

Status of Tribal Women

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The Region

The northeastern region of India covers a total geographical area of 2,55,037 sq kms. and is inhabited by a population of 31,547,314 (1991 Census). The people belong to a number of religious, linguistic and ethnic groups. The ethnic situation in the North-East is unique. The region is reported to have 209 Scheduled Tribes apart from a number of other ethnic groups. From the ethnic point of view, the seven states of the North-East may be conceived of as:

1. Those states having a majority of Scheduled Tribe population: Mizoram 94.75 per cent, Nagaland 87.70 per cent, Meghalaya 85.53 per cent, Arunachal Pradesh 63.66 per cent; and
2. Those states having a minority of Scheduled Tribe population: Manipur 34.41 per cent, Tripura 30.95 per cent, and Assam 12.82 per cent.

An important feature of the North-East is its heterogeneity. Three major groups inhabit the region: the hill tribes, the plains tribes and the non-tribal population of the plains. Within each group, there is great variety in terms of language and dialect (as many as 420), religion (Animism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam

and Christianity) and races (Austriac, Negrito, Mongoloid and Caucasoid).

Women in India

Fifty years after Independence and about the same span of planned development, women's position in India is still grim. Their position has worsened considerably in almost every sphere of life with the exception of some gains for middle-class women in terms of education and employment. The available literature on women in India has brought to light many negative social practices like rape, wife-battering, domestic violence, dowry deaths, prostitution, and working long hours within and outside the home without recognition. All this indicates the declining value of women in almost every sphere of life.

The growing knowledge on women and the gradual spread of gender awareness among women scholars has brought about a need for studying women's status in society. Realisation of this is evident in the establishment of about a dozen centres for studies on women attached to various universities in India. An objective and scientific interpretation of culture from the women's point of view is, however, still lacking. Women scholars have not yet been able to carve out a niche for themselves where their position is secure. Their's is still a voice in the wilderness; a voice seldom heard even by women themselves. Among those who are striving hard to represent women are anthropologists. As Mahale has rightly stated:

By providing a new perspective for women's studies, anthropologists have encouraged a good deal of re-examination of existing theories, critical questioning and research and have contributed towards extending the frontiers of Anthropology (Mahale 1991: 103).

But women and anthropologists have a long way to go before they even think of congratulating themselves. And this is even more true for tribal women.

Concept of Tribal Women

The notion of 'tribe' has engaged the attention of anthropologists throughout the history of the discipline, yet without conclusive results. The concept seems to have defied any standard definitions by anthropologists. According to *Notes and Queries in Anthropology* (1960):

A tribe may be defined as a politically or socially coherent and autonomous group occupying or claiming a particular territory.

In the *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, there is an entry on 'tribal society', which says:

In general usage, the word 'tribe' is taken to denote a primary aggregate of people living in a primitive or barbarous condition under a headman or chief. The unnecessary moralistic overtones that this usage implies can be provided or minimised by the use of the expression 'tribal society', which is to be preferred to such synonyms as 'primitive society' or 'preliterate society'. At the same time, the word 'tribe' need not be discarded. Indeed it has become a technical term denoting a territorially defined political unit, a usage that recalls the original use of the word for the political division or patrician orders of the Roman State (Lewis 1968: 146-151).

There are a few studies published on the tribal women of India in general and the north-eastern part of India in particular. However, there is hardly any substantial work undertaken in order to understand the concept of tribal women. Interests seem to revolve around the status of tribal women and the problems they face and not on conceptual clarification.

Generally speaking the parameters used to define women, their roles and status are different from those used for men. This is unfortunate. They are, for instance, depicted as the preservers of culture and social life whereas men are glorified as hunters and killers. The general tendency to define men in tribal society in terms of role categories like warrior, hunter, statesman and elder has little to do with their relationship with women. Women by contrast tend to be defined almost entirely in

relational terms, in terms of kin roles as, wife, mother, sister, etc. In other words, while men can be defined independent of women, the latter cannot be defined independent of men.

The general picture of female literacy in India is not encouraging at all but the still lower rates for Scheduled Tribe women are alarming, notwithstanding high literacy rates among a few tribes or tribal conglomerates like the Mizos and Ao Naga tribes (1991 Census). While the general female literacy increased from 12.95 per cent in 1961 to 24.9 per cent in 1981, it actually increased from 3.16 to 8.04 per cent for Scheduled Tribe women for the same decades. It is a paradox that while the highest female literacy rate is amongst the tribal women of Mizoram, the lowest literacy rates for women (between 1 and 5 per cent) are also in the neighbouring tribal state of Arunachal Pradesh.

