

## **Role of the Chief in Administration of Traditional Village System: A Study of Thangkhal Village in Manipur**

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### **Abstract**

*The Thangkhal are one of the many tribes found mostly in Manipur state especially in Churachandpur district. They evolved their own traditional administrative institution. Their village administration was looked after by the chief who was called "Hausa". He was the man who established the village for the villagers. The chief was helped in his day to day administration by a few selected elders. Theoretically, all the powers in the village are vested in the chief and he is a despot. But in practice, he administered the village as advised by members of the village council who are selected by the chief from the people whom he favoured. He also had the right to dismiss any of his village council members at any moment without assigning any reason thereof. He presided over the meetings of the council which were generally held in his house. They took all the decisions in the village which are followed by the villagers. In this paper, an attempt is made to give an elaborate account of the role played by the Thangkhal chief in the administration of traditional village system.*

**Key words:** Thangkhal, Chief, Village, Tradition, Administration.

### **Introduction**

The Thangkhal are one of the many tribes found mostly in Manipur state especially in Churachandpur district. They belong to the Mongoloid stock of the Kuki-Chin-Mizo group of tribes. They also belong to the Tibeto-Burman family, speaking the Tibeto-Burman language. They claimed their origin from 'Khul' which means cave, a place which has not been ascertained to any degree of certainty, as their traditional home.

Like any other tribal group, the traditional Thangkhal village was under

the control of one person called 'Hausa' which means chief. His post is not elective but hereditary and is passed on from father to his eldest son, who otherwise is known as 'Upa' (Gangte, 2003). Without a chief, no village can be established. It was the chief who established or founded the village and has the supreme power in the village. The chief was helped in his day to day administration by a few selected elders. Theoretically, all the powers in the village belong to the chief and he is a despot. But in practice, he administered the village as advised by the village council who are selected by the chief from

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the people whom he favoured. He also had the right to dismiss any of his Upas at any moment without assigning any reason thereof (Sangkima, 1992). He presided over the meetings of the council which were generally held in his house (Malsawma, 2002). Decisions were usually taken by the consensus of this council (Hluna, 1992). However, he usually ruled the people according to the customary law of the Thangkhal as his subjects can desert him if he rules despotically and move to other villages as they were free to move and shift to any village as they wished. This check on his power, however, did not diminish the importance of the chief in his village (Rualkhumzo, 2004).

A Thangkhal chief was succeeded by his eldest son, that is his legitimate son. If he had no legitimate son, his eldest meita (son of concubine) succeeded to his chieftainship. Thus, this paper throws some light on the role played, and privileges enjoyed by the traditional Thangkhal Chiefs in administering his village.

### **Role of the Chief**

The Thangkhal chief was responsible for the control of the village administration. He along with his council members worked for the welfare of the villagers. The welfare and security of the people were the prime concern of the chief. It was the duty of the villagers to obey the orders and decisions of the chief with his councilors. All matters relating to the issue of orders, framing of rules and regulations and important instructions

were made by the chief and his councilors based upon the customs and traditions of the people. Those who disobeyed were punished and even expelled from the village (Rao, et al, 1987).

A Thangkhal chief was responsible for taking care of the poor, orphans, widows, sick and any needy people in the village. He had to provide food and shelter to those people. He also had the right to receive and protect any criminal who took shelter in his house. By accident or intentionally, if someone killed another person, to escape punishment, such persons can take shelter in the chief's house (Nunthara, 1996) and no one can harm him until his case was heard in the chief's court and final decision was made.

The chief was also empowered to work as the dispenser of social justice in his village. His court functioned as the highest legal authority in the village (Sharma, 1992). Cases like murder, theft, adultery, seduction, etc. are settled by the chief and his councilors. His verdict was final and binding on both the parties. The council can discuss any matter. It tried both civil and criminal cases. The appellant would bring a jar of rice beer at the court as a court fee to file a law suit. Only after this, the council including some of the elder people in the village will discuss and decide the case. In such cases, if any member of the council including the chief had any connection with the impending case, they did not participate in the deliberation, nor would interfere with the findings or decisions

(Niangdeihnuam, 2008). The council was the only court and there was no other court of appeal. The court would take up all the cases and its decision was final and binding on the people. The village court acted as a court of compromise within the society (Ralte and Malsawmliana, 2011). After the case has been heard, the court imposes fine upon the guilty party. A fine of salam (a pig) and zubel (a pot of rice beer) was imposed on the guilty party according to the customary law of the Thangkhal if the case is not serious. However, if the case is a serious one, the guilty party will be fined salam, zubel and sialpi (a mithun). The mithun will be given to the winner party. The chief and his Upas - the elders would usually spend the salam on a feast. The salam and the zubel are the privileges enjoyed by the council. However, all these are done not to hurt any party but to bring compromise among the parties in particular and in the society in general.

