

Role and Status of Sakachep Women and their Self-Help Groups

Q. MARAK¹ & T. KHAWZAWL²

*Department of Anthropology, North-Eastern Hill University,
Shillong 793022, Meghalaya
E-mail: qmarak@rediffmail.com*

KEY WORDS: Sakachep women. Role and status. Self-help groups. Jaintia Hills District. Meghalaya.

ABSTRACT: The role and status of women are useful parameters for gauging the development of a society. The present paper is an attempt to look into the setting up of SHGs in the village of Saitsama in Jaintia Hills District, Meghalaya and whether it plays any part in the changing status of Sakachep women

INTRODUCTION

The concepts of status and role are interchangeably used many times. These two concepts are no doubt related but they do not mean the same. Linton (1936) says, "You occupy a status but you play a role". Every position or status in society, therefore, carries with it a set of expected behavioral patterns.

Though all roles and statuses derived from social patterns are integral parts of patterns, they have an independent function in relation to the individuals who occupy particular statuses and exercise their roles. Thus each person holds a number of positions in society known as statuses. A woman might be a musician, a teacher, a wife and a mother. Each of these social positions, with rights and duties it entails, is a status. Although a person may hold a number of statuses, one of them defines the person socially.

A role emphasizes "performance", of what one can do and how well he/she can do it regardless of age, sex and group membership. Linton (1936) makes a distinction between "ascribed" and "achieved" roles. An "ascribed" role is one if occupants acquire it automatically as a result of certain objective characteristics or relations to others which are beyond

their control. The most important bases of ascription are birth into a particular family, birth order, sex and age. Any role is said to be "achieved" if it is not "ascribed". However it is that which an individual has because he has either chosen it or earned it. It is the results of his efforts and his action.

The present paper is an attempt to study the role and statuses of Sakachep women and whether there has been any change due to the setting up of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) by them.

Sakacheps are a "tribal" group of people from north-east India, belonging to the Mongoloid group and are following patriarchy. "Sakachep" literally means "to trap animal", perhaps referring to them being expert hunters in the past. They are found spread in different parts of north-east India, viz., Assam, Tripura, Manipur, Mizoram and Meghalaya. They count themselves similar to Lushai, Hmar, Hrangkhoh, Biata and other Chin-Kuki groups of the region. The present study has been conducted among the Sakacheps of Saitsama village in the Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya. The village lies towards the north of the district, and is approximately 140 km away from the capital city of Shillong and 60 km away from Jowai, the headquarter of Jaintia Hills District. Altogether there are 8 localities in the village with 202 households. The total population of the village is

¹Assistant Professor

²Junior Research Fellow

1235, with males numbering 622 and females 613. Besides the Sakacheps, the village is also occupied by an equal number of Pnars, a matrilineal group from the Khasi-Jaintia stock.

Village Saitsama has 3 schools — primary, upper primary and a private school. In matters of transport and communication, the village is relatively cut off from the main national and state highways. There is a horticulture nursery farm run by the Agriculture Department of Meghalaya and one animal husbandry farm. One public health centre is present in the village. The apex administrative body of the village is the *Dorbar Shnong* or the 'village council' which is responsible for the maintenance of law and order within the village. The responsibility of looking after the village lies with the Headman who is elected by the people.

Sakacheps are a patrilineal group of people (in opposition to the matrilineal Pnars of the village) and follow rules of patrilineal descent. They follow clan exogamy because they believe that they are descended from the same ancestor and are closely related to one another. Those who breach the rule of clan exogamy are punished by the community (fines imposed and couples separated) and at times ex-communicated from society. *Inkua-khat* or family is the smallest unit of descent group; in the family, men have relatively more power and authority over family affairs. They are also the ones who inherit the ancestral property such as land, house etc while in few cases women inherit movable property such as livestock or agricultural produce. They follow the rules of patrilocal residence, wherein a couple after marriage moves to the husband's familial residence or locality (in case of neolocal residence) so that the children grow up in the father's house/locality/village.

In a Sakachep family the eldest son inherits authority and power from his deceased father or a man inherits the position of "family elder" from his deceased senior brother; when the inheritor man dies he is succeeded by a still younger brother or, if there are no remaining brothers, by his eldest son and so on. Therefore the largest share of the family property is given to the eldest son as he is the heir to the family. Women do not inherit the ancestral property such as land, house etc., even if she is the only daughter in the family. In such cases, the property is usually given

to her close male paternal kins or father's brother. Only in certain cases, she inherits movable property such as jewellery, livestock or agricultural produce etc.

