

Gender Relations and the Web of Traditions in Northeast India

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Abstract

Although the women in India's northeastern region appear to be enjoying a higher status compared to their counterparts in the rest of the country, in reality traditional and customary practices discriminate the women in so many ways. The paper aims to look at the gender relations in northeast India and explain how the women are still caught in the web of traditions and customs.

Keywords – Women, gender relations, gender socialisation, customary law.

Northeast India comprises of the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. It is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse regions in India. The region has a high concentration of tribal population in the hilly states of Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim and also in the hill districts of the state of Manipur, Assam and Tripura (Shimray, 2004). Each tribe has its own distinct historical identity, linguistic, cultural practices and life styles that are carried forward from generation to generation (Fernandes and Sanjay, 2002).

Women in the region when compared with their counterparts in other parts of the country, are often portrayed as enjoying greater freedom with respect to their mobility and the absence of certain practices such as dowry, obligatory wearing of burqas (covering of one's entire body from head to toe using veil or long garment). This visible gender equality which is mostly obvious in the public sphere is most often being talked about in the context of the northeast and is often envied by the women of other regions of the country (Banerjee, 2010; Xaxa, 2008). This picture of

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women enjoying a higher status however is an illusion created by many. Even though the discriminatory social practices seem to be absent, yet in reality there is strong discrimination against women mainly in the light of tradition and customary practices. Based on secondary sources, the paper aims to look at the gender relations in the socio-economic life of the tribal in northeast India which constructs gender inequality and how women are still caught in the web of traditional custom.

Societal Dictum that Portrays Women as Inferior

The metaphors of women in the tribal societies are predominantly negative. Lucy Vashum has mentioned in her article, 'Status of Tribal Women' (2003) that among the tribes of northeast India there are various taboos. Contact with women on certain occasions is considered to bring evil or bad fortune to the man. For instance, the Zeliangrong Naga men believe that sleeping with one's wife before going hunting may bring bad luck to the whole group'. The Zemei Naga males are forbidden to touch the meat of an animal killed by a woman, as it is 'considered that touching the meat would be below their dignity because bravery is a quality of men and docility that of women' (302). Among the Tangkhuls in Manipur there are certain gender taboos such as, 'a woman should not yell in public, a woman should not climb over roofs, trees etc. Ill luck will fall upon a man if he walks below a woman's clothes line' (Kashung, 2012: 11-12). The oral traditions of many of the tribes 'reflect the broad spectrum of marginalisation of women in the society' (Chakraborty, 2008: 28). There are phrases and sayings among the tribes which indicate that women were not given the same status. The traditional attitude towards Hmar women are reflected in the sayings such as *Nuhmei varin tuikhur ral a kai ngai naw* which means that the wisdom of a woman does not extend beyond the bank of a river. Even among the Mizos, there are also certain sayings such as a woman and old fence can be replaced any time. Just as the crab meat is not counted as meat, so also women's word is not counted as word. Unthreatened wife and unthreatened creepers of the field are both unbearable (Dena, 2008). Rose Nembia (2008) has also mentioned that in the traditional Garo society, women are 'ridiculed with the saying that just as a goat is without teeth, so a woman lacks brain'. The Mayon Nagas of Manipur considers 'women as having no principles' since women are considered to have no permanent clan, as her clan changes into that

of her husband's after her marriage (12). The Khasis in Meghalaya also had the sayings that 'if the hen crows, the world including the family will change for the worst' (Zehol, 2006: 104).

Such sayings indicate 'substantiation of the historical role ascribed to the women and also serve as justifications for the distorted and stereotyped construction of gendered practices in the society' (Chakraborty, 2008: 28). It also gives a picture of patriarchal ideologies in the society. It can be noted from the above sayings or phrases that women were not regarded to have the 'wisdom and the reasoning power' and the capability of being given any power, be it in the private or public domain (Lalrinchhani, 2008: 214). These sayings not only lower the status of women in the society but also weaken the priceless work done by women in the family.

