

SOCIAL CHANGE ON THANGAL TRIBE IN MANIPUR: ANALYSIS WITH HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempted to understand social changes in the Thangal Naga tribes and its influencing factors. The Thangal Society also undergoes change. Changes amongst the Thangals became louder when Manipur was brought within the pale of British administration. In others words, modernization of the Manipur society in general and Thangal society in particular was first started with the occupation of Manipur by the British after the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891. Now, the Thangal are at the cross road of identity crisis. Many factors are contributing to this. The most important factor is demographic. Although the census date show the increasing rate of population of the Thangals, yet the total population of this tribe is still less in number.

Keywords: Social change, religion, kingship, educational changes, khullakpa

1. BACKGROUND

The Thangals are one of the indigenous Naga tribes restricted to the Senapati District of the state of Manipur in north-east India. Presently there are 13 Thangal villages. They are found in eleven hill villages of the Senapati District. Mapao Thangal, Thangal Surung, Makeng Thangal Tumnou Pokpi, Tagaramphung (Yaikongpao), Ningthoupham and Mayakhang are some of the bigger villages. They are Mongoloid in appearance. They are close-knit and live in hill villages. Traditionally Thangals are farmers cultivating a range of crops such as rice and pulses; vegetables such as brinjal, potatoes, tomatoes, chillies, cucumber and mustard leaf; fruits such as mango, papaya, plantain, pomegranate; and fruits locally known as tii. The agricultural implements that these Thangal tribes use to a great extent are the adze, sickle, axe, plough, and yoke. Some villages practice jhum, or slash and burn agriculture. Animal husbandry and poultry farming are also the occupations which make them self-sufficient. Women are engaged in various cottage industries, especially weaving. The traditional attire of the Thangal tribe reflects the inherent simplistic lifestyle of the Thangal people. The people of the region, both men and women, generally dress in bright and colorful attire. The principal dress is largely traditional in nature. The way the Thangal people wear clothes is unique from other communities. During

social functions, the females wear clothes like the Thangal mekhela called pa-thoi, a wrap and shawl. The mekhela is the main ethnic dress of Thangal women, worn by women of all ages.

2. SOCIAL CHANGE

Social change is an interesting theme for historians, social reformers, Sociologists, social anthropologists and philosophers. The concept of social change became very popular in the 18th and 19th Centuries due to scientific discoveries, social reformations and cultural renaissance in Europe. Auguste Comte (1798-1857), J.S. Mill (1806-1873), Karl Marx (1818-1883), Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), Habhouse (1864-1929) and a host of other social scientists developed a number of theses in connection with the in changes which were taking place in different parts of the globeⁱ In many cases, the term ‘change’ is associated with the notions of ‘evolution’, ‘development’ and ‘progress’. But it is also worthy to mention that, change does not mean good things alone. Some human societies go backward and this process is known as devolution.ⁱⁱ Again, when a society remains stagnant because of certain constraints, the process is called evolution.ⁱⁱⁱ Besides, social changes are taking place as a result of internal and external forces.

Like other human societies, the Thangal Society also undergoes change. Changes amongst the Thangals became louder when Manipur was brought within the pale of British administration. In others words, modernization of the Manipur society in general and Thangal society in particular was first started with the occupation of Manipur by the British after the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891. It has already been mentioned in the previous chapter that certain changes were taking place in the administrative apparatus of the hill and plain areas of Manipur. This administrative transformation was followed by a chain of changes in different fields educational, economic, religious and social.

3. EDUCATIONAL CHANGES

Just to know more about the educational changes which are taking place amongst the Thangals in modern times, a word or two may be mentioned in connection with the traditional Educational system prevalent in pre-modern Thangal society. In this connection, it is worthy to mention Durkheim’s view on education. Here, Durkheim pointed out that education was an ‘action exercised by the older generations upon those who are not yet ready for social life. Its objective it to awaken and develop in the child those physical, intellectual and moral states which one required of him both by his society as a whole and by the milieu for which he is specially destined. Thus, we come to know that education does not mean literary education alone. It covers different specialized actions like physical education, training for moral upliftment and technical skill.^{iv} Thus, there are two types of education-literary and non-literary.’^v

While literary education was very limited amongst the Thangals, non-literary education, which consisted of physical training, martial art and physical education, technical skill etc. was strictly enforced among the entire population of the Thangals. It has also been stated in the previous chapter that for training in martial art and physical education, there were the tribal dormitories of the Thangal people.^{vi} Another interesting form of non-literary education was that the family, clubs and society as a whole through day-to-day routine works provided instruction to the youngsters on different subjects in formal ways. Moreover, through their participation in their annual social-religious functions like worship for the plentiful growth of crops, the young Thangal boys and girls could develop knowledge on different lines.^{vii}

4. INFLUENCE OF WESTERN EDUCATION

Even prior to British occupation, some British official from 1826 tried to impart western education to the hill people and the plain dwellers. They felt that it would eventually lead to better administration of justice and a gradual sweeping away of abuses.^{viii} All these schools established to impart western education, however, could not survive long. In brief, none of the English schools could function properly before 1891.