In a Thangkhal village, the chief was virtually the proprietor of the entire village land called Gam (Rao, et al, 1987). It was his duty to make allotment of lands for house building and cultivation among the villagers in consultation with his council members. If anyone from other villages want to migrate to the village, he or she has to ask permission for settling in the village from the chief. Again, the chief also had the power to banish any subject from his village if they do not obey the rules and regulations of the village and he can also confiscate all the properties (Niangdeihnuam, 2008). In such cases, all

the confiscated properties will be taken by the chief.

It was also the duty of the chief to welcome distinguished visitors to the village. He had to take care of the visitors during his or her stay in the village (Chambers, reprint 2005). It was also his duty to provide food, shelter and safety to the visitors during their sojourn in the village.

In the traditional Thangkhal village, the chief with his council members looked after the administration of the village. Theoretically, all the powers are vested in the chief. He decides all the cases in consultation with his council members. All the village officials like the Manchillis, Tangsam, Sikkheng, Siampu were appointed by him. They all worked together for the welfare of the village.

#### **Privileges of the Chief**

A Thangkhal chief had certain privileges for looking after the village. As he was busy in looking after the village administration, he had some privileges. All that the village contained belonged to the chief and he could call upon his people to furnish him with anything that he required. The privileges enjoyed by the Thangkhal chief in his village are:

*Saliang*: It is the right leg of an animal killed or caught in trap by the villagers in a jungle hunt. It is a must for every villager to give this saliang to the chief (Rao, et al, 1991). In case the villager failed to pay this tax, he had to pay a fine of sialpi (a mithun) and salam (a pig) as compensation to the chief.

*Tangseu* : It is paddy given by the villagers to the chief every year which is a bamboo basketful containing about 3 tins. The amount may differ from village to village. It is likely that the Manchillis and widows were exempted from this due. Those who did not pay Tangseu would be fined Sialpi and Salam by the chief. For giving Tangseu, a particular day was fixed. On that particular day, the villagers would bring the fixed amount of paddy to be given to the chief. In return, the chief would feed the whole village with rice beer called Tangseu zu or Buh seu zu in return for what he got from the villagers by way of tax. His councillors also contribute or donate pots of rice beer on this day (Chinminlian, 2011).

Manual labour (Free construction of house): Another important right of the chief was to have his house built by the villagers without payment of any cost either for labour or collection of building materials when his house needed to be repaired or to be newly constructed. For this, at least one person from each household will come for constructing the chief's house. It was, however, customary for the chief to give a feast to the villagers when the house was completed (Chatterji, reprint 2008).

Thus, in return for the services rendered by the villagers, free of cost and the tributes paid as token of loyalty, recognition, obedience and solidarity, the Hausa has to protect their interests by providing security socially, politically and economically. It is also the bounded duty

of the Hausa to see that every villager is protected from external aggression and danger (Gangte, 2003)

### **Limitations and Check on the Chief**

Theoretically, the chief enjoyed enormous powers in his village. He was all in all in the village and no one could question his authority. However, in reality, his powers were not without limitation. He had to act according to the customary laws. If he becomes too tyrannical, his subjects could leave and migrate to other villages and seek shelter under another chief (Rao, et al, 1991). They had the right to migrate to any village of their choice. Even if the chief did not allow, he could move stealthily at night (Paite in Mizoram, 2011). As his power also depended on the number of houses over which he ruled, he had to look after the welfare of the people and not be too tyrannical. He also had to take into account the advice and opinions of the councillors who were there to help him in any decision making. Sometimes, if the chief was inefficient and incompetent, there were chances of reducing him to a mere puppet and his councillors overruling him.

### **Conclusions**

The Thangkhal who belong to the Mongoloid stock of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo group of tribes are mostly found in the southern part of Manipur. Traditionally, they were under the rule of a chief called Hausa (chief). The post of the chief was hereditary and passed on to the eldest legitimate son. As he spent most of his time in looking after the welfare of his

subjects he was given privileges like Saliang, Tangseu and free construction or repair of his house. Theoretically, the chief enjoyed enormous powers in his village. However, he was bound by the customary laws or else his subjects could leave and migrate to other villages and seek shelter under other chiefs.

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