

Problems of Historically Determining the Status of Women of Manipur

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This paper is an attempt to outline the problems of historical assessment of the status of women of Manipur through a critical analysis of the papers submitted in a seminar organised by the department of History, Manipur University and sponsored by I.C.S.S.R. (N.E.R.C.) This may add to awareness of general problems of historiography of Manipur.

What is status and how can it be determined in historical perspective? 'In law status refers to the legally enforceable capacities or limitations of persons but social scientists also include those rights and duties fixed by custom as well as law.' (Britannica) Some sociologists extend it to mean position with respect to distribution of prestige and honour and sometimes wealth, power or authority. Status can be determined by birth, more so in a country like India, or attained.

Status can be determined historically by looking into: (i) What has it been and why, (ii) whether there is change and why and finally, (iii) by outlining the orientation of the change.

When the status of a group or community is to be determined one has to be sure whether that group is homogenous whether, it is different from other contemporary similar groups and why. For example, determining the status of women in Manipur one has to be first clear about the parameters. In the working paper following points were stressed:

1. The status of women in Manipur or anywhere in the world is not what it should be. There are variations due to ethnic and historical reasons but essentially there is not much basic difference.

2. The status of women is usually seen vis-a-vis that of man, for obvious reasons, but it is not the scientific and correct way of looking at the problem. It should be looked into in terms

of what a women, as a human being, as an individual and as collectivity, should have and does not have and why. It may be helpful to remember that Engels called women proletariat of the proletariat and finally,

3. The situation is changing due to historical forces all over the world. The changes may be slow, compensatory, and superficial but changes there are, de jure as well as defacto, too obvious to be ignored. But they are not product of philonthropy but of struggles.

However, the problem of assessing the status of women of Manipur, in Meitei as well as tribal societies, anticipates certain clarity about the following:

1. There are certain essential similarities among all womenfolk all over the world irrespective of natural, ethnic, political and ideological variations.

2. Similarly, there are variations in terms of natural, ethnic, economic and political conditions and ideology of the state manifest in the historical process.

3. The status of the women can be understood only in historical perspective.

4. All consideration of the status must take into account:

(a) What has been their status and why?

(b) Nature of the change taking place and

(c) Orientation of the change.

5. Any effort to understand the studies of women and efforts to change it should not be looked into in terms of narrow feminism only. Their status is part of the status of oppressed and exploited broad masses and will basicly change only with the basic change in the society.

6. And finally efforts to change this situation should not be satisfied with changes brought about from above and certain obviously satisfying changes taking place even at the grass root level. The real change will come out only after the basic and consequent superstructural change. In other words struggle for change in the status

of women is part and parcel of the struggle for basic and superstructural change being waged for the real freedom of human society. (Working Paper presented by L.B. Varma)

In another paper A.K. Roy underlined that problem of determining the status of women 'is not merely a conjectural problem, It is structural problem' and therefore 'any micro-level study of the same is not to be made in isolation, but must be made keeping in view the structural context from which the 'phenomenon of male domination and class domination emerged'. Usually the 'non economic variable like cultural and psychological come to expect an immediate impact' but any scientific study should keep in view that 'such variables are themselves subordinate to the economic structure and any explanation of the non economic variables become meaningful only when they are explained within the broader structural context'. (Manuscript of the paper submitted by A.K.Roy).

In this perspective, when examine, the papers submitted in the above mentioned seminar (3 general, 7 on Meitei women, 6 on tribal women and 1 on Muslim women) pose following problems:

- a. lack of conceptual clarity in the approach
- b. paucity of source material
- c. inadequacy of tools applied
- d. tendency to go for sweeping generalisation
- e. lack of emphasis on orientation of the changes and finally
- f. interdisciplinarity

Let us examine these problems one by one:

Conceptual Problems:- Lack of conceptual clarity led to (a) confusing between status and role (the point was made by G. Kabui in his paper on tribal women). Most of the papers talked about role without realising that the role does not always give the status.

b. most of the papers dealt with the subject in isolation without keeping the structural and universal perspective. This has been the bane of many 'micro' studies which lose 'macro' perspective.

c. Mostly the case was made that the problem was man vs. women (paper by A.C. Arunkumar on Sex Alienation in Meitei Society and other papers). This led to discussing what could be called crude feminism.

d. Most of the papers situated the role or status which appeared to be static in time and isolated in space. This betrayed the lack of grasp of very nature of historical studies.

Sources: Coming to paucity of sources it was obvious that researches are handicapped by lack of source material and this is true of not only this study but almost of all studies on Manipur. This is the objective situation but what makes it worse is subjective lack of critical approach.

Due to dirth of archeological, numismatic, epigraphical sources whatever is available is limited to literary sources, puyas and Kumbaba, they too not being easily available and inaccessible even if available. Some of them are in the script which is not discernable for most of the people, even scholars. Those which are available in the known script of today for example, Cheitharol Kumbaba, remains untranslated. We are told that an English translation is available in London but it is difficult to understand why a xerox copy, if not the original, could not be brought to Manipur or why it could not be translated again.

The other side of the coin, the English records, are mostly sources of history and not history (We made this point in a paper read at Passighat session of NEIHA in 1986) and therefore one has to be very careful in accepting their judgment.

This obliges the scholar to depend on oral sources (most of the papers are based on oral sources). But it is a difficult and tricky terrain. Oral sources are accepted in historiographical persuits, considered even necessary by many, including this author, but how to determine the veracity and how to corrobaborate? We will discuss

this aspect later.

Problems of Methodology: - The question of methodology is important, always, but when there is paucity of sources the nature of problem is different.