Gender Relationship in the Society

Gender is a constitutive element in all social relations. The term 'gender' refers to the social classification of men and women as 'masculine and feminine' (Oakley, 1972: 16) and their expected behaviour based on their assigned social roles (Basin, 2000). The different roles that are ascribed to men and women are socially and culturally determined and influenced by traditional practices, institutions, customs and beliefs. Most of the societies in northeast India are patriarchal society where men dominate and exercise control over most of the resources and are considered superior to women.

Traditional gender roles have a great influence on gender relationship in the society. Almost all the tribes in the region have their history of warfare and headhunting. In such situations ensuring peace and security to the people was an important duty on the part of the youth. Hence the institution of bachelors' dormitory played an important role as the training centre for the youth. Even though maintaining security was its main concern, the bachelors' dormitory was also concerned for the welfare of the village community. It was also an institution in which the young men learned technique of war, fighting, wrestling, traditions, etiquette, religion and all the essential things for their lives (Dena, 2008; Sikdar, 2009). Women and girls were not allowed to enter such youth dormitories (Mann, 1996). Most of the tribes in the northeast deny young women with such training facilities (Burman, 2012). They were rather obliged to look after

the welfare of the family as most of the domestic affairs and the household maintenance fall upon them. Today, even though such institutional practices have been done away, yet the attitude towards women, to quote Temsula Ao (2010), as 'benevolent subordination' continues.

The pattern of gender socialisation in the region has been shaped by the deeply rooted culture of patriarchy. Socialisation is defined as the 'process through which people come to know about the expectations of the society (Anderson and Howard, 2008: 66). Hence, gender socialisation is the 'process of socialisation which teaches children their gender roles' (Basin, 2000: 13). From the moment a child is born, gender socialisation and gender expectations come to influence the way boys and girls are treated. Gender socialisation thus affects the 'self-concepts of women and men, their social and political attitudes, their perceptions about other people, and their feelings about relationships with others' (Anderson and Howard, 2008: 305).

From the early age children of this region learn what it means to be a boy or a girl. Girls are socialised early into household chores. They are taught to cook, fetch water, wash dishes, clean the house, looked after their younger siblings while their mothers are away in the fields. Meanwhile boys are taught maintenance chores such as looking after the fields, cutting firewood etc. Girls are expected to remain at home and look after the family where they are made to think that the domestic activities and nurturing are women's work while boys are made to work outside thereby depicting the 'gender-stereotypical roles' (Lakshmi, 2007: 213). The process of gender socialisation continues throughout the life cycle. When a girl grows up and become a married woman, managing the household is her sole responsibility. For instance, though a woman might be just returning from the field it is expected that she prepares food and do the needed household chores (Krishna, 2005). Men showed their masculinity by not interfering in any of the household chores. As have been mentioned by Lalrinchani (2008) that, though a man might be near the cooking place where his wife has cook something and even if the vessel overflows, he would just watch and call his wife who is busy in some other chores to attend it. Man considered doing 'household chores as a shameful thing' as they don't want themselves to be address as 'henpecked husband' by their fellow men (148-149). This negative attitude of men underlines the patriarchal notion of men.

Most tribal traditions make a clear separation between family and society. While the management of the family and all the activities connected with it are considered to be the sole responsibility of women, men on the other hand are concerned with administration and management of the affairs of the community. There are indeed very strict gender rules and norms that define the roles, responsibilities and attributes allotted to women (Ao, 2010). Within such a framework, gender has always been a basic differentiating factor, as is reflected in the cultural norms that have assigned specific roles to men and women in society.

Today, the economic responsibilities of women no longer centers only on agricultural work. Educated women have started working in government and in private jobs and started residing in towns and cities. These women bear double work burden as their family responsibilities continues which creates problems for women who take up jobs outside the home. As this work outside the home demands from them 'independence, mobility and long hours of work; the family demands the opposite- subservience, service, co-operation'. Even in the outside world men continue to take control as they did in the home. As men do not have to carry the double burden of work, they are much better trained in their profession and rise much higher than that of women (Basin, 2000: 36-46).

Customary Law and Gender Relations

The gender relations of the tribal which constructs inequality can be analysed looking at the customary law of the tribal communities in the region.

