

Introduction of modern Education among the Tangkhul women.

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Abstract :

The Tangkhul is one of the Naga tribes inhabiting the Ukhrul district of Manipur state. The formal education that came along simultaneously with Christianity and the cultural contact with the outside world brought significant changes to the Tangkhul society. Education and conversion go on parallel lines, as the former was considered an effective instrument to help the tribal people to understand their teachings. The first Christian missionary, who came to the land of the Tangkhuls was William Pettigrew who introduced modern education to the people of this tribe. As he worked to educate the boys, his wife, Alice Pettigrew, worked to educate the girls.

Amidst stiff conservative attitudes of the people, the foundation for modern western education was introduced by Mrs Alice Pettigrew. With the worldwide development on the discussion on women's issues, conscientization for women's concerns are a recent development of these people. This work will present the history of the development of the missionary education which is mainly responsible for transforming the Tangkhul women. It will study the overall impact of education on these women. In short, it deals with the process of women's education and their empowerment in a historical perspective.

Key words: women, missionary, modern education, attitude, progress, empowerment.

Introduction:

The Christian missionaries introduced a modern system of education wherever a church was founded. Hence, a school would simultaneously be established. These schools are known as 'mission schools'. Education and conversion go hand in hand. The students are the ones who got converted to christianity first. It is the christians who were the first to be educated from among the people. They were raised to higher positions and better opportunities. They identified the idea of progress with christianity. The idea of progress was an incentive and inducement to embrace christianity. Hence , to be a Christian had become something to be coveted.

The coming of the missionary :

The first Christian missionary who came to Manipur with full patronage from the British was Rev William Pettigrew who was from the Arthington Aborigines Mission Society. He arrived in Imphal on February 6 , 1894. He began his education ministry by private tuitions to the children of the government employees. On 7th May of the same year, he opened a school at Chingamakha in Imphal. The Hinduised Meiteis construed Pettigrew's preaching as a deliberate attempt to impose upon them the government's religion. Maxwell, the then British political agent, took an alarming view of the situation and expressed his fear that trouble might arise if Pettigrew's activities were not nipped in the bud. He, therefore, served the ultimatum that Pettigrew leave Imphal. However, he suggested that he could work in the hills.

Pettigrew finally moved to Ukhrul in early 1896 where he was given a plot of land which is now known as Phungyo in Ukhrul village. A small temporary thatched hut was put up and the villagers were invited to learn to read. But none responded. So, Maxwell warned the village elders that the boys should attend the school or they would be severely caned or be sent to jail. The chief of Ukhrul village Raihao, agreed to send 20 boys to the school and 10 boys were sent from Hundung by its chief, Zingthan, which is the neighbouring village.

Their response :

At first, the villagers were not happy. They thought that the government was attempting to take their boys away to the foreign land with no prospect of seeing them again. Pettigrew assured and convinced them that their boys would be taught for their own and for the tribe's benefits and that they would not be spirited away to the unknown land. Only when the people were satisfied, they allowed the boys to attend the school.

In realization of the importance of education, in general, and the need for equality in opportunities for the intellectual development of men and women, the missionaries placed special emphasis on the education of women along with that of the boys . They faced tougher challenges to get girls to enroll in school. It was because the parents thought that the education for girls were a waste of time who were more needed for domestic chores. There was much resistance against sending the girls to school. They would send their boys but not the girls.

The coming of Rev William Pettigrew to the land of the Tangkhuls , brought into contact Mrs Alice Pettigrew with the womenfolk of this tribe. It proved to be an even greater boon for this less fortunate section of the society, the Tangkhul women.

While William Pettigrew worked for the boys since 1896, his wife Mrs. Alice Pettigrew did the same for the girls. However, when she tried to persuade the girls to attend class, no woman came forward for many years. If the people looked with suspicion upon any attempt to educate their sons, how much more strongly did they oppose the education of girls ? In other words, education for girls were out of question. A girl in the family is indispensable in their homes for all the household chores. For years, Alice Pettigrew fought against this conservative attitude. The idea of a female going to school, to leave the home and give up the work in the fields were those of almost impenetrable walls that took long to batter down. Females were meant for a life of drudgery in the home and in the fields. It took Mrs Alice Pettigrew fourteen years to make any appreciable impression upon the attitude of the people, even when the parents had become Christians.

