

STATUS OF WOMEN IN HRANGKHOL SOCIETY: A CASE STUDY OF DIMA HASAO DISTRICT OF ASSAM

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Hrangkhols belonging to the Tibetan Mongoloid race are living in Dima Hasao district of Assam and are one of the earliest groups who migrated to the land. They have their traditional religion, cultural, political and economic activities where both of men and women are entangled. But women do not enjoy equal rights and status despite their enormous contribution to family and society. Like many other societies of the world civilization the women of the Hrangkhols tribe are suppressed by the men folk and the women are regarded as inferior. Hence the present study is intended to focus upon the status of the Hrangkhols women. The study is primarily based on field study due to the scarcity of written records.

The Hrangkhols are a hill tribe of Northeast India that possesses a rich socio-cultural heritage. The Hrangkhols live in the Dima Hasao district of Assam as well as in other areas of North East India like Mizoram, Manipur, and Tripura. Like many other ancient people as well as other Mongoloid groups, the Hrangkhols have their own legends about their origin. According to their legend, the Hrangkhols migrated to their present habitat from Khurpuitabum or Singlung (literally meant rock cave) in China. Among the tribal communities that presently live in North East India, the Hrangkhols are perhaps one of the earliest hill tribes of the Mongoloid race. Due to lack of written records, the actual time of their migration to Assam is not known. Based on oral traditions, it is believed that around the early part of the 4th century they left China and came down in to the plains of Myanmar and some parts of Tibet, where they settled for several centuries. After wandering for hundreds of years, they came down to the Lushai Hills (Mizoram) and remained in that area for about three hundred years. Since then, they were scattered in different parts of the states of Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya and Assam. In Assam, they are found in the areas of the Dima Hasao and Cachar Districts. There are twenty-five Hrangkhols villages in Assam with a population of more than six thousands. In the early part of the twentieth century, the majority of the Hrangkhols converted to Christianity. The Hrangkhols are generally grouped in the Kuki-Lushai tribes. The Hrangkhols descended from the Kuki-Lushai tribes. Due to their nomadic habits, they perhaps moved across the plains of Cachar and settled in Dima Hasao District of Assam.

Like the other societies, the Hrangkhols women have been playing a significant role in day-to-day life in their society. Generally in tribal societies the status of women is strong in their socio-political and cultural life. However, exception lies

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in the Hrangkhoh society where women have marginal status compared to their male counterpart. Therefore, the present paper is intended to focus upon the status of women in the Hrangkhoh society.

The Status of the Women in the Family

The Hrangkhohs follow a patriarchal system of family structure. After marriage the women are required to adopt the title of their husband. Except for working to fulfil her household needs the women cannot exercise any authority in any aspect of the social life and they occupy a status inferior to their male counterparts in the traditional Hrangkhoh society. They have no power to exercise their views in the society; the women have to remain submissive and dependent upon the male. According to the Hrangkhoh customary laws and practices, the women do not enjoy the right to the property of their parents or even in the property of their husbands. The Hrangkhohs believe that women are incapable of holding property. Girls are sometimes allowed to retain a small portion of the jewellery belonging to their mother, but that is all (Soppitt:1893: 6). If a man has only daughters, the property passes to the nearest male relative of the deceased, while the daughters receive nothing (interview with Kalim). So also on the death of a husband without any son, the property does not remain with the widow, but passes to the nearest male relative of the deceased. Being the head of the family the father performs all the socio-religious rituals of the family but the women are prohibited from performing the same. The women are never allowed to be the head of the family. All earnings by the individual members of the family go to the account of the father. However, the wife and the grown up children in a family are allowed to keep a certain amount for their own requirement. Having a conversation between male and female members within family is very rare. Even the husband never address his wife by name, rather he address her by saying '*uai*' and vice versa or as the mother of "x" or father of "y" etc.

After the death of the father, the elder son (if he is adult) takes the responsibility of the family including his widowed mother. In case of the son of the deceased is a minor, the close relatives on the paternal side takes the responsibility of the family until the child attains adulthood. The widow, while shouldering responsibility of the family is always required to consult with the relatives of the husband in the maintenance of the family. Traditionally, the Hrangkhoh women are not allowed to be the head of the family; hence, she is bound to take advice from the male members from among her husband's relatives.

In a universalised concept of a family, women have to do a lot of work and bear responsibility in every domain of life. The works she has to do exclusively are cooking and offering the rice to the family members (rice is the staple food of the Hrangkhohs), pounding rice in the mortar and pestle, brewing rice beer, cleaning in and around the house, offering food to the fowls and pigs, etc., and weaving at

the handloom. Other tasks are performed by both male and female: collecting fire wood, fetching water, collecting roots, plants, leaves, wild fruits and vegetables from the forest, etc. Despite these, the Hrangkhols women do not have any voice in the family and women are not allowed to be the head of the family. If there is no male issue, widows have to follow the instruction from her husband's nearest male member. This reflects the low social status of women.