However, after 1891, when the British Indian government introduced a new administrative system in the state, modern education was once again introduced into the state with renewed energy. This time, western education became popular amongst the valley people as the new administrative system demanded a number of educated local people to staff its new administrative apparatus. But the tribal people of Manipur including the Thangals were quite ignorant of the newly the preview of the social and administrative system.

In spite of the continued efforts made by the British Indian Government, there were at first, little enthusiasm for modern education among the tribals. Modern education came to the Thangal villages very late. In 1952, a lower Primary School was established at Tumnoupokpi Thangal village.^{ix} It is said that this school was established on the advice of the Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. This School was upgraded to the Standard of Junior High School in 1978. The Tumnoupokpi Model Junior High School has been providing educational facilities not only to the children of the village but also to the children of the neighbouring villages. One Government U.J.B. School was established at Ningthoupham Thangal village in 1961. Now, it is run by three teachers. it has about 70 regular students.

At Mayang khang Thangal village, there is on Government U.J.B. School which was established in 1958. At present the school has three teachers and 70 students. There is one government U.J.B. School at Thangal Surung which imparts education from Nursery to Class V. The village of Angkailogdi does not have any educational institute. But the children of this school get

educational knowledge and facilities from the schools of Senapati. For higher studies, and professional course the Thangal students use to go to Imphal and other cities of India.

Table 4.1: The following Table shows the literacy rate of the Thangals^x

	Male	Female	Total
Primary	109	112	221
Middle	231	127	358
Matriculation	73	64	137
Higher Secondary	29	16	45
Graduate degree Other than Technical	13	7	20
Engineering & Technology	1	0	1
Veterinary	1	0	1

Here it is also worthy to mention that under the new educational system, some Thangal boys and girls qualify themselves as Officers, nurses, clerks, teachers and writer etc. Such changes were mainly due to the liberal ideas, ideologies, culture, custom and civilization of the west. Modern education is the storehouse of western literature developed by Homes, Daute, Shakespeare and a host of other European Writers.^{xi} It is through modern education that the educated Thangals and other Manipuris in general were introduced to philosophy of Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Hegal, Marx and Lenin.^{xii} In other words, western education along with its ideas and ideologies which the educated Thangals came across in course of their study were the powerful levers of social change in the Thangal society.

This is the strong belief of all the concerned that modern education is going to produce amongst the Thangals doctors trained in modern medical science, by lawyers versed in the structure of the new legal system, engineers conversant with modern technology and other efficient professional people.

5. RELIGIOUS CHANGES

Religion plays a better role in bringing about social change in the Thangal society. The first Christian missionaries who entered North-East India and roamed the valley of the Brahmaputra River were two Jesuit missionaries namely Stephen Cacetts and J. Gabral.^{xiii} In the later period, the American Baptist Mission also established their station at Sadya, a remote border area in Upper Assam.^{xiv} Such an enthusiastic religious enterprise taken up by the American Baptist was due to a book entitled Journey of Two Voyages along the cost of China in 1831 and 1832 written by an independent missionary named Charless Gulzlatt.^{xv} In this book, the author expressed his

optimistic hope for spreading Christianity in China.^{xvi} The other missionary group which carried out missionary activities amongst the tribals of N.E. India was the Serampore Mission of the British Missionary society.^{xvii} The first Christian Missionary who came to Manipur was William Pettigrew. The missionary arrived at Manipur on the 6th Feb. 1894.^{xviii} It is said that he entered Manipur with the hope of introducing Christianity among the Meeteis of the Manipur Valley. However, on the advice of the British officers, he went to Ukhrul to start his missionary activities.

