

Brief communication

**GENDER ISSUES IN THE TRIBAL SOCIETY OF THE
NORTH-EAST : SOME OBSERVATIONS**

*Lucy Zehol**

I

Men and Women are different Society treats them as different and pays detailed attention to maintaining and emphasizing that differences through clothes, ornaments, gestures and roles.

Men and Women are also similar but there is no general interest displayed in the similarity. Although, women and men are both human beings, social beings that share many things is common, their similarity and commonality of interest are often forgotten. Even though the similarity is dismissed, yet women's separate and specific needs do not receive much attention. At best their needs and interests are subsumed under the 'general' interest which is men's. We are used to hearing the words "men include women" but forget that the word women has more alphabets. This perception affects the quality of women's life in profound ways and so we need to examine and understand the differences and similarities between men and women and the basis for this assumption. And gender is the basis of this assumption.

The differences between them are social and cultural and not biological and are constructed by society. And what we call a gender issue is the issue that concerns the social and cultural differences in the discrimination of both the sexes. When women are discriminated by men and vice versa, it is a case of gender issue. Gender issue is a pursuit for social justice and it is a universal responsibility. It involves the State, Community, the Village and the Individual.

* Department of Anthropology, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong - 793 022, Meghalaya

Anthropologists in general are critical of feminist tendencies to universalize what are really only culture-specific features of the sex gender system. It is argued by Social/Cultural Anthropologist that the male dominance over females in all the societies is not the same. It varies from culture to culture.

II

If the non-tribal society suffers from gender problems so does the women of the tribes. However, for all considerations, the gender issue has to be analysed, in the context of the particular society. Let us take the case of the Tribal women in the North-East India.

Existing Stereotype Images of Women

It is generally believed that the tribal women enjoy a high status because their societies are egalitarian. They have no *purdah* system, no restriction on their movement, food habits, attire, pre-marital sex and widow re-marriage etc. When a women is in trouble or when she is ill treated by her husband she is supported by her parents, brothers and clan members. For instance, Furer Haimendorf writes that "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 their status is high compared to their non-tribal counterpart elsewhere in India, one of the points that this paper seeks to make is that the men in their own societies do not treat them as their equal.

III

Reported Images from the Field

Customary Law

The customary laws of the various tribes of the region are clearly in favour of the men, who continue to subscribe to those in order to retain their superiority vis-a-vis

the women in their own societies. This is one of the commonly observed aspects of the tribal people in the region; and the factors like education, occupation and religion do not seem to have had any impact towards overcoming such gender bias among the men though the women are not without such bias either.

Oral Texts (Proverbs, Myths)

Images of women in the tribal societies of the region are rather negative. They are often equated with animals or birds and conceived of as having less intelligence and wisdom. Thus, among the Mizo, 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. That the words of women do not have any value is reflected in their traditional belief, 'as a crab's meat is not counted as meat, so also a women'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 *Nishing* of Arunachal Pradesh 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 principle 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, the same have little or no value in society. According to the Lotha Nagas, males possess six kinds of strength where as females only five. For this, they christen the boys on the sixth day after birth; and girls on the fifth day.

Taboos

There are instances where even a woman's contact is supposed to bring evil to men during hunting and war. For instance, among the Zeliangrong Nagas, it is a taboo to sleep with his wife or touch her inner garments before going to war or hunting

because this may bring ill luck to the whole group. The Zemei Naga males would not touch the meat of an animal killed by a women for 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 looms or weaving kits/accessories before leaving for wars/raids, hunting or wrestling. Belief prevails that such act will bring ill luck to individual man or to the entire venture.

Attitudes

An irony of the traditional Naga society is the case of the 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 while the opposite treatment is meted out to a wife. She is made to undergo physical punishment. The tip of her nose would be chopped off, her heel sliced off or her hair cut off. Besides, she will be socially exposed to shame.

Such attitudes towards a woman reflect her 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 the society.
- (iii) Woman is subordinate to her husband.
- (iv) Birth of a female child is welcomed because she will help her mother in household chores and be of help to her smug brother's comfort.

Further, a wife is usually not associated with any decision making process relating to money matters. Among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh 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. The husband takes all major decisions inside and outside the family. The wives/daughters are to abide by the wishes and orders of their men. Even in the field they are under the control of men. At home, the mother/wife has to manage the household works though some men help to a certain extent.

