

Chapter - 6

Authority Structure in the Molsom Society

The conduct of the members of the Molsom society is regulated through three-fold authority structure, namely the family authority structure, the village authority structure and the community authority structure. The present chapter aims to discuss, in detail, about the composition and functions of the authority structure at the three levels and to interpret their significance for the maintenance of the social order in Molsom society.

Family authority structure

Among the Molsoms the conduct of the members in the family is regulated and the socio-economic and politico-religious activities of the family are looked after by the head of the family. Normally the oldest male member heads the family and his wife acts as his assistant. After the death or invalidation of the head, the next eldest male succeeds him. This new head could be the eldest son or eldest son-in-law (in case the family has

no son or the eldest son has been staying with his father-in-law's family). In case the family has no adult male member the wife of the head takes up the responsibility.

The head represents his family at the village and community affairs, such as in matter of selection of the village chief and other members of the council and attends the village meetings called by the village council. He looks after the economic and socio-religious activities of the family. In shifting cultivation he is to choose the *jhum*-field to be cultivated by the family and has to take decision about the variety of seeds to be sown in the *jhum*-field. Land and other property of the family are kept under his control.

The family authority structure of the Molsoms is, more or less, akin to that of the other tribes of the state with the exception that, after the death of a head among the Molsoms his eldest son-in-law is also entitled to succeed him. In the villages where a sample survey has been conducted for the present study, it has been found that 1.03 % of family heads are the eldest son-in-law of the deceased heads, 6.90 % are the eldest sons and 3.45 % are the wives of the deceased heads.

Table 6.1 : Family heads and their relations with other members.

Relation	Number of family heads	Percentage to total family
Husband, father, father-in-law.	257	88.62
Eldest son of deceased father	20	6.90
Wife of deceased head	10	3.45
Son-in-law of deceased head	3	1.03
Total	290	100.00

The village authority structure

The conduct and affairs of the Molsoms at the village level are regulated and directed by the village council which also looks after the socio-economic, politico-religious and other activities of the village people. The village council of the Molsoms consists of the *khuoulm* or Chaudhury, that is, the village chief, the *khandolloom* who is the assistant to the *khuoulm* and the *khamdoltoum* the messenger. Two youth leaders namely *tangoaloum* the leader of the boys, and the *nungyakoulm*, the leader of the girls of the village, also help the council when necessary. Besides the above secular structure, there is another one-man religious institution consisting of the *awchai*, the priest of the village, who, when

required, helps the council in the magico-religious aspects of the problems under trial.

The village council of the Molsoms is, more or less, akin to that of some other tribal communities of the state like the Reang, the Tripuri, the Kolois, the Uchoi etc. though, of course, with some differences. Among the Reang and the Tripuri the village council consists of four members namely the Chaudhury, the Achai, the Karbari and Khandol (Gan Chaudhury 1983 ; Deb Burman 1983:64). But among the Uchois only two members, namely, the Chaudhury and *karbari* constitute the village council (Deb Burman 1963 : 30) while the village council of the Kolois consists of three members— one Chaudhury and two *khandols* where no *karbari* or *achai* is found (ibid.). The village council of the Molsoms, in contrast, consists of three members—*Khuoulm*, *khandolloom* & *khandoltoum* - but occasionally they are assisted by three others i.e. the leaders of the male and female youth groups and the village priest.

The members of the Molsom village council are selected by the villagers in a formal meeting. First of all the village chief, the *khuoulm*, is selected which followed by the selection of the assistant of the chief, the *khandolloom*, and the messenger or the *khandoltoum*. In the selection of the *khandolloom* and *khandoltoum* the preference of the newly selected village chief gets some priority. While selecting the *khuoulm*, some religious rites are observed by the village priest. But such rites are not performed in selecting the other council members.

All the family heads and some other adult male members of the village assemble in a meeting and choose a person from among the family heads of the village for the post of *khuoulm*. Usually an aged and brave man with remarkable hunting records, who is also considered intelligent and economically sound, having many young males in the family, is preferred. In the traditional *jhum* economy, economic status of a person is measured by the number of adults in his family. It is so probably because

in *jhum* economy the land is a community property looked after by the village council; and a family is allowed to cultivate as much land as it can manage by its members. So, naturally, greater the number of adults a family possessed wider the stretch of land it is allowed to cultivate resulting in higher production. But in settled economy, a person's economic status is measured by the cultivable landed property he possesses. The criterion that the head of a family which has a number of adult males is generally selected as the village chief probably owes its origin to the fact that the personal family life of the village chief would be disturbed as he would have to remain engaged, most of the time, in the activities of the village council and thus he would be constrained to detach himself from the economic and other management activities of his family. The other adult males, in such cases, can look after the family and economic activities.

