

GENDER, CULTURE, AND CHANGE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S ROLES IN TRIBAL SOCIETIES

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“To awaken the People, it is the women who must be awakened. Once she is on the move, the family moves, the Village moves, the nation moves”

- Jawaharlal Nehru

Since the dawn of civilization, women have always been taken for granted. They were treated as inferior to men and there were times when they were considered to be just the property of men. The subjugation of women can be seen in all spheres of life be it in the family, the society, politics, economy and even in the church. The Tribal Society in the North East which to the eyes of the outsider is one of the most progressive in terms of women empowerment. Majumdar, while dealing with the status of Tribal women states that “the rigid codes of behaviour which outlined for women in Brahmanical texts do not affect Tribal and lower caste women”.¹ Even though it is very clear that Tribal Women are not bound by the codes of Brahmanical texts, yet one cannot say that all tribal women are treated the same way in their own societies. O. L. Snaitang states “Though women played an important role in the structure of the society, they were not necessarily highly regarded or permitted freedom of actions as persons”.² When it comes to the status of women in the Tribal Society, there are two dominant views: one view suggests that men and women in the tribal society enjoy equal status whereas the second view is of the opinion that women occupy the lower status in tribal societies. Such being the case, it is very difficult to say whether women are really enjoying equal rights/ status in Tribal societies or are they being treated as subordinate to men?. In order to be able to understand the real position of women in the Tribal Society, this paper will try to bring out the economic condition of Tribal women and their involvement in the economy of the society and will also try to draw ways and means as to how women can be empowered and helped so that they can be economically independent and live life to its fullness.

1. Women in the Tribal Society:

Women have always been the integral and inseparable part of any society irrespective of their nature, form and social structure. It is the combination of man and woman, biologically, socially and culturally that gave rise to humanity and the connected order of living. There will be no society without woman, this is true till now and will always be in the future.³ In spite of such an intimate connection of man and woman, and her importance in the society, woman has always been treated as inferior, the second sex, incapable, underrate, and even deprived of basic human rights and even alienate! This kind of treatment of women has not only been historical but continues even in the contemporary situations.

Tribal women as such enjoy very little control over immovable property. They hardly ever inherit land, particularly in the patrilineal societies. However, when compared with other non-tribal women, tribal women are not totally debarred from owning any kind of property. Among most of the tribes unmarried women have absolute rights over their own earnings. Women in tribal societies can usually inherit movable property and the boys get all the immovable property.⁴

Lalhriatpuii writes about the Mizo women in Mizoram that they were extremely discriminated against with regard to the inheritance of property as they were never given rights over the landed property. If there is no son in the family, the family property including ancestral home should go to the nephew of the father.⁵ Among the Nagas, it is a practice of all tribe not to pass inheritance, particularly land, to their daughters, wives or even mothers- who are women. It is always the eldest son which inherits the entire property and if a man has no sons then his daughters can inherit the movable property but the land will go to the father's kinsman.⁶

Among the matrilineal tribe of Khasi and Garo in Meghalaya, the descent is traced through a female line, succession and inheritance also descends in the same direction. This however is not an assurance that women are enjoying an equal social status like men. A deeper analysis is required to know the reality in such a society. Even though the household property is inherited from mother to daughter and she is the owner of property, the management of property is always vested upon the hands of a male. In the Khasi and Jaintia tribe, the property is managed by the wife's brother and in the Garo tribe it is jointly managed by the husband and his father in law.⁷ Among the matrilineal tribe of Khasi, and Garo though the succession is through females, it is always a male who succeeds- a sister's son. In domestic management, males and females hold equal power, however in important matters males take the decision.

1.1. Economic conditions of Women in Northeast India:

India has experienced rapid growth and development in the past years in many spheres. Gender equity is not one of them. This is deplorable considering the important role played by women in the socio-economic growth of the country. The Indian development model has yet to fully incorporate the important role played by women for propelling the socio-economic growth of the country. Current governments at state and central level must understand that no nation can progress unless its women are given equal access to opportunities and adequate safety and security.⁸

The North Eastern part of India is very rich in natural resources with fertile land, rich forests and substantive mineral and hydrocarbon deposits; however, the region has lagged behind the rest of the country in its economic condition. This low economic condition has been caused by several factors, however, one of the main factors is that per. sq km of cultivated land is very less in the hill areas of the Northeast and greatly affects the economy because the Northeast region mainly depends on agriculture for their economy. In most states, *jhumming* cultivation is still practiced extensively and this requires hard labour and it entirely depends on the weather.

