

Role of Chiefs and their Associations in the Electoral Politics of Manipur with Special Reference to Churachandpur District in the 2007 Assembly Election

Lhungdim Bulchong Hemkhomang

Despite the emergence of the Manipur Village Authority Act, 1956 in the hill areas, the Chiefs in Churachandpur district who are supposed to be Chairman of the Village Authority continues to exert authority within the territory of their villages. In the present day-Churachandpur, Chiefs generally tend to have a democratic outlook during the elections. Many declared 'Free Vote' in the villages during elections. The respects and obeisance they command from the villagers give them the 'mandate' to influence the voting behaviors in the polling booths. With wide horizons of democratic outlook and accommodative attitudes of the ultra-modern Chiefs, the present form of the institution of Chieftaincy deserves to be strengthened with Legislative Acts. Nevertheless, the current mad race to become a Chief at all cost should be discouraged in order to preserve and conserve the uniqueness of the Traditional Institution of Chieftainship.

Keywords: Electoral Politics, Manipur, Churachandpur, 2007 Assembly Election

Literally the word '*Hausa*' denotes a person who possesses great wealth in the form of land, cattle, valuable stones, gongs etc. and who is well versed in all types of incantation and music. '*Hausa*' also denotes a person who has captured many slaves in battles to work for them, who has amassed many weapons through victories in battles and who belongs to a powerful and well-known clan. Such a person becomes the Village Chief. To be the '*Hausa*', that is, the chief of the village, it is absolutely necessary for a person to build a new village of his own without such a village, the person is known as '*Mihau*' (Rich man) (Goswami, 1985: 85).

Hausa is thus the all powerful Lord of the village. He may also bring other villages under his control. He distributes the land of his village to the people for cultivation and for other purposes (Ibid.).

Like the Chieftains of Mizos, Sema and Konyak Nagas, Khasis and Garos (Sangma 1981: 62), the Kukis also have traditional Chieftaincy System. But their Chieftaincy is absolutely hereditary, and land is entirely vested in the hands of the Chief. They are

Dr. Lhungdim Bulchong Hemkhomang is Associate Professor in Political Science, Jawaharlal Nehru Government College, Pasighat, East Siang District, Arunachal Pradesh.

strictly monarchical and the Chiefs are absolutely despotic. A chief is generally assisted by five or six elders collectively known as '*Shemang Pachong*' (Councilor). Their activities are concerned with agriculture, defence, labour, education and religion.

The Role of Chiefs: A Case of Churachandpur

Despite the emergence of the Manipur Village Authority Act, 1956 in the hill areas, the chiefs in Churachandpur district continues to exert authority within the territory of their villages. Although as per section 3(4) of the said Act, they are supposed to be the Chairman of the Village Authority (Das, 1987: 522). In Churachandpur district, the Mizos and Hmars called Chief as 'Lal', the Koms called 'Hausapu', and other communities called 'Hausa'. Barring the Tipaimukh belt in Churachandpur district where village administration is governed by the periodically elected Village Chairman, the other areas (Five Assembly constituencies) are headed by the Village Chiefs. In the present day Churachandpur, the Chiefs generally tend to have a democratic outlook during the election days. Many of them declared 'Free Votes' in the villages during the election. But how far the statement is true is to be examined in a proper perspective. However, like the King/Queen in England, the Traditional Institution of Chieftaincy thrives to persist among most of the tribal in Churachandpur district. Village Chief still commands respect and obeisance from the villagers. Hence, the village Chiefs generally commands in the polling booths as well. This is due to the fact that, villagers can not become villagers without Village Chief and vice versa, and the welfare of the villagers entirely depends on the joint endeavours of the chief and villagers together. As Tarun Goswami has rightly pointed out that to be a chief, it is absolutely necessary for a person to build a new village of his own. In the present day Churachandpur district it has become a trend/fashion for those who could afford to procure land to build new village to become a De facto as well as a De jure chief after gathering a minimum of twenty households. The Traditional Institution of Chieftaincy is purely based on Birth Rights. But the trend now in vogue is to become '*Mihau*' (Rich man) first in order to be '*Hausa*', that is Chief.