Christianity reached the area of the Thangal very late. It came among the Thangals only in 1944 through foreign and national missionaries.^{xix} The Mapao Thangal was the first village to embrace Christianity.^{xx} The first Paster was Kd. Theiba of Mapao Thangal village. He died quite young. Gradually, all the Thangals became Christians.^{xxi} The first Christian song book 'Rira' (Laa) writer in Thangal was compiled in 1956 by Mr. Sangngo and Mr. A.S. Parang of Thangal village.^{xxii} The second song book 'Lamkapilaa' was also released by the Thangal Naga Music Committee under the supervision of Rev. The Thangemei, Mr. Kd. Phungshim, Mr. A.S. Parang and Mr. K. Pamei in 1975 at Gauhati.^{xxiii} It was published by the Christian Literature Centre. The third one was also released in 1995 at New Delhi.

In religious aspects, the Thangal had a well established religious system which met social, cultural and religious demands of the traditional Thangal society. This traditional religion continued to function for a longer period until Christianity was introduced amongst them. Under the traditional religion, there were a myriad of gods, namely, Keilong Raiba (Protector of the village), keiraiba (Household deity) and Gongraiba (deity of the hills) with Rira as the supreme god. According to the Thangals, the number of the goddess was very limited. They also worshipped tree, stones of extraordinary shape and sizes and other natural objects. Besides, forest, rivers, mountains, lakes and other objects of nature which were significant to them were also regarded as the symbols of gods. They were also aware of the existence of the evil spirits who could be propitiated with offerings made by the priests called Mals.

The Thangals were also influenced by the superstitious beliefs in omens, dreams, magical charms in all works of life. From all these, it can be said with precision that the religion of the Thangal Tribe had magic and black art as its essential ingredients. Such beliefs played a vital role in the socio-religious life of this tribe. Since the Thangals had faith in the adequacy of their traditional religion, it could be used as a remedy for psychological treatment as in the case of the other tribes of Manipur.^{xxiv} Here, mention may be made of the witch doctors who diagnose the neurotic ailments by means of propitiation thereby restoring the patients' psychic balance. At the group level, the tribal religions including that of the Thangals gave a sense of confidence, security and inspiration in earning certain mundane affairs like protection of the Tribal village

from external aggression and from internal dissension. This is that psychology which enabled the tribal people to meet calamities, fight enemies with a high morality and to hunt animals without fear.^{xxv} With regard to this, Kingsley Devis stated that "Science is always tentative and partial. It deals in probabilities, not in absolutes. Magic deals in absolutes and can therefore give confidence in a way that Science cannot".^{xxvi} Thus one has to appreciate the tribal religions which gave high moral standard, confidence, security and inspirations in earning certain mundane affairs.^{xxvii}

CONCLUSION

The Thangals also had a well established socio economic system. It has already been mentioned that the socio-economic institutions of the Thangal of the pre-colonial and pre-Christian period made the requirements of the traditional social life of this tribe based on self sufficiency of the family and of the village. Here, we know that the tribal didn't produce for market sale but for family and village consumption in olden days. Thus, traditional tribal economy was characterized by the existence of subsistence farming and self sufficiency. In short, before the advent of the British rule, the Thangals were self contained and didn't depend on any foreign countries for agricultural and industrial pursuits. So, during the Pre-British period, the people of the valley and the hills including the Thangals "required very little to make it a model native state of a unique type, its people happiest of the happy".^{xxviii} It has already been mentioned that the traditional system of education of the Thangals was mainly based on non-literary educational system. This non-literary educational system which had martial art, state craft, art of village defense etc. was imparted in the tribal dormitories of the Thangals. Regarding cultural aspects, it is a well known fact that the Thangals even today play a prominent role among the tribals of Manipur in dance and music. The traditional Thangal dances like Male-War dance, Male-group dance, Female-dance and a host of other have been widely acclaimed in all parts of Manipur and India. The modern songs of the Thangals are also popular among the major sections of Manipur. Their romantic songs and lullabies are the essential parts for composing the widely popular Manipuri songs.

However, change doesn't meant always good things alone. There is every fear of losing the centuries old Thangal customs tradition and culture under external influences. Here it is to be noted that such old ideas, values, thought and antiquarian artifacts are to be preserved with loving care as they are well associated with the identity of the tribal people. Now, the Thangal are at the cross road of identity crisis. Many factors are contributing to this. The most important factor is demographic. Although the census date show the increasing rate of population of the Thangals, yet the total population of this tribe is still less in number. Such things call for help from different sections. Here, the Indian constitution will act as the safeguard of this minority

tribe, and other depressed and backward classes. The fathers of the Indian Republic provided special constitutional safeguard for the tribes. Article 342 of the Indian constitution empowers the President of India to notify the list of Scheduled Tribes after due consultation with the governor of the state and any modification of the list can be made by Parliament.

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- ^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 205.
- ^v *Ibid.*, p. 209
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