



## TRADITIONAL VILLAGE ADMINISTRATION OF THE KUKIS OF ASSAM: AN OVERVIEW

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### ABSTRACT

Of late, the study of traditional institutions has attracted the attention of the policy makers, researchers and social scientists due to increasing interest in and support for decentralization. Significantly, efforts have been made to study the village administration of the tribals which in itself is a setup of well-organized governance. As such, the traditional political life of the Kukis too is deeply rooted in their customary laws in their society. The village is the most important political unit among the Kukis and the chief of the villages and his council of ministers which function within a territorial jurisdiction wielding its political authority and prerogatives over the village in absolute terms are the supreme political power.

Keywords: *Chieftainship, traditional, administration, village etc.*

### INTRODUCTION

The tribal mosaic of Northeast India is characterized by its rich cultural diversity, unique traditions, and complex social institutions. Among these communities, the Kukis constitute a significant ethnic group with a distinct historical and cultural identity. Spread across several states including Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Assam, the Kukis have contributed immensely to the socio-cultural landscape of the region. In Assam, the Dima Hasao district is home to a notable Kuki population, with 15,797 members as per the 2011 Census. Despite their demographic presence and historical significance, scholarly engagement with the traditional institutions and governance systems of the Kukis in Assam remains limited.

This study seeks to fill that gap by offering a focused analysis of the traditional socio-political institutions of the Kukis, especially within the Dima Hasao district. The research aims to explore how traditional administrative practices have evolved or persisted over time and to what extent

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these practices continue to influence contemporary Kuki society. Understanding such indigenous systems is not only vital from an anthropological standpoint but also for informing inclusive and culturally sensitive governance in tribal regions.

Given the complexity of tribal societies and the nuanced variations within the Kuki community itself, the study employs both qualitative and secondary methods. Interviews with village chiefs, community elders, and leaders of social organizations provide primary insights, while a wide array of literature from books, journals, and newspapers supplement the research. By situating the study within a defined geographical and cultural framework, the research endeavours to provide a comprehensive yet localized understanding of the Kukis in Assam.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**The following objectives are framed for the present study:

- The study tries to depict abrief note on the Kukis of Assam.
- The study will make an attempt to understand, analyze and explain the institutionsprevalent in traditional Kuki society.
- The study endeavors to know whether the traditional way of administration is still relevant in the contemporary Kuki society.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Any study on the tribal society is a complex process. Likewise, a specific analysis on traditional set up of the Kukis is difficult to accomplish with a single method. Therefore, certain research tools like interview and questionnaires have been used in course of the study. Moreover, data was also extracted through interviews with the chiefs, leaders in the social organizations etc. Secondary sources like articles in magazines, books, journals, newspapers and books of literature were used.

## **SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The Kuki community is found in most of the North Eastern states of India. In Manipur, they constitute one of the major tribes besides the Meiteis. Likewise, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Tripura have a considerable number of Kuki people. Assam is no exception to that. The



present study is confined to the Dima Hasao district of Assam which is a home of 15,797 (Census 2011) Kuki people. It is in this area that the research is engaged.

### **BRIEF ACCOUNTS ON THE KUKIS OF ASSAM**

The word *Kuki* is a generic term which includes a number of tribes and clans. This generic term covers a large number of people who migrated to different parts of North East India from contiguous areas lying further east at different points of time. The term is a historical, colonial concept; it was a generic category for the tribal communities not only in Manipur but in larger parts of North Eastern India.

There is no clear evidence from the Kukis themselves as to when they first started to settle down in North Cachar Hill district (presently Dima Hasao). They were illiterate in those days and did not have any record of their entry into this land. However, it is generally believed that the Kukis came to N.C. Hills towards the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century from the south during the Kachari movement from Dimapur to North Cachar Hills.

### **TRADITIONAL VILLAGE ADMINISTRATION OF THE KUKIS**

The traditional political life of the Kukis is deeply rooted in their customary laws in their society. The socio-political institutions are closely entrenched with other institutions. Their system of political institution is based on kinship relations and is termed as a mere ‘Social Organization’ distinguished from ‘Political Organization’ of civilized communities. The most important aspect that has to be highlighted is the chieftainship and the concept of territory among the Kukis. The village is the most important political unit among for the Kukis and the chief is the supreme authority. The following parts illustrates the Political Institution or village administrative system of the Kukis in their traditional society.

### **VILLAGE CHIEF (*HAOSA*)**

The office of the village chief is called *Haosa*. It is hereditary, passing from father to son. The office is occupied only by the ‘*Upa*’ or senior person except among the Lushai Kukis which goes from father to the youngest son. Among the Kukis and unlike the Nagas, *Haosa* has the absolute right of ownership over the entire land of the village. According to the Kuki customary law; a



daughter cannot become an heir to the father. However, if the eldest son was found incapable of holding such responsibilities due to physical or mental inability, the next eldest son would automatically succeed his father. It is always essential that this institution of *Haosa* or chief, which sustained social solidarity, maintained social mores of a Kuki village. The *Haosa* system has come to stay as a perennial source of custom and tradition, in that, in spite of the onslaught of modernism and advancement in all walks of life, the Kukis are able to inherit a rich cultural and traditional heritage and also on matters relating to economics, politics, religion, judiciary etc., which has its bases on the proper interpretation of the customary law and tradition.