One reason for such a paradox is that tribal women of the region (for that matter of any other region) are not a homogenous group although they are known by the generic category 'tribal women'. It is important to remember that 'tribal women' are diverse ethnically, linguistically, geographically and also historically. Often progress made by middle-class tribal women is taken as an indication of their high position. But the ground reality is that the majority of them are found in rural areas where they are disadvantaged in terms of education, occupation, etc. One may also note that women in tribal societies could be considered doubly disadvantaged, in the first instance as tribals and in the second, as women.

Concept of Status

'Status' denotes position in terms of rights and obligations in society. A general trend in the literature on the status of women has been to compare it with that of men. This indicates that their status is based on roles and it is understood only through the rights and roles of their male counterparts.

Generally, the status of women has two dimensions: (i) the

extent of control enjoyed by women over their lives, and (ii) the extent to which they have access to the decision-making process and are effectively in position of power and authority. Besides, certain indicators such as level of literacy, employment, political participation, decision about marriage, management of domestic affairs, etc. are also adopted to assess the status of women. It is obvious that a precise and complete assessment of the status of women can be made only by taking into account both qualitative and quantitative factors. It is also necessary to look into both ascribed and achieved statuses of women in order to understand this complex issue of women, particularly in tribal societies. In other words, status refers to the relative position of a person or category of persons in terms of prestige and honour attained through birth, inheritance or acquisition of wealth, power and authority. Talcott Parsons (1951) identifies six attributes of status, which are both ascribed and achieved. They are:

- (i) Membership in a kinship unit
- (ii) Personal qualities
- (iii) Achievements
- (iv) Possession
- (v) Authority
- (vi) Power

Ralph Linton has made a distinction between achieved and ascribed status. In general, the criteria of ascribed status must be birth or biologically hereditary qualities like sex and age. But, in a socially defined role, which accompanies such a status, there may be very important elements of expected achievement. In the opinion of Linton, status and role are concepts serving to connect culturally defined expectations with patterned behaviour and relationships which comprise social structure. He further observes that each person in society inevitably occupies a multiple status and that for each of these statuses, there is an associated role (Linton 1935: 76).

Social status is commonly thought of as the position that an individual has in society. It is not, however, comparable to the

position that a building occupies in relation to other structures in the habitat and its occupants. In the first place, an individual has not only one but many positions in society. Secondly, the social status or position of an individual is not a static condition as is the location of a building. It is rather the product of a dynamic process of interaction between what is inherited and what is achieved.

Role and status are two sides of the same coin. According to Linton, there are no roles without status nor status without roles—the roles represent the dynamic aspect of status. Parsons also argues much along the same lines. But Bierstedt disagrees: To him, though there is no status without a role, and no role without a status, and though both status and role are usually correlative phenomena, it is possible to have one without the other (Bierstedt 1957).

But a status without a role is like an unfilled position in an association. For example, when the president of an association dies, the vice-president, whose status, in turn, falls vacant assumes his/her status. The status of the vice-president is filled in the next election. But in the interim period, there is a status without a role in the case of the vice-president. It is also possible to play a role without occupying a status. Most women play the role of a nurse when a member of the family is ill. A nurse has a status in a hospital but at home, nursing is a role.

A role is the behavioural aspect of status. Status is occupied but role is played. A role is the manner in which a given individual fulfills the objectives of a status and enjoys its privileges and prerogatives. A role is what an individual does in the status he occupies. For example, the prime-ministership of the Indian Union is a status. A man/woman who occupies this status has certain duties, responsibilities and obligations and in turn enjoys certain privileges, prerogatives and perquisites. His/her duties are attached to the office, that is to the status, and not to the individual.

Next to status-roles is the phenomenon of status-rights. A person who has a status in society has some rights that distinguish him from others who do not have this status. For

example, the status of a professor entails a number of rights that distinguish him/her from students and from all others who do not have that status.

Along with status-roles and status-rights, we also need to understand status-symbols. One of the rights of a very clearly defined status-role is the use of some particular status-symbol or symbols. Military personnel wear uniforms distinctive to their particular service, thereby distinguishing themselves from other services and from civilians. Within a particular service also, the uniform of officers is again sufficiently different from that of other ranks and files so that officers and men are distinguishable at a glance. Rank further differentiates officers from men.

The status of women can be divided into two broad domains: (i) the domestic domain, and (ii) the public domain. The former includes activities performed within the localised family unit, whereas the latter includes political and economic activities.

According to Majumdar and Madan:

The status of women in all types of societies, particularly in patrilineal, is determined by various types of taboos that are attached to the women generally. These taboos can be protective, preventive or productive... It would be scientific error to approach the women of a society with a rigid bias to the view that they have either a low or a high status, such dichotomies are generally misleading. There can be so many intermediate status, there can be polarity, though it may not be so striking. The status of women in the Indian context cannot be defined simply (1956: 147-48).