For selecting the village chief, at first, the name of a person is proposed by any of the heads of the families and if that name finds favour with the majority of the people assembled there for the purpose and if the person also is willing to take up the responsibility then the *awchai* of the village arrange for a test to find out whether the choice is auspicious.

He sacrifices a hen to the *tuisangro* deity and removes the elementary canal of it. He then conceives of the elementary canal as divided into two parts namely the mouth-adjacent part, which is presumed to fall on God's side, and the rectum-adjacent part, which is considered as belonging to man's side. The *awchai* then checks up whether there is any damage spot on the elementary canal. If any spot is seen on the part supposed to belong to God then no problem arises; but if there is any spot on the rectum adjacent part or simultaneously on both the parts then the selection of the village chief is supposed to be ominous and in that case the villagers propose another name.

After the selection of *khuoulm*, other members of the council namely *khandolloom* and *khandoltoum* are selected by the village people. The

personal qualities and the other criteria for selection as *khandolloom* or *khandoltoum* are the same as those for *khuoulm* selection.

Functions of the village council members

Distinct work division is found among the council members. *Khuoulm*, the head of the council, exercises supreme power in the council. He negotiates various socio-economic, politico-religious and other disputes and problems faced by the council. In traditional *jhum* economy the *khuoulm* is to choose the *jhum*-field and settlement area where the villagers would shift during the *jhum*-cycle. He is to collect subscriptions from the villagers and arrange annual *sangrak* and *khoser* worship. Besides, the *khuoulm* represents the village in the inter-village affairs and in selection of the members for the community council.

The *khandolloom* is the assistant to the *khuoulm*. The *khandoltoum* is the messenger who also arranges for *dabo*, the smoking implement during meeting of the council. The *khandoltoum* also implements the physical punishments imposed by the council. Usually the house of the *khuoulm* is used as the office of the council. During council meetings the *khuoulm* may take the help of any adult villager to solve the problem under trial.

The *tangoaloulm* and *nungakoulm* are selected by the youths of the village in a formal meeting. An expert hunter, having remarkable knowledge in craftsmanship and music, is preferred for the post of *tangoaloulm*. Similarly, preference is given to expert weaver, or to those having special skill in *zukola* preparation, dance and music, for selecting the *nungakoulm*.

The *awchai* is selected in a formal meeting called by the village council where all heads of the families assemble. Personal qualities and other

criteria for the selection of *awchai* are almost the same as those for the selection of a *khuoulm*, with the exception that the person, in addition, must have a specialised knowledge of the magico-religious rites and rituals. Though this religious institution is not directly a part of the village council, yet in the arena of village administration, it works along with the council. The *awchai* performs all worships arranged by the families or village council and is entrusted with the duty of treatment of diseases by performing magic or worship. He helps the village council with his knowledge and ideas about the magico-religious aspects of the problem under trial. The *awchai* represents the village, along with the other council members, in selecting the members for the community council. Besides, he has to perform religious rites and tests during the selection of *khuoulm* of the village council. In return of the *awchai's* service, the village people cultivate his land for one season in a year. The general activities of the Village Chief are confined to his village only.

The *tangoaloum* and *nungakoum* make inquiry about the problems especially relating to premarital sex and violence and place the report before the council. Besides they lead the youth team during the *ron*, the customary mutual exchange of labour, and other youthful group activities.

There is no fixed tenure of office for the members of the village council, at the same time, it may not be life long. It fully depends on the working efficiency of its members. Whenever the village people find incompetence in the activity of the council, they dissolve it in a general meeting of the villagers. Besides, if any member or members of the council feel himself or themselves, in any way, incompetent to perform duties, he or they may resign. But if the *khuoulm* resigns, then the other members of the council have also to resign because the latter do not have any executive power of their own. However, they may be re-elected in the next council meeting. In case the other members or member, except *khuoulm*, resign no change takes place in the overall structure of the council; only the post which is

vacated with the resignation of the respective member, is filled up by selecting another suitable person in a formal meeting of the villagers.

