

# “Naga Customary Laws and its Relevance in Present Society: A Study of Zhavame Village of Chakhesang Tribe of Nagaland”

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## Abstract

“It is our collective and individual responsibility to preserve and tent to the world in which we live” **Dalai Lama**

Customary laws are those sets of belief of traditional laws which are passed down by the forefathers. These laws differ from place to place and tribe to tribes. These laws are made for the welfare and protection of the community which poses a question whether Customary laws are strengthening the community relationship in present day or not. However, with the coming of Christian missionaries to the North East India, the tribes transformed themselves from earlier belief to modern which bring contradiction between the old and younger generations. This study makes an attempt to explore the Naga customary laws of Chakhesang Tribe and its relevance in the present society. It will also look into how customary laws are effectively keeping the people united and how those age old laws are dealing with the problem of the present society; it will also bring out the comparative view of traditional and modern administrative system. Evidence with the help of qualitative tools and interview methods are drawn from Zhavame Village of Chakhesang tribe of Nagaland. The prudent of how customary laws play major significance in this modern world and how people revered to these laws will be seen in broader view. This paper will also highlight the relevant to the identities of the Naga society and its social practices.

**Keywords:** Customary laws, traditional, welfare, identities, Christian Missionaries.

## INTRODUCTION

Customary Laws are manmade yet these laws become the major part of every citizen if one has to live in a community or a society. Every individuals are made binding to the laws of the land which are practice and pass on since the ancient days by the forefathers. Customary laws of one village may not be same as compare to the other village however; one village is chosen here to represent the customary laws of the Nagas. The reason in doing so is, these laws in general are made for the welfare and protection of the community, to strengthen the community relationship and stand as the fence between the good and bad citizen. Customary laws are those set of laws which are made uniform and are practice, belief and accepted

by the indigenous people. These laws are mostly unwritten yet it has existed and transcended from time immemorial. The custom of the local communities are their main Identity. The people oblige to it and these laws are responsible in maintaining peace in ones land. This study will highlight the practice of customary laws in Nagaland and the Chakhesang tribe and do the detail study of Zhavame village Customary laws.

## NAGALAND

Nagaland, one of the tribal states of India lies between 25<sup>0</sup>60 and 27<sup>0</sup>40 north latitudes and between 93<sup>0</sup>20 and 95<sup>0</sup>15 east longitudes. It is located in the North-East region surrounded by the state of Arunachal Pradesh in the north, Assam in the west, Myanmar in the south. Nagaland has an area of 16,579 square kilometres with a population of 1,978,502 per the 2011 census of India (Census 2011, 2011). As tribal, the Nagas have its own unique social fabric cultures with various dialects, tribes, ethnic groups and different customs and its usage. The Nagas are shrouded by their oral histories, tradition, myths, taboos and legends and also they are customary bounded people who believe these laws are given by the elderly wise man with experiences, action and wisdom. The people respect the customary laws and look up to it when any problems, conflicts or misunderstanding arise amongst the people of one's own land. The customary laws are regarded as the protector of the local communities as these laws are extended to every individual of the community regardless of its clan or caste and rich or poor. The Nagas have been taking care of its own problems for long and give fair justice to the people, according to Shikuto Zapuli, “70-80 percent of cases are deal at the grassroot through customary laws” (The Morung express, 2017) . Therefore, even if these customary laws are not enforced directly by the legislature the government recognise some areas of life which can be tackle by the customary laws.

On the eve of the creation of the new state of Nagaland, 1963, the Union parliament of India has inserted Article 371(A) under Thirteen Amendment Act, 1962. This article was added

to fulfil the aspiration of the people of the then Naga Hills-Tuensang Area and to facilitate the creation of the 16<sup>th</sup> State of Indian Union..... This article provided special safeguard to the state of Nagaland with respect to religious, social and customary practices, ownership and transfer of land and rules for administration of justice. Thus, the union government don't have much interference in the practices of customary laws of the Nagas. The customary laws act as the fencing between the good and bad citizens of every Naga Village.