Family plays a major role in the arrangement of marriage and performance of rituals. The name-giving ceremony of a new born baby is also performed by the individual family with the father's father as an important role performer. If a child is a boy he is more likely to get names in the likeness of his father or grandfather. For example, if the name of the father/grandfather is Lalchunlean Vaichai, the child may be named as Lalchoi, Lalnul, Lalting, Lalsiam etc.

ROLE AND STATUS OF SAKACHEP WOMEN

Different factors lead to differing roles and statuses of women. Certain roles set by society lead many times to the type of status a woman has, whether it is social, economic or religious. Even though these three are interlinked, for one given situation, a woman or man may have different statuses socially and economically. For the purpose of this paper, the role and status of Sakachep women are looked at through two important activities:

- (a) Household activities, and
- (b) Agricultural activities.

Household activities would in some ways shed light on what the status of a woman in her own home is; while agricultural activities (and therefore economic activities, since they are an agricultural group) would shed light on the economic status of women to some extent.

Household Activities

These activities are many and varied ranging from cleaning the house to cooking and serving. The Table 1 shows the activities of Sakachep men and women at the household level. The total number of respondents is twenty (male =10, and female=10).

Table 1 suggests that most of the household related activity is done by women. Men help them out only when no other alternative is present. Usually it is the mother who does the cleaning/sweeping of the house together with cooking and serving. Many times, it is seen that women are up early at daybreak cleaning and cooking before they leave for the

TABLE 1
Work distribution at home among Sakachep people

Nature of work	Women	Men
Preparation of morning tea, cooking meals, serving and clearing up afterwards	Yes	No. Only if women are not available.
Sweeping house, courtyard and washing clothes	Yes	No. Help wives in sweeping courtyard when she is sick
Fetching water from community tank	Yes	No
Taking care of young children and aged	Yes	No. Only when women are not available.
Cutting/carrying/chopping firewood	Carry cut/snapped firewood from jungle Chop firewood into splinters at home	Cut big branches in jungle which wives carry home in baskets
Feeding Livestock	Yes	Washes buffalo.
Decision making	Everyday decisions like cooking, feeding children etc.	All economic and "major" decisions

agricultural fields. Again in the evenings, on their return from the fields, they get busy in the cooking and serving process. If an adult or adolescent daughter is present in the house she shares the burden of the mother and takes over the cleaning of the house and washing of clothes.

Interestingly it is the "small" decisions like what to cook, which portions to serve whom (even though at times husbands advice their wives which portions to serve him or a guest), how to dress their children, which vegetables to buy etc. which are made by women. On the other hand, all "major" decisions like how much of money to spend on what, which school to send their children to (even though wives also have their say), which groom/bride their daughter/son should marry etc. are all decisions finally taken by men.

Agriculture Activities

Agriculture is the mainstay of the village and both men and women are seen engaged in agricultural works. Both slash-and-burn and wet paddy cultivations are practiced in the village. In both these agricultural processes, men and women are involved, though the work allocated to each differs. The earlier processes of clearing the forest and cutting the bushes and shrubs are done by men. The latter processes of digging, sowing, weeding, harvesting etc. are participated both by men and women.

Agricultural operation of wet paddy-field is predominantly the same as those undertaken in the slash-and-burn cultivation except ploughing of field

and transplantation of seeds or crops. Here too, the initial stages of soil preparation, tilling and leveling of field are done by men.

TABLE 2
Work distribution in the fields among Sakachep people

Nature of work	Women	Men
Decision to grow crops	No	Yes
Carrying spade, hoe, knife, baskets, seeds, saplings, food etc.	Yes	No Men carry only the dao (big chopper)
Clearing the jungles, cutting bushes and undergrowths in slash-and-burn, and burning	No	Yes
Ploughing fields with bullock in wet paddy	No	Yes
Tilling the soil	Yes	Yes
Sowing	Yes	Yes
Transplantation of seedlings	Yes	Very rarely
Weeding	Yes	Occasionally
Harvesting	Yes	Yes
Transportation of grains with stalks	Rarely	Yes
Husking of rice-grains	Yes	Yes
Pounding and winnowing	Yes	No
Decision to sell crops, livestock	No	Yes

It is seen that when it comes to agricultural labour, men are seen doing heavy-duty tasks like clearing of jungles or cutting down trees etc. which are jobs that

supposedly require more strength. However, the rest of the activities are equally shared except when transplanting of seedlings, weeding of crops and pounding and winnowing of grains is concerned, which jobs are specifically assigned to women. As in Table 1, in Table 2 also women are seen taking secondary or no role at all when it comes to "major" decisions like which crop to grow and which harvest to sell, and whether to sell any at all.

