

Available online at <http://www.ijims.com>
ISSN - (Print): 2519 – 7908 ; ISSN - (Electronic): 2348 – 0343
IF:4.335; IC Value: 60.59

The Power of Women: A Study of the tribes of Meghalaya

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Abstract

Meghalaya is a very small state in the north-east India but its tradition and culture has something to inspire the rest of the country. Meghalaya is inhabited by three tribes, namely, the Khasis, the Garos and the Jaintias, but the state and its people are one of the few surviving matrilineal society. The women of these tribes enjoy more freedom and respect than the women in the rest of the country. In Meghalaya, women are considered superior than men, which is a rare culture in our country. The tribes of this state celebrates the birth of a daughter in the family because daughters are considered as an asset to the family, unlike the rest of the country where female foeticide is taking its toll and a daughter is considered as a burden for the family. The inheritance laws of the state of Meghalaya are in the favour of women instead of men. The daughters in Meghalaya inherit the property from their mothers unlike other Indian societies where the ancestral property is passed from father to his son generation after generation. But every coin has two sides and we should not judge anything from just one side, we need to consider both the sides of the coin to know the real value. It is true that the state offers ample power to its ladies but in the public domain they are still behind men. The state of Meghalaya is matrilineal but not matriarchal. The women in a matrilineal state are not as much powerful as they would have been in a matriarchal state. This paper analyses both sides of the situation of women- the pros of living in a matrilineal state as well as the cons of not having a matriarchal society.

Keywords- Matrilineal, women, power, Meghalaya, tribe

Introduction

If empowerment in true sense is realization of own value, assessment of own strength, giving importance to own perception, bear a favourable attitude for technology and overcome all the barriers which acts as hindrances for the development, Indian women lack behind. Power of reasoning, power of vision, power to control over resources, active participation in family's decision making process, participation in community politics, if we analyse Indian women from all these aspects, still they are not at the same stage as their counterparts. Sometimes they have access to capital, access to credit, and access to information but do not have control over the resources. With power the women will transform themselves and increase their status from 'unprivileged' to 'privileged' and can lead a dignified life and developed to powerful women. If we think women with the angle of power in other societies and in tribal societies the scenario is different though not completely opposite. According to Dhebar commission report (1961) the tribal women in most cases is not a dredge or a beast of burden but exercises a firm hand in family matters. Even after five decades tribal women enjoy more freedom in family and community affairs. They do almost all the activities related to agriculture, livestock and other allied activities. In most of the tribal societies though women do lot of physical labour but they enjoy more freedom. They have comparatively better participation in production and productivity. Tribal women act as major contributor to the economic production of tribal. In some cases, they also control their husband's income, but in spite of all these things they are also co-earner of the house. Women in India in general, tribal women in particular face multiple problems like malnutrition, poor health, maternal mortality, less education, over burdened with their triple role such as productive role, reproductive role and management of community assets and participation in community politics etc. If there will be equality in power sharing and participation in decision making then achievement of empowerment goal can be ensured. In a complex society the equation between power and women is not uniform. There may be numerous variations according to the culture, family structure, types of marriage choice for life partner and control over their bodies. In this backdrop this paper analysed the women and power in tribal society particularly different tribal societies of Meghalaya.

The khasi women

The Khasi tribe being matrilineal, the wealth passes from mother to daughter and the children take the mother's surname. There is a Khasi saying, "long jaid na ka kynthei" which means "from the woman sprang the clan" (Gurdon, 82). That is why this tribe ensures that the women should get utmost respect and freedom in their lives and hence the mother's surname becomes the children's surnames. According to the Khasi tradition, a khasi man has to leave his parental home and goes to his wife's house after marriage. According to the inheritance laws of the tribe, the youngest gets "the largest share of the family property, because it is she whose duty it is to perform the family ceremonies and propitiate the family ancestors. The other daughters are entitled to a share of their mother's property, although the youngest daughter gets the lion's share, e.g. the family jewellery and the family house, and the greater part of what it contains. The youngest daughter cannot dispose of the house without the unanimous consent of her sisters. If the youngest daughter dies, she is succeeded by the next youngest daughter and so on" (Gurdon, 83). After marriage, the youngest daughter and her husband stays in the ancestral house where as the other married sisters start their nuclear families with their husbands and children. Any unmarried sister or brothers can stay in their ancestral home and their responsibility is taken by the youngest sister who gets the house. She also takes care of her father and mother who stay with them. The Khasi society gives the freedom to women to select a man, live with him and marry him according to their own choice. Whether born of a formal relationship or out of it, a child in khasi community is never considered illegitimate because the identity of child is related to the mother. The father is responsible for earning for his wife and children and taking important decisions for the family. In Khasi tradition, a man is a protector and a woman is the keeper of the house and the custodian of family property. One of the major constituent elements of the Khasi system is the role of the maternal uncle as the supreme counsellor. "Thus there is a virtual three fold division of family responsibility- the mother looks after the hearth and home, the father provides all that is necessary for the maintenance of his wife and children and the uncle attends to the business affairs that come before the family" (Gajrani, 186). As far as the public domain is considered, women stand far behind men. Khasi people consider politics, war and administration as men's domain. Women are not allowed to attend *Durbar Shnongs* in the locality or village councils in the village and men head the village administration till today. Women can never become headman. They can only act as a moral force behind men and suggest their opinions on various issues (shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in)