### CHAKHESANG

The Chakhesang is one of the major tribes of Nagaland. This tribe previously fell under the Eastern Angami but later designated as a separate tribe from the Angami tribe in August 1946. The name Chakhesang is an acronym of three allied sub-clans taking 'Cha' from 'Chokri', 'Khe' from 'Khezha' and 'Sang' from 'Sangtam'. The Chakhesang people mainly used three major dialects namely Chokri, Khezha and Poula. The district headquarter of the Chakhesang Nagas is located in Phek district which is situated in one of the most eastern parts of India with geographical area of 2026 sq.km sharing its boundaries with Zunheboto and Tuensang district in the north, Manipur in the south, Myanmar in the east and Kohima in the west. The total population of the Phek district stands at 163294 as per 2011 census (Krocha & Dukru, 2013).

The Chakhesang tribe covers around 104 villages, these villages are divided into various groups basing on their language, social, ethical and aesthetics cultures but all these village have a common social custom i.e to maintain the integrity and solidarity of their own village by maintaining a customary laws which is equally attended to every individual of the village under any circumstances. The people practice animism in the past but presently 95% of the people have converted into Christianity. The laws and practices given by the ancestors are still kept alive, many of those traditions are still followed in the form of customary laws.

### ZHAVAME VILLAGE

The Zhavame Village is one of the biggest villages under the Chakhesang tribe with the population of 4567 and total household of 1170<sup>1</sup>. The People are believed to have migrated from Makhel and after the long venture from mountain valleys, meadows and rivers the forefathers of Zhavame reached the present habitation. Since the people believe in animism, they performed certain rituals on the land and started to reside there. The village was named from the word *Zhava* which literally means 'Enchanted Lake', later the village was name as Zhamai or Zhavame which means the people of the enchanted lake. Zhavame village is situated at the foothill of the Kapamodzii range, located in the southern part of Nagaland, bordering Manipur state. Therefore, the village is surrounded by number of villages belonging to both Phek district of Nagaland and Senapati district of Manipur. Some of the neighbouring villages are Zelome, Tsiipfiime, Thetsiime,

Lekromi, Pfiitseromi and Kami etc. from Phek district and Tungjoy, Layi, Kilo, Zeme, Ravome, Zhobume, Vapfiime, etc. from senapati district.

The Zhavame village is based on patriarchal linkage, the clan system are strongly followed till date. The people of Zhavame depend on land, forest and agricultural production received both from Jhum and terrace cultivation as their main source of economy. The village is governed and bind together by tradition and customary laws. In olden days the village was led by the village chief called as the *Muvu* but with the growing of time the village council have been given the authority to look after the welfare of the village. The villagers are guarded by the customary laws of the village since ancient days till now.

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Zhavame people have been practicing their traditional cultures for ages, some of which are still relevant to the present generation and some seem to have degraded way back. With the coming of Christian missionaries and introduction of education system the people stop some of the rituals and practices they does before. However, there was no written record on any practices or customary laws, it was fully verbal and oral. Thus, some senior educated elders have tried to codify the laws and made record of the practices but so far no exact or proper research work has taken place. This study is mainly done to explore the practices of customary laws of Zhavame village of Chakhesang tribe. This research is set to investigate into the problem faced by people regarding the customary laws in Zhavame village and also to document and record the laws practiced and followed by the local people. There is no doubt that customary laws play a very significant role in the life of people but there are some major obstacles which cannot be ignore as well. In order to develop the community, factors like, women are not allowed to take part in village administration, property rights, land issues or citizenship etc. We have to take note of the customary laws carefully in order to fit in the contemporary generation. Therefore, this study would like to unearth the problems of customary laws in the contemporary world

### OBJECTIVES

**The main objective of this study is to:**

1. To document the traditional laws for the continuity of culture and identity.
2. To probe deeper into the customary laws of Chakhesang Tribe, which itself plays a role of a mini-state.
3. To draw out the impact of customary laws in society at the grass root level.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research work is qualitative and more descriptive in design where the important data are collected from both the primary sources as well as secondary sources. The primary sources include the interview schedule, questionnaire, interaction with the village people and observation

<sup>1</sup> Data source recorded from Village Council Chairman.

participation etc. Secondary data include the census reports, books, journal articles, periodical, internet sources, etc. The researcher used purposive and stratified sampling to cover the study area.

