

## **Economic Contributions of Women in Traditional Naga Society**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper brings out a brief outline of women in Traditional Naga society, where agriculture plays a very important role. Apart from other economic activities, agriculture is focused more in this paper. It analyzes the work of women in agriculture and argues, women as a backbone of agriculture. The paper also compares the work of women in agriculture before and after the coming of Christianity. Agriculture being the main occupation of the Nagas, from the time of hunting- gathering and warfare period to the modern Naga society, women have always worked more than imagined. From traditional time, while men engaged themselves to hunting and warfare, women work in the field as well as managed all the household chores. Yet, men are termed as the 'bread winner', the question arises as to why not women be termed as the 'bread winner' or 'hard worker'? In household work or fieldwork a Naga woman is always ahead of her counterpart. The coming of Christianity has tremendously marked an epoch in the history of the Nagas and women in particular.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Bread Winner, Identity and Economy.

### **Article:**

Like most women's history of the North- East India and many other parts of India, the history of Naga women has been an untold history. Exclusion of women's history while writing history has been a common topic which many feminist and writers critique in their works. The selectiveness of many writers and scholars intentionally or unintentionally exclude the history of women and their work. These exclusions and selectivity have pushed aside, many remarkable works of women, which has uplifted the society in many ways. The reconstruction of Naga history in the twentieth century has not been free from its own silences and selectivity. Due to gender disparities, the history of Naga women is all the more difficult to trace unlike the history of men. This simple linear narration and representation of Naga history, with its selective representations and silence, denies Naga women a place in the Naga history. This paper tries to bring out some of the economic contribution of women in the Traditional Naga society through agriculture. It also argues and put women at the center of the argument.

This paper, particularly studies the Angami tribe, one of the major tribe of the Nagas. From the traditional time, Angami Naga family has followed the patriarchal family system wherein women, whether, as a wife, daughter, sister or mother, as a woman was made to feel inferior to man. Women were confined to the household and food gathering duties within the confines of the village state. The traditional Naga society, not only placed women in the family and assigned her little or no place in the social, political and religious institutions, women were assigned an enormous role in economic activities. Commonly applauded as a daughter, wife, sister, and mother, the economic traditional Naga society considers women as an equal partner to men in word, but the word 'equal' could not be considered because women were not considered as equal with men in practice. Among the different tribes of the Nagas, the status and role of women in the traditional society differ a lot even though Nagas were situated in one region.

The traditional Naga society witnesses the importance of Agriculture and placed it as the main economy of the society. Apart from other crops, rice is cultivated on a large scale. Rice is the staple food of the people and they had a highly developed agricultural pattern. Unlike some other tribes of the Nagas, the Angami tribe has two types of cultivation namely '*Nhalie*'<sup>i</sup> or Jhum (or slash and burn) cultivation and the '*Tekhu*'<sup>ii</sup> or Terrace cultivation. The *Nhalie* cultivation was cultivated especially in slope areas. We can also call this as shifting cultivation as this cultivation was shifted every year. A. E. Woods in his tour to the Angami country, describes the agricultural pattern of Jhum cultivation as "Hard at work"<sup>iii</sup>. On the other hand, the *tekhu* was cultivated from the same area of land and the work was done mainly during the rainy seasons. Terrace cultivation was also made permanent where water was available almost throughout the year. Jhum cultivation requires more work than the terrace cultivation. Due to the scarcity of water, people of Northern Angami practice the Jhum cultivation more to the terrace cultivation unlike the southern Angamis.

When it comes to cultivation labor it is always the women who get up early to start the work before men. This was observed as a tradition, where women work more hours than men do. The necessary equipments of the field were carried by women and not by men. All the things of men like, spade or *dao*<sup>iv</sup> or plate or cup to be used in the field should be carried by the women folk. All these were carried by women saying that man works harder than women in the field, though in reality women work more hours than men work. The condition of women was pathetic when it comes to agricultural work. After a heavy work in the field once a woman got back home, she started to do all the works in the house such as carrying or filling water and collecting firewood, cook food for the whole family where as men went to '*dahu*'<sup>v</sup> and chat with friends. The rice cultivation was distinguished by the used of irrigated terraces, cultivated year after year. This ultimately increases the work of the women folk and makes it more difficult where the work of women itself sustained the nature of patriarchy in Naga society. In an Angami family or for that matter in a Naga family every member of the family gives a hand in the agricultural work.

From a very early age, a girl child is taught how to work in household chores and help in fieldwork by her mother or elders when her brothers and boys of her same age were out playing with their friends. A mother gets little or no help from her husband and sons when it comes to household works but her daughters help her. The position of women in Angami Naga society could be illustrated with a woman coming back from the field with her loaded basket on her back and her baby in the front, accompanied by the men smartly tagging along scot free. Davis rightly commented that the Naga Women, in general, '...become mere household drudge'<sup>vi</sup>.