The role of women in the economic development of a society has always been underestimated and this is mainly because women are not treated to be at par with men. The economic status of women in the North East is directly an impact of their social status. For most women, with an exception of the matrilineal society of the Khasi and Garo, women do not own any immovable assets from their parents and this leaves them to be economically dependent. The economic status and the role of women can be enhanced if they have property related rights like owning, managing and inheriting property.⁹ While women are very engaged in agriculture, this is generally subsistence rather than cash crops. It is estimated that women own only 1% of property and lack of rights to inherit or own land, severely limits women's engagement in larger scale cash crop production. Even when women can inherit land, as in the case of the matrilineal society the need for male protection or labour may mean they will give the land to male relatives to manage. Lack of land ownership may also stop them participating in schemes to improve agricultural output, while lack of wider assets disallows them from accessing loans. This is true with regard to applying loans from the banks, in the case of personal loans a person must have a monthly income of not less than 25000 rupees where as in the case of agricultural loans one must own an adequate acre of lands as a mortgage for the loan applied.¹⁰

Patricia Mukhim in her paper *Gender concerns and Food security in Rice Farming System in Northeast India* has drawn the attention to the declining role of women in the overall organization of production activity. She describes the state's agricultural policy as 'gender blind' even though there is a national policy for women, the northeastern states do not have a state policy for women that could define their role in the different sectors of economy.¹¹ Given their lower asset base, women farmers may be most affected by climate change, and while having knowledge of how to adapt, they may be least able to adopt appropriate adaptation strategies. When women are in paid employment, they are more likely to be engaged in part time rather than full time work, in the informal rather than the formal sector, and across the globe women earn less than men for comparable work.

2. Importance of women in Economic development:

The most influential evidence on the importance of women to economic development has come from research used to support the World Bank's 'Gender Mainstreaming Strategy' launched in 2001.¹² This research highlighted that societies that discriminate by gender tend to experience less rapid economic growth and poverty reduction than societies that treat males and females more equally, and that social gender disparities produce economically inefficient outcomes.¹³ The primary pathways through which gender systems affect growth are by influencing the productivity of labour and the allocative efficiency of the economy (World Bank 2002). In terms of productivity, for example, if the access of women farmers to productive inputs and human capital were on a par with men's access, total agricultural output could increase by an estimated 6 to 20 percent.¹⁴ In terms of allocative efficiency, while increases in household income are generally associated with reduced child mortality risks, the marginal impact is almost 20 times as large if the income is in the hands of the mother rather than the father.¹⁵

Women have always been identified as being a reliable, productive and strong labour force makes them the preferred workforce for textiles and electronic transnational corporations. According to research women are considered to be 'good with money,' including being better at paying back loans, has led them to be in microfinance programmes. Women are also more efficient distributors of goods and services within the household and this gives them the upper hand to being the resources aimed at alleviating poverty, such as cash transfer programmes. The above shows how important women are for development in economic growth.¹⁶ This however does not guarantee that women will have an equal treatment as

men, while bringing economic growth gains, will not fundamentally change the position and situation of women. It is important to note that while gender equality will help bring economic growth, economic growth will not necessarily bring gender equality. Advancing gender equality requires strengthening different dimensions of women's autonomy: economic and political autonomy, full citizenship and freedom from all forms of violence, and sexual and reproductive autonomy.¹⁷

3. Towards Women Empowerment:

Empowerment may be defined as strength. To 'empower' is to give power or authority to act.¹⁸ Empowerment demands self-assertion, resistance, protest and mobilization against those powers which challenges freedom, equality and liberty. Empowerment will take place when men and women recognise and act against those forces which oppress or suppress any one of the gender. As a process it allows a person to make decisions, assert opinions and have self-confidence. Empowerment, therefore allows men and women to project themselves.¹⁹ Empowerment especially of women is the need of the hour in the tribal society if men and women are to live as equals. Traditional values and cultures hold women as inferior to men and this hinders them from full participation in the economic life of the society and the church.²⁰ Women and men alike should be empower so that the traditional values which hinders the growth of a full human potential can be broken down.

Empowerment is not a want but it is a need because despite the fact that many feminist movements have taken place, gender inequality is still widespread. There is a need to liberate women's mind so that they understand that they have the power and options, empowerment should prepare a person to combat discrimination. Women need to be empowered and in the process of empowering them, men need to show their support in order that both men and women can equally contribute to the growth and life of the society and the church. Improvements of women's status will require not only an analysis of the relations between men and women and the empowerment of women, but also the concurrence and cooperation of men. There is a need for men's participation to alter the social and economic position of women.

The need for women empowerment is a must not because women are weak but because they are made to believe that they are – this is the sad reality that we are facing. The continual negative attitude towards women basing on their gender has left even the powerful women in the state of being powerless and women have developed an understanding that they are weak. This traditionally assigned label has marginalized women to an extent that they are not able to rise up to their full potential without full support and empowerment. There is an urgent need to understand the ground reality of economic inequality between the sexes, there is a need for the change of attitude towards women, to actively advocate, identify and teach about the need for the total liberation of humankind.