The garo women

The Garos, just like the Khasis, have a matrilineal society. The children take their mother's maiden name as their surname and the daughters inherit the maternal wealth and property. The difference between the two cultures is that "while the Khasis ascribe to the youngest daughter the bulk of family inheritance, the Garos, on the other hand, by ascription recognise an heiress to family property from any of the daughters at the household in which case, she is married to one of her father's nephews. Usually the girl loved most, obedient and well behaved succeeds to that title. She is called *Nokma* and her husband is *Nokrom*" (Joshi, 140). However at certain places in Garo society, they follow the rule and appoint the youngest daughter as their heiress. Another difference between Garo and Khasi culture is that while marriage in the same clan is not allowed in Khasis, cross-cousin marriage is allowed in Garos. The marriage is generally proposed by the girl. After marriage the groom resides in the house of bride's mother. Though mother is the person in supreme command in a Garo family, yet father is responsible for the subsistence of the family members. A sharp division of labor is found to exist in a Garo family. For procuring the source of subsistence, males are held responsible while the females stand for all domestic duties including cooking, rearing of children, fetching of drinking water, preparation of country liquor, collection of fuel etc. (importantindia.com). The women in Garo society inherit property but it is the husband of the heiress who is the acting *Nokma* or the village headman.

The jaintia women

The Jaintia society is also matrilineal. The mother is the origination of the clan and the children bear her name. In Jaintia society, family refers to mother and her children. The striking difference between Jaintia culture and other two cultures is that even after marriage Jaintia men stay in their mother's or sister's house and their wives lives in their own house. The husband goes to the wife's house only during night time because the whole day they spent doing their respective chores. "The husbands were only allowed to visit the wife after dusk, a time suitable for leisure" (Rizvi and Roy, 39). According to their tradition, this type of settlement helps in increasing the closeness between the mother and the son as the son, even after

marriage, stays with his mother and earns for her. However, he cannot take any decisions regarding his children's future or their marriage as it is taken by his in-laws. "The son belongs to his mother in life and too after death. His bones after death are kept along with the bones of his mother. All the ceremonies, other related matters and entire household are controlled by the mother in the Jaintia family. She is the head and custodian of the whole property" (Joshi, 227). Marriage in the same clan is considered a sin. The inheritance of the wealth and property is also from mother to daughter. Generally the youngest daughter inherits the property.

Conclusion

Meghalaya has granted its women enough freedom and scope in social, economic and cultural spheres. It is the women who inherits the property, rules the house and takes the name of their clan forward through generations after generations. However when the public and political domain is considered, they are lagging behind. The Khasi women are not allowed in Durbars or village councils. Though the *nokmaship* is hereditary but the daughter is not the village head, rather her husband becomes the acting *Nokma*. Very few women are interested in contesting elections which leads in resting the full political and administrative powers in the hands of men. Women are playing very little role in policy making. Even in agricultural field, women are not able to keep pace with men in taking major decisions. One important aspect behind this lagging of women is that women are considering the domestic arena as their domain. They are feeling overloaded with the responsibilities of managing the household and children and working in fields. All they need is a strong movement to enlighten them about their role in public domain and make them understand how their involvement in the decision making and policy making process can improve and enhance in their lives. "Women of Meghalaya are competitive, intelligent, practical, hardworking and very creative, and these values and qualities will be properly used in the decision making level, if they are represented in the local, State and national politics. Women activists should come forward and enlighten the women folk on the importance of women participation in public life" (Joshi, 296). Malala Yousafzai rightly said for all the women "we have to change this idea that women are only supposed to work in the house; women should go out and be what they want." If the women of Meghalaya will be able to achieve their power in these public domains, then only we can say that they are completely empowered and can help their state Meghalaya in reaching greater zeniths of development and be great sources of inspiration for the women in rest of India.

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