In the backdrop of the above discussion, it is possible to generalise that in determining the status of women in any society, four important factors to consider are: social status, economic condition, political empowerment, and psychological condition. The status of tribal women in the North-East may also be seen in terms of these four factors:

A. Social Status

- (i) Social standing as
- mother
 - daughter
 - sister
 - wife
- (ii) Extent of control enjoyed by women over their lives in social matters like
- marriage
 - divorce
 - family
 - inheritance

B. Economic Condition

- (i) Extent of control enjoyed by women in property rights e.g.
- to own property
 - to manage property
 - to sell property
 - to inherit property
- (ii) Occupation and livelihood
- to work for a salary and to have control over income
 - distribution of work in the family

C. Political Emancipation

- (i) Extent to which women have access to
- decision/policy making
- (ii) Extent to which women are effectively in positions of
- power
 - authority

D. Psychological Condition

- (i) Attitude of the society towards women
- (ii) Mind-set of men and women towards women

Status of Tribal Women in the North-East

It is generally believed that tribal women enjoy a high status because their societies are egalitarian, they have no purdah system, there is no restriction on women's movement, food habits, attire and widow remarriage and when a woman is in trouble or when she is ill-treated by her husband, she is supported by her parents, brothers and clan members, etc. For instance, Furer-Haimendorf writes:

Many women in more civilised parts of India may well envy the women of the Naga Hills, their high status and their free and happy life and if you measure the cultural level of the people by the social position and personal freedom of its women you will think twice before looking down on the Nagas as savages (1933: 96).

Although the status of tribal women is higher as compared to their non-tribal counterparts elsewhere in India, one of the points that this essay seeks to make is that men in their own societies do not treat them as their equals. The customary laws of the various tribes of the region are also clearly in favour of men, who continue to subscribe to them in order to retain their superiority vis-a-vis women in their own societies. This is one of the most unfortunate aspects of tribal people in the region and factors like education, occupation, and religion do not seem to have had any success towards overcoming such gender bias among men (though women are not without such bias either).

Images of women in tribal societies of the region are rather negative. They are often equated with animals or birds and conceived of as having less intelligence or wisdom. Thus, we find proverbs among the Mizos, which say that women's wisdom cannot extend beyond the bank of a river; that a wife and an old fence can be replaced at any time; and an unbeaten wife and an uncut weed of the field are both unbearable, etc. They consider women's words as having no value because 'a crab's meat is not counted as meat, so also a woman's word cannot be counted as words'.

In traditional Garo society, women are ridiculed with the saying that just as a goat is without teeth, so a woman lacks brain. Among the Nishis of Arunachal, a man's social status is reckoned in terms of the number of wives and mithuns he possesses.

The Mayon Nagas of Manipur consider women as having no principles because they do not have a permanent clan, for their clans change into that of their husbands when they marry. Even when their pre-marital clans are reckoned, these have little or no value in society. According to the Lotha Nagas, while males

possess six kinds of strength, females possess only five. For this, they christen the boys on the sixth day after birth and girls on the fifth day.

There are instances where even a woman's contact is supposed to bring evil to a man. For instance, among the Zeliangrong Nagas, it is a taboo for a man to sleep with his wife or touch her inner garments before going to war or going hunting because this may bring bad luck to the whole group. The Zemei Naga males will not touch the meat of an animal killed by a woman: that would be below their dignity because bravery is a quality of men and docility that of women. The Khezha (Chakhesang) Naga men are strictly forbidden to sleep with their wives or touch their garments or their looms or weaving kits/accessories before leaving for wars/raids, hunting and wrestling since they believe that such an act may bring bad luck and the defaulter or all the men of the entire village may be unsuccessful.

An irony of the traditional Naga society is the case of Angami Nagas among whom the husband is credited for his extra-marital or illicit affairs. The more mistresses he keeps, the higher is his status. The loincloth of a male is originally decorated with three lines of white cowries but that of a man who has illicit affairs is decorated with four cowries as an honour to his male prowess: the opposite treatment is meted out to a wife. She is made to undergo physical punishment. The tip of her nose is chopped off, her heel sliced off or her hair cut off. Beside, she will be socially exposed to shame.

Such attitudes towards women reflect their status in the family and society on the whole. In all tribal societies of the region, notions such as the following reflect the basically patriarchal society:

- (i) Birth of a male child is auspicious
- (ii) Man is the provider and protector of society
- (iii) A woman is subordinate to her husband
- (iv) Birth of a female child is welcomed for the reason that she will help her mother in household chores and help her brother

Further, a wife is usually not associated with any decision-making process involving money. Among the tribes of Arunachal, for instance, all matters relating to purchase and disposal of any family property or those relating to bride-price, etc. are decided by men only.