### **Administrative system and customary laws of Zhavame village**

#### ***The ancient Zhavame village administration system***

The Zhavame people are very rich with its Folk tune and folklores which give us the glimpse of how life was back then. Traditionally, before the advent of Christianity the people belief in nature such as trees, stones and spirits etc. Though there were no written records, the administrative system that the villagers practice since the ancient time is very systematic in nature. All the village decisions are take care by the village chief called as “*Muvu*” and the families who has already given the feast of merit called as “*Zhosuchume*” . According to the traditions the village have two special shawls called as “*Saparudu*” and “*Hapidasa*”, these shawls can be own only by those people who has giving the feast of merit, i.e *Zhosochume*. Though the *Muvu* is the chief of the village, the *muvu* mostly deal with the religious activities and maintain all the taboos of the village and the *Zhosochume* works more on the administrative field.

Whenever there are things to be discussed the *Muvu* along with all the malefolks of the *Zhosuchume* will come together in a meeting place called *Muzhobu* (also known as the war tower) and start discussing the matter and if at all the meeting is conducted with the villagers as a whole those people who don’t own the shawls does not have any rights to speak or share their views on the problems or issue, as it will be considered invalid. The decision taken by the *Muvu* is considered to be final. When we look into the roles play by the *Muvu* and the *Zhosochome* we can see that all the legislative, executive and judicial activities of the villagers are done by them. The laws and rules they followed and exercise are not just given out directly at the spot but these laws are custom and were pass on from generations back.

In legislative and executive fields the *Zhosuchume* will decide all the require changes in the village such as rate of the meat, rice, fines,etc,. If at all there is unusual natural calamity happens in and around the village they believed it to be a curse and therefore in order to please their God the *Muvu* alone with the *Zhosuchume* will discuss on how to bring solutions to the problem, for which, they may <sup>2</sup>called a day off from every heavy works or no one will be allow to cross the village gates or no one will be allow to burn anything for a particular day and they will be asked to practices their rituals and pray. Once the decision is taken the *Muvu* will stand on the top of the village and announce it to all corners of the village twice, one in the evening before a new day begin and one early in the morning of the particular day. If anyone violate or disobey the order he/she will be severely punished.

In judicial field as well, the *Muvu* and *Zhosuchume* act as the custodians of the customary laws. The deal with all the cases of the village such as theft, marriage, divorce, quarrelling, immoral activities, land disputes, adultery, arson, endogamy, breaching of customary laws, etc. The cases will be deal by the *Muvu* and the *Zhosochome* in the *Muzhobu* (village meeting place or the war tower). The punishment are given according to the customs and traditions some of which are-

1. If one is found guilty in case of stealing, he/she will have to pay fines to the owner.
2. In cases of fines, if the case involve only one person then the fine will be not much but if its group it will be higher and if they whole clan is involve it will be even more higher.
3. If one is found guilty in case of adultery after married she will not be given any land or properties but will be have to leave the house only with the clothes she is wearing. In case of man, his share of property will be shared with the wife.
4. If anyone has done adultery with other enemy village he/she will be banish from the village
5. In case of disputes between two village first they try to solve problem on their own but if it get worst it is solve by means of war. Whoever win the war also win the case.
6. If in certain cases the culprit is not been able to identify, then all the man fold of village will come together and curse the person<sup>3</sup>.

But with the coming of Christainity and modern education system the living standards of the people gradually started to transformed. Though still now there are some elderly animist believers exist in Zhavame Village, there is no more *Muvu* as such. Instead village administrations are under the control of the Village council body.

