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“Once Self-Sufficient And Egalitarian Tribal Economy Transformed Into Dependent Economy: The Tangkhul Economy”

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Abstract:

This article presents the economy of the Tangkhul Naga tribe as an egalitarian economy. The Tangkhul Naga tribe is one of the numerous sub-tribes of the Naga tribe inhabiting the Himalayan hill in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, and Myanmar. It is a paper that presents the tribe as a self-sufficient village community with very little contact with the outside world. They are agriculturists and were able to sustain themselves with what they cultivate and what nature provides in the wild. They were contented with who they were and what they had until the arrival of the missionary and exposure to the outside world. It was then that their needs and economic activities began to increase and the dependence on the outside world set in.

Terms

Tangkhul Naga, self-sufficient, egalitarian, agrarian economy, dormitories, age set, barter system

Introduction

The Northeast region of India is home to numerous tribes. One of the major tribes inhabiting this region is the great warrior tribe of the Nagas. The Naga tribe have numerous sub-tribes again occupying the parts of the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland. Some of the Naga tribes are also found across the border Myanmar. They live in villages on the hilltops as independent republic state govern by a chief and assisted by the council of elders. The origin of the nomenclature “Naga” is shrouded in mystery and seemed to have been coined by the outside world in recent times.

One of the largest Naga subtribes are the Tangkhuls who live in the eastern part of Manipur occupying the Ukhrul district. There are some Tangkhul villages across the border in Myanmar in the Somrah track. They are animistic when it comes to religion and farmers by profession. They are warriors and known for head hunting but at the same time very hospitable to everyone except the enemies. This history of the Tangkhuls doesn't seem to clearly reveal from where they originally came and how they came to occupy the present territory as they heavily depended on oral mode of learning.

The first Missionary Rev. William Pettigrew came to Ukhrul by default in 1896 and started a school. Ever since then the socio-economic and political system of the tribe has seen drastic changes. They were the first tribe to receive western education and Proselytization. Thus, even today they have very high percentage of Christians population and very high literacy rate. This have either destroyed the very social fabric on which the tribe had built on for centuries, brought about massive changes in the economic activities of the tribe (B.G. Verghese). The religion also has shifted from animistic to Christianity while the republic form of village administration have given way to democracy even though the traditional village administration by the chief and the council of elders is still practiced and in place.

The socio-economic and political system since time immemorial was such that every village was self-sufficient (R.R. Shimray) even though they do not have much. Producing enough to last a season was the objective of every economic activity and commercialization was never the agenda. The needs were few (G.E.R Grant Brown) and the agricultural activities and resources in the fauna and flora were enough to meet the need of the tribe. The customs and traditions were customized in such a way that every member of the village materialistic need is cared for and no member of the village is discriminated. The village was egalitarian in nature since they believed in collective responsibility toward one another.

Tangkhul tribe as a self-reliant and egalitarian Society:

1. Agrarian economy

The Tangkhul economy is an agrarian economy (Shibani Roy & S.H.M.Rizvi). The agricultural activities commence with the celebration of the new year festival or the seed sowing festival known as "Luira". Their staple food is Rice, and this is what they cultivate in abundance. According to the topography of the landscape, they either do their farming as terrace fields or Jhum (Shibani Roy & S.H.M.Rizvi). The southern kingdom is known for Jhum cultivation while the rest practices terrace farming (Khashim Ruivah). Terrace farming is of two types: the perennial wet field and the seasonal fields depending on the monsoon rain. The perennial wet fields are supposedly more fertile and productive and easier to cultivate.

Besides paddy they also cultivate variety of vegetables such as mustard leaves (Kayanghan), cabbage (Kopi), potato (Mayangpai), beans (Ringronthei), chilli (Kasathei), cucumber (Karopthei), pumpkin

(Khaimaithei), Maize (khamathei) etc. The rich tropical forest also supplies plentiful seasonal fruits, nuts and berries. The common horticultural products of the community are Plum (Heikhathei), Peach (Mayangthei), passion fruit (stabor) etc.

All agricultural activities are carried out by every family in the privately owned property or in the commonly owned landed property of the village “Khamaram”. The economically poorer individuals or families are given permission to cultivate in such land so that none in the village should starve. They do not produce to commercialize but labor hard to produce maximum to ensure sufficient production to last till the next harvest. It was like “Household production, Household consumption” (U.A. Shimray). In the event of lack of foodgrains, they may borrow from fellow villagers in exchange for labor.

The seed sowing festival is usually observed in the month of February/March as per the decision of the village which commences the agricultural activities of the year. This is the biggest and most important festival which is even celebrated with a lot of fanfare even today. It is followed by various stages of agricultural activities and festivities which finally culminate in the harvest festival “Chumpha” (Khashim Ruivah).

2. Age sets/groups

One of the interesting traditions in the Tangkhul community is the practice and significance of age sets “Yarnao”. This is a tradition in which people of the same age form a group. This group plays a significant role in society socially and economically. Young people are encouraged at a very young age to know their age group and form a bond. The age group becomes part and partial to the individual. Most of the major activities and festivities are celebrated as age groups. Infact there is a special festival of the age groups called as “Yarra kashak”. It is celebrated for 14 days right after the seed sowing festival.

