

# Status of Darlong women in traditional family from Northeast India

H Theresa Darlong

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**Abstract:** The paper endeavours to reconstruct the various practises of the Darlong; in particular, pertaining to women in traditional Darlong family. Customary law was established and implemented as a mode of social control for the Darlong Community. Focusing on the Darlong women in the traditional family through ethnographic studies conducted on the tribe. Darlong society is a patriarchal and Patrilineal till today both in social and political space is still dominated by men. The Darlong women play a very important role in everyday life. The earlier traditions have now lost much relevance and have been forgotten. It endeavours to recollect and compose the traditional practices relating to marriage, divorce, separation, adultery and Bringing up of children in a traditional Darlong Community. This paper tries to analyse the role and status of Darlong women in the traditional family pre-Christianity in 1919.

**Keywords:** Gender and social Class, Customary law, Culture, Marriage, village endogamy, land Rights.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The 'Darlong' tribe belongs to original Kuki-Chin Group in Tripura, in Northeast India and are known as 'Kuki', one of the 19 scheduled Tribes in Tripura. The Darlong are numerically microscopic minority with a population of 8500 (Darlong, 1996). Traditionally, the Darlong settled down in areas where shifting cultivation was possible (jhum) and many of their traditional values, culture, songs, dances and hunting activities revolved around the cycle of shifting cultivations, which the Darlong people call 'loi'.

Most of the rituals of birth, marriage, divorce, amongst others, evolved over a period of time, according to the geo-social needs of the tribe. However it can be noticed that women were not given a status equal to men. The status of women especially in pre-Christian society is considered to have no authority both in social life and family. Due to contact with Christian missionaries, both protestant and Roman Catholic, Christianity transformed lives of the Darlong community and their and culture, especially that of Darlong women. Initially the teaching of Christian doctrine was seen as a threat to the traditional indigenous forms of worship and rituals. Not only did the living condition of the society change but also the lives of the women in particular changed. The conundrum on status of women still exists since while Christianity and its life style taught women to be more empowered (education, economic independence, etc), simultaneously, the customary practices were never in favour of an equal status to women. Basically Darlong society is strictly patriarchal even today, both in social and political space which is dominated by men. In order to understand the present status of the Darlong women it is important to understand the status and role of traditional Darlong women. The paper mainly focuses the role and status of Darlong women before their contact with Christianity.

## 2. MARRIAGE FOR DARLONG WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL FAMILY

Physical attractiveness was an important criteria influencing selection of marriage partners. The family of any girl eligible for marriage would seek a young man who is good in hunting and gathering food. Similarly, a woman was expected to show proficiency in weaving traditional garments (Puan), preparing food, and extending hospitality. She should be good a weaving cotton to make garments. Pat khar and puan suk. She was is defined to have premium quality when she had the skill of dancing, which was a traditional form of entertainment and act of celebration during rituals.

Marriage within the same clan was not permitted among the Darlong, though marriage within the tribe was preferred. The practice continues even today. One cannot marry within a generation from a common ancestor. First cousin marriages were deemed incestuous, and close relations like uncle and niece were a taboo for the community. Sometimes the chiefs'

daughters might marry outside clan or tribe to establish friendly relations with other chiefs. Inter -group marriage also presented difficulties because of land, which could be inherited bilaterally. Land was viewed extremely high, both in economic and sentimental values.

The first step in any marriage (love marriage or arrange marriage) was the discussion preceding the acknowledgement of a marriage. In some instances the discussion might be completely friendly and in others it may not. First the boy's family sent a Palai or middle man to the girl's house to seek her hand in marriage and is given a gift of indication (hman phal). If the parents and her uncle approved of relationship then they accepted the Hman phal. A traditional successful marriage was always discussed prior to approval. A Pui Thiam was the traditional priest of the Darlong before Christianity. He performed all ceremonies for all occasions including marriage. The Pui Thiam was a most powerful law maker during that time.