Status in Religious Affairs

The Hrangkhols have their own religion and they worship almost twenty two gods and goddess at different times, related with day-to-day life. It is noteworthy that the traditional Hrangkhols people use a large part of their gross income on their religious activities. But the Hrangkhols women are denied religious rights. The *Bojol*, an open place near the river or any source of water used as a sacred place of worship by the Hrangkhols community is closed to the women. They are not allowed to officiate as the priest to perform worship nor are they allowed to participate in the *pujas* celebrated in the *Bojol*. Women are not entitled to enjoy equal religious rights and social status with the men under the traditional system of religion. Practically *bojol*, the place of sacrifice or the *pujas* are closed for the women, which is a rare custom in the tribal society of northeast India. Women are regarded as impure during the period of menstruation and during this time their husbands too are also not allowed to participate in any religious activities.

However, a great transformation has occurred in the Hrangkhols society with the advent of Christianity. The Hrangkhols women from families that have converted to Christianity have been liberated to some extent from the low status in the religious and social sphere. Women are now working in different portfolios of Church and are permitted to participate in prayers of the Church along with the men. However they still do not enjoy the property rights.

Marriage System and the Status of Women

The Hrangkhols women enjoy a certain amount of freedom regarding marriage. The normal age of marriage for the women is twenty years. Love marriage and the liberty to choose their mate is accepted by the society. The system of dowry is absent among the Hrangkhols which is a burning problem in many parts of India at present. To honour a girl a bride price is paid by the family of a prospective groom. Both polygamy and polyandry are not practiced, but the widows are allowed to remarry immediately after the death of their husbands. On the other hand a widow is bound to marry her deceased husband's younger brother without any objection, a custom that demonstrated the inferior status of women. Although, the status of woman is not equal to that of the male, Hrangkhols society treats women with respect.

Political Status

The Hrangkhol community has a high degree of social cohesion and identity. However, in political life, women have no right to raise their voice. They have to keep themselves away from active discussions in any matter. The Hrangkhols have a democratic tradition in political life known as *Halām* where every kind of social and family dispute is solved democratically. They have three tier administrative system like *Kho Devan* (village court), *Satha devan* (inter village court) and *Halām* as supreme judiciary system of the whole community in the district. But the women have no rights to participate in this local government system. They have no rights to be the member of these popular branches of administration, even their advices or any opinions to any disputes are not given any importance. Popular proverbs compare woman sometimes with children and sometimes as the door to the hell.

Nujuar-literally meaning a case against illicit relation of women, married or unmarried is the only administrative institution where the Hrangkhol women can participate. However, this institution is exclusively for the women. In household activities, women have equal duty to husbands but in status the women are always inferior to their counterpart men. The women are not attracted about the modern political exercise extended by the Indian constitution. Till today, there is no one from the woman community who participate in the political exercise like Member of Legislative Assembly, parliament or in the Autonomous District Council, while one member for district council is reserved for the Hrangkhol community.

Educational Status

However, it is interesting to note that there is no bar for women on receiving education, but the literacy rate of the women is less in comparison to that of the men. The education scenario in Dima Hasao district is not good as a whole and the people of the Hrangkhol community live in the hill areas where communication is generally not good and one cannot easily go out from the village to the town or any other institution for education. Today it seems that women's education is advancing without any sex discrimination. Of the two doctors in the community, one is a woman. From the 250 families surveyed the poor educational status of the Hrangkhol women is revealed. 78.7% of traditional Hrangkhol women and 67.2% of the Christian Hrangkhol women are illiterate and 13.3% and 24.4% of traditional and Christian women respectively have passed primary school. Only 6% of the women have passed High school or Higher Secondary school. The following table shows the education level of the mother of the respondent which will show the poor level of women education in Hrangkhol tribe.

Christianity, Modernity and the Women

In Christian Hrangkhol, there is no discrimination in religious affairs, as the women have the right to go to the church along with the male partner. Women now get the

TABLE 1: LEVEL OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION AMONG HRANGKHOL TRIBE

	<i>Traditional</i>		<i>Christian</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>Count</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>%</i>
Illiterate	59	78.7	109	62.3	168	67.2
Primary	10	13.3	51	29.1	61	24.4
High School	5	6.7	10	5.7	15	6.0
Higher Secondary	1	1.3	5	2.9	6	2.4
Total	75	100.0	175	100.0	250	100.0

(Source: field study)

same status in Christianity in every spheres of religious life. Along with the religion, the Christian women are quite advanced in education and in government job also. If the husband is not available at home for some time or expired, Christianity offered the full rights to her to be the head of the family. But Christian Hrangkhols also accept their traditional judiciary called *Halam* and accordingly the participation of the women are still restricted. The rights of the property also not offered to the woman through the Christianity although it is prevalent in Christianity. Both the traditional and converts Hrangkhols are not ready to offer the equal rights and in respect of inheritance and judiciary to the women. The process of modernization has been creeping in social system of the Hrangkhols. The young women started to get education and exposed to modernity. Now they adopt the western style of dresses, joined in modern economic activities and gradually develop their confidence as the counterpart. But still they have to go long way to get the equal status with the man.

Conclusion

In conclusion it has been found that conversion of Hrangkhols to Christianity has gradually improved the status of women in their society especially in the field of religion and family life. But a lot still needs to be done for the improvement of women's status particularly in the field of property rights, religious and political activities. The need of the hour is the proper education among the women. The social outlook of the both sexes needs to be changed so that women can accommodate themselves in the mainstream of the society with dignity and status.

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