The roles of Mrs Alice Pettigrew :

In the midst of stiff opposition from the conservative parents, the opening wedge for girls' education came through night school. Alice Pettigrew walked from door to door, urging the parents to permit their daughters to attend the night school after the day's work was done. It was in 1908, that she was able to interact with the girls. Nine girls came forward to attend the night school regularly. Of the nine girls, three were from Ukhrul village. They were (i) Sanamla Ragui (ii) Harngaila and (iii) Mahongai Rumthao. Four of the girls were from Chingjaroi village. They were (i) A. Choroni (ii) A. Ngalew (iii) A. Kasune and (iv) A. Aserew. And the other two (i) Shurila and (ii) Langzarla were

from Paoyi village. Mrs Alice Pettigrew persuaded these village girls to come and stay in Ukhrul to attend the night school regularly. She could communicate with the girls as she had learnt the Tangkhul language. Gradually, she taught them English and they began to learn and communicate in English.

Mrs Alice Pettigrew used her bungalow for the night school. She also used the girls dormitory for the elementary education. She continued to visit the girls' dormitory. The nine girls attended the night school regularly. Though the first batch comprised only Tangkhul girls from the various Tangkhul villages, in the following years, girls from other tribes from other areas came to Ukhrul to join the night school which was held in the missionary's bungalow sometimes, and sometimes in the dormitory and in the church on Sunday. Mrs Alice used to give gifts like detergent soaps, beautiful colorful clothes, napkins, etc, to the girls to draw their interest. But ironically, the girls thought that the gifts were too precious to be used and so they used to hide them and she had to convince them that her gifts were to be used and should not be kept hidden.

In 1922, the mission centre was shifted to Kangpokpi for a bigger mission work. The mission had two hostels for girls. There were altogether 48 girls in 1922. Of them, 24 girls were Tangkhuls and 24 others were from Kom and Thadou Kukis. The girls were given a monthly scholarship of rupees 3/- which was funded by the American Women Baptist Foreign Society.

The girls' education was not confined only to reading and writing, singing and praying. It included co-curricular activities which helped them to mould their moral character.

The missionary's wife wanted to uplift the low standard of living of the people. The people, their houses and their surroundings were very dirty. People in the pre-Christian days hardly had any time to bother about taking care of all these. It was Mrs Alice Pettigrew who taught them about sanitation and personal hygiene, resulting in their sound physical health. She was the first person to introduce detergents, she also taught them to keep their utensils clean, to keep their body and clothing free from bad smell, etc. The women were also educated to bathe the young children with boil water everyday. Another important lesson was the care to be taken during their menstruation period. Most women suffered as a result of untidy sanitary napkin while working in the wet terrace field even during their menstruation which led to the cause of many unknown diseases. The girls were also taught about grooming which contributed to maintaining good morality. There were changes in their hair style and in their way of dressing. A full dress became a mark of entrance to the church.

She also taught the girls about interior decorations, and how to organize their kitchens, which was not known to them. These people who used to live together with the domestic animals, began to live in an organized and a much cleaner environment.

Alice Pettigrew made a great breakthrough in the use of medicine. The people had not known the use of medicine. They were trapped in ignorance and superstitions. They took no medicine to cure their sickness. Instead they offered sacrifices to the spirits which they believed had caused the sickness. This was one great challenge faced by Mrs Alice Pettigrew. The medical mission work was started by her. Her missionary training had included a course in medicines and nursing at Sussex County Hospital, England, and she soon found good use of all the knowledge and skill she possessed. Malarial fever, cholera, dysentery, tuberculosis, leprosy, small pox, chickenpox, etc, and mention may also be made of the wounds from spears, axes and knives, which were quite prevalent in the hills those days. Initially, they were willing to accept the application of ointments for the external wounds but was reluctant to eat the medicine for fear of offending the evil spirits. It took time for Mrs Alice Pettigrew to win their trust and confidence. Her long patience and her successful nursing of a young blacksmith who had received terrible burnt, convinced them of the benefits of the medicines. Seeing the miracles of the medicines people came to the missionary with all sorts of complaints because they found great relief to their aches and pains. Though they did not come to listen to their teachings, they gathered around the missionary and his wife in awe to have a glimpse of their wonderful medicines.