In the society, it is the male who dominates in all spheres of life and females are forced to be responsible for only family care. Almost 50% of the population are females and thus their empowerment becomes a must if the society is to achieve full development. The Indian Government through its constitution has provided equal rights and status for both men and women; however, in order to solve the issue of gender discrimination and to bring about equality, the continuous efforts of everyone is required.

3.1. Suggestions for women Economic Empowerment:

Women's subordination can be seen as having its roots in their exclusion from the market sphere and their limited access to, and control, over resources. The key was then to place women 'in' development by legislatively trying to limit discrimination and by promoting their involvement in education and employment. It is not sufficient to add women and girls into existing processes of development but there is also a need to problematize why they are excluded, the focus therefore should be on addressing the imbalances of power at the basis of that exclusion. We should also questions the notion of 'development' and its benign nature, there is a need to shift from a narrow understanding of development as economic growth, to a more social or human centered development. We should aim for a more holistic approach and seek to address women's strategic gender interests by seeking the elimination of institutionalized forms of discrimination for instance around land rights, or ensuring the right of women and girls to live free from violence.²¹ Following are some of the ways through which women can be empowered economically and this will inturn help in the economic development of the society:

3.1.1. Equal Opportunities: The stereotype idea that tribal societies are free from gender discrimination – a perception that is rooted in the romanticised view of the so- called primitive and small-scale societies documented in the earlier anthropological and ethnographic literature and backed by some feminist has led to the increase subjugation of women.²² Women are often seen and viewed as wives and mothers whose functions are chiefly concern with family and biological reproduction and therefore they are not seen as equal contributors in the economic activity of the society. The long years of child bearing and rearing has led to the assumption and acceptance that women are to do household works and domestic chores and this can be seen in the deeply entrench and well established gender roles in the society. With such a view of

women, men are therefore assigned to do the more extroverted and income generating work while women are confined to the domestic spheres and this division of labours has not only made women to be economically dependent but even their productive works are merely seen as a part of their natural functions.²³

3.1.2. Equal wages for equal works: Globally, women are paid less than men. Women in most countries earn on average only 60 to 75 per cent of men's wages.²⁴ Contributing factors include the fact that women are more likely to be wage workers and unpaid family workers; that women are more likely to engage in low-productivity activities and to work in the informal sector, with less mobility to the formal sector than men;²⁵ there is a need for a proper legislation so that it can alleviate the hardships suffered by women workers in many areas of employment in the North East. In 1976, the Equal Remuneration Act was passed with the aim of providing equal remuneration to men and women workers and to prevent discrimination on the basis of gender in all matters relating to employment and employment opportunities. This legislation not only provides women with a right to demand equal pay, but any inequality with respect to recruitment processes, job training, promotions, and transfers within the organization can also be challenged under this Act.²⁶

As part of its Directive Principles of State Policy, the Constitution of India through Article 39 envisages that all states ideally direct their policy towards securing equal pay for equal work for both men and women, and also ensuring that men and women have the right to an adequate means of livelihood.²⁷ While these Directive Principles are not enforceable by any court of law, they are crucial to the governance of the country and a state is duty bound to consider them while enacting laws.

3.1.3. Equal access to education: Education contributes a lot to the growth of economy. Education helps to improve the quality of labour and thus in turn helps the women to be able to improve their socio-economic conditions. Many women are trained in their families with traditional art and craft of weaving, embroidery, knitting etc and with formal education those skills can be enhanced and be more productive and hence help women to be economically independent.²⁸ The laws enshrined in the constitutions can be made known to the people through education and this will in turn help women to be able to know their own rights.

The gender pay gap in India increases with an increase in educational qualifications. While comparing men and women who had only completed high-school level education, it was observed that women earned 10.34% less than men. Women who had gone to college for four to five years or who had received advanced degrees earned around 30% less than their male counterparts. With an increase in the level of education, where women had obtained a Master's degree or a Ph.D equivalent, it was observed that the gender pay gap ranged between 44% to 46%.²⁹

In a country where nearly 70% of the population lives in rural areas, access to educational opportunities is limited. Moreover, poverty puts the girl child at a greater disadvantage. Add to this the social attitudes towards women, and it is obvious that we need a multi-pronged approach if we are to achieve education for women worldwide. When we educate and empower one woman, we set off a chain reaction that transforms the life of her family and the community she lives in. An exemplary model is the network of trained Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA), created under the National Rural Health Mission, who have played a crucial role in improving the health of women and children across India.³⁰ By neglecting the education of women, we will compromise the future of the Indian nation. By investing in women and their education, we are investing in our present and in our future.