In family affairs like marriage or girl's education, women are consulted but the final decision lies with men. It is also the case with the Lotha and Sema Naga tribes. All major decisions inside and outside the family are taken by the husband/father and the wives/daughters are to abide by the wishes and orders of their menfolk. Even in the field, they are under the control of men. At home, the mother/wife has to manage the household work though some men help to a certain extent.

The birth of a girl is not an unwelcome event in tribal families particularly in matrilineal ones. She is always wanted. However, there are tribes who prefer sons to daughters because sons are needed to continue the family lineage and are important for the defence of the village. Zeliangrong Naga husbands can divorce their wives if they fail to give birth to sons.

Again, a boy child up to the age of thirteen or fourteen years is allowed to lead a life of ease, fun and pleasure, while the girl child is trained to take up all responsibilities of the household and play 'a little mother's role'.

It is generally believed that in tribal societies, girls are free to marry whomsoever they like and parents simply agree to their will. But facts reveal that among some Naga tribes, the opposite is the reality. Parents among the Angami and Konyak Naga tribes and even among the Nishi tribe of Arunachal arrange marriages. The girl's parents demand huge property as bride-price for their daughter. She does not have any option to choose her life partner. If she refuses her parents' choice, she is discarded by her family.

Women rarely have property rights. As a daughter, a woman is not entitled to own any ancestral property. If a woman is the only child, the ancestral property will be given to her father's immediate male relatives.

It is the women who usually perform secret rituals in religious

ceremonies. Yet, in one of the most popular Angami festivals *Sekreni* (feast of purification), women are not allowed to fetch water from the spring or other sources due to fear of defilement. Men do not even consume food cooked by them. Women are prohibited to go near men or to walk past them. All this prohibition takes place on the day of the secret ritual called *Pri*.

In terms of political empowerment, tribal women, whether belonging to matrilineal or patrilineal society, were not allowed to take part in the deliberation of the village council nor were they allowed to address or even stand before the village crowd, not to speak of assuming the office of chief or village headman. Even in the Khasi-Jaintia society, women were not allowed to enter any *dorbar* or council because politics was considered solely men's affair. The Jaintias have a superstition that bad days are ahead if women are allowed to enter politics. A popular saying prevalent among the Khasis is: 'If the hen crows, the world including the family will change for the worse'.

Tangkhul Women

Before I close this paper, I consider it pertinent to briefly present the case of Tangkhul women to demonstrate the dynamics of tribal women. This case will also indicate how the insurgency situation in the North-East is hampering the interest of women.

The Tangkhuls form the second most populous tribe among the Naga tribes of Manipur. They are mostly concentrated in the Ukhrul district of this state, although there is a sizeable number in Imphal town as well. They were once considered to be one of the most developed of all Naga tribes as their district had the distinction of having the first school and college in the entire tribal area of the state. Education among the Tangkhuls started early, with the establishment of the Pettigrew College established in 1896.

Tangkhul women were also in a position to take advantage of the spread of education in the district. As a result, many of them gained entry into various all-India services like Indian

Administrative Service, Indian Foreign Service, Indian Forest Service, medical professions, and the like. The achievement of women among them would, however, not be possible without the active support of the society at large and other women who have not been so fortunate in life. It is also obvious that their achievements would have been much more significant had they not faced certain obstacles in their society. One such obstacle is the male bias of this strongly patrilineal society. Even today, people have a relatively unfavourable attitude towards the education of girls and certainly give all priority to the education of boys over girls. Parents also have a strong reservation against sending their daughters for higher education outside the district or state for fear of inviting certain untoward developments that would not be welcomed by their own society (especially by the men).

One other obstacle is the insurgency situation, which now restricts the movement of girls. Apart from this it has made women and girls vulnerable to molestation and rape at the hands of the security force personnel. There are many instances of unmarried women being molested and committing suicide instead of facing the stigma or embarrassment for their entire life.

Conclusion

If one looks at the condition of tribal women at present, it is clear that they have made a lot of progress in almost every field and have been able to enter into many unconventional occupations. What we see of them is almost unbelievable if we remember what they were even till the end of the colonial rule in India. But if we compare their situation with that of males in their respective societies, the achievement of women is far from satisfactory. Whether it is in terms of certain criteria like education and occupation or in terms of patriarchal values governing the behaviour of people, women are a disadvantaged lot and it may take many years for them to be at par with men in all respects. To bridge the gap between the male and female

worlds, it is not enough to talk about reservations or blame patriarchy. Women must make a concerted effort to change their destiny.

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