### **3. DIFFERENT FORMS OF MARRIAGE AMONG THE DARLONG**

**Marriage by mutual consent:** When a boy liked or loved a girl he told his friends or elder brother to report the news to his parents. After the news reached his parents they engaged a middle-man (palai - mostly the uncle of the boy) to go to the girl's house and inform them that the boy liked the girl and propose for her hand. He carried rice wine (Zu) as a token of the proposal. If the girl's parents were pleased of the proposal the girl was asked if she accept the proposal (mutual consent was ensured). After the acceptance, a 'Palai ' was sent, the second time, carrying a kind of agreement for bride prize (Bawng) to be given to the girl parents. If the girl parents accepted the bride price it meant that they accepted the proposal and they cannot accept any other proposal from that day onwards. The third time when the Palai went to the girl's house the girl parents usually fixed the date according to a convenient time. Then the marriage is performed as per the tribal rituals (by the priest or 'Pui Thiam' and after marriage the girl usually carried household things for the new house. This practice enabled her to use her own things without shyness in her new home.

2. **Love Marriage :** The loving couple went to the traditional priest for marriage. The Pui Thaim (traditional priest ) sacrifice the chicken and looked into their eyes till he declared that everything is alright and then the marriage was performed.

3. **Child Marriage :(Chawng Moi Lak)** happened at a very early age when the boy's parents liked a particular girl. They approached the girl's family and proposed for the marriage of their son. If the girl's parents were willing a marriage was arranged and the girl started living at the boy parents. Sex was prohibited until they attained puberty. There were no ritual and the only ritual performed was Ar Mit En by sacrificing a cock and recitation of rituals by the Pui Thiam followed with a ceremonial community feast. This was labelled the best wedding ceremonial performed. This kind of marriage was usually practiced in the Chief's families.

4. **House husband (Mak Lut ):** When a boy could not pay the high bride price the boy volunteered to go and stay with the girls family. The boy stayed there for three years after which the father in law put them separately and gave the property and land etc. The entire responsibility of this new family was that of the father in law.

5. **Marriage by Eloping:** If a boy and girl loved each other they elope to the boy's house and informed his parents that he had brought home a girl for marriage. The elders of the village were invited and a feast organised that very night and it was an accepted form of marriage.

6. **Marriage by Trial:** In traditional society male was given the license of "Nghaksak"- the liberty of marry a woman for trial period. This was mainly practised among the chiefs and high born. The marriage would be solemnised only if the woman passed the trial. On the other hand, there was also the liberty to reserve a girl- "Chongmoilak" (similar to a child marriage) for marriage at a very young age by a boy. While the boy had all the privilege to reject any moment he wanted to even after reservation.

7. **Polygamy :** The traditional society practised polygamous marriage and the advantages of culture retention ascribed to such an institution. Polygamy was usually practised among the Chiefs, whose circumstances admitted maintaining more than one wife, especially if the first wife was barren. Lesser known chiefs had equally large number of wives. A chief's wealth would be estimated in terms of the number of spouses, particularly when more than one wife were daughters of high born family since each would bring to their husband slaves, property and land which would add to his resources (shum) and facilitated the extension of hospitality which was important in intergroup relationships and to maintain alliances with other chiefs and tribes. The prestige of having several wives was considered essential in maintaining the dignity and prestige of the chief and in strengthening his position of importance in the tribe.

Desire for children, particularly males was one of the reasons of polygamous marriage .If a woman was unable to bear children; she might herself suggest a second marriage. Occasionally, a lack of male children would result in the husband divorcing to marry another wife. There has been an ethnographic practice where the sister had to marry her dead sister's husband.

During war or severe fighting, regardless of the original cause, the defeated party might give to the victorious chief their women, to initiate peace negotiation and alliances. Whether the chief himself was married or not appeared to be the little consequence for such peace-making. Where daughters of chiefs, particularly (nughak) virgin girl or high- ranking women, would be offered in such transactions, this greatly enhanced the prestige of the victorious chief.

