



International Journal of Research in Academic World



Received: 10/April/2024

IJRAW: 2024; 3(5):44-47

Accepted: 08/May/2024

Socio-Political and Religious Status of Tribal Women in India: A Few Observations

*¹Dr. Grace Don Nemching and ²Dr. Mercy Vungthianmuang Guite

¹Associate Professor, SOEDS, Swami Vivekananda Bhawan, IGNOU, Maidan Garhi, New Delhi, India.

²Assistant Professor, Centre of German Studies School of Language literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.

Abstract

It is portrayed generally that the status of women in tribal society is comparatively better than non-tribal women. This paper will examine the status of tribal women with regard to inheritance, property rights and also look into their political role and discuss what the real scenario is whether like the non-tribal women they are also oppressed and dominated in some way or other especially when it comes to inheritance, property and political power or if they indeed enjoy a better status.

Keywords: Tribal, tribal women, political structure, status, property, inheritance

Introduction

In India, tribal population is concentrated predominantly in areas of North-East India; Himalayan Region; parts of Central and Western India; and in Andaman, Nicobar and Lakshadweep islands. With onset of modernization and formation of the so called mainstream civilized society, most of the tribes has adopted some of the features of the caste based society which is an integral part of the Indian society. According to the 2011 census, Madhya Pradesh has the highest tribal population in India and Bhil tribe constitute the largest tribal group. With onset of modernization and formation of the so called mainstream civilized society, the tribals have in most areas adopted some of the features of the caste based society which is an integral part of the Indian society.

Status of Tribal Women in the Social Sphere

Simply defined, a status is a socially defined position in a group or a social system, such as female, student, teacher, child, mother, father etc. A status occupant is expected by other to behave in a special way, relative to specific situation. One of the ways to analyze the status of tribal women in a society is to ascertain it in terms of their mode of descent, inheritance and succession, authority and residence, within the broad structural framework of patriliney and matriliney. The tribal women, as women in all social groups, are more illiterate than men, the low educational status is reflected in their lower literacy rate, lower enrolment rate and their presence in school. (Bhasin: 2007) ^[1].

When compared to non-tribal counterparts, the gender relations in tribal societies appear to be rather egalitarian, with women enjoying a comparatively high social standing and economic value in comparison to men. Female participation in economic activities is crucial, but her participation in non-economic activities is as significant. The women of the tribe labour extremely hard, in some cases even harder than the males. The indigenous women have the ability to express themselves and exercise their freedom. Economic changes are occurring as a result of the implementation of development programmes, and they affect men and women in different ways. This inequality resulting from the development process necessitates a thorough investigation because it has resulted in inequity not just between tribals and non-tribals, but also among tribals on the basis of gender. The patriarchal nature of tribal communities prevails in the vast majority of them. Women are not equal to men in the traditional sense, but they have a greater social status when compared to non-tribal women. Both their relatively high social standing and the raising of their children were dependent on an abundance of riches and a limited amount of control over their lives. To put it another way, tribal women owed their comparatively high social position to a combination of abundant resources and a clear distinction in their society between the household and the social arena. The man represented the family in society, and the woman served as the primary decision-maker in the family's economy, production, and social interactions, with the man as the primary decision-maker. When it comes to resource control, tribal women have a higher social status than

non-tribal women. Their active participation and decision-making in land utilisation, agriculture, and the control of cash flow in a tribal economy are ensured as a result of this arrangement (Paray:2019).

The Khasis, Garo and Jaintia tribes of Meghalaya represent a matronymic, matrilineal, matriarchal and matrilocal kind of kinship structure. In this case, the descent is traced through a female line; succession and inheritance of property descend in the mother's line. The residence in most of the cases is matrilocal in nature. In these societies, the household property is inherited from mother to daughter; however the management of property is always vested in the hands of a male. Therefore, the women's power is limited to their ownership and the management of property and decision making in production process are controlled by the male folk. In the Karbi society of Assam, women do not inherit property and after marriage the bride goes to live with her husband. There are other restrictions such as women cannot be members of the village council and in certain socio-religious occasions women's participation is considered to be a taboo. But they are allowed to possess personal property like ornaments. The men folk in no circumstance can dispose of the property of the womenfolk without the latter's permission. The Bonda tribe of Odisha is patrilineal in nature, but women's voice is highly respected due to their economic importance in the society.