Customary law is part of the tribal traditional customs and practices where the tribes considered it 'intrinsic to their identity and culture' (Fernandes and Gita, 2009: 95). Customary law can be understood as 'an established system of immemorial rules which evolved from the way of life and natural wants of the people, the general context of which was a common knowledge, coupled with precedents applying to special cases, which were retained in the memories of the chief and his counsellors, their sons and their son's son, until forgotten, or until they became part of the immemorial rules' (Bekker, 1989: 11). The operation of customary laws acts as a powerful tool to define the roles of men and women and dictate acceptable standards of behaviour. Women's social and economic

status continues to be influenced by customary rules (Agarwal, 1994; Krishna, 2005).

Almost all the customary law of the region which includes 'people's beliefs, customs, social mores, precepts, rites and usages practiced since time immemorial, are not always conducive to the interests of women' and the customary laws relating to 'property and marriage are highly oppressive to women' (Nongbri, 1998: 20). As has been mentioned above, women in the region shoulder heavy economic responsibilities viz-a-viz men. Yet their customary laws deny them equal rights to property and inheritance which is one of the important factors affecting their empowerment (Agarwal, 1994).

The customary laws in matters of marriage and divorce also are far from favourable to women. Among many of the tribes in northeast India, women are treated as mere commodities which can be seen in their custom of bride price. Bride-price prevails among the various communities in northeast India where the bridegroom has to pay certain amount of money to the girl's parent. This custom of bride-price which is practiced among the tribes is based on the recognition of the importance of women's role in the economic sphere. It is the 'reflection of the fact that women are a productive worker in the economy of the tribe' (Nembiakkim, 2008: 13). Though bride price was paid to compensate the girl's family for their loss of an 'economically active member', it has provided man with the 'justification to treat his wife as a disposable commodity' (Nongbri, 1998: 22). The payment of bride price did not protect women against exploitation within the family (Krishna, 2005) rather it creates limitation on women's right to initiate divorce as it 'entails the obligation to return the bride price to the husband. So women prefer to suffer in silence even if she is ill-treated rather than take recourse to divorce' (Nongbri, 1998: 22-23). In most of the communities of the northeast, the customary laws are constituted and interpreted by male alone. Women have no role in decision-making. Due to their customary laws, they aren't allowed to share their ideas in village decision-making (Fernandes and Gita, 2009). Women are excluded from participating in all the important decision making institutions (Ao, 2010).

Almost all the communities in northeast India are patrilineal society where descent is traced from father to son except for the state of Meghalaya,

where the Khasis and the Garos follow the matrilineal system where descent is traced from mother to the daughter. Yet what remains similar is that patriarchy rules in all these societies. Women were never allowed to represent the family or the kin group at the community level. Moreover, they are neither being given any authority at the social level. Thus, even though women have property rights in the matrilineal society, but when it comes to decision making whether it is in matrilineal or patrilineal societies, it is regarded as the domain of men (Gneezy, 2009; Krishna, 2005).

Concluding Remarks

The status that men and women enjoy in the society is socially and culturally determined. Moreover, as women are socialised from early age towards the household responsibilities, they considered themselves as subordinate to men. In spite of their economic contribution women are still far from being at an equitable position. Women are no doubt educated today and could earn their own living, yet they are still not the decision makers in social, economic and political institutions. As the economic, political, social and cultural institutions are by and large controlled by men, gender inequalities and subordination of women continue to exist. In the name of preserving traditional customs and tribal identities, very often individual and gender choices get foreclosed and women are relegated to the lower status. The customary laws and practices among most of the tribal societies in northeast India treat women as 'second sex' (Gough, 1971). Such practices overlap with gender equity, women's liberation and their empowerment. The customary law of all the community needs to be grounded on equality and human rights such that both men and women are given equal rights. As Kamla Basin (2000) has rightly stated that in order to attain gender equality 'it requires each one of us, man and women, to look into ourselves and overcome our negative 'male' (being aggressive, domineering, competitive, self-centred) and 'female (being submissive, fearful, difficult) qualities' (83).

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