

THE TRIBAL WOMEN

B.C. BHUYAN

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Karbis and Dimasas are the two principal tribes living predominantly in the two autonomous districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar situated within the geographical limitations of present Assam state.

This volume is a collection of papers presented to a seminar on the 'Status of Women' in the two tribal societies of Karbi and Dimasa organised by the Political Science Department of Diphu Govt. College in February, 1989 under the auspices of the Indian Council of Social Science Research, Shillong.

Eminent social scientists, professors and scholars contributed papers on different aspects of the status of women in these two tribal societies. It is hoped that this collection will surely throw some light on the subject which is probably, quite unknown to the people outside this region.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Editor of this volume, Dr. B.C. Bhuyan teaches Political Science in Diphu Govt. College and has got his Ph.D degree on the study of the Working of the Karbi Anglong District Council. Dr. Bhuyan was a member of the Executive Committee of the Indian Political Science Association.

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Edited by

Dr. B. C. Bhuyan



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Editor's Note

Though the position of women in India is better than in most of the countries, the positions that are assigned to them are not equal to that of men. Even in the present century, most of them are confined to the four walls of the house and denied equal opportunities for personal growth and social development. They are treated with discrimination which, in fact, gives them their low status. The Constitution has given Indian women a status which is unique, but the social, economic and political constraints have made them 'second class' citizens in real life.

The traditional idea of women being confined to household activities has deprived them of adequate health care and educational facilities. The female mortality rate is higher in India due to frequent pregnancies, poor diet and lack of proper medical care. In the field of education, the picture is equally discouraging. Seventy percent of the Indian women are illiterate. Female literacy is eighteen percent in the rural areas and forty seven percent in the urban areas. The drop out rate for the girls is 55.5 percent at the primary stage and 77.7 percent at the middle school stage. A girl's education is, to some extent, constrained by household chores and other responsibilities.

In the economic field, the picture is equally dismal. In the rural areas, the women have to shoulder two basic economic activities, such as to look after the children i.e. to play the role of a housekeeper and to tend and rear livestock owned by the household. Due to the modernisation and mechanisation of industries, there has been little scope for employment of rural women in recent years... The policies of agrarian reform, such as transfer of technology, commercialization of agriculture, privatization of land have threatened women's economic rights in the societies. Forest development policies which protect commercial interests of industries have also adversely affected the economic interest of rural women who mainly rely on fuel, fodder and food. The industrial policy of the modern government which results in fast deterioration of environment

has affected those women who earn their living through crafts based on wood, cane, grass etc. Women also work without any protection of labour laws.

On the political front also there has been a dismal picture everywhere. Although the women constitute approximately fifty per cent of the total population, their participation in politics is most disappointing. The percentage of votes cast by female voters is always lower than that of the males in all the general elections held since the days of our independence. Their record as holders of political office is equally most unimpressive. It cannot be said that education is the factor. Because there are some areas in India, such as Kerala State, where female literacy rate is very high but participation is awfully poor.

The North East India is not an exception to the rule. This part of India is a confluence of various peoples — plains and hills. The rugged physiographic features of the hills render the hill tribes to live in splendid isolation. This isolation has made them the most backward sections of the people of this region. The British administration initiated a policy which included the writing of a series of monographs on the tribes, specially, the hill tribes of the North East. Very little work had been done on the Karbis and the Dimasas, the two principal tribes of the two autonomous districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar situated within the geographical limitations of present Assam state. Another significant aspect of the tribes of the region is that they do not possess any written literature, although they are very rich in oral literature. The present work therefore, is mainly based on secondary sources.

The Indian Council of Social Science Research, North Eastern Regional Centre, Shillong has been organising a series of seminars on the various aspects of the people of this region. One such seminar was on the status of women in the societies of the North East. The Department of Political Science, Diphu Govt. College was entrusted to organise a seminar on the status of women in the two tribal societies of Karbi and Dimasa in the year 1988. Due to some agitational problems of the autonomous state demand movement, the seminar could be organised only in the month of February, 1989. Efforts had

been made to contact a large number of participants and the response was quite encouraging. Some articles in Assamese and Bengali were also received. But barring a single, all those articles could not be published. The editor expresses regret for his inability to incorporate the translated form of those articles.

