attention in this connection is that which relates to the redefinition of the status of the women in the changing order of the society. The traditional Tangkhul society was a community based society like all other tribal societies but it is now fast acquiring the characteristics of an individualistic, money economy society. In the earlier traditional society a Tangkhul woman could not see herself other than a member of the community, of the clan, the family, and the village. Now with the introduction of education and the avenues for her to achieve a new identity for herself, there is a redefinition of the status of the Tangkhul woman.

The Tangkhul form the most populous community among the Naga group of tribes in Manipur, and according to population, they rank second. At the time of the 1971 Census, the Ukhrul district where the main concentration of the Tangkhul is, did not have any urban area, and thus by implication it meant that all the Tangkhul were of a rural background. From this we will have to exclude, however, those Tangkhul who have settled in Imphal permanently. The Tangkhul today form a prominent section of the population of Imphal town. In fact, they are the pace setters for the modernisation of Tangkhul and the achievement of Tangkhul women. We will soon return to discuss this. According to the Census of 1981, less than 10 percent of the population of the Ukhrul district lives in Ukhrul town, while the rest reside in the villages.

In Manipur, Ukhrul has the distinction of having the first School and College in the tribal area. The Pettigrew College was first established as a School in 1896. With education coming first to the Tangkhul, this community had every reason for progressing fast in the field of education—by a hind sight it now appears, the implications of which were of a very crucial nature. In the first instance, education progressed fast and wide among the Tangkhul. This community produced many professionals and persons of letters.

Education among the Tangkhul women has progressed proportionately. Today it is a pronounced fact that education among the Tangkhul women is as popular as it is among the males. As a result of which, educated Tangkhul women have shown creditable achievements in different fields. Now Tangkhul women have joined the medical profession as well as the Indian Administrative Services. Many Tangkhul women have enrolled in professions like teaching and nursing, also. The Tangkhul women have proved beyond doubt that they have high aspirations and are achievement oriented. It is this motivation which is responsible for increasingly attracting them towards education. The Tangkhul society, both rural and urban provide full support and encouragement to its girls. It should be mentioned here that it is not only the educated and working Tangkhul women who are on the march toward progress, but the housewives also are giving their share of support. A number of voluntary women's organisations have come up among the Tangkhul. Such voluntary organisations both in Imphal town and in the villages in Ukhrul district are taking to all sorts of welfare activities for women and children.

All this notwithstanding, the pace of education among the Tangkhul does not seem to progress as it should. According to my understanding this is because of factors, social, economic, and political. If the constraints from each of these is not attended to seriously now, in all likelihood, the pace of education of the Tangkhul girls, and for that matter among the boys as well, will experience a serious set back.

The Tangkhul society, by all considerations is still a traditional society despite the fact that the impact of Christianity, education and urbanisation have made considerable inroads into their traditional ways of living. Tangkhul parents still give greater preference to the education of the boys than to the girls. There appears to be some sort of subdued hesitation among the parents to encourage higher and continued education among the girls. Along with this is also the hesitation among the parents to encourage and allow the girls freedom in such things as selection of employment. It should be mentioned here that much of the hesitation is due to the constraints of living in traditional society. It is hoped, and there are indications, that this will soon give way to a greater liberal attitude in the society towards the education and employment mobility of their girls.

Economic constraint is another factor which, to a considerable extent, inhibits the progress of education among the Tangkhul girls. Ukhul district, where the main concentration of the Tangkhul exists is a high, forested area, and it has limits to its economic progress. Though it appears that the government is doing much to help ameliorate the economic condition of the tribals, not much substantial change has been experienced. What impact this has on the capacity of the Tangkhul parents from the villages to encourage their daughters for education can well be imagined. Most of the visible progress of female education among the Tangkhul is by those inhabiting the city of Imphal. The Tangkhul inhabiting this area are obviously economically much better off, and hence can afford to encourage their daughters to go in for higher education. There is still much which remains to be done to encourage the diffusion of education among the Tangkhul girls from the Ukhul district.

Besides the above mentioned social and economic factors, there is a political factor which appears to be introducing a very debilitating effect on the progress of education among the Tangkhul, including the education of girls. As we are aware, the Naga part of this region has been for long politically very sensitive, and as a consequence, law and order have at times remained at a very low ebb. The Ukhul district of Manipur has been one of the worst affected in this respect. In the cross-fire between the underground and the loyal, as well as between the underground and the security forces, many of the educated Tangkhul have been killed or wounded. It will be futile to try and determine who fired these shots, but it may be mentioned that lawyers, teachers, and other professionals among the Tangkhul and those inhabiting the Ukhul region have been marked as the victims of these bullets. This has on the one hand, drastically reduced the number of educated Tangkhul in the rural areas, and, on the other, it has brought all kinds of uncertainty. The impact of this on the progress of education among the Tangkhul has been more than obvious. In turn obviously this has affected the progress of education among the girls, too.

I feel that in view of the encouraging progress which education has made among the Tangkhul women so far, efforts should be made to remove these constraints so that women's education may progress further as there is every indication that it will flourish given the right climate.

REFERENCES

1. R.R. Shimray, *Origin and Cultures of Nagas*, New Delhi, 1985.
2. M. Horam, *Social and Cultural life of Nagas*, Delhi, 1977.