Birth of a girl is not an unwelcome event in tribal families particularly in the matrilineal ones. She is always wanted. However, there are tribes who prefer sons to daughters because sons are needed for continuation of family lineage and village security. The Zeliangrong Naga husbands could even divorce their wives if they failed 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 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 Nishing tribe of Arunachal Pradesh 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 from her family.

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

It is the women who usually perform the secret rituals in religious ceremonies. Yet, in one of the most popular Angami festivals *Sekrenyi* (feast of purification), the women are not allowed to fetch water from the spring or other sources due to fear of defilement. Men do not take even the food cooked by them and they are prohibited even to go near the 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, are not allowed to take part in the deliberations of the village council. Further, they are not allowed to address or even stand before the village crowd, not to speak of assuming the office of the chief or village headman. Even in the Khasi-Jaintia society, women are not allowed to enter any *Durbar* or council because politics is considered solely as men's affair. The Jaintias have a superstition that bad days are ahead if women were allowed to enter politics. The popular saying prevalent among the Khasis is like this, 'if the hen crows, the world including the family will change for the worst'.

Such observations about women playing leadership roles in political or socio-religious matters are, however, not peculiar of the tribal societies. It is a world phenomenon. Hence, instead of painting a romantic, mystic and rosy picture of the tribal women of the Northeast, I would like to add that women here may be better off than her counterpart elsewhere in India. However, they are definitely not equal to men in their own societies in terms of attitudes, social status, economic condition, and political rights. Women indeed have experienced significant improvement in lifestyle and opportunities but they have a long way to go before they achieve equality with men.

IV

Reflection in Census and Basic Facts Reports

Keeping in mind the above picture, let us also take a quick look at the tribal women that emerge from the Census reports and Basic Facts reports of the Seven States in terms of number, literacy and employment.

As per the Census of 1991, the population of the Northeast is 3,25,47,314 out of which 1,51,60,085 are females and 16,387,229 males. The sex ratio recorded in 1991 has been 958/955/945 (Manipur, Meghalaya and Tripura) respectively which are above all India level of 927 males per 1000 females. While Assam (923), Mizoram (921), Nagaland (886) and Arunachal Pradesh (859) females per thousand are below All India level.

The general picture of female literacy in India is not encouraging but the still lower rates among the Scheduled Tribe females is quite alarming notwithstanding high literacy rates among the Mizo and Ao Naga tribes (1991 Census). While the general female literacy increased from 12.95% in 1961 to 24.9% in 1981, the figures are 3.16 to 8.04%...for the Scheduled Tribe females for the same decades.

The highest female literacy rate is found amongst tribal women of Mizoram, the lowest literacy rates for females (between 1 to 5%) is found in Arunachal Pradesh, another tribal state.

There is a gradual improvement in the literacy rate in all the states particularly in urban sectors for the male as well as the female population. However, the low female literacy particularly in the rural area amongst the Scheduled Tribes needs special attention.

As per the Economic Classification of Population (1991 census), we find the number of males more in the categories of cultivation, agricultural labours, household industry except in the category of marginal workers where there are more females.

Another important observation one can make from the data as available in the 'Basic Facts' reports of any of the Seven States of the North East India (Nagaland-1999; Manipur-1998, Arunachal Pradesh-1998, Meghalaya-1998) is that women hardly can make it to most of the top ranking posts of the States. In fact, a negligible size of women is found in a few high level bureaucratic positions.

The above suggests that in spite of all kinds of facilities that the government has provided, men are at a more advantageous position than women in the North East of India.

Conclusion

From the above description, we can raise two important issues :

(1) We can observe that the origin of the stereotype images of women has basically its sources in the reports on pre-marital sex, widow-remarriage, easy divorce and "no ill-treatment" and hence the impression that the position of tribal women of the North-East compared to the rest of India (non-tribal areas) seems to be much better off. These are persisting stereotypes which tend to give the impression that

women are more or less equivalent to their men in a more or less egalitarian tribal society, no discrimination, and empowerment in all spheres. A typical romantic, mythical picture.

(2) The second issue is drawn from the analysis of the field reports drawn from sources like the customary laws, oral texts (proverbs, myths) taboos, attitudes (before birth, childhood and after marriage) or even a brief summary glance at the census and other reports. All these offer a totally grim reality where an inherent gender bias is the order of the lives of women in the North-East.

Hence,

- (a) The Government of India – State and Central and Non-Governmental organizations have to ask themselves whether the position should be based on the stereotype images or on field reports.
- (b) The needs for men of the Tribal society to think in retrospect as to the injustice in the society.
- (c) And for women themselves to make concerted effort to change their destiny. It is a basic challenge today.

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