3.1.4. Equal responsibilities: In a family set up, men often exercise their power on women especially on reproductive activities and this severely affects women. Women's continued inability to control their own fertility means that childbirth limits their ability to engage in productive activities. Men may see the decision over if and when to have children to be their decision, and large numbers of children may be read as a sign of male fertility and power, which becomes more important when masculinity is threatened. There is a link between women's ability to control their fertility and economy. Studies also show that paid work can promote greater understanding of sexual and reproductive rights among women. Women's socially constructed altruistic behaviour means that economic resources that enter the household via women are more likely to be spent on household and children's needs. Female-headed households may not be the 'poorest of the poor' as popularly constructed, since women who live with men may suffer 'secondary poverty'-- the household overall is not poor but, as the man withholds income for personal consumption, women and children within the household are poor.³¹ When women earn, men may withhold even more of their income, leaving women and children with access to the same level of resources. This irresponsibility on the part of men needs to be addressed so that both husband and wife shoulder the family responsibility equally.

3.1.5. Formation of Self Help Group's (SHG'S): SHG is a holistic programme of micro-enterprises covering all aspects of self-employment, organization of the rural poor into self Help groups and their capacity building, planning of activity clusters, infrastructure build up, technology, credit and marketing. It lays emphasis on activity clusters based on the resources and the occupational skills of the people and availability of markets. The concept of Self-Help Group has its roots in rural areas and it has been mooted along the rural and semi urban women to improve their living conditions. Though it is applicable to men in our country, but it has been more successful only among women and they can start economic activities through SHG movement. In India, this scheme is implemented with the help of NABARD as a main nodal agency in rural development. It is self-employment generation scheme for especially rural women, who don't have their own assets. Mahatma Gandhi says "...India lives in her seven hundred thousand villages and the soul of India lives in her villages"³². So the empowerment of India depends mainly on empowerment of these village. The Empowering Rural India and its impact on development to a large extent depend upon the development of its 833-million strong rural population of India. However, the recent studies on development issues, endorsed aptly that the sustainable development can be made possible by making women an equally important paradigm of the development process.³³ For the eradication of rural poverty, there was a need for self-employment and wage-employment programmes. To fill this gap the Government had implemented a series of self-employment and wage-employment generating programmes like Rural Works Programme (RWP), Integrated Dry Land Agricultural Development (IDLAD), and Area Development Schemes (ADS) etc. The rural housing programmes like *Samagra Awas Yojana*, *Indira Awas Yojana* etc have been implemented to provide houses to the roofless rural poor. Antyodaya, Annapurna etc schemes have been implemented to help the destitute rural poor. The credit institutions like nationalized commercial banks, regional rural banks, co-operative etc have been instituted in rural areas to extend credit facilities to the rural poor. SHG programmes paved the way to rural poor women to approach the banks for credit. It is a revolution in 'Rural Credit Delivery System' in India.³⁴ Self-Help Groups will help women to be economically independent.

Concluding Remarks:

The society can develop in a true sense when women makes progress, despite the fact that it is men and women together that constitutes a society, women are not given the rights and adequate opportunities to develop and play an important role in the society, they were and are still treated as the second class citizens even though equal rights have been granted in most constitutions. The contributions of women towards the socio-economic development are no doubt immense yet they usually go un-notice. Women are to be identified as active partners in the development process and enough support should be given by men and the government agencies in uplifting their social and economic conditions. The law alone is not enough to bring about this change, it is just an instrument to prepare the people to accept the change, for the change to really take place people's awareness has to increase. The societal order and norms (eg., gender stereotyping, gender based work etc) also have to change in order to be able to adjust to the new value of life where mutual respect and equality exists.

In conclusion, there is a need to denounce all the oppressive structures in our culture and tradition which renders women the position of being inferior to men and there is a need to announce freedom, equality and justice for all. Men and women should be treated equally right from their childhood, work should not be divided and equal opportunity should be given for both boys and girls to exercise their creativity and skills.

Boys and girls should be encouraged to be leaders and the position of leadership should not be restricted to boys/ men alone. There is a need to recognise and accept women as equal members in the society and economic development. Women should be allowed to be the village heads, Politicians, entrepreneurs and leaders one should not be debarred from taking any leadership role just because of their gender.

Patriarchy is to be seen as an oppressive structure and that it is needed to be denounced. Patriarchy is present in our family, social, political, economic and religious life and it is one of the main contributors in the oppression and subordination of women and finally there is a need to realise that both women and men are equal.

Women empowerment should give women the right to live their life with a sense of self-worth, dignity and respect, they should have complete control over their life both within and outside the domestic spheres, they should be allowed to make their own choice and decisions. Equal opportunity should be given in social, political, economic and religious activities and equal status in the homes and societies should be maintained. There should be no discrimination on the basis of one's gender. When both men and women are empowered, there will be an over- all development in the society.

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