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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### WOMEN POSITION IN THE TRADITIONAL KHARAM SOCIETY: AN ETHNO HISTORICAL APPROACH

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#### ABSTRACT

The Kharams are one of the natives of Manipur. Being a patrilineal society, only the sons inherit the family property. However, if the parents are rich; they offer even the immovable property to their daughters as marriage gift. But in comparing with other tribes, the Kharam woman enjoys more power and privileges in the society. A woman has the right to marry, divorce and choose mate according to her own choice. The women play vital role in running and maintaining the house. They are very hard working. They participate in the field work (agricultural) and they are experts in the art of spinning and weaving in different designs and some of them earned their livelihood by means of weaving. Even though their task is confined in the families there are certain works which cannot be completed without their help. They also take part in the field of socio-economic, political and cultural activities of the society. They are not represented in the village council (Kataar) but they are powerful and influential in getting their wishes through their husbands. In fact, women in Kharam society play a great role in building up the economy of the family. They find a place in religious activities. They are also respected by their counterparts. The data are based on available primary and secondary sources.

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#### INTRODUCTION

The Kharams, one of the natives of Manipur belong to Tibeto-Burman family (Grierson, 2000). They are recognized as scheduled tribe by the Government of India only in January 2003(The second schedule, part x, 2003). The term *Kharam* means southerners; (*Kha* means south and *Ram*, southerner). Like other tribes of Manipur, the Kharams also trace their origin to a cave. It is in conformity with their folk song sung by female singers locally called *Lapi* group during their annual festival in October, which says: "Look, here we came out from this cave. Our life in this world is enjoyable than in the cave." According to their tradition, there was a tiger at the entrance of the cave, which killed and ate whoever came out of it. One day a man disguising himself as tiger came out of the cave. On seeing him friendly gesture, the tiger remained silent and left the spot. Thus, man emerged out of the cave. It is believed that the said cave is located somewhere near the *Makhel*, about ten kilometers away from *Oklong* village, Senapati District, Manipur (Singh, 2007). Another theory suggests that the Kharams along with other ethnic groups of Tibeto-Burman family came from two regions; south-East Asia and Eastern Tibet or Western China. As they are Tibeto-Burman, they must have lived with other groups of the same family in south West China before 1000 B.C and migrated to

eastern Tibet, Upper Burma, then moved into Irrawaddy valley, Malaysia and Indonesia, and they returned southward and entered north East India through Manipur river, and some tracts of Indo-Burma border to their present habitat (Kamei, 2004). After emerged out of the cave, the tradition further relates that they settled on the west of Makhel at Makuilongdi, a big village and in course of time their population increased as many as 7777(seven thousand seven hundred only)(Gina, 2006). From there, they migrated to southwards following the course of the Gowai River and settled at Gokkoklong, Tamenglong District along with other tribes like Rongmei, Aimol, Chiru etc. As differences cropped up with the Rongmei, they parted from there and migrated southwards and finally settled at Khudungsaitaakboi, which is believed to be located near the border of Lushai hills, present Churachandpur District. Now, they are found inhabiting in four villages, namely Kharam Pallen, Tampak Kharam, Tuisaphai and Laikot Phai, Senapati District. These people are also found scattered in different villages like Laikot, Charoi Chagotlong, Sempangiar, Lowangsengol, Senam Kom, Wakanphai, Natok Kabui, Gaipuinam, Langol Tarung, Theiyong etc. Of these Laikot, a Kom village, the Kharams form a major population (Singh, 2007).

#### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data of the study are based on the available primary and secondary materials of published works and also on field work

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interview with knowledgeable persons of the Kharam community.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