### **POWERS AND FUNCTIONS OF HAOSA**

The Kuki chief enjoyed enormous power. He possessed executive, legislative and judicial powers in the village. He was the supreme administrative head whose word was law. He works as an administrator of the village with his councilors who were appointed by him from among the villagers. All that matters relating to issuing of orders, framing of rules and regulations were based upon the orders of the chief. Those who disobey were severely punished and even expelled from the village.

The chief was the supreme judge in deciding any case. The village court of justice was composed of the chief and his council members. The chief was the chairman of the village council. The chief, however absolute his power over the land might be, normally allows, in consultation with the council of ministers, the villagers to cultivate and utilize as per requirement.

Another important function of the chief was to welcome distinguished visitors to the village. He even provided them with food and accommodation during their sojourn in the village. It was also a customary practice that whoever visited the village should make a courtesy call on the chief and apprised him of the purpose of his visit to the village as well as the duration of his stay.

The modern type of police force was absent in the village. All the political, military and judicial powers were vested in the chief and his Councilors. It was the chief who appointed all the top officials of the village like the Village Councilors, the Priest, the Blacksmith and the Village Messenger. It is also the duty of the *Haosato* see that every villager is protected from external aggression and danger.

### **LIMITATION AND CHECKS ON THE CHIEF'S POWER:**



The chief enjoyed enormous power inside the traditional Kuki society. The villagers did not have the right to oppose their chief individually as well as collectively. However, the power of the chief has its own limitation. For example, if a chief became too tyrannical, then the villagers had their traditional right to migrate to other villages and desert the chief. In that case, the chief had no right to stop them as it was a practice sanctioned by tradition. This served as some sort of check on the power of the chief.

But then it was a very difficult thing for the villagers to do so. Because, even then, the chief had the right to confiscate the movable as well as immovable property of the villagers who decide to desert him. This means the villagers had to lose all their property if they decided to migrate without the chief's permission. Thus, it was extremely difficult for the villagers to desert their chief and migrate to another village.

### **SEMANG PACHONG (COUNCILLOR)**

In a Kuki village which comprises of many clans, the head of the clan normally becomes the chief. The chief therefore selects two village elders called '*Semang Pachong*' to be his helpers or counsellors. The most important qualification for *Semang Pachong* was possession of tact and wisdom. Besides, he was supposed to be well versed in the customary law and usages of the people. They were all selected from among the elders of the village from different clans so that every section of the society was represented in the chief's council. It was done mainly to ensure proper administration in the village.

The participation of the village elders in the administration of the village is noteworthy because due reverence and respect is paid to elders and their advice is always taken into consideration. In this connection, LalkhawlienPulamte writes, "*Although the Chief had a free hand to choose his Semang Pachongs he normally selects a man who carried the confidence and support of the people and who had a good reputation in the village.*"

### **POWER AND FUNCTION OF THE SEMANG PACHONG:**

The *Semang Pachong* or the village councilors occupied an important place in the village administration. The main duties of the village councilors were to aid and advice the chief in the village administration. They used to act as legal advisers to the chief and were expected to be



familiar with the customary laws of the people. The chief assisted by the councilors decided all matters pertaining to village administration. In this regard, Sharma notes: “*these councilors extended their help to the chief in smooth running of the administration*”. Though theoretically all powers were in the hands of the chief, yet in practice he tried cases in consultation with his councilors.

The role of the *Semang Pachongs* or councilors in the inter-village relation was of great importance. Usually, the chief never accepted or ignored any kind of proposal brought to him by the emissaries from other villages before consulting his councilors. In receiving proposals from such emissaries, he used to summon his own councilors to discuss the matter. Sometimes the councilors could over rule the chief’s proposal if they had a better proposal to offer. The chief used to feel it obligatory to entertain such proposals of the councilors.

### **THIEMPU (PRIEST):**

The word ‘*Thiempu*’ derives from the word ‘*thiem*’ which literally means knowledge and ‘*Pu*’ means an elderly person. Thus *Thiempu* signifies an aged person who had much knowledge and wisdom. He occupied a very high status in the social hierarchy. In fact, his status was next to that of the village chief and his councillors. He was the person who played the most important role in the spiritual life of the society as he performed all the religious rituals.

### **FUNCTIONS OF THE THIEMPU:**

The *Thiempu* or the priest took an oath. Any complicated case, which could not be settled by the village court, was referred to the priest. The priest used to administer an oath or made the concerned parties undergo an ordeal while deciding the case. This system was normally adopted when a crime was committed and the culprit was not known. This was usually done in the presence of the chief and his councilors.