At first, the woodshed served as a dispensary. Later, when the permanent mission bungalow was built, the old mud house was used as the dispensary, and Alice Pettigrew dispensed medicines and took good care for a growing number of patients. On the Pettigrews' first furlough, William Pettigrew took a two years' course at the Livingstone Medical College for Missionaries. When they returned to Ukhrul in 1906, the mud house was demolished and a four-roomed permanent dispensary building was erected. It was in constant use until the removal of the permanent headquarter to Kangpokpi in 1917 which has now become a full fledged hospital. Medical work became one of the most effective weapons to win the hearts of the people.

The girls were also taught the art of knitting. This art was foreign to them. Ever since the coming of Alice Pettigrew, the girls started knitting. They used bamboos to carve out the sticks which was used for knitting.

It proved to be even more convenient as they could sharpen the sticks in different shapes and sizes, according to their wishes. This was a good idea which was invented by Alice Pettigrew and her first batch girl students. She also imparted the art of sewing and stitching. She taught them to stitch and cut the clothes and the other imported materials.

Alice Pettigrew's constant interaction with the girls enabled her to draw out the potential of every girl. They were encouraged to develop their skills in different fields by providing better and more scientific facilities. On 11 March, 1930, William Pettigrew noticed a young girl in the dormitory who was a talented handloom weaver. Seeing her expertised in the craft, the missionary and his wife appointed Ms. S. Ningmasai of Tuinem village, as an instructor in weaving. She was paid extra amount apart from her monthly scholarship. Thus, weaving was instituted in the school from 2 pm - 4 pm everyday. Later, in 1937, she was called to Ukhrul by Mrs. Duncan, the wife of the then S.D.O. of Ukhrul, to instruct the trainees in the weaving institution. Later, she established her own private weaving institution in her village. Many tribal girls attended the weaving school. She was invited to many conferences in India. She was honoured with award for her outstanding contribution and achievements in the field of social work in the International Women's year in 1975. She received the award from the then Chief Minister of Manipur state, Shri R.K. Dorendro on 26 January, 1975.

The impact:

By 1922, the opposition to education for girls began to decrease and the durbar of Manipur recognized education for girls and who were allowed to enter the schools established for the boys. Soon many more girls came forward to receive the formal modern education and Rev William Pettigrew mentioned in his report on the Great Convention at Kangpokpi which was held in January 1928, where more than one thousand christian delegates representing several tribes assembled for the first Baptist Convention of Manipur. There he wrote that the number of the female converts were comparatively as many as the male converts.

Of the 9 first batch girls of Mrs Alice Pettigrew, 7 girls were sent for teacher's training at Golaghat and training for nursing at Guwahati in Assam. After the completion of their training, they became teachers and nurses. One of the first lady teachers to assist Mrs Alice Pettigrew was Choroni from Chingjaroi village. She was the daughter of the chief of the Chingjaroi village. Another girl, Sanamla Ragui from Ukhrul village served as a matron in the Mission school at Kangpokpi. Both of them were from among the first batch of her students. Many others came forward to assist her as well.

Another girl, Dr Pamleiphy Shaiza who was one of her students of 1927 batch became the first among Tangkhul women to pass out Matriculation in 1938 from Calcutta University. She was also the first medical doctor from among the Tangkhul women. She completed her MBBS in 1958. She retired as Deputy Director in the Medical Department of Manipur state government. Dr Pamleiphy Shaiza shared her gratitude to her teacher, Mrs Alice Pettigrew, in the Centenary celebration which was observed with great pomp in 1996 in Ukhrul.

Miss Shiningla Keishing from Bungpa village, became the first woman to take up the job of a Pastor in the history of Manipur Baptist Christian. As a young girl, she was with Alice Pettigrew in her school in 1929 - 30. This is one rare achievement and very significant as females are not favoured to become a Pastor even today. Miss Shiningla Keishing also became the first woman MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly) of the Manipur State Assembly in 1967 - 72. She also established a co-education school in 1964 called Tiny Tots' Unique school, in Imphal, the capital of Manipur state, which is today one of the best schools in the state.

Alice Pettigrew was also a spiritual mother. Her students got converted to christianity. The converted women in turn took active part in converting other womenfolk to christianity. In every village, her students took the lead in the Sunday schools where secular and spiritual teachings go hand in hand.

Alice Pettigrew, apart from being an educationist, a missionary, a nurse and an artist, she was also a social reformer and a prized social worker. She encouraged the women to form groups and to raise their own funds. She advised them to keep aside a handful of rice everytime when they cook their rice. This rice would be collected and sold which would become a part of their funds. This is still practised by every christian women. Every Sunday, the offerings of the week were collected and auctioned in the church's premises. This is one way of the women societies to organized their mission funds.