With wider mental horizons of democratic outlook and accommodative attitudes of the ultra-modern Chiefs, the present form of Institution of Chieftaincy needs to be strengthened. However, the current mad-race to become Chief at all cost should be discouraged in order to preserve and conserve the uniqueness of the Traditional Institution of Chieftaincy. In Churachandpur district, among some particular communities, to be a Village Chief in one's life time is a 'Prized Possession' to envy at. In view of the mushrooming growth of Chief-ships in the district, a particular community belonging to Kuki-Chin tribe in their jest of humour said, "among the five walking men on the street, if addressed properly and uttered 'NINGTHOU' (Chief in Meitei) from behind, atleast three of them are sure to turn back to respond". Chieftaincy to a very large extent, in wider spectrum, contributed immensely to the overall administrations of the district. According to the statistical records there are 540 villages in Churachandpur district, which also means that there are the same numbers of chiefs present in the district (Haokip, 2008: 3). All the Village Chiefs, putting together, supplement to the overall administrations of the district besides their primary duty towards their villages.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Chiefs and their Councils/ Organisations/ Associations

were seen to be quite active in asserting their political influences in the social domains. The Kuki Chiefs' Zonal Council, Manipur, submitted a memorandum to Smt. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India for their demands for the creation of Kuki Hill District.¹ On the questions of making Sadar Hills subdivisions a full-fledged Revenue District, a *Memorandum* was also submitted to Honorable Home Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, Government of India, by the Sadar Hills Kuki Chiefs' Organisation, Manipur on the 7th of October 1984.² Chiefs and their Associations play a vital role in the socio-economic and political domains. Out of the larger conglomeration of the Chiefs' Union, formations of smaller units or area-wise Chiefs' Associations are also in vogue. In Churachandpur district formation of area-wise Chiefs' Associations consists of Teiseng Area Chiefs' Association, Koite Lui Area, Lanva Lui Area, Tuining Area, Makhao Tampak Area, Saiton Area Chiefs' Association etc. Teiseng Area Chiefs' Association is typically a strong and working body in Churachandpur district. The Association is armed with a well-functioning traditional Court. To its credit it has successfully tried numerous cases within and outside its jurisdictions. The philanthropic aspect of the Association contributes immense nutrients to the social fabric of the society. The Chiefs and their Associations are often seen to make joint demands for the overall socio-economic development of the areas such as road communications, water and power supply, construction of culverts, bridges etc. to the aspirant candidates and parties during elections.

Conclusion

Village Chief become the First Citizen of the village and held respectable place in Churachandpur district. He occupied the centre stage in village administrations. He enjoys certain discretionary powers and functions in the village. On the eve of election the chief become important, their opinions attains significance, their protests become meaningful and in some cases even lead to performance. Therefore, it is strongly believed that as long as parliamentary democracy persist the Chiefs and their Associations may continue to persists and make the aspirant candidates dance within an interval of every five years according to their tunes.

Notes

¹ 'Kuki Hills District', a memorandum submitted to Shrimati Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, by the Kuki Chiefs' Zonal Council, Manipur, dated 27.07.1971.

² A Memorandum submitted to Honorable Home Minister, Narasimha Rao, Government of India, by the Sadar Hills Kuki Chiefs' Organisation, Manipur, dated 07. 10. 1984.

References

Goswami, Tarun (1985): *Kuki life and Lore* (Guwahati: North Cachar Hills District Council).

Sangma Milton S (1981): *History and culture of the Garos* (Delhi: Book Today).

Das, J. N. (1987): *A study of Administration of Justice among the Tribes and Races of North-Eastern Region*, (Guwahati: Law Research Institute Eastern Region, Gauhati High Court).

Haokip, Ngurjang Anty (2008): '*Profile, Churachandpur District, "Crossroad"*': A

Document on Churachandpur', (Churachandpur: A Publication of District Administration Churachandpur).