Based on the roles that women play at home and in the agricultural fields, they seem to be overburdened by work. Again from personal interviews and case studies taken women seem to list heavy workload as their main problem. They feel that the amount of work they undertake at home and outside is taxing. Quite often they have to complete several other household works including cooking, washing, care of livestock and leave home for the field quite early. Majority of the women work in their own fields (owned by the husband through inheritance or purchase) but they do not take proper rest even when they do not feel too well unless the problem is serious esp., when they are in their advanced stages of pregnancy. According to the collected data, maternity care is taken with much less interest and women start attending to their household and agricultural works just after two/three days of delivery. When the children are young, she takes them along to the fields. Women, working with a child on the back, are a common site. The work done by women both at home and outside the home requires nutritious food and medical care. However, of the twenty interviewed, none of the women were regular visitors to the PHC. Again, due to the heavy workload in the fields, women stay away from home during the day-time which seemed to have a repercussion on young school-going children, some of whom bunk school on a regular basis or give it a miss altogether.

SELF-HELP GROUPS IN SAITSAMA

There are seven self-help groups (SHGs) in the village. These are composed of women members only. These SHGs have been set up initially with the help of a non-governmental organization called Rilum Social Welfare Organization (RSWO). RSWO is an organization that is funded by Church's Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA) and has as its aim to bring in economic development in the region where it operates.

At present it has helped set up thirty (30) Self-Help Groups in the state of Meghalaya through financial and logistical assistance.

There are ten or less members each in the SHG who strive towards sustaining or helping themselves through various economic means. They engage in different activities like rearing of hen and pigs, and plantation of ginger. Microfinance is another means through which these groups try to sustain their financial needs. Every month each member deposits a sum of Rs. 5/- or Rs. 10/-, which the group leader in turn deposits in the Bank.

Following are three of the Self-Help Groups which are working in the village.

SHG-1: This first SHG began in 2003. Initially the members collected a sum of Rs.20/- every month which was deposited in the State Bank of India, Thadlaskein Block, Jaintia Hills. However over the years, this monthly contribution has gone down. This group originally received financial contributions (as loans) of Rs. 4000/- and Rs. 2000/- in 2007 and 2008 respectively, from RSWO. They also received financial help from Thadlaskein Block Office to the tune of Rs.25,000/- towards setting up of a poultry farm in December 2008. The group had envisaged to raise a poultry farm in 2009 which started with construction of the coop. Out of these the group is to refund an amount of Rs. 15,000/- only to the Block.

For the chicken coop, during the conduct of this fieldwork, bamboo, wood, thatched leaves and other raw materials that are required for the construction of the same had been procured. An amount of Rs. 4000 for the raw material including labor charge had been paid. Their plan outlay was to start with 50 chicken for which they had nominated one member from their group to take care of the farm.

SHG 2: The SHG Asana was set up in 2004. There are nine members. In the beginning the group functioned quite regularly as a well-functioned group. They held meetings once a month where the members of the group chalked out various ways to help each other financially. This regularity (in the conduct of the meetings) ultimately went down to four times a year and then to two times a year at present. The group charges an amount of Rs.30/- as admission fee and a monthly contribution of Rs.5/-.

The SHG started with rearing hen which was wiped away by bird-flu. However, the group now considers the possibilities of piggery, ginger plantation, rearing hen again and the like. They considered earning money as wage laborers too.

Asana has received financial help from RSWO twice, one in 2007 an amount of Rs. 4000/- and Rs. 2000/- in 2008.