Angami Naga women play a very significant economic role within and outside the family where they be termed as the backbone of society. Women carry out major agricultural activities collect fuels and other articles from the jungle, and carries water, looks after the children and the domestic animals. But all the communal properties were controlled by the clan elders and these clans elders were usually males and not females. There are always imbalances in giving privileges and opportunities between men and women, but when it comes to agricultural work there was no difference on sexual lines. One should be clear that in Angami Naga society women do not inherit ancestral property in any case.

Many scholars and writers who termed men as the 'bread winner', but in the Naga society, one need to study carefully the society and avoid such mindsets and such a pre- conceived notions. A mother in every Angami Naga family is responsible for so many works such as cooking the food, fetching water, collecting firewood, collection of vegetables, weaving for whole member of family, washing, feeding the children and animals, gardening, housecleaning, making *Zu* the traditional rice beer, etc. Apart from all these works the mother is not excused from going to field for agricultural work. From the traditional time men seems to have 'specific work' in the family, whereas women do not have that and thus they have to do

the rest of the work. Of the many remarkable works of women in agriculture, which they do it themselves without the help of men needed to be mentioned.

Traditional Angami Naga society witnesses the participation of all the menfolk in warfare and hunting. The men folk were the 'honor' and 'fame' seekers in the village and women were left alone to do all the work in the field or home which sustained them for the whole year. The male members were known to the people through their hunting skills and their art of warfare. This was the period when the men folk will be away for days and weeks in the forest. Without the help of men folk the activity of agriculture continues. Though Jhum cultivation is considered a 'poor occupation'<sup>vii</sup> because of the hard labor needed, women continue to strive hard to complete the cultivation at the right season. There were also circumstances where they had to spend the whole night in the field to drive away the birds from their crops. Since Agriculture is the main occupation of the people, women have to do all the household work as well as the fieldwork with or without the help of the children. Men alone cannot be called as the bread winner when women do all the agricultural activities, do all the household chores and take care of their children when the husbands were after 'honor and fame'.

One of the most important roles that a woman takes part in Agriculture is the "first reaper". Among the Angami Naga tribe, the beginning of the harvest was led or started by a woman known as '*Liedepfü*'<sup>viii</sup> or the first reaper. It was a custom and ritual for women to initiate agriculture in Angami Naga society. The *liedepfü* played a very important role, where until she starts the harvest no one could start harvesting. The day of her first ritual was observed by the whole village as *Genna* or *Kenyü*<sup>ix</sup>. On the day she goes to the field with her *mekho*<sup>x</sup> and she would bring a little of paddies and plant besides the *Kharü*<sup>xi</sup>, the village gate. The next day she would return and harvest those paddies and keep it in her *mekho*. She will act as if the *mekho* was heavy and will utter saying, "Our harvest will be fruitful for everyone". She takes those paddies home and she cooks that rice the whole day as a ritual. Cooking the whole day indicates that their rice would be plentiful for everyone and it would last for a long time, and the ritual ends that day. This ritual was done by the *Liedepfü* for the fruitfulness for the whole village. Thus, after these rituals everyone in the village starts harvesting.

Agricultural activities are done in different groups. One of the most common work forces among the Angami tribe is the '*pele*' or the 'peer group'. *Pele* is a peer group form by a certain group of same age young people to work together mainly in the field and work for each other. The works of the peer group in the agricultural activities also reflects on their wedding day. On the day of a woman's marriage, her male friends from her age group known as '*pele*'<sup>xii</sup> or peer group would come and ask '*pelisa*'<sup>xiii</sup> from her husband. The demand made by the male members of the *pele* on the marriage day is termed as *pelisa*. *Pelisa* was asked by the male members of the *pele*, it was a must for the husband to give what they ask for. It could be in terms of kinds or cash. This *pelisa* was then spent for a feast by the *pele* member's exclusively for men. This *pelisa* was given as a gratitude to the male members of the *pele* for helping the girl in the hard work in the field. This feast of *pelisa* was strictly forbidden for girls to join, as there was belief that it might ruin the life of the married girl. The concept of *pelisa* in Angami society tries to bring again the patriarchal nature where men show their power over women. As mentioned in the preceding paragraph, women, particularly work more than men in agricultural activities, but the system of the traditional society places women as a secondary sex where men take the better place.

By the nineteenth century, the Naga Hills witnesses the entry of foreigners as administrators, missionaries, anthropologist, etc. The coming of these foreigners has brought tremendous changes and development in the later period of time. One can agree that they introduced the system of 'coolie' among the Naga society. This was the period when the male members of the village have to carry the necessary things of the administrators from one place to the other. The villagers were compelled to supply some men folk to the government officials passing their villages to carry their belongings. From some tour dairies

of the administrators we also find that the village has to pay a certain amount of money if they delay or failed to supply coolies. For instance, in 1893, the then Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills, Captain A. E. Woods in his tour diary said, "One *khel* of *Nerhema*<sup>xiv</sup> delayed in giving coolies, and I fined them Rs. 100"<sup>xv</sup>. This one example shows that the village was by any means compelled to give coolie to the government officials who pass their village.