Historical fact is a coy mistress and needs careful advances. There are veils and veils and one has to see through them.

Methodology is determined also by the nature of the discipline. Howsoever pious may be the intension of the historian to be a 'judge' and arrive at 'truth' of the past no body can recreate the past as it actually was, claims of Ranke notwithstanding. There are two processes of creating history, one when significant changes are brought about by people and history is made and then when it is assessed and history is written. The writer of history plays the crucial and critical role. He is not a camera, a tape-recorder or a mirror of the past. His own mental make up, attitudes, aptitudes and ideologies, consciously or unconsciously shape the image of the reality of the past. So the reality presented in history and the actual reality are naturally at variance. Best efforts can aim at similarity and not sameness. This handicap is as subjective as objective, as ideological as epistemological.

So, the problems start as soon as the researcher start selecting his facts, and select he must, howsoever scarce the facts might be for they do not select themselves? The facts have to be authentic, relevant and related. They have to be corroborated and situated. If there is no external logic one has to find an inherent and intrinsic logic. This is particularly true of oral sources. For this there are accepted methods and tools.

For example, if oral sources are to be tapped one can take interview through a questionnaire there could be definite questions leading to definite answers where there are suggestions in the questions themselves or one can let the interviewer speak freely and the researcher can

selve out what is relevant. (One can refer to a special issue of Poetics on Narrative Analysis April 1986 ed. by Elisabeth Gulich and Uta M. Quasthoft published from Amsterdam). Then there could historical material in folklore, idioms, proverbs and songs.

Even while searching for facts about past in written documents one must be cautious in establishing the authenticity of document, the credentials of the author and also about motives of recording whatever is recorded.

The papers presented in the seminar needed more careful use of the tools,. For example, papers on Non Manipuri Women of the Manipur University Campus, on Status of Women in Moyon Society, on Mizo Women, Tarao Women, on Rongmei women etc. are mostly based on interview with women, half of whom were illiterate. They present almost static and universal picture but in isolation. The perspective is not clearly marked. This had to happen because of hurry, lack of preparation, insight and foresight.

Even when the written documents are used there is a tendency to use the informations uncritically if not gullibly. For example, perhaps the only book concerning the subject is 'Feminism in traditional society' by Manjushri Chaki Sarkar and she has been profusely quoted. But she herself has used Kumbaba uncritically (see her description of Lai Haraoba). And most of us continue to do so even now. Even now the authorship, motive, motivating situation's and agencies and finally credentials of the writers of Kumbaba are not thoroughly clear. Then, she has a tendency to go for easy generalisations. Similarly the British records have usually been quoted without questioning the motive and reliability of the information. All this shows that tools of history have to be used more rigorously.

Tendency of Generalisation :- The tendency to arrive at definite conclusion and generalise is a major pitfall for a historian, who is supposed

to be a sceptic, even fussy about facts. The historiography of Manipur shows alarming tendency to accept one or two evidences as symptomatic of a general characteristic. It has been confirmed by the papers on status of Manipuri women. Let us take up the paper on Muslim women of Manipur in which author quotes profusely from Koran to prove that Muslim women have equal rights and then falls prey to contradiction when she insinuates on limitations in actual practice. Similarly papers on tribal women or women of today have the tendency to accept as general traits hat is just a few examples of individual behaviour, demeanour or opinion. For example, the question of accepting, rejecting or trying to do something to change the status of women by tribal or Meitei women can not be determined by just a few case studies. That too from a small cross section. Accepting or rejecting a value system is a very complex phenomenon which manifests itself in a very complex way. Sometimes the same individual may accept one thing at one time and reject the same thing at the other time or accept one aspect of the system but at the same time reject another aspect. Such partial acceptance or rejection do not often mean much and should not be loosely generalised.

Orientation of change:-

Changes in history can be understood only in terms of what preceded and what followed, or, if one is studying the contemporary society, in terms of orientation of the change, which way the changes seem to be leading. Unless it is grasped wellk the nature of changes may not be properly identifiable. It is part of the scops of history. As we see present in the light of the past, so could future be seen through present. So, any study of status of women today can be fully comprehensible on the one hand by studying what has been the status and on the other by what will be the status, seeing the forces of history operating today. It is not a question of passing any moral judgement, it is a question of studying the dialectics and dynamics.

Interdisciplinary:- The dialectics of specialisation and inter-disciplinary approach has enriched the knowledge and wisdom of society but the nature and limitations of inter-disciplinarity must be clearly understood and emphasised. It is one thing to use a concept or tool of one discipline to explore and understand another but quite another to equate them.

Let us be precise. There are areas where study of myths, folklore and oral tradition is the only way to probe an ethnic group. This is as necessary for sociology, as for anthropology as for history. They may have to use similar tools but are their interests same? Can the nature of all those studies be the same? No, never. A historical study will aim at situating a group in the flux of time, trying to trace the roots and their feeding area, it will study the forces, contradictions, interests or to repeat, the dialectics and the dynamics.

In studying the status of women this danger of mixing and confusing sociology and social anthropology with history has manifested time and again. Line of demarcation, howsoever thin, is there and has to be seen and established.

Historiography of Manipur is in a critical stage. It is performing even those tasks which have been more or less completed in most of the other parts of the country, exploring the basic facts, filling the gaps in chronology and history and separating myths and legends from history. On the other hand serious efforts are being made to conceptualise the known facts. At this juncture some of the problems that emerged during discussion on determining the status of women of Manipur might help us in being more aware of their significance and in trying to sum them up and do the needful.