The working tenure of the one-man religious institution namely the *awchai* is life long but not hereditary. The *awchai* can resign only if he feels himself, in any way, incompetent to perform his works. The *tangoaloum* and *nungakoum* are relieved of their office when they get married.

Customary laws

To regulate the behaviour and affairs of the individual in the different aspects of life and for sustaining peace, some laws, customs or norms are prevalent in the Molsom society, which the members of the society are expected to abide by. The village council is vested with the power to impose fines and punishments if violation of such a norms occur. The amount of fines and the forms of punishments vary with the nature of the offense. Fine in cash or kind, torture, excommunication etc. are the customary punitive measures. Some of the existing laws and related forms of punishments to be imposed against the violators, are cited below.

Table 6.2: Existing laws and related forms of punishment of the village council

Forms of offenses	Nature of fines or punishments
1	2
Premarital sexual relation.	Rupees forty-five and an earthen pot of <i>zukola</i> .
Conception by a girl before marriage	Rupees forty-five, one earthen pot of <i>zukola</i> and one bottle of country liquor. (these are to be given by the boy and the boy would have to marry the girl)

Marriage of a girl before initiation of Risabomb ceremony.	The parents of the girl are fined Rupees forty-five.
Courting a person whose marriage has been socially settled.	The accused person is to compensate the amount which has been spent for settling the marriage.
Marriage between tabooed relations	The couple is fined Rs. 45, one earthen pot of <i>zukola</i> , excommunicated, and has to arrange a feast after the period of excommunication.
Adultery	The convict is fined rupees one hundred twenty, one earthen pot of <i>zukola</i> and five bottles of <i>rakzu</i> .
Community exogamy	The convict is fined rupees forty-five, one earthen pot of <i>zukola</i> and excommunicated for a period fixed by the council. He also has to arrange for a community feast.
Divorce	The person seeking divorce is to pay an amount of rupees one hundred-thirty and an earthen pot of <i>zukola</i> .
Cultivating <i>jhum</i> on other's land	The accused is fined with rupees five and two earthen pot of <i>zukola</i> .
Killing other's domestic animal.	The convict is fined with an amount equivalent to the cost of that animal or he has to give an animal of the same species and size and an earthen pot of <i>zukola</i> .
Killing of wild animal already trapped by some one else.	The accused is to return the animal or an amount equivalent to the cost of that animal, a fine of rupees five and an earthen pot of <i>zukola</i> .
Trespassing into or entering a village or going out of the village on the day of annual <i>sangrak</i> or <i>khoser</i> worship.	The convict is fined an amount which has been spent for the respective worship and <i>hens</i> and <i>rakzu</i> the quantity of which is decided by the village priest and the village council.

Besides the laws mentioned above there are some norms prevailing amongst the Molsoms which are expected to be followed by the member of their society. No fine or punishment is imposed for violating such norms, but a norm breaker is condemned by the village people. Some of these norms are cited below.

- 1). If anybody takes the help of physical labour of any person or persons the former is expected to return the labour when the latter is in need of the same. Such mutual exchange of labour, in Molsom is known as *ron*.
- 2). A big game is expected to be distributed among all the households of a village, whether it is hunted in group hunting or by an individual.
- 3). Every household of a village is expected to give subscription for the performance of any rite, ritual or ceremony arranged by the village council.
- 4). In the holy day of *sangrak* or *khohser* worship, nobody from the village is expected to work in *jhum* land or in settled cultivation.
- 5). At least one adult member from each household of the village is expected to take part when the villagers customarily cultivate the land of the village priest for one season a year.

Community council

The community council of the Molsoms consists of eleven members, namely, the *kamchikao*, the head; *awchai*, the priest; *yaksung* and *khuksung*, the assistants; *sangialean* and *sangiatoum*, the messengers; *sangkanta*, the executor of corporal punishment; *okma*, the tobacco maker; and *modi*, the *zukola* supplier.

The members for the community council are selected by the *khuoulms*, *awchais* and some other influential members of the Molsom villages. The selectors gather together in a formal meeting, usually in the house of *ex-kamchikao* and select the members for the community council. At first, in the process of selection, the *kamchikao*, the head of the community council, is selected which is followed by the selection of the *awchai*, *chapialian*, *chapiatoum*, *yaksung*, *khuksung*, *sengialian*, *sangiatoum*, *senkanta*, *okma* and the *modi*, one after another.