No serious research work women position in the traditional Kharam has done by any scholar consulting and using all the available sources. But some scholars have been brought to light on the subject matter in their respective works. However, still await thorough investigation and treatment within a wide canvas. It can be stated that the Kharams have inherited their property through male line, i.e. the preference in the matter of inheritance has been given to male only. In contrast to it, the women also have some privilege in this matter, i.e. in the absence of a son in a family, the daughter (s) has (have) the right to inherit her (their) parental property including house, land and mother's property. The Kharam society is a patrilineal society and more important is given to male members. They are divided into seven exogamous clans namely; Saichal, Raangla, Saiphu, Jaiche, Rakhou, Marem and Seilon. The term 'status' is a very elusive one. In sociological literature the term status is used as a synonym for 'role' (Majumdar and Madan, 1987:141). The Kharam women enjoy a great deal of freedom. They have right to marry, divorce and choose their mates of their own choice. The constraints on social liberty do not appear to be suppressive. The social participation of a woman does not pose for any significant social disability. Women are not secluded and they have freely consumed meat and drink rice-beer in the company of menfolk. Men and woman dance together. Kinship prescriptions do not debar them. No disparity marks the celebration of male and female childbirths. The rites and ceremonies are almost common to them. In a family a woman does enjoy a privileged position. The family and kinship usages do not burden her with extra taboos and impositions. She has, more or less, those restrictions which are also applicable to men. In inter-personal relations in the intra-family situations the role of woman is almost at par with the man. In the arena of competence the woman is not considered inferior to man. Apart from her being physically strong, she is not considered intelligent.

### Right of inheritance

In the traditional Kharam society, the right of inheritance for women is not clearly shown from their family of orientation (i.e. from their parents). They can only inherit some property like paddy fields from their parents (if the parents are wealthy persons and offer the item as marriage gift). Otherwise they have no right to claim as it is a male dominated society. Unlike the Garos, no daughters can inherit property of the parents (Play Fair, 1975). On the other hand a woman can inherit the property whatever her husband possesses. She has the right to distribute it among her children according to her will.

If the husband has a second wife and the first wife remains silent at her husband's residence with or without her children, she gets half of her husband's property otherwise she does not have any right to claim. If a husband wants to divorce her without her fault, he returns the bridal gifts along with the divorced woman. On the other hand, the bride-price called *Mann* is forfeited by the woman's party. If the woman is a wrong doer or guilty person she or her party return bride price whatever was taken at the time of their marriage.

### Woman's role in the economic activities

The women play a very important role in the Kharam society, particularly in the economic activities. In short, every aspect of economic activities falls in the hands of womenfolk. For example, a woman's work includes different activities starting from household chores to the heavy work of agricultural and horticultural activities. It is the normal duty of a woman to collect drinking water from the water resources (ponds/spring/river), firewood from the nearby woods, edible items like vegetables, roots, shoots, tubers, spices and fruits either from jhum fields (cultivated) or forests (wild). In addition to this, she prepares the jhum fields either *Rampui* or *Kanglei* by tilling or uprooting the soils with the help of a small hoe called *Katu* for the plantation of various crops at the same time (mixed cropping). The main duties of the menfolk (either husband or parents or guardians or brothers) are to fall down the trees of the thick forest, let them dry in the sun and burnt them (slash and burnt method). After sowing the seeds, it is also the duty of the woman to protect the seeds from birds and animals during the day time till the seeds germinate. Moreover, they also take tender care to grow the plants nicely. In this regard they are weeders too. As stated above, the male members take part in clearing the jhum fields (*Rampui* and *Kanglei*) and making fences to protect the crops from wild animals. Above all, during harvesting also women take major part i.e. they use to reap, thrash and transport the harvested crops. As stated earlier, women use to collect water for their daily use (for cooking, cleaning, bathing, washing, wiping etc.). Similarly, they collect the logs of firewood on their shoulders using their transporting baskets (*Singkong*). After reaching home, it is their duty to cut the firewood logs into small pieces to dry in the sun and burn quickly. The same process is followed in the case of paddy. They help in transporting the harvested crops and store them in their granaries. Then it is also their duty to let the paddy dry in the sun (bask) and husk or pound them. They make it ready for cooking and also for brewing rice-beer. Moreover, it is their routine work to maintain their family with food supplements (a short of gathering economy is still practicing) and cash.

Every woman in the Kharam society usually rears various domestic animals for their own consumption or for economic development of the family (if the woman is married) or of her own (if the woman is unmarried, this is counted as her property) and becomes her bridal property. The domesticated animals include fowls, dog, pig and mithuns, but the workload falls to menfolk (mostly of these animals are counted as the wealth or cash animals for male members of the Kharam society). It is the right of women to sell or buy these domestic animals (fowl, dog, pig etc.), thus men have no right over these domesticated animals. They cannot consume or sell without the consent of the woman concerned. To rear these animals (cited above), the woman takes all the possible responsibilities like feeding, taking care or looking after them etc. In some families, they are helped by their children. The Kharam women are also good weavers. They weave different clothes for their own use, because it is the duty of the woman to supply the clothing of her family members by weaving. The woman who does not have the idea of weaving is laughed at by the members of the society. She is not appreciated by all. In the case of unmarried girls, people use to select the girl who is skilled in all respects and her *Mann* (bride price) is also high. According to Kharam custom and tradition, weaving is an