Among the Girahya tribals of South Rajasthan, women do not inherit any property. The jewellery of women also belongs to their husbands and cannot be passed on from mother to daughter. A Giriya mother can have no claims on her children if she goes against her husband's interests. Like women of upper caste, Girahya women observe the practice of 'laaj kadna' (veiling the face) from the elder male relatives of their husband. Husbands exercise control over their wives with the practice of bringing co-wives. Polygamy practice and patriarchy see women and children essential as labourers on a man's agricultural field.

Among the Paliyans, a Hill-Tribe of the Palni Hills in South India, women are subjugated under patriarchy.

The Gaddis of Himachal Pradesh have their own way of inheritance which is quite different from the Hindu Succession Act. There are two ways of inheritance- *Mundaband* and *Chundaband*. Munda means boy. In the Mundaband system, if a father has one wife the property is distributed in equal shares among the male children. As per the Chunda system, if a father leaves behind more than one wife, the property is equally distributed between the wives. In case there is no male child in the family, the widow is entitled to it for the whole life. Right of inheritance of property is not given to the daughters of family (Mukhopadhyay: 2002)^[9].

Oraon tribe exhibits features of caste society and inheritance of property is from father to son. A girl is entitled for her maintenance from her natal home till she gets married. A widow is entitled to maintenance if she lives in her husband's family.

The Bhil tribe is also male-dominated which can be expressed in many ways. For instance, the birth of a male child is cause for big celebration. The purdah (veil) system prevalently practiced among the Bhils. The social status of Bhil women is determined by her status as a mother. Her position is intermittently linked with the idea of reproductive labour or her status as mother.

J.H. Hutton made it clear that Sema Naga women enjoy a high social status. Marriages among them are convenience-based, and a girl is never married against her will. She is

given a good treatment by the husband in whose house she occupies a high position (Mukhopadhyay:2002)^[9].

- Like any other family with a patriarchal set up, even in the Mizo family the father is considered the head of the family who is the authority in the household. The other members of the family in the household enjoy and share the property but they do not have the right to claim any of the property. In matters of inheritance and succession mother's line is disregarded. In accordance with the law and custom of the society, male ultimo-geniture is followed wherein the youngest son in the family who is the heir to the father's land and property (Gangte: 2016).
- The Kabui, like the other Naga tribes of North East India are patriarchal and patrilineal.
- The Kabui has community as well as individual land system but women are not allowed to own any type of ancestral land whether individual or community. Among the Kabui, in matters of acquired property especially land, it depends on the owner regarding whom he/she wants to give it to, but generally it is given to the sons. If an acquired land falls within the Kabui village the owner cannot give it to the daughter. This is because of the traditional belief that when she gets married she will be considered as a member of her husband's household and village and therefore becomes an outsider. According to the Kabui tradition, lands are not supposed to be given to anyone who is an outsider. However, even in the case of the daughter who remains unmarried throughout her lifetime, this rule is followed. Thus, property getting transferred to an outsider may seem as a mere excuse to retain male dominance over the properties and hence the society. Regarding the self-acquired property of a Kabui woman, it can be said that it belongs to her. She takes her acquired property along on her marriage and she can devolve it whenever and on whomsoever she wants. In case the woman dies intestate then the property will go to whoever performs her last rites. Usually it is her brothers or brothers' children or any male relatives (Kamei: 2011)^[21].
- Inheritance among Tripuris devolves from father to son and the eldest son generally gets the major share. According to Tripuri customary laws and practices, the male is the absolute owner of family property, whether self-acquired or inherited and he holds the right to dispose any such property. The father distributes his property between the sons in his old age to avoid possible disputes after his demise. Sometimes, the father is pressurized by the adult sons to distribute the property. On occasion, the incapability of the father to look after his property forces him to divide the property among his adult sons. But in many cases, the property is partitioned after the death of the father. In some instances, it has been found that after the death of the father, his sons inherit two-thirds of the property and the remaining one-third is distributed equally between the mother and daughters. If the mother's property is registered, then the daughter becomes the legal inheritor of her mother's property. If a Tripuri man has more than one wife, sons of the second wife also get an equal share of their father's property. The adopted son of a person also has the right to inherit his foster father's property (Shil & Jangir:2021)^[22].

