ABSTRACT

SOCIETY AND CULTURE OF THE HRANGKHOLS OF DIMA HASAO DISTRICT OF ASSAM.

Statement of the Problem

The Hrangkhols are one of the hill tribe that possess a rich socio-cultural heritage. The Hrangkhols are declared as the scheduled tribes under the Kuki groups of tribes through the Indian Constitution Article no 342. They have their own language known as Hrangkhol where similarities in some extent with the language of Kuki-Lushai group of tribes such as Biate, Hmar, Halam, Thado, Lushai, etc., are shown but they have no written literature and history. The Hrangkhols have their religion known as Sonong. From the date of the introduction of the Christianity in North East India, the Hrangkhols started to convert into Christianity and more than 70% (approximate) population have now changed their religion. Rest still follow their traditional religion. There is no division in the name of caste but now division have begun between traditional religious followers and Christians.

The economic institutions of the Hrangkhols are based on jhum cultivation. They produce rice, millet, maize, vegetables, fruits, ginger and turmeric. Many times, they depend upon the forest for their livelihood, a few number of the population are earning their livelihood from the government or semi-government services. There are no industries or any other institution, which can generate employment or accelerate the economic condition of the people. The literacy rate is 60% (approximate) in Hrangkhols community but maximum of them are able to read and write only.
They have their traditional dresses and female wear the *Puanbom*, an open-ended shawl like cloth to cover their lower part and another cloth, small in length and breadth use to cover the upper part of their body. The men wear the cloth like *‘Duti’* (Dhuti) and *Zakua (Kamij)*, Lukom (turban) in head. After conversion into Christianity, the life styles of the Hrangkhols are undergoing changes that continue to this day.

They have their traditional rites and rituals practiced in their own way. The Hrangkhols have their traditional administration known as *Halam* headed by *Kalim* who is selected democratically and not acquired by hereditary.

In Assam, they are found in the area of the Dima Hasao and Cachar districts. There are 25 Hrangkhol villages in Dima Hasao District of Assam with a population of more than five thousand.

**Significance of the Study:**

As has been observed, a study undertaken on the Hrangkhols of Dima Hasao district of Assam is important for two reasons. First, it will help one to know about the tribe and their traditions, customs, society and religious beliefs. Secondly, it will help the different scholars in the reconstruction of the tribal history of North East India, and help the administration in evolving effective programmes for development of the tribal people of North East India in general and the hill tribes of Assam in particular.
Scope of the Study:

The study will be limited to the socio-cultural, religious and economic activities of the Hrangkhol community. The geographical area under review will be limited to the Dima Hasao district of Assam, bounded on the north by present Nagaon and Karbi Anglong districts, on the south by Cachar District, in the east by the states of Manipur and Nagaland and on the west by Meghalaya. The period under review will be from the post independent period to the present day.

Objectives:

- It is proposed to study the culture and tradition of the Hrangkhol society and economy.
- To examine the traditional religion of the Hrangkhols and changes that occurred in their religious practices.
- To identify and analyse the factors responsible for changes in different aspects of the Hrangkhol society.

Hypothesis:

- It is believed that the Hrangkhols as a tribe possess their very own traditions, culture and beliefs, separate from other Kuki tribes.
- In recent times, there have been changes in the religious traditions and socio-cultural belief among a section of the Hrangkhols.
Methodology:

This is an empirical study, with historical approach, based mainly on primary sources of data through direct observation and interview method. The present study is a combination of observation, interview and critical study method with gender-sensitive-approach.

Organization:

The material thus collected has been studied and organized under the following heads:

The first chapter is the **Introduction** consisting of a discussion of the origin and migration of the Hrangkhols to Assam, their geographical location, the details of their villages, their population in the area under survey i.e. the Hrangkhols living in the Dima Hasao District of Assam. It also contains a survey of literature, hypothesis and scope of study.

The second chapter **Social Customs and Traditions** deals with the social structure of the tribe, their family structure, education, marriage, food habits, dress and ornaments, position of women, festivals and other social ceremonies and practices. The traditional political structure of the Hrangkhols has also been discussed.

The third chapter **Livelihood, Cultivation and Trade** is an account of the means of livelihood, nature of economic activities, income groups, relation between economic activities and social status, as well as between education and economic activities, etc.

The fourth chapter on **Religious Beliefs and Practices** discusses the nature of traditional Hrangkhol religious beliefs, religious ceremonies and festivals, etc. It also
enquires into the causes and the courses of the changes in traditional religious belief and practices.

The last chapter is the Conclusion, a summary of the findings and observations of the foregoing discussions.

MAJOR FINDINGS:

➢ The majority of the Hrangkhols have been converted to the Christianity, while the other section who became minority still follow their traditional religious beliefs.

➢ Inheritance of the property goes to the eldest son of the family and no female child was offered property rights of their parents. The position of head of the family occupied by the eldest son of the family. The women were not allowed to be the head of the family by custom.

➢ Dowry was not observed while widow remarriage was practiced. The popularity of the love marriage along with elopement as well as inter community marriage was seen among the youth, regarding marriage. Belief in witchcraft was not seen in Hrangkhol society which is still a big problem in many parts of North-eastern region.

➢ The women literacy rate was poor compared to that of the men. It has been observed that the Christian Hrangkhols are quite advanced in education and economic status.

➢ The traditional Administrative system of the Hrangkhols known as Halam headed by Kalim was strictly maintained by the Hrangkhols. All members of the community (including Christians ) with great honour and faith maintained the customary rules and regulations of the Hrangkhols
associated with the social life. The respect to the *Kho Devan* (village council) is a significant feature of the Hrangkhols.

➢ The dormitory system was not found in the Hrangkhol society, which is a unique feature of the Kuki-Lushai-Chin group of tribes. This system plays an important role in the tribal way of life.

➢ The economic activity is divided into two divisions such as economy of the traditional religious followers and economic activities of the follower of the Christianity. The Christian Hrangkhols developed quite faster than that of the traditional religious followers.

➢ The sustainable economy of the Hrangkhols is mainly based on agriculture. Agriculture was done under two system- *Jhum* (shifting) and wet cultivation. The wet cultivation system is minimal.

➢ Rice, ginger, turmeric and various vegetables are the main agricultural product that contributed to their gross economy. Apart from these crops, fruits like pineapple, banana, jackfruit, pear etc. also help in the Hrangkhols economy. Animal husbandry plays an important role in the Hrangkhols economy.

➢ The role of women in the Hrangkhol economy is found to be very significant. However, the status of the women was observed to be very low compared to their male counterpart in the traditional Hrangkhol society. The women do not enjoy property right of their parents or even in the property of their husband.

➢ Modern technology and the government development schemes are still to have an effect in the majority of the Hrangkhol villages. It was limited to
a few educated people among the Hrangkhols that were benefitted from the development programme; rest still faces life’s hurdles.

➢ The *sonong* or religion of the Hrangkhols is now under the threat due to the shortage of *Ochai* and vast expenditure incurred in performing the religious rites and rituals. The conversion to Christianity is a phenomenon that was found to be effecting the continuation of their traditional socio-religious rituals and customs.

➢ *Zu* plays a significant role in the Hrangkhols’ traditional socio-religious and economic activities.

➢ The feelings of solidarity and identity has developed among the Hrangkhols while they have been suffering from identity crisis in modern times due to influence of Christianity, acculturation and assimilation of culture. Solidarity has now become the main problem among the Hrangkhols due to their small numbers in their different village.