Women were frequently captured in battles, which were referred to as concubines. Despite the low status of the majority of such women they appear to have been reasonably well treated. The function of the captured women as of the other secondary wives was to increase the labour force.

There are stories and tribal legend of how the Chief visiting village on his tour capture the women for concubines. When people heard of the Chief's visit, they would hide their women or make them wear torn clothes and smears ashes on their face to make their appearance ugly in order to avoid the women from being captured. There are details of how the chief would force the woman to sleep with them.

#### **4. CUSTOMS AND TABOOS OF BIRTH**

There was a strong desire and a great affection towards children. A wide variety of religious rituals were performed and food considered to give a good fertility was given to woman in a belief to facilitate healthy child birth.

Detailed information concerning the ritual and rites of birth of a child and parental and post natal activities are found in folklores and tribal tales. All customs relating to birth were in the form of rituals. Mostly women gave birth at home with the help of the elderly ladies in the community. Women of high rank had female attendants at the time of birth. A specially constructed house was prepared for the birth of the child with the belief that the pillars of the house should be inside the house. Only women were allowed at the time of birth but the father, husband and relatives were seated in another room along with the Pui Thaim (Priest).The priest kept reciting the rites so that the mother would have a smooth delivery. A very sharp bamboo was used to cut the umbilical cord of the baby and a thread treated with honey wax was used to tie the umbilical cord of the baby and turmeric was applied to the cord. The father and mother of the child were not allowed to do any work for seven days and seven nights following the child birth.

The postnatal ceremony was celebrated with naming of the child. The rites occurred when the child naval fell off. All the villagers were invited to celebrate the birth of the child. The ceremony included rituals of cleaning the baby with running water to remove any impurities during birth, and dedication of the child to the appropriate masculine and feminine roles. Water was sprinkled and a name conferred usually by giving the name of their ancestor.

Right from the day the husband came to know that his wife is expecting it was a taboo to kill any animals or birds. It was considered harmful for the baby, and the belief remains even today .The Darlong call it Kut chuk,(Curse hand).There are many stories which actually makes the person belief in these taboos.

#### **5. ROLE OF WOMEN IN SOCIALIZATION OF CHILDREN**

Education of the Darlong child, male or female began with lullabies composed for the child. It is used composed by elders, parents or grandparents, and they would tell stories of history and mythology, including the genealogy. This was done for the education of the child, provide basic knowledge of the tribe and pass on folklore. This was repeated to the child during bedtime so that the next generation can remember. Special training of traditional crafts, especially in weaving, began at a very young age. Much knowledge of the culture was passed on through ceremonies. Even when a girl is a small her parents made for her a small puan tham tharo (an instrument for weaving traditional garments) and she would start playing with the specially designed instrument from a young age. She later underwent training for weaving under the guidance of her mother and elder relative in the family, leaning the different pattern and design exclusive to their tribe. It was a must to learn that for the girl before she gets married. Weaving by women is usually done in the evening or at night. Games were a means of imparting instruction and reinforcing cultural expectations to the younger generations. Dignity and grace were inculcated by achieving proficiency in dancing and in playing the traditional flutes and drums. Men and woman equally participated in leaning the correct steps .The elder Darlong had a favourite past time to sit with the children under the moonlight and stars listening to stories of the tribes, legends, and tales. Children would thus learn a good deal of history. Grandparents would make it a point to impart this knowledge to the younger generation.

## 6. ADULTERY AND WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

In Darlong society, if a woman was found committing adultery she would be penalised for misbehaving. In the pre-Christian era women who committed adultery were either be-headed or cast out of the village. In fact, the entire family were at times abandoned to die astray. In the famous legend of “Hrangsuana and Chawngmawii”, Chawngmawii was beheaded by her villagers for loving a man from another village considering it to be a case of adultery. At times, under the consent of the village elders and the demand of the victim’s family, the victim was given to the hands of the ‘predator’ for marriage. In the legendary tale of Zialunga, the protagonist Zialunga raped a woman when she was having a bath at a lake. The rape gave birth to a child, Zawltleipuii, who later grew up to be the most beautiful woman in the Darlong history. However, Zialunga was not penalised instead was given the right of being Zawltleipuii’s father.