Status of Tribal Women in the Political Structure

The newly elected 17th Lok Sabha has 78 women Members of Parliament (MPs), the highest since independence and we

currently have the first tribal (women) President of India. However, despite these achievements, the political life of tribal women is not different from their social life. The political structure of the tribes comprises of elders, village headman, village panchayat and the tribal chief. The entire structure is headed by the males who dominate the decision-making process.

Among the Aos of Nagaland, the village affairs are entirely run by the council of elders which is an exclusively male dominated affair.

Among the Padam Minyong of Arunachal Pradesh, women are prohibited to exercise any power in the political life of the tribal society.

Among the matrilineal Khasis and Garos of Meghalaya, the chiefs (political headmen) are always the males.

Among Kissans of Orissa, Irulas of Tamil Nadu and Bhils of Rajasthan, all patrilineal societies, women don't take a prominent part in the political discussions and are denied the membership to the traditional village panchayat. The key positions in the council are held by the male members.

The case of Naga women is interesting to read in this connection. In the year 2006, the Naga Municipal Act was passed, ensuring 33 per cent reservation for women in municipalities and councils. With resilience from the male councilors, this Act has not yet been passed in state.

According to Rosemary Dzuwichu, the concept of gender budgeting is accepted as a matter of policy decision, but not been translated into reality for women at the grass-root. In Nagaland, there is absence of women from the decision-making bodies. *Putu menden*, the village council of Ao tribe has been excluding women in the decision-making level as a result women are simply relegated to their reproductive roles like making tea at the Village Development Board (VDB) meetings (Dzuwichu: 2012) ^[5].

The tribal women of Bastar did not have any political rights in the traditional political system, at least their problems were heard and attempt used to be made towards their solution. New political system adopted by the government of free India had posed many problems for them.

Women in Religious Sphere

Women are usually appointed as priests in tribal societies. Both sexes participate in ceremonies, but men shoulder major responsibilities. Men mainly play musical instruments. Women do take part in dancing but their movements are different from men. As the religious sphere is most dominating among tribals it constitutes a major field for male domination. Religion legitimises gender hierarchy. The religious sphere is a major field for male dominance, and a strategy to deprive women of public authority. There are a few innovations in religious sphere, and hence these changes must exist within a traditional, ritual and textual structure. Religious institutions are resistance to gender equality. In structure an explicitly male religious framework contains the tribal societies. Though the secular institutions strive to eradicate inequality but it was seen that women of these areas were lagging behind in all fields.

Among Gaddis and Bhils men control ritual realm. Women participate in dancing and singing. In the rituals of Gaddi Chela or Bhil Bhopa, Gaddi and Bhil women merely participate as spectators. There are no female counterparts of Gaddi Chela or Bhil Bhopa. The subordination of women in religious activities and their denial of access to positions of religious leadership has been a powerful tool in most world

religions in supporting the patriarchal order and the exclusion of women, from the public form.

Among the Paite tribe, majority follow christianity and the pastors (head of the Church) is always men. It is the men who preach in the church and the main activities of the church is supervise by men. Women are never appointed as pastors.

The Khonds uphold a unique religious institution of female priests and spiritual interlocutors called the Pejjenis, who customarily enjoy the authority to perform important religious and social ceremonies related to human and nature cycles, social relations, disease and illness. The Pejjenis play a role in appeasing the gods and spirits and conduct spiritual dialogue with the other worlds. Understanding this critical role provides insights not only into the religious philosophies of the tribe, but also into the social arrangements that can open up debates on egalitarianism, complementarity, dualism and gender hierarchies.

Like other tribal societies in Assam Karbi society also has the unique significance of goddess worship tradition. Their society is mainly based on agriculture and therefore, their all kinds of divine beliefs centering around the goddess who related with agriculture; viz:- the goddess of clouds "Haimur." Their village chief was also known as "karma bursa" plays the part of the religious priest and he first invokes the Haimur goddess by singing religious songs. This prominent religious ritual of Karbi society every year observes in Assamese month Bohag and Jeth in their capital place "Rong Hang/Bongbong. According to Karbi society's religious beliefs, their main observer god is "Hemfu"; "Mukrang" is the god of creation and "Rasinjak" is their deity of climate, war and peace. In comparison to other gods of Karbi society's religious beliefs, the female deity "Rasinjak" receive the higher position.