From the tour diaries and early written records written by the anthropologist, there was also no record of 'women coolie' in the Naga society. Coolie among the Nagas before the coming of the foreigners was not known. This was the period when men folk have to obey the rules of the government and carry the things from one place to the other for several days and weeks for free. Women were left alone with their children all by themselves to do all the household chores and the agricultural activities. In agricultural activities there is no such division of works between men and women. Wives do not wait for their husbands to come back and help them in the fields, but they continue to work and complete the works. In Angami society the word 'equality' can be used in such kind of time as there is no differentiation between men and women in agricultural activities.

The coming of Christianity in Naga society has brought in a great change. Modern education as the vehicle for spreading Christianity has paved the way for the people and connects them with their outside world. Christianity itself holds the strong stand of patriarchy in Naga society. Gender equality in education was introduced among the Nagas. But practically girls were not allowed to go to school and learn with the boys. Girls have to help in the agricultural activities and support their brothers who are studying. The male folk with the education were given jobs in government offices, whereas women continue to work in the field and look after their family. Women alone stayed back in villages to work for the family for living.

The twentieth century witnesses the growth of education in Angami Naga society. Priority was given to boys' education than to equal education. Though Christianity teaches about equality, it failed to eradicate the patriarchal strong hold in Naga society. Female members of the family continue to work and help their parents to look after their family and brothers who are studying in and outside the district and state. Though education and Christianity has its vast influence over the whole of the Angami Nagas with its modernity, the society still waits for women to first reap the harvest. Angami Women have been carriers of identity through the ages with their work as *liedepfü*. Changes can be seen in all aspects of life with modernity yet, still there are some traditional practices still continue where women have been a remarkable figure in society. The concept of *liedepfü* and *pelisa* still continues in this so-called modern Christian era.

Women thus, can be termed as the backbone of economy in the society. Though "women's work" and women's role in the economy has been defined differently through the ages, there's truth to the slogan, "every woman is a working woman". An old saying, "men work from sun to sun, women's work is never done" expresses the reality that for almost all women through history, they have worked in the home at domestic chores and sometimes in the public work world, too. Though men were considered to be stronger and more capable than women in the Angami society, when it comes to agriculture it was the women who do almost all the work in the field. Women toil hard, work in the field and in the house as their work was very much needed in the agricultural and the household work. Thus, women in the Angami society emerge to be the backbone and for the subsistence of economy where they also are the bread winner and hard workers. Women in Naga society are also termed as a model of labor where they are mainly valued on that account.

Angami women have been contributing a lot to the economy of the society since the traditional period yet most of their work remains untold. Most of the writing of the history excludes women's history and her work. But one needs to reconsider and reconstruct the history as we cannot call a complete history without mentioning each and every detail in the society. Women

have been a carrier of identity through the art of weaving skill, and her enormous agricultural work, and thus should be mentioned. From traditional time to the present women have been playing a major role in the building civilization and in making a modern society. The Naga women's history needs to unfold and bring out from the long sealed history to complete the history of the Nagas as they are the history maker and identity carriers.

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### Endnotes;

<sup>i</sup> 'Nhalie' means jungle field as 'nha' means jungle and 'lie' means field.

<sup>ii</sup> 'Tekhu' means terrace or wet cultivation. Usually terrace cultivations in Angami region are like steps.

<sup>iii</sup> The Deputy commissioner of Naga Hills, *Dairy of captain A E Woods, I.S.C., Deputy Commissioner, Naga Hills 1899*, Kohima, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>iv</sup> *Dao* can also be called as a big knife. This is use for cutting down the trees.

<sup>v</sup> *Dahu* is a grave of the priest, usually situated on highest level of village. This *dahu* is restricted for women to sit on it.

<sup>vi</sup> Hutton, JH. *The Angami Nagas*. London: Oxford University Press, p. 167.

<sup>vii</sup> The Deputy commissioner of Naga Hills, *Dairy of captain A E Woods, I.S.C., Deputy Commissioner, Naga Hills 1899*, Kohima, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>viii</sup> *Liedepfü* is a *tenyidie* word which means the lady who starts the harvest or reaps the crop.

<sup>ix</sup> *Kenyü* means taboo.

<sup>x</sup> *Mekho* is a basket which is commonly used by the Nagas in general and Angamis in particular. *Mekho* is carried behind our back hung from our head. All the necessary items used in field are carried like firewood, paddies, water pot, necessary tools used in fields, etc.

<sup>xi</sup> *Kharu* is a gate. Every Angami villages have village gate. *Kharu* plays a very important role in almost all the festivals of the Angami Nagas.

<sup>xii</sup> *Peli* is a group of young people of same age usually found in Angami villages. This is a kind of institution where they work in each other field in rotation basis. It can be also term as a communal work.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Pelisa* can be term as 'price for the hard work by men for women'

<sup>xiv</sup> Nerhema is an Angami village under Kohima district.

<sup>xv</sup> The Deputy commissioner of Naga Hills, *Dairy of captain A E Woods, I.S.C., Deputy Commissioner, Naga Hills 1899*, Kohima, 1899, p.1.