The age sets are socially important because generally it is within this age group that young people find their life partners, they celebrate festivals together, they shoulder the burden of marriages and festivities together, every member is equal regardless of their economic status, even in the event of death it is the age set that cares. Economically the age set is significant as they do all agricultural activities together as a group on rotational basis (A.S.W. Shimray) thus there sufficient supply of labor, the labor required during festivals, wedding, death etc. are all shouldered mostly by the members of the age set.

3. Collective housing

The Tangkhuls are known for construction of houses because of the tradition of nucleus family. Once the son is married he moves into a newly constructed house on the property inherited or the parents and the remaining family members moves out from the family home into a new one (T.C. Hodson). Thus, there is always construction of houses in the village.

There are different kinds of houses constructed, the ordinary house and the special house “Lengchengshim”, and the dormitory “Longshim “. The ordinary house is constructed by the family with the help of the clan and the age sets in terms of labor and materials. Lengchengshim is constructed by the whole village together, while the “Longshim” is the dormitory of the village or hosted by a well to do family and the members are responsible for it. The house constructed usually has the room for the animals first, followed by the kitchen with the hearth and then the bedroom with the granaries.

Thus, we find that every family in the village has a house to live in even though the size may differ. The family and the clan take a collective responsibility to ensure that the materialistic needs of every member are taken care. The widows and the orphans are also cared for by the clan because it is considered a shame for any member to lack anything within the clan.

4. Industrial production

The economy of Tangkhul Naga does not have any large or medium industries engaging in industrial production. This is not because it does not have the resources, but it can be attributed to the lifestyle of sharing rather than selling. Things have slowly been changing with the introduction of money. Yet, industrial production has been confined to small and cottage industry.

The largest essential production is the handloom industry. Until recently every girl must learn the art of weaving. Every mother and girl of age learns the art of weaving and weave beautiful shawls and wrap arounds to meet the needs of the family members. (T.C Hodson). The art of weaving is taught within the family or clan and in the dormitories and therefore there is no cost in learning. Villages such as Ukhrul, Toloi, Ngainga, Somdal, Tuinem and Phadang are known for weaving (T.C. Hodson).

The men are known for weaving baskets, making potteries. Some specific villages are known for salt wells that produce the required salt for the Tangkhul kingdom. The southern villages are known for weaving cane tables “Riphan” and stools. The village of Longpi and Humphum is known for black earthen potteries.

5. Market: Leingapha

As was discussed earlier, much of the agricultural or industrial production is for self-consumption but sometimes during the festivals there are markets for exchange of goods (Nshoga A). These markets are temporary markets “Leingapha” because it is only during the village festivals where the villagers and villagers from other villages can come to exchange goods on barter system. It is a very localized small market, but it serves the need of the basic needs of the villagers as they can exchange goods to meet their various needs.

6. Collective hunting and fishing

Being a tribal community, meat consumption is a necessity and very much part of the culture of the people. The requirement for meat consumption is either met through domesticated animals or hunted in the wild. There is fortunately abundant supply of meat in the wild as long as it was hunted in the ancient traditional way, but with the usage of modern advanced technology, the population of animals in the wild have dwindled rapidly.

Every catch in the wild if it is a big animal is to be shared with the clan and the village. During the festivals every family gets a share of the meat, during wedding the whole village is invited by default and the age set members, the cousins, the clan receives special share of meat. When the sisters visit the brother's home during festivals, they are given a portion of meat to take home to their family. During certain festivals such as "Chumpha" all the adult men of the village go on hunting together. Even today in the 21st century, some villages such as Ningthi practice the traditional collective fishing and sharing once a year.

7. Common land resources

Besides the private property every village has common forest land "Khamaram". This land belongs to the village and is given to the ones in need to meet their need for farming or fuel needs. There are some families or individuals have fallen into economic difficulties or have no land to cultivate then they can request for such land. The territory being at a high altitude can be quite challenging in terms of climatic conditions specially in the winter. The sole fuel supply until recently has been firewood, the materials for construction of houses etc. can all be obtained from such land with prior permission from the village authorities.

8. Egalitarian economy

The Tangkhul Naga tribe as much as the other Naga tribes does not have caste system and does not discriminate anyone on the grounds of occupation, sex, color, size etc. Every member of the village is equal. They produce for self-consumption, but the nature of hospitality is such that the community is known for sharing and giving.

There is no class division (Singh Chandrika) but the clans are titled "Amei/Achon", "Achui/Ayai" and "Achui" to know the order of ranking within the family. The "Amei-Achon" title is given to the oldest in the family and it cannot be contested. They are highly revered and respected as the elders in the family, clan, and society. They are also economically better off as they inherit the lion's share of the family property, but they also bear the responsibility of providing for the younger ones (A.S.W Shimray).