The *Thiempu* occupied an important place in the administration of the village also. All cases which the council could not decide for lack of evidence were referred to the priest. In fact, in the past, many of the culprits disclosed their hidden crimes for fear of the oath or ordeal and the cases were settled.



### **LHANGSAM (VILLAGE CRIER OR MESSENGER):**

Like *Semang Pachong*, *Lhangsam* or the Village Crier is an elected cabinet member who was proposed, seconded and democratically elected directly by all the villagers.

### **FUNCTIONS OF LHANGSAM:**

*Lhangsam* is responsible for the following duties and obligations

- (a) Public relation, publicity and external affairs
- (b) Communications summoning all villages for meeting when asked by the village cabinet members through the advice of the chief.
- (c) Keeping all trade roads communication fit for travels
- (d). Information
  - (i) Within
  - (ii) Outside the village linking up the village

So far as his positioning in the village power structure was concerned the village crier used to act as a coordinator between the councilors and the village.

### **THIHKHENG (VILLAGE BLACKSMITH):**

Most of the traditional Kuki villagers were agrarian by profession and the service of the village blacksmith in making and repairing of tools is essential. The chief appointed any of the villagers who were skilled in this field. The number of the village blacksmith differs from village to village. There are normally two types of blacksmiths in the village. They are namely public blacksmith and private blacksmith. The difference between the two types of blacksmiths was that the chief did not appoint the private blacksmith, while the other was appointed by the chief.

### **FUNCTIONS OF THE THIHKHENG:**

The main function of the village blacksmith was to make weapons and agricultural implements. He used to manufacturer new tools if the village so desired. The villagers would go to the blacksmith early in the morning carrying some charcoal and the tools they wanted to get





repaired. If a villager wanted to manufacture a new tool, he has to provide the raw materials required for the purpose. The village blacksmith tried to complete the work in the morning, since all the villagers are cultivators, they required the services of the blacksmith.

In summing up, each Kuki village is administered by

- (i) *Haosa* (Village Chief) whose lineage is hereditary
- (ii) *Semang pachong* (Village Councillors), an elected cabinet member
- (iii) *Lhangsam* (Village Crier and Messenger), an elected cabinet member

All these cabinet members are truly responsible for the good governance of the village concerned. The office of the chief is hereditary while his cabinet members are democratically elected directly according to the need.

## **OBSERVATION AND CONCLUSION**

The administration of the Kuki society revolves mainly around the office of the chieftainship and village is the main political unit. The chief along with his council of ministers are the legitimate authority who administered according to the customary laws. Although the origin and growth of the chieftainship among the Kukis is not clear and certain, it is apparent that it is a product of necessity. In fact, the process in which the chieftainship evolved can be associated with Hobbes's theory of Social Contract as there was neither peace nor leadership to settle the issues that erupted in the Kuki society. The basis of the office of the chieftain ship has been found to depend on the norms of the kinship succession. Therefore, the law of primogeniture holds very important in the Kuki society. This naturally brings us to an analysis of their genealogical descent from their remote ancestral chief till date.

As such, the social and political lives of the Kukis are influenced by the traditional and customary laws which they inherited from a long period of time. They managed their internal peace and unity, cultural values, social relations and resolved their differences on the basis of their customs and traditions. The customary laws and the traditional practices are the foundations of the Kuki tribal society. The traditional institutions were mostly democratic in spirit and egalitarian in character and played dynamic role in governing the people on the one hand and in welfare activities on the other.





The Kuki chief is often portrayed as a despotic ruler in his particular village. However, a different school of thought believes that the Kuki chief was neither despotic nor autocratic in his rule. In fact, the chief does not rule but guides. His authority was given by custom. He considers the entire village member as his own family member and treated them equally. He was the guardian of law.

So far, as the day-to-day administration is concerned, it is carried out in accordance with the traditional laws and usages and it seems that the Kuki chiefs hardly adhere to the rules of the village administration as stipulated by the district administration, nor, has the government has strictly insisted upon their enforcement. The common men of the modern Kuki society however, always prefer the customary tradition because it not only quickly disposed any case but is also less severe in imposing any capital punishment upon any culprit for committing serious crimes.

Thus, it has been observed that the village is one of the most important units of the Kukis that played a vital role in the administration of their society. This draws the interest of many social science researcher on their age-old administrative structures like the office of chieftainship and the youth organizational set ups. Traditions are often viewed as a force to thwart off any change and modernization. Sometimes it is even considered as an institution to maintain the hegemony of a very few who are looked upon as authoritative power structure in the conventional Kuki society. Therefore, many social scientists have even resorted to the proposition that the traditional institutions would gradually cease to exist in the days to come. However, instead of condemning assuming the traditional as irrational and outdated; many contemporary societies still try to find their solutions by using the conventional customs and knowledge.

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