The editor is thankful to the authorities of Indian Council of Social Science Research, North Eastern Regional Centre, Shillong, for the generous assistance they provided to make the seminar a success and for that matter, the publication of this volume. He is particularly thankful to Dr. P.S. Dutta, Deputy Director of the Centre who rendered all possible help to make the seminar a success. He is thankful to his hon'ble Principal Prof. J.N. Neog and members of the teaching staff of Diphu Govt. College for their continued assistance in all possible ways. He is particularly thankful to his departmental colleagues Mr. J.D. Thang, Mr. Bakkar Ali and Miss Majula Dowerah (presently lecturer, Dibrugarh University) for the co-operation they extended in this particular respect. Thanks are to his former colleague Dr. Tonmoy Kumar Bhattacharjee, Professor and Head of the Department of Political Science, Haflong Govt. College Haflong, for so kindly translating the Bengali article of Mrs. Anupama Naiding.

Last, but not the least, the editor is thankful to Mrs. Deetimali Barua Nath, his colleague in the English department who had been kind enough to read the manuscript and suggest corrections.

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Introduction

The present study is a collection of twelve papers presented at a seminar on the status of women in the tribal societies of Karbi and Dimasa held at Diphu Govt. College in the month of February 1989 under the auspices of the Indian Council of Social Science Research.

G.C. Sarma Thakur in his paper entitled 'Social Status of Karbi Women' as reflected in the Socio-cultural life and legends of the Karbis states that the status of woman is inferior to that of man. But one thing, he points out that she is not status conscious. She is happy with the status she possesses. Sarma Thakur admits that the role played by the UCHEPI in CHOMANKAN festival provides some kind of high status to Karbi woman. In conclusion, he says that the status of woman in Karbi society is not low in certain respects if not high.

Aswini Bora narrates in his paper by giving a brief ethnographic note on the Karbis. Dividing the society into five institutions, namely the family, economy, religion, politics and education, Bora went on to describe the status of Karbi woman in these institutions. Finally, he makes a case study of the women in Ran Sing Rongpi village, which he states was going through a transition.

P. Phangso in his paper entitled Status of women in Karbi society refers to some myths and legends and tries to prove that the woman's status is high in the society. But in the field of traditional administration, she has no place in the society. Phangso makes a comparative study of the woman in the hills with that of the plains.

Tado Terangpi in her paper entitled 'The Role of Karbi Women in Society' explains the various functions performed by the woman in the society and considers that her role is indispensable in certain respects. She is hopeful of some better role to be played by her if she is provided with some better opportunities.

Minakshi Rongpi Gogoi in her paper put emphasis on the role of woman in the traditional Karbi society. She, however, admits that her status has gradually been high in recent years due the spread of education amongst them.

G.C. Medhi deals with the status of woman as a member of the JIR KEDUM, a village dormitory of the Karbis. He lays stress on the fact that Karbi girls enjoy less freedom than the boys. This type of dormitory training, however, is not found now-a-days in Karbi society.

Prof. Rong Bong Terang in his paper entitled 'Women in Karbi Society according to Folk Tradition' asserts that the Karbi society is basically a male dominated society and therefore her status is not equal to her male counterpart. Woman, according to him, is treated as an instrument of labour only. Prof. Terang cites some folk songs to prove that woman's status is not equal to that of man.

Professor U.B. Pandey seeks to define the status of Karbi woman in terms of the mythology and symbols of the tribe.

Of the Dimasa section, Dharmeswar Dowerah, in his paper, entitled 'The Social Status of the Dimasa Womenfolk' opines that though the Dimasas have patriarchal system of family structure woman enjoys more or less an equal status with man traditionally. He refers to the existence of bride price system which is called KALTI in the said society. In the field of education, Dimasa woman is the most backward. He lays stress on the spread of education amongst them.

Prof. Tonmoy Bhattacharjee deals with Dimasa female clans and some problems. He gives a historical account of the rise and fall of the Dimasa kingdom and observes that due to the conservatism of the society, Dimasas have been facing demographic loss which cannot be compensated.

Anupama Naiding while dealing with the traditional status of Dimasa women asserts that woman enjoys a very comfortable position in the society. Naiding, however, regrets that the modern educated woman in the society lacks some of the traits of woman, such as simplicity, sobriety etc.

M. Nunisa begins his paper by giving a history of the Dimasas. He gives the etymological meaning of the word

Dimasa and also discusses the geographical extent of the Dimasa society. Nunisa deals with the various activities of the woman in the Dimasa society. He concludes by saying that the Dimasa society is at the crossroads and in real jeopardy. He suggests the implementation of economic programmes for the upliftment of woman in society.

J.L. Thaosen in his paper entitled 'Status of Women in Dimasa Society' lays stress on the high status of woman in the society.

Jibon Chetia names the various male and female clans of the Dimasas. He, however, deals with the various aspects of the status of women in both the tribal societies of Karbi and Dimasa.

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