#### ***Administration structure of the present Zhavame Village***

The role of Village Council is very significant in the village as they hold the overall authority for the administrations of justice within the village. The village council holds the full powers to deal with the internal administration of the village, maintenance of law and order, enforce orders passed by competent authority, maintenance of water supply, roads, forest, education, and other developments and welfare activities for the village. The village council is consider to be the parent body of the village as all the other department such as the Students’ Union, Youth society, Women Society fall under the village Council authority. The Zhavame village have a unique process of running the village customary laws i.e every department are given respective fields to deal upon and the other department cannot interfere with the case but they can support and back up or give suggestions with the decision made by the concern department. The Youth Society is given

<sup>3</sup> Data collected from village elders and personal interview.

full authority over the crimes committed or disturbances created by the youth of the village they youth body also maintain a youth jail in village, the women society deals with all the women case such are rape case, physical harassment or any kind of cases indulging with adultery and immorality, etc., the students' body look into the matter of students as well as being a pressure body it can act as an all rounder in viewing and giving suggestions to any cases. When it comes to land disputes or conflicts with other neighbour village the village council take control. So far there is no particular customary court in Zhavame village and therefore all the cases are settle and discuss in the Village Development Block (VDB) hall by the village council and his sub- departments alone with the accused and victims of the crime or problem committed. The running of Zhavame village customary laws are very much alike with the state laws, the village have 7 khels namely Pame, Krocha, Movi, R.Domeh, Z.domeh, Dukru, and Pohena. All the khels have their own sub-council body at the khel level and these khels also have some strict rules and regulations within their own Khel yet the Village customary law is considered as the common supreme law and followed by the whole villagers. When there is any problem in any Khels the sub-council body first deal with it and later when this matter become difficult in Khel level it is taken to the Village council body. The Gaon Buras and Village Council member are regarded as the custodians of the village customary law, the member present in council body are nominee send from each khels.

#### *Zhavame village customary laws*

##### **FAMILY**

The Zhavame people followed the patriarchal system of family line, therefore descents are traced through the male line. The villagers prefer the nuclear type of family where the children become independent after married and take up the responsibility to look after their own household, this type is prefer more by the villagers because in this way there will be less misunderstandings between the families and love and affections will grow more. The father is the head of the family and all the power and authority to make decision for family lies with him and his headship continue as long as he is alive. In some cases, if there is no father in a family the eldest son or the mother, whoever fit best, take all the decision of the family. The role of the head of the family is very important because all the important decision specially regarding economic activities and work like wood carving, construction of house, agriculture implement, demarcation of land boundary, felling of trees, taking part in village administration, political field, etc. are taken care by the father and the mothers are mostly given the duty of taking care of the domestic activities such as weaving, embroidery, sowing of paddy and vegetables, gardening, cooking, feeding the children and taking care of domestic animals etc. The main income source of the villagers is received through agricultural work done by both the husband and wife.

##### **MARRIAGE AND INHERITANCE**

In the olden days the marriage ceremonies in Zhavame village are mostly done according to the animism belief and rituals but in the present context with the coming of Christianity the majority of the population started to adopt the Christian faith and marriages are done in the church, the villagers practice monogamy where the man or women will get settle with only one wife or husband and if there is any other affairs apart from the husband-wife relationship it is consider immoral and actions are taken upon them. The Zhavame families does not practice any price of equilibrium system present days but the parents of both the bride and bride-groom help their children marriage at the best possible ways.

The parents of both the bride and groom can give fields, lands or rice etc. to the newly wedded couple. The paddy fields given to the bride and groom are called as "*Luphra*". According to their old practice, if the husband died his widow and children have the right to continue cultivation in her husband *Luphra* or paddy field and the husband relative does not have any right to take back the field but if in any case the widow remarried or dies the field will return to the respective relative, vice versa.