The rituals and ceremonies of marriages among the Tangkhuls are very expensive but much of it is borne by the clan and the age-set group. The marriage of a well-to-do and royal family is known as “Kharaknoa Shakzat” while that of the commoners are known as “Vahongnao shakzat” (Sothing W.A Shimray). This differentiation comes about because of the economic abilities to spend and provide for the guest but when it comes to participation and sharing, it is the same for every guest. Normally it is the Amei/Achon family who can host the feast of merit and erect the “Tarung” and Dormitories because of its elaborate feasting and festivities but it is not exclusive.

The tribe is a strong patriarchal society (T.C Hodson) but without gender discrimination (Nshoga A) and in the surface it may seem the women are discriminated and neglected but in reality the women are highly honored, respected and revered. They may not be part of the council of elders but some of the roles played by women is exclusive. There are festivals such as “Chumpha” which only women can perform, economic activities such as weaving which is exclusively by the women. There is a woman married into another village “Phukreila” (Sothing W.A. Shimray) is highly respected by both the villages as she is the goodwill ambassador between the villages (Khashim Ruivah). In times of war or conflicts, only she has the exclusive right to retrieve the wounded from the battlefield as she cannot be harmed by both the warring parties.

9. Eco-friendly and balanced economy

Being a tribal society, it lives in harmony with the environment because they know the importance of a healthy environment for its survival. The Tangkhuls are known to be animistic in their beliefs before the arrival of Christianity in 1896 because they worship the natural phenomena. All economic activities are carried in harmony with the nature. Nature is observed to predict future events. Nature is looked upon as the source of life and food and sustenance. They do everything to please nature whether it be agriculture, hunting, fishing etc. because they believed that displeasing the nature will bring hardships and failure of crops. Their acts are controlled by nature because it the sole provider. Regardless of the status or age, everyone is expected to follow the tribe’s norms and values because they believe in collective responsibility and consequences.

10. Education

Education and learning in the Tangkhul tribe were in the boys’ and girls’ dormitories. After the children attain puberty, they are expected to stay in the dorm where they live together with the other young people of the locality or village. The boy’s dorm is called “Mayar Longshim” while the girls’ dormitory is called “Ngala Longshim” (Khashim Ruivah). There can be one Longshim or boys and girls respectively or multiple dormitories in the village.

The membership of the dormitories is open to all the young people of the village regardless of the clan and economic status. All the young people sleep on a large bed made of a single wooden log “Samkok”. The members in the dorm are taught the art of weaving, war, house making, usage of knives and axe, weaving baskets etc. by the elders in the dorms. They are also taught the history of the tribe and village orally. One of the most important learning in the dorm is the norms, values and traditions of the tribe which are expected to be followed strictly regardless of their economic or clan status. Every member in the dorm is equal and is expected to carry out their assigned responsibilities. It is the nerve center of the village and tribe and has contributed significantly to the survival of the tribe for centuries. But this tradition has seen a sad demise with the arrival of Christianity and Western Education and along with it the norms, values, traditions and customs is also witness drastic changes (Chandrika Singh).

Conclusion:

From time immemorial the tribe did not feel the need of the outside world for they had enough of what they needed and thereby lived essentially a self-sufficient village life (Nshoga A). Their simple life and the little need to survive was met through cultivation or in nature amidst the flora and fauna. There was not a single villager who had no shelter nor food to eat because the clan and the village took it as their responsibility to provide for and protect everyone. They did not have much but they had enough of what they needed.

The arrival of Missionary, Christianity, Western Education and then the exposure to the outside world brought in drastic changes in the social fabric, traditions, norms, and culture of the tribe (B.G. Verghese). It also changed the economic activities by introducing Money economy, market economy and eventually increasing the needs to which the self-sufficient village was not able to provide and sustain. The shift from dormitory system to school transformed the village youth from providers to dependance and thus there was shortage.

Thus, all the advancement, growth and development have failed miserably to provide for the needs because the supply has not increased as much as the demand. Even though some of the social traditions and practices are still in place but the social fabric has changed so much so that today it is more of selling society rather than sharing society. It has become more of amassing and accumulation of wealth rather than providing for everyone. Thus, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening and visible which was once negligible. Today it has become an individualistic rather than collective responsibility. The traditional economic activities and social practices are dying a natural death due to westernization and monetization.

Once the independent republic village have almost become completely a dependent village to the outside world from meeting the smallest to the greatest need. Yes, there is a need to change accordingly to keep pace in a dynamic world through education, adoption, and adoption but that does not mean that we

should abandon activities that provide enough for us to become dependent on others. Education and development should preserve and strengthen the existing practices by creating opportunities and not destroying them. It should be tools to create utility or else it has failed.

The Tangkhul kingdom resources can still produce enough to meet much of our needs to be self-sufficient and commercialize. The need of the hour for the tribe is to exploit the resources and opportunities by bringing in sustainable development. The tribe needs to realize its potential and be creators of utility rather than just duplicators and ensure that the social fabric, economic and political practices that have kept them thriving in history is preserved at all costs. Restoring self-reliance and self-sufficiency is key to development and preserving the much-needed traditions and culture otherwise the tribe can self-destroy and be extinct for **the want of**.

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