If the victim gave birth to a child through the adultery, the predator was penalised with “Faruang” - the penalty of bearing the entire expense of the particular child and will simultaneously have every right over the child under the consent of the village elders and the victim. The tradition of “Faruang” yet prevails in the Darlong society. However, the case in which it is applied differs; when a couple divorce or part from each other after having a child, the father can pay “Faruang” of his child with the mutual acceptance from the part of the mother as well. The Darlong folk often narrate the tale where a king raped a woman when she was asleep one afternoon. The king in return promised to pay “Faruang” secretly to the woman he raped and the matter was said to be settled by the two without the knowledge of others.

## 7. DIVORCE

“Ral Inma” was a tradition of separation of a lover and a beloved before marrying each other. The tradition applied to a boy and a girl prior to marriage and was not applicable to a married couple. When a girl and boy decided to marry each other with or without witness but circumstances changed just before the marriage it would result in an informal divorce for the two. The phenomenon was called “Ral Inma” and the boy had to pay a fine for robbing one’s chastity. In this case, if the girl was with a child the boy had to pay a “Faruang”. Even if the boy refused to pay the penalty, the child shall inherit his/her mother’s name. However, if a child is but in the womb of the mother during the informal divorce it belongs to the mother given the situation that the boy filed a case in the apex court.

If the woman was pregnant during a divorce or if a woman decided to divorce her dead husband, then the child would be owned by the father (relatives or so) and no “Faruang” can be demanded. After the death of a husband, when a wife decides to divorce her dead husband, she would be liable a fine, “Maktha”. In addition she would have to return the entire ‘Hmanpui’ paid as bride price by the husband during her marriage. When a minor child exists the same rule shall apply as before. However, if the wife is pregnant it used to be discussed and examined as to whether the incident happened prior to the husband’s death or after.

The earlier Darlong society practiced the tradition of ‘Polygamy’. Since the society was patriarchal society, any divorce law or marriage law hardly put any hurdle on the part of the male. On the contrary, the male were given every liberty for second marriage after the death of his woman regardless of the presence of minor child, adult or alike.

When a wife separated from her husband, without any specified reason and logical explanation, the divorced woman had every right to move out from her husband’s house along with the dowry and gifts given to her at the time of marriage. If she was given land as a gift it was her right to own that land. It is a tradition till date which is practised that when women moved to her husband’s house they keep a record of the things that were given as gifts. The women have all the rights on these materials given to her.

## 8. WIDOWHOOD

If the mother had a minor child with her during the death of her husband, the child would go with the mother but owned by the father giving “Faruang” (meaning officially the father would be the person who demised). If the child was an adult he/she has every liberty to choose with whom he/she would live in the future and no “Faruang” could be demanded from the part of the mother.

When a woman was separated from her husband due to his demise, she went to her brother (practically considered to be her father’s house) and later returned to her husband’s house after completing the tradition of ‘Kir Inle’. The woman returning back to her husband’s house was considered as a family member as did during her husband’s living days.

## 9. ADULTERY

If a couple, a wife or a husband committed an act adultery after the death of the either, the law specifically referred to a woman and was known as “Chawse hnuai pasal nei”. The woman who committed adultery shall be fine for committing adultery and had to return to her husband’s family the entire ‘Hmanpui’ - bride price paid during the marriage. Further, she cannot demand any of her properties such as ornaments given by her husband.