One of the most unique practice of the Zhavame village is the practice called "*Modumorao*" which means the paddy field of the wife are return to her relative after the completion of 3rd generations. The women or daughter are given the gift of love from her parents during the marriage as *Luphra*, this field can be cultivated by the daughter, the grand daughter and the great granddaughter and after her death or completion of three generations the *Luphra* shall returned to the relatives. In case if any conflicts or disputes arise among the deceased family and the relative over the inheritance of the paddy field the relative shall prevail. In any event, if the case grows bigger the Village council take the final decision. This practice is followed till date in order to keep the family link alive. In order not to forget the blood line or the link of *Modumorao*, the villagers followed the practice of "*Sourhwuo-Sounyi*" i.e during the festival of *Thuni* which is held once in a year, the father, brothers and nephews etc will give meat to their daughters, sisters, nieces and granddaughter etc.

##### **DIVORCE**

In case of divorce the lands or fields which are brought by the wife and husband will be taken back respectively and the land and properties they bought together will be equally shared between the two of them, if they understand and negotiate with each other it in good terms. But in case of adultery if the women living with her husband is found committing adultery with other man then she will have to leave the house of her husband empty hand except only with the clothes she wears. In the event, if the man is caught red handed committing adultery with others wife in the husband's house the husband and his relative have every rights to beat him or punish him accordingly. However, if the incident took place in other place the husband should not revenge on him outside the house.

### **CUSTODY OF CHILD**

As the villagers follow the patriarchal linkage of family system where the child is given the name of the father. In many events it is the father who take care of all the children if it is possible for him but in cases where the number of family is large the parents share the children, here, the daughters will be given to the mother whereas the father take care of the sons. If in case of illegal marriage, the boy and girl had a child and the boy refuse to take the girl as his wife. The girl will take care of the child till the baby reach the age of two and the boy will have to give Rs.10000 at time of delivery plus 10 tins of paddy annually for 2 years after which the child will be handed over to the father. If in case, the girl refuses to marry the boy, the girl shall take full responsibility of the child for 2 years.

### **INJURIES AND DEATH**

The village customary laws have certain penalties for any event that lead to death or injury of somebody's life be it intentionally or accidentally.

In case of intentional killing, the culprit shall be penalized with a fine of Rs.5,00,000/- to the nearest kith and kin of the victim after which the culprit shall be judge as per the law of the land. In case of accident, the guilty shall have to pay a fine of Rs.2,00,000 to the nearest kith and kin of the victim and it shall be final and binding. If in case where the person is injured intentionally or accidentally the village council shall examine the case and the final verdict of the council will be binding. If conflict arise between the relative of the decrease and the guilty on the issue of whether it is intentional or unintentional, the guilty shall take an oath and pay an ex-gratia of Rs. 2,00,000 to the nearest kith and kin of the deceased.

### **STATUS OF WOMEN**

The status of women differs from society to society, Zhavame Village having a patriarchal background there is no doubt that the male population are given more preference in many area such as right to inherit the parents immovable properties and land past on by ancestors, decision making process, custody of children and taking part in village administration, etc. but as compare to the other society or any other part of India the women in Zhavame village enjoy more privilege and social status. The women are given equal educational opportunities, equal love from the parents, as a gift of love the daughters are also given paddy fields, grains, clothes etc., during her marriage and the manual work either it be domestic or economic the man and woman both work hand in hand together in present days. The women of Zhavame village are also given the platform to formed an organisation called as, “The Zhavame Women Society” this women organisation fall under the village council authority, all the cases which include women problem like rape case, physical harassment, domestic violence on women, adultery, immoral practices, selling of alcohols in village etc. are deal by the women society. The women of Zhavame village does not lack behind in any activities and duties towards the community and their family,

they are chaste, faithful, hard working and very determining with whatever things they do. Looking at the surface level the status of women is not very low but when we look into various problem face by the village women, so far there is no women representative in village council administration, immovable property rights are not given to the daughters or for that matter even if the daughter is the only heir, if in case, the parent died the properties are taken away by the relative or cousin and she don't get any share on it. We can still see some loopholes in the condition of women and improvement is very much required for the present day. The traditional mentality of women are inferior than men and are not capable of taking decision or making the women to confine in house whole chores or domestic activities alone cannot be followed in present days because with the growing generation and impact of education and modernization the girls or women are becoming very competitive and smarter as compare to the traditional old days.