inseparable work of economic activity assigned to each and every woman. Nowadays, many Kharam women become interested in selling their own produces to the market. The market centres are the *Lamlong* Bazar for the Laikot Phaizol, the Laikot Kharam and the Tuisenphai villages and the Imphal proper for the Kharam Pallen and the Tampak Kharam village. Thus most of their agricultural and horticultural products are sold by themselves directly in these markets.

### Woman's role in the household management

The main work of the woman in the household management is started with the household chores. It is stated in the woman's role in the economic activities that all works fall on the womenfolk. For instance, they use to work their meals and feed their family members. Before cooking, they usually pound the rice as it is their routine work. They also arrange the vegetables or any edible items (either roots or shoots or tubers or edible lichens and fungi) to prepare their daily curry. Thus various types of curry are prepared from their own collection from their kitchen gardens, jhum fields and forests. Menfolk on the other hand supply the meat of wild animals that they hunted from the forests or fishes caught from streams and rivers. The remaining necessary materials are taken care of by the women. The Kharams depend upon the woman for her capacity and capability as manager of the house. They considered that the woman is the only responsible person of kitchen. Thus for their daily consumption, the women usually cultivate various leafy spices in their kitchen gardens and jhum fields. In addition to these domesticated spices various wild spices (in the form of leaves, fruits, roots etc.) are also collected from forests not only for their own consumption but as cash crop also. Besides cooking and collecting vegetables and spices, the Kharam women usually collect water for their daily use and firewood for cooking. The washing of clothes is also assigned to women. In addition to this, they look after their children. They weave clothes for their family use. Above all, it is also the duty of women to look after all the domesticated animals. Thus, the Kharam women are very laborious. They bear all the responsibilities assigned to them. In all respects, they are indeed worthy of praise.

### Woman's role in the religious activities

The Kharam religion has not debarred the woman's participation in various rituals, festivals and ceremonies. The women have also been admitted in the religious order. It is clearly seen in the annual festival of the *Lapi Kahoi* (festivals for the female singers called *Lapi*). On the festival day, the *Taangwas* ready rice-beer pot, called *Yubel* with eight sipping bamboo pipes (for eight leaders). The four female leaders sit around the *Yubel*, and then they are encircled (in the next round) by the four male leaders. The sipping of the rice-beer from that *Yubel* is started first by the four female leaders and it is followed by the four male leaders. It clearly shows that in the Kharam society the women find a place in the religious activities. They are also respected by their counterparts. The other religious activities attended frequently by the Kharam women are : i) in the funerary, ii) in the wedding ceremony, iii) the birth ritual, iv) the various types of feasts-of-merit, v) the *Meithal kaap* and other annual festivals and vi) the worshipping of god, deity and spirits (individual and village level both) to protect them from illness, sufferings etc. On the other hand there are some religious activities where women

and children are not allowed. If someone violates this prohibition a heavy fine is imposed upon the guilty person. For instance, women and children are not allowed to go out of their respective houses while the *Kaangrai Mindai* ritual and the *Thi Kaphou* rituals are performing.

### Woman's role in the political activities

In the traditional mechanism of social control, the woman has hardly given any place. This position has always been occupied by the members of menfolk. So they are totally out of scene in this regard. However, they are not represented in the village council but they are powerful and influential in getting their wishes through their husbands (Budha, 2014).

### Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be stated that the Kharams have inherited their property through male line, i.e. the preference in the matter of inheritance has been given to male only. In contrast to it, the women also have some privilege in this matter, i.e. in the absence of a son in a family, the daughter (s) has (have) the right to inherit her (their) parental property including house, land and mother's property. The difficult physical conditions and the limited working season compel the Kharams to work hard for their existence. The women make more contribution in agricultural and horticultural activities. This is the addition to their household chores including weaving. The Kharam women have enjoyed more freedom and privileges in their social, cultural and religious life. The only disadvantage is in the field of education. Girls were never encouraged for higher studies. So they remained uneducated for a long time. Now, girls are taking up education in large number and the number of school going girl is increasing day by day. With increasing education the change in the outlook has also been marked.

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