

Konyak Women

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The purpose of the present study is an attempt to make an exploratory study of women amongst the Konyak tribe. We would like to express our gratitude and thanks to our informants viz., Mr. K. Naiba Konyak, Directorate of School Education, Nagaland, and Mr. S. Yangba Konyak, NPS, a DSP without whose help, this paper would not have been possible.

Mon, the home of the Konyaks is situated at an altitude of 897.64 metres above sea level and stands at a distance of 354 kms from Kohima and 280 from Dimapur.

In general, the status of women was very low in Konyak society. Apart from the household chores, she had to attend to the field and other family requirements. She had to live under the domain of her husband and in many occasions, she was considered a mere being for pleasure and for reproducing. In every walk of her life, she had to live within the various restrictions and taboos imposed on her. Some of these are:

1. No matter what the position be, she could never become the head of the family. Even if a widow continued to live in her late husband's house, she had no liberty and she was under the direct supervision of her in-laws.
2. Women were not allowed to attend any meeting of the village, unless she was specifically invited.
3. Women were forbidden to touch male weapons like spear, shield and dao.

There was an ormen that if a young girl (spinster) walked over a dao, she would get pregnant.

4. Women were not allowed to enter the morung, for there was a belief that if she did the morung would be struck by a lightning.
5. Women were prohibited from wearing the ornaments or the articles worn by male folks.
6. At the time of going for head hunting or village fight, the women were tabooed from uttering any word. Beliefs being that, for such words uttered by women, their mission would fail.
7. Women were not allowed to put on hair and for which she had to shave her head all the time. This was done, so that, women do not dirty the food.
8. Women could not inherit her father's properties.

Festivals

The Konyak community like any other Naga community was full of festivals and merry makings. During the festival or social gathering, young girls were at liberty to dance with boys from any other clan or even from other villages except for her father's clan. In her rich traditional attire, she could dance to her heart's content. She could mingle with the boys of her age easily during the singing and dancing, and in all the occasion, she was expected to respect her male counter part. She would dance with her rich traditional attires which had been given to her by her parents, and it was through the rich attires, that she could display the economic status of her family to their villagers or the neighbouring villagers. The poor could not afford such rich attires and would go for inferior attires.

During the festival, women played a very important role and had her own specific share of enjoyment. It was during this period that married women would visit their parents. The parents in turn would give to their daughters, pigs or anything worth that value. During the festival, she would cook the best food to be served during the dancing.

After a good harvest, the much awaited season sets in. People in festive mood would kill buffaloes, cows etc. and feasted together. Before the animals were killed, women would perform the necessary rituals.

Like any other Naga tribe, the rich men of the village threw feast of merit to the villagers. During this period, the wife in her best dress and ornaments along with her husband, joined the main procession.

During the head hunting days, heads were taken as trophies. The heads of a young unmarried girl was equal in value to that of a man. When the villagers returned victorious with the trophies, the warriors who returned with head/s, were as a mark of their merit tattooed on their faces and body. For his victory, not only himself, but even his wife would also be tattooed. This tells us that women equally celebrated with the brave warriors at the time of their victory.

The Konyaks were worshippers of the gods of nature and spirit. Women were not allowed to participate in the religious ceremonies. During certain rituals, it was the mother who saw to it that her daughter was tattooed.

Women had freedom of sex before marriage. Usually, the grown up brother and sister never slept under the same roof. The girl had to sleep in another house. Because, by tradition, it was a shameful thing for the sister to sleep in the same house where her brother was sleeping. This occasioned her to have freedom of sex.

Marriages were arranged by parents. The girl's parents demanded huge properties as price for their daughter. She did not have any option to chose her life partner. She was only to consent to the choice of her parents. If she refused her parents' choice, she was discarded from her family. With the passage of time, this is no longer the same. An interesting fact to be noted here is that, a son would always marry a girl from his mother's clan. However, in present time, this is also no longer adhered to.

If divorce had arisen due to the fault or infidelity of the wife, her parents were to return all the properties they had received from her husband at the time of their marriage. Not only that, in addition to what he had given, the husband could demand more. On the other hand, if the fault was that of the husband, he had to pay to the wife, double of what he had already paid to his wife's parents. Divorce was one of the main causes of the many conflicts between clans or villages. Many of the head huntings started between the clans or villages just for a mere divorce.

Though the father was the head of the family, the mother was the main source of earning for the family. She toiled from morning till late night to earn for the family. She worked much more than her husband. She would go to the rich men's field and with her hard earn wage, she would sustain the family. Sometime, women clubbed themselves into groups, comprising of five or more and earned money.

Most of the domestic works were done by women. She managed and distributed the works within the family. It was forbidden for a women to kill any domestic animal. Even if a chicken was to be killed, it was the husband who would kill the chicken.

Even if the couple had no issue, the wife could not claim her share of property. In such cases, they adopted a son from her husband's clan and all their properties went to their adopted son. The adopted son was always picked up from the husband's clan so as to avoid complications in future.

Mediator : One of the most important roles played by women, was the role of a messenger or mediator during the inter-village war. In case of any dispute, women conveyed to the other village, the existing terms of agreement or the terms which were acceptable to her village and the other village to act accordingly, failing which, war could be declared between the two villages. During the head hunting days, women carried the head of the slain ones to the bereaved families. They could move freely between the warring villages. Not all women, but only the exceptionally talented women could play such role. It was tabooed to kill such women.

The Present Day Women

With the coming of Christianity, the society has come out of most of the evils of the traditional norms. Today, educated parent/s living in the town are very much aware of the fact that education is a must both for sons and daughters. Though in terms of population, women are lesser, they are now given the best of opportunity for their development. The yester year women were mainly engaged in cultivation and domestic chores. If she was beautiful, she was called by the Angh (King) and she had to join as one of the concubines. If she refused, the Angh would

curse her and a belief prevailed that the tiger would eat her up.

Today with her education, she has come out of this bondage and she is able to join in different professions. However, lots remain to be done. The girls in the villages and rural areas have still not moved out of the village gate and there are many who are still bounded by the traditional norms.

The KNSK (Women Welfare Organization)

The women welfare organization had started just recently. The lone and the apex women organization among the 110 Konyak villages is the 'Konyak Nyuyong Sheko Khong' (KNSK). The main objectives of the KNSK are to ensure that education facilities are given to the girls and to eliminate the evil practices which had for so long prevailed in the Konyak society.

One of the great achievements of the KNSK is the banning of liquor in Mon district, before the Total Prohibition Act was passed in the Nagaland Assembly. The KNSK is struggling to uplift the status of women, which for so very long was considered as a mere human being meant for pleasure and reproduction. Apart from this, the other main thrust of the KNSK is to educate and eradicate drug abuses in the Konyak society.

Besides the KNSK, the local church women organisation also plays an active part in the over-all upliftment of women and children in the society.