Unlike the olden days where women are rape or molested yet no certain actions are taken place, in present society the status of women of Zhavame village is becoming somehow progressive as the elders, educated or learned leaders have come up with certain laws for protection of women. In any events, if any person attempts to rape any girl or women the accused will be penalized with a fine of Rs.20,000 and if a girl or women is raped an amount of Rs. 75,000 will be fine. Women status need some more brushing in the contemporary society as the women of today's generation are very capable of every works, the women are working in various work places be it field work, agricultural work, business, government offices, teaching and so on<sup>4</sup>.

### **LAND DISPUTE**

The villagers own absolute ownership in the village community land. Land and its production is one of the major source of their livelihood. The Zhavame villagers practice both jhum and terrace cultivation for harvest. Regarding land holding men are given preference and women don't have much on it be it family individual land or community land. Major cases in village level usually arise due to the land dispute both within and outside village, they are between clans or neighbouring villages etc.

Land dispute within the village, in any event if dispute arise between the individual and the village community the village community will have the privilege to take oath over the dispute area however if the community refuses to take the oath the individual/clan shall have the joint ownership with the village community over the disputed area. If any individual or clan is proven in conspiring to take over the village community land, they shall not have share over the village community land.

<sup>4</sup> Source collected from personal interview and drafted Village Constitutional Laws.

Land dispute with other village, if at all there is a case regarding land dispute with the other village, the village council members of the two village will first try to deal with the matter and if it get worse it will involves the other neighbouring villages to deal with the case. Under no circumstances, village land will be lease to other outside the village. In any boundary dispute, if the whole community take part in any movement where one lost his/her life the village community will pay a sum of Rs.1,00,000/- as an ex-gratia to the nearest kith and kin of the victim and also pay 100 tins of paddy per year for the period of 5 years.

### MAJOR FINDING

1. Majority of the villagers are not well verse with the Customary laws, therefore 100% of the respondents support the preservation and documentation of traditional laws.
2. The status of the women are comparatively better in education and other fields yet still now there is no female representative in the ancient Muvu system nor modern village council administration.
3. More than 40% of the population think that women themselves hesitates to take part in village decision making body.
4. The village does not practice Price of equilibrium. Majority of the male population in the village are supportive towards the gift of love given to a daughter by her father while a hand full of them still does not support this system(in the form of Field,land, property ,barn of harvested rice, ornaments etc)
5. Practice of Modumorao, Luphra and sourhwuo-Sounyi is one of it unique culture.
6. The village council body act as the parent body in taking care of the customary laws while several sub-departments such as Women Society, Youth Society, Students Union are given works respectively.
7. From the respondents source, around 80% were of the view that the village council administration work are interfere by the higher political activities.
8. The people are very satisfied with the verdict of justice given through the village customary laws.

### RELEVANCE OF CUSTOMARY LAW IN PRESENT SOCIETY

The value of customary law is very high ever since the olden days. With the growing of time and people many young educated minds get the knowledge of both the constitutional laws as well as the customary laws practice by the local communities back at home. Which make them live both the side evenly. They are still very much relevant in the life of the local communities as these laws act as the fencing between the good and bad citizens of the community or village in particular. The National laws may be very good at its highest level but most of it becomes irrelevant when it reaches to the

ground or field level of the villagers' problems. Therefore, the local people know the best of what is require in the village or community and in order to maintain peace and stability these customary laws plays a very efficient and effective work. These laws do not remain static but follow prudent and change alone with the living standard of the people. The customary laws are more important and relevant in the present context because more crimes or problems take place in the present generation as compare to the olden days. Most of the villagers initiate the practices of maintaining the village customary court and jails for the welfare of the people to keep the pace of peace and harmony in the society

### CONCLUSION

The proposed study, as can be ascertained from the objectives, is primarily analytical in nature. This is significant because it attempt to establish why the customary law is taking shape in such an aggressive way and how it came to be suddenly dwindle in the interface of tradition and modernity. On other hand, it also gives opportunity to critically analyse the position or relevance of the customary law in the society where other domain such as Christianity and Westernization have eclipse in most cases.

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