The Tangkhul women society in memory of Alice Pettigrew established a school at the site of her old bungalow in Ukhrul. It is named Alice Christian School after her. Today, it is one of the most sought-after schools in the Ukhrul district. It is run by the funds of the women society.

There has been a gradual improvement in the status and role of the Tangkhul Naga women after the coming of Christianity. The main agency through which Christian missions contributed to the improvement of the conditions of women being education. Christian missions were given almost complete responsibility for education, in the hill areas, and it always included the female education. This was largely the work of women missionaries. From the very beginning they taught the girls reading, writing, home and child care and the Bible. In due course, the Tangkhul women themselves became evangelists and teachers.

Although, there has been a considerable progress in the field of education of women, still a lot needs to be done. Most of the girls go for education to get married properly. Among the rest, a majority receives education as per their needs like merely earning a degree. Only a few opt for education for academic excellence and for their enlightenment.

Wealth plays an ambivalent roles for pursuing education. The absence of any economic compulsion is the main factor for the slow progress of female education. Because in order to get good education and to pursue for higher studies, one has to go to the towns and the cities. But since it is difficult to go to the town areas from the interior villages, only a fortunate few families who can afford to support and with a consciousness and determination, sacrifice, etc. can get to pursue the higher studies. Majority has to be content with the highly neglected government run schools in the villages which mostly cannot give any satisfactory result. There are many other reasons responsible for the slow progress of the education among women. They are, poverty, distance of the school from their homes, lack of accommodations even if they are willing to leave their homes, lack of awareness on the importance of education, lack of support and encouragement, etc.

With the recognition of the need to direct the process of social change and development towards certain desired goals, education has come to be increasingly regarded as a major instrument of social change. One of the expectations from education is that it will bring about reduction of inequalities in the society, that education leads to equalization of status between individuals coming from hitherto unequal socio-economic strata of society. Education was created essentially for men with the ultimate objective of utilizing them as government servants. In the initial years, girls had little or no access to it, partly because society at that time could not imagine women as government servants. However, as the formal system of education began to spread, the role of education as a liberating influence came to be recognized and increasingly accepted. Thus the advocacy for the access of girls and women to the formal system of education spearheaded by missionaries and a few enlightened officials gained momentum.

Social attitudes to the education of women varies. It ranges from acceptance to the needs, to one of absolute indifference. While some families were opposed to it for traditional reasons, others welcomed it as an accomplishment and a symbol of modernity. A number of people still finds itself unable to do so for social and economic reasons.

Education with all its inadequacies has made a definite impact. The women have become aware of the inadequacies of the traditional role that has been assigned to them. It has opened up arenas in which women can compete freely with men. It has helped them to prove themselves equally worthy as men. It also creates new avenues for them in the competitive employment market. There is considerable roll enhancement for them. Beyond their traditional roles, they are now called upon to assume several new roles. Today, be it professional services and in the field of social activities, there are now a number of successful women enjoying high and respectable positions.

Education has helped these people to break through the traditional patterns of life. It has helped them to enter into a new meaningful communication with the world. These sentiments have been well acknowledged by T Luikham in his book, 'A short history of the Manipur Baptist Christian'. There he wrote, " The advent of Christianity into Manipur marks the beginning of a new life and its introduction into the hills is pregnant with many effects of far-reaching importance. The hill people ignorant as they were, hardly believed that the new religion would work miracles among them. It has brought civilization to those headhunting people who enthralled themselves with blood feuds between village and village, clan and clan were at their greatest heights. No one would deny the name 'Savage' for our people, when our forefathers were naked and their knowledge limited, when they were fighting each other for no lasting benefits and when life and property were insecure. We should feel proud that we have come from that stage to the present civilized state. The dark is gone and are now in contact with the outside world".

Despite the lack of resources, the Tangkhul women is now an active section of the society. They now shoulders equal responsibility with men, to take their society into the realm of peace and development. There is a new generation of educated and professional women, equipped to meet the challenges and opportunities that lies ahead. There are movements and initiatives from among the Tangkhul women that are aimed at developing a new socio- political and economic activity, empowering them to play a more positive and active role in shaping the destiny of their society. Education is now highly valued. The significant roles of Mrs Alice Pettigrew deserves the credit for laying the foundation of modern education for the Tangkhul women by her conviction and her charming personality.

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