The personal qualities and other criteria for choosing a person for the post of *kamchikao* are the same as those in the case of selecting the chief of the village council. The method and other formalities observed for selecting the *kamchikao* are also akin to those observed during the selection of the village chief.

After the selection of the *kamchikao* the *awchai* is selected. A person with sound religious knowledge along with other personal qualities, which are taken into account for selecting the *kamchikao*, is considered for post of *awchai*. Normally, the *awchai* is selected from a village adjacent to the village of the *kamchikao*. The new *kamchikao* and *awchai*, along with other assembled members, then select the other members of the community council. The same criteria, as are followed in selecting the *kamchikao*, are followed for selecting the other members of the council as well. But no religious rite is performed for selecting them. The members like *chapialian*, *chapiatoum*, *sengialian*, *sengiatoum*, *okma* and

modi are generally selected from the village of the *kamchikao* or from the adjacent villages for smooth running of the council.

After all the council members are selected, the *kamchikao* assumes the office formally when the *silungket*, the magical test-stone used for identifying a sinner, is handed over to him by the outgoing *kamchikao*. This *silungket* is believed to be preserved from their days in Bolpuitang, the original place as they believe, of their inhabitation.

Function of the community council members

Clear hierarchy and functional division are there among the members of the community council. The *kamchikao* acts as the chairman and exercises supreme power over the council members. He gives the final decision in solving the problems faced by the council; constitutionally he controls all activities, economic, social, political, religious etc. of the community as a whole. The hierarchy goes downward from the *kamchikao* to the *awchai*, *chapialian*, *yaksung*, *khuksung*, *sengialian*, *sengiatoum*, *sengkanta*, *okma* and the *modi*.

The *awchai* acts as the religious advisor to the *kamchikao*, helping him with his magico-religious knowledge in solving the problem under trial. Besides, the *awchai* performs the *sangrak* and *khoser* worship and other rites, rituals, ceremonies etc. arranged by the community council.

The *chapialian* and *chapiatoum* act as the deputy chiefs of the community council. They are assisted by the *yaksung* and *khuksung*. The *sengialian* and *sengiatoum* communicate the decisions and other information of the community council to the village councils. They invite the members of the community council to attend council's meeting whenever necessary. The *sengkanta* executes corporal punishment

conferred on a guilty by the community council. The *okma* and *modi* arrange for and serve tobacco and liquor during the meeting of the community council.

Usually the problems which remain unresolved in the trial of the village council are placed before the community council. This council tries to resolve problems in two ways. It sends its representatives, the *chapialian* and *chapiatoum*, to the village council from where the dispute has originated. The *chapialian* or *chapiatoum*, on behalf of the council, tries the case in a meeting arranged by the village council and settle the problem. Secondly, the community council solves the problem in a formal meeting in the house of the *kamchikao*.

If any dispute remains unresolved after the trial in the court of community council the *kamchikao* takes the matter in his hand and solves it with the help of a magical test-stone known as *silungket*. The *silungket* is put on the palm of the accused person and if the person fails to keep the stone on his hand the charge brought against him is taken to be established. The *silungket*, as they believe, would hot up on the hand of a guilty and a real sinner would not be able to keep the stone on his hand; on the contrary, it would remain cool on the palm of an innocent person. But the *silungket* is rarely used for judgment as most of the problems are settled in the trial of the community council. The forms and measure of fines and punishments exercised by the community council are mostly the same as those imposed by the village council with some little differences in the severity of the corporal punishments.

Besides looking into intra-community affairs, the *kamchikao* also represents the community in inter community affairs. He used to represent the community during the customary annual tribal gathering of the state which was traditionally held at the palace of the then Maharajas and was known as *hasam bhojan*.

The working tenure of the community council is not fixed and, at the same time, it is not life long for any of its members too. It depends, as in the case of village council, on the performance of the office bearers or the violation of norms by the council members, especially by the community chief. If the people of the community feel that the existing council has lost the efficiency expected of them they can dissolve the council in a formal meeting. Besides, the *kamchikao* or any member of the council may resign if he feels himself unable to run the office competently. Any termination of the *kamchikao* results in the dissolution of the council as a whole. But when any other member of the council resigns no change occurs in the over all structure of the community council; but the vacant post is filled up by selecting a suitable person in a formal meeting of the community council.