Women are the keepers of religion in a Khasi society. It is said that the "youngest daughter holds the religion". Honouring and revering ancestors is a part of the religion of the Khasis. Since the youngest sister is the custodian of the clan, she is responsible for the funeral ceremony and burial of her family members. The whole clan has got great love and respect for the khadduh (youngest daughter).

Conclusion

Most of the tribe in India is Patronymic, patrilineal, patriarchal and patrilocal, which means that descent, inheritance; succession is through to an original male ancestor. Tribal women in the traditional political structure did not have important positions and their power was almost negligible. In recent times with land alienation, land dispossession and pressure on land due to increased population, tribal's have been looking for alternative jobs. Dispossession of the tribal lands also rendered women's subordination to others as agricultural labourers which was accompanied by the loss of her independence in the process of participation in agriculture.

References

1. Bhasin, Veena, "Status of tribal women in India", *Stud. Home Comm. Sci.* 2007; 1(1):1-16.
2. Bhuyan BC. "*The Tribal Women*", Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 1993.
3. Chauhan, Abha. "*Tribal Women and Social Change in India*", A.C. Brothers, Etawah, 1990.
4. Dahmen F. "*The Paliyans, a Hill-tribe of the Palni Hills (South India)*", Anthros Institute, 1908.

5. Dzuwichu, Rosemary. Development and Women: The Discourse in Nagaland in Dev Nathan and Virginius Xaxa (Edts.). *Social Exclusion and Adverse Inclusion: Development and Deprivation of Adivasis in India*. New Delhi: Oxford, 2012.
6. Gennep, Arnold Van. "Rites of Passage" The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1960.
7. Maitra, Sudeshna, "Dowry and Bride price" prepared for the *International Encyclopedia of Social sciences, 2nd edition*, February, 2007.
8. Mann RS. "*Tribes of India*", MD Publications, New Delhi, 1996.
9. Mukhopadhyay, Lipi. "*Tribal Women in Development*", Publications Division, New Delhi, 2002.
10. Nembakkim, Rose. *Reproductive Health Awareness among the Tribal Women in Manipur*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2008.
11. Nongbri, Tiplut. 'Gender Issues and Tribal Development' in Dr. B. Janardhan Rao, Tiplut Nongbri and Livinus Tirkey: *Problems in Tribal Society: Some Aspects*. RGICS. 1998; 47:17-36.
12. Sarkar, Amitabha and Dasgupta, Samira. "Aspects of Tribal Culture in the Forest Environment of Bastar", in *Stu Tribes Tribals*. 2009; 7(2):81-89.
13. Singh, Awadhesh Kumar. "*Tribal Development in India*", Serials Publications, New Delhi, 2008.
14. Unnithan-Kumar, Maya, "Gender and 'Tribal' Identity in Western India", *Economic and Political Weekly*. 1991; 26(17):WS36-WS39
15. Vidyarti, Lalita Prasad, and Rai, Binay Kumar. "*The Tribal Culture of India*", *Concept Publishing Comapany, Delhi*, 1976.
16. Von Furer-Haimendorf, Christoph. "*Tribes of India*", Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1982.
17. Xaxa, Virginius, "Women and Gender in the Study of tribes in India", in *Women's Studies in India*. (edited by) Mary E.John, Penguin Books India, 2008.
18. Xaxa, Virginius, "Tribes as Indigenous people of India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1999, 34(51).
19. <http://ncw.nic.in/pdfreports/Customary%20Law.pdf>
20. Gnagte, Mercie," Gender and Customary Law: A Case Study of Mizo Tribe in North East India ", *Indian Anthropologist*. 2016; 46(1):17-30.
21. Kamei, Shellunglu, "Customary Inheritance Practices and Women among the Kabui Naga of Manipu" *Indian Anthropologist*, 2011; 41(1):55-69.
22. Shil, Ashim and Jangir, Hemraj P, "Exclusion of Tribal Women from Property Inheritance Rights " *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, October-November, Margin and Transcendence: In memory of Siddalingaiah, poetic voice of the Dalit movement. 2021; 2(2):327-340.