SHG 3: Tyllingilang is the name of another Self Help Group running in the village. This was set up in 2008. There are ten members. One of the successful projects is microfinance. Each member deposits an amount of Rs. 20/- every month to the Bank in the account of the group. This is simply not allowed to hatch in the bank but serves any group-member in distress. If any member borrows money, an interest of Rs. 2/- is charged for every Rs. 100/- every month. This not only adds interest to the contributions but at the same time helps the members in times of crisis. The other financial contribution came from Thadlaskein Block in December 2008 when they received an amount of Rs. 25,000/- for a poultry farm.

In the near future, Tyllingilang is aiming to enlarge their poultry farm and to set up a small bakery in the village. From the above it is seen that the main functioning of the SHGs in Saitsama village is twofold:

1. Microfinance, and
2. Undertaking minor projects

Of the two, microfinance is one scheme which even though faces hurdles (due to inability of the member or other non-members to deposit money regularly), is comparatively successful. On the other hand, minor projects like poultry and piggery which have been taken up are yet to bear fruit.

DISCUSSION

Sakachep women, as seen in the foregoing sections, work hand in hand (if not more) with the men in the agricultural fields; however at the family level, their workload is evidently greater. Despite this, the women in the village have very little role when it comes to making financial decisions or what is referred to as "major" decisions which are the domain of the men and women play supportive roles. However with the setting up of the SHGs and with the

participation of the women in the SHGs a change is seen in the overall pattern, albeit small.

Sakachep women traditionally cannot make any "major" decisions. They are only to play supporting role to their husbands' decisions. These major decisions include decisions like which school to send children to, and whether to continue their education or stop altogether; which crops should be grown in the fields; which amount of the produce is to be shared or sold etc. In fact, all financial decisions are made by men. Women do not make any decisions related to money: they neither own it nor have the power to spend it. This in a way shows that women are deprived of certain decision-making and money-spending powers. Despite the varying statuses of men or women in tune with the work/activities connected with it, the word "status" in many cases also connotes honor, esteem, respect and prestige. Status in this sense is a gratification, and its loss a deprivation (Zelditch, '68).

The three SHGs in the foregoing section were all run by women. These SHGs have made certain changes in the lives of the women-members. First, it has helped them financially in a small way. Whatever money has been accumulated whether through accruing interest in the bank or as profit from various schemes, this was equally shared (based on the differing amount of deposits made) at the end of every financial year. For the first time, many women owned money to spend whichever way they liked, but it is seen that most prefer buying kitchen utensils and dresses for children, while a few preferred to let it remain for another year so that the amount increases and a 'bigger' purchase like a cow or bullock can be made. This has to some extent made them self-reliant too. Second, the financial self-reliance has led to a self confidence; Again, since all decisions are taken by the members, so the women have also learnt to make certain decisions like setting up of poultry or piggery, planting of ginger, setting up of a bakery etc. They have also gained knowledge regarding the know-how of these ventures. They are also not too 'shy' to approach different authorities like the RSWO, Bank or the Block Development Officer for financial loans.

Lipset ('64) and Marshall ('64) made a distinction between short-run and long-run effects of economic change. In the short-run one will find a polarization of extremist ideologies: the newly created strata will

develop extremist left ideologies as they seek greater equality of political participation in society, while the older strata will become defensive and develop extremist right ideologies that preserve their established monopoly of status. However over time as the newer strata come to have a legitimate place in society, with status and power equal to their wealth, the newer strata develop much less extreme ideologies and the older strata become less defensive.

At present however Lipset and Marshall's predictions are too early to visualize. Nevertheless, it is important to note that even though Sakachep women are making small decisions for themselves and their families, they are still playing supportive roles at the family level. This might be due to the age-old traditional familial structures still in force among them.

In conclusion, therefore, we can state that the SHGs in Saitsama have to some extent led to a change in the roles of women in the economic sphere. These in turn have led to certain new privileges with some spending and decision-making powers. These have, therefore, led to a slight elevation in the social and economic status of women in the village.

REFERENCES CITED

- Linton, R. 1936. *The Study of Man*. Appleton: New York.
- Lipset, S. M. 1964. The changing class structure and contemporary European politics. *Daedalus*, 93:271-303.
- Marshall, T. H. 1964. Citizenship and social class. In: T.H.Marshall (ed.), *Class, Citizenship, and Social Development: Essays*.: Doubleday: New York.
- Zelditch, M. Jr., J. Berger and B. P. Cohen. 1966. Stability of organizational status structures. In: *Sociological Theories in Progress*, pp. 269-294. Vol. I. Houghton Mifflin: Boston.