Changes

Over the years, no major change has taken place in the structure and functioning of the village and community council of the Molsoms except for the relaxation of some traditional laws. For instance, the village council or community council, nowadays, allows community exogamy with a minimum fine of community feast only. At present, the community council gives permission to the people of other community to become Molsom. The interested person, in such a case, has to arrange for a community feast. The convert is allowed to choose any clan he likes but he is to declare his choice before the council with a promise to obey all the existing laws, norms, customs, beliefs, values etc. of the Molsom society.

The secular and religious components of the authority structure of the Molsoms have some sort of separate identity so far as its framework is concerned. The secular part is vested with actual power and it occupies higher status in the hierarchical strata. Thus the village chief in the village

council and the community chief in community council head the power structure whereas the *awchai* forms an essential auxiliary body. Such separation in the structure does not interfere in the functioning of the council. Rather, some sort of diverse affect is found so far as some of its activities are concerned. The *awchai*, for instance, acts as the main determinant in the final selection of the village or community chief. A person cannot be selected as the village or community chief if the religious test of the *awchai* proves ominous.

The effect of the Panchayati Raj on the traditional authority structure

Introduction of Panchayati Raj in the Molsom villages, as well as in other hill villages of the state, has facilitated the involvement of the Molsoms in the main stream of the state's administration. Though there was a Territorial Council in the state and, like members of other communities, the Molsoms also took part in electing the members of that Territorial Council before the introduction of the Panchayati Raj, yet that institution did not have much effect on the village or community level authority of the tribals. It is, however, admitted that some new traits were introduced in the political behavior of the members of the tribal community, especially when the system of election was introduced in place of selection, for constituting the Territorial Council. Since that time processes like secret ballot voting, canvassing, participation of all adult males in the processes of selection etc. have been brought in to use. Besides, since that time, the Molsom females, along with the females of the other tribal communities, for the first time, started participating in the election process. But all those new things were confined only to their behavioural pattern and made no impact on the functioning of their self government namely village or community council. It was the Panchayati Raj which penetrated into the functioning of the traditional village and community councils of the Molsoms.

However, it can not be said that the two authority structures exist and function with their areas of contradictions. Rather, the relation between the traditional self-government and modern village panchayat is more or less, one of cooperation and mutual coexistence. Both authorities have their own influence over the people and have separate functional jurisdictions.

The problems related to sex and violence, marriage, divorce, adultery, disputes regarding *jhum* lands, problems related to religious activities etc. are dealt with by the traditional authority. Whereas the problems concerning land, health and sanitation, education, communication etc. are dealt with by the village panchayat. In some cases, especially in case of a serious or long pending problem, the traditional village council and village panchayat hold the trial jointly. Besides, the village panchayat, whenever necessary, also takes the help of the traditional village council. In many cases the leaders of the traditional authority structure have been inducted into the Panchayat bodies through election,

It may be pointed out that the problems which the village or community council deal with are traditional in nature so far as their origin is concerned. On the other hand the problems which the village panchayat handles are created in the new situation, that is, in the settled economy. As stated earlier, the traditional shifting economy of the major sections of the Molsoms has changed into settled economy and, as a result, the land which was the property of the community in the shifting economy has become individual family's permanent property. Therefore, the nature of land disputes which occur nowadays, are mainly related to the right to possession of land. The records of these permanent lands are maintained by the agencies of the state government. Other problems which the new authority covers also have their origin in the permanent settlement. The homestead area in shifting economy, as mentioned earlier, shifted from place to place along with the shifting of *jhuming* from one *jhum* land to another during a *jhum*- cycle resulting in most temporary settlement

pattern. The communication system, in such temporary settlement, does not develop due to the fact that once a pathway is made it is used only for three or four years, that is, as long as *jhuming* and settlement continues in that area; the pathway is abandoned when the *jhuming* shift to some other place. This absence of the need of a permanent type of settlement and a permanent type of road and other communication system in a shifting economy left construction of roads etc. out of the purview of the activities of the traditional village council. Activities like these have now been taken up by the village panchayats without any encroachment into the activities of the traditional village council. And this explains why the Molsom have been able to retain the core of the structure and functions of their traditional village panchayat,