

WOMEN THROUGH THE INDIAN TRADITIONS

P. Sathya, Assistant Professor, Department of History, Shri Sakthi Kailassh Women's College, Salem.

Abstract:

Visibility, entrepreneurship, sense of justice, collectivity and indigeneity are some of the markers in the colouring of the picture of women in Northeast India. They are out fending for their families and they were out defending their state from colonial forces. Making their mark in the field of sports, theatre, weaving, education etc., they are at the same time in the cudgels of domesticity with the sense of ethnic identity overarching their individual idea of being a woman. This paper seeks to bring in some of the frames of the women in Northeast India. The idea of Northeast is too contested, and at the same time constitutes a very large area, to bring into the ambit of this paper. Therefore, what it attempts to do is to take a view from afar and see from a broader lens touching a few of the issues concerning women in the region.

Keywords: Culture, Customary laws, Meira Paibi, Naga Mothers' Association, Reservation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Culture is the ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. This was remarked by Clifford Geertz (1973) in his book Interpretation of Culture. Drawing from Max Weber who said that Man is an animal suspended in the web of significance he himself has spun, Geertz took culture to be those webs. The world of women in the Northeast is woven with their cultural matrix. Therefore, their rootedness in their culture and seeing themselves from the indigenous discourse is the way they would perhaps like to tell their stories. Although we will realise that few do the actual spinning. The rest are simply caught. texts. In these systems, indigenous women 'preside over rituals, preserve but also re-create traditions'. Indigenous religions are not monotheistic, but tend to view the cosmos as made up of the living and the dead, each essential to the whole. Nature must, therefore, be nurtured. This is in stark contrast to the Western hierarchies of (masculine) intellect and (feminine) intuition or emotion, of objective and subjective, material and imagined reality. Such hierarchies may provide a basis for the view that the natural environment and 'inferior beasts' are there for humankind to explore and exploit (Sylvia, 2010). This belief in nature, and, as we shall see later, in the fertility cult gives the identity to the women as the generative principles of their societies. But, the assimilation of the major religions have somehow diluted their role as well as the belief in the generative processes.

Then comes the issue of yard sticks. It is a research methodological fallacy to compare the status of women in Northeast taking the parameters like sati, bride burning, female infanticide, purdah etc. and the absences of them being indicator of high status of women in Northeast India. To say that they are different from their counterparts elsewhere is correct, but that does not necessarily mean that they are better and have a very high status. They have now started measuring their situation and their position with their own yardsticks. Today they are questioning the customary laws through which their life is guided. The Naga Mothers' Association is one such organisation which will be discussed later in the paper. Women in Northeast India too, are producing and selling their kitchen garden produce and their intricate weaves. They may not be big

entrepreneurs but are economically self-sufficient. Every household in the villages has a loom, a small or big kitchen garden and a pond with plenty of fishes. This being the conflict region for a long time, women here have learnt to sustain their families in the absence of the men, who are taken to insurgency or led to drugs or drunkenness. Today, one sees the growing enterprise among them. The younger women have taken to designing the traditional weaves as well as creating processed food. They are now seeking market outside their region.

2. RELATED WORK

The Ima Keithel is the largest market exclusively run by women in Asia. Nobody complains if your fish is measured in small tin boxes, or your cloth is measured with the arm's length. Women here most often do not use formal weights and measures. Another striking feature of this market is that the stalls are generally passed from mother in law to the daughter in law; not only does it not follow the formal inheritance law among the male agnates but also does not go through the matrilineal inheritance from mother to daughter. The women who sit there are those who have been married, brought up their children and can spill out, as their domestic roles have been taken care of by the younger affine, usually their daughter in law. They are generally between 50-70 years of age. But recent studies have shown that women with a much younger age group, between 35-45, are entering Ima Keithel. They are generally the sole bread earners for their children as their husbands have either died due to drugs and AIDS or due to the conflict between the state and the non-state actors. But nevertheless, those who have earning husbands, about 50-60 percent are able to earn more than them. In other states too women are visible in the market relations in a more informal manner.

Women have remained a marginalized section of the society not in India but in the world as a whole. They have been an exploited lot in matters related to liberty in financial, social, religious and psychological. Particular in India, the age old social norms in patriarchal over emphasis have played a havoc role in sidelining and suppressing these natural liberties in the veil of preserving modesty and sanctity. By the mid eighties the women's liberation movement had gained momentum and the current phase of debate on women empowerment is a byproduct of an urbanized middle class in academic circles and as a consequence of it the women working class was recognized gradually as a subject of women studies. Most of the civilizations in the world, from all times have treated women as a secondary citizen. In the Europe and America, women got the right to vote in 1970's. Christianity, a modern religion, has debated "if women were humans at all". Neither does Islam treat its women at par with men. Jainism believes that only men can attain Nirvana. Mahabharata times were no different. But this should be no reason to conclude that the ancient Hindus were barbarians in a straight sense.

Among the Tangkhuls there is a traditional institution of women as peace negotiator called by the term Pukhrelas. Even though some of the tribes may claim that women have no place in the village councils, there are incidents of women chieftains and women warriors among them. According to Baruah, there is a historical legacy of women occupying a seat of power among the Nagas