There was stronger law for woman who commits adultery. If a woman was found having affairs with a married man, she had to pay in kind as a penalty known “Voksun Hmam” to the other woman. On the other hand, the man who committed an act of adultery with a married woman had to pay a penalty called ‘Ret Lei’. Thereafter, a conclusion shall be made as to whether the adulterer would continue to live with the old wife or the new one. Depending on the decision made by the adulterer, judgement would be drawn. If the adulterer decided to live with the new, he paid a ‘Maktha’ and completed other formalities before he paid a fresh bride price for the new one. The same law applied for the woman involved in adultery including the divorce law mentioned above. However, if the adulterer decided to continue living with the old wife then everything goes fair and fine.

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## 11. INHERITANCE LAW OF THE DARLONG WOMEN

The early Darlong women do own property but there is no much records, the privilege was given Darlong chief daughters and sister of the Chief was given land sometimes as dowry and as at times as gift. The Darlong women mostly take her ornament and Pori where she kept her clothes and puan and ornament (mainly made of red beads and red stone .Both men and women wore a wide variety of materials , including shells, animal teeth , anklets, bracelets, combs for their hair made of Bamboo. Both men and women have long hair until they came in contact with Christian missionaries, Feather of rare Greater Racket-tailed Drongo the men usually have head gear and a they usually decorate their hair with bamboo pipe nicely decorated on top of their front head. Women wore leaves or tail feather of various birds For more valued ornaments, such as neck and ear pendants, Brass waist belt ,black and blue beads Individually owned property where passed on from parents or grandparent their heirlooms usually descend from the generation from their ancestors and where treated with great values. In these circumstance it may be ear pendant, Rithi Red ornament were regarded as very valuable and would sometimes display to others by wearing it on special occasion for other to admire .

The transmission of these objects is sometimes given as gifts to the chiefs of other tribes, thus constituting materials symbols of exchange .A women personal property also includes weaving sticks, pounders for beating cotton, a spinning yarn that is traditional handloom .This property could be transmitted by inheritance from mother to daughters. Rice pounders made of wood and household property such as cooking utensils, basket, were handed from mother to daughter, as was regarded as personal property of the women.

Ownership of land by the woman is not known much as land was primarily owned by the chief in the traditional Darlong society, rights of using the land was given by the chief. Land itself could be inherited through either parents, transmission appears to have been in the direct inheritance, some says girls equally inherited with their brothers, other say woman does not inherit land, only ornaments or artefacts' belonging to their parent, A husband usually was given rights to cultivate on his wife land especially if the husband does not own any land. The woman born in the chief family had a number of privileges, and mentions of customary rights is give to the chiefly women. The high ranking woman would wear ornaments which is highly valued often heirlooms of the tribe

## 12. CONCLUSION

For Darlong woman to be eligible for marriage a young woman was expected to have physically attractive and she should have household skills that is cooking, weaving garments for the family and basic skills in cultivations. The most important function of Darlong woman was child birth. Rituals were performed on barren woman to induce conception. Since birth of the children was sacred, rituals were performed on the mother and child to purify them. The ceremonial baptism with water is similar to Christians receiving baptism. Male infant's baptism was celebrated and was dedicated to become great warriors in future generation. For female infants, welcoming to the family was celebrated with preparing food and entertaining visitors with food and rice wine.

Education of the young Darlong children was the responsibility of all the members of the community. For young Darlong girls, in particular, it was the mother who played an important role to train the daughters to be capable of looking after her family after marriage. Girls would be trained in all domestic activities, given training in weaving and taught about social values and culture of the Darlong society. Darlong woman who were born in a Chief's family occupied a very important position and they received privileged treatment and were honoured as symbols of the entire tribe. Hospitality was a virtue expected from all women in the Darlong society- they welcome entertained, accommodated all guest. The way of living in shifting cultivation created the traditions and culture of the Darlong people.

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- [8] The author, a Darlong herself has endeavoured re-unifying fellow clans/tribes and documents the almost erased tribal habits, values, practises and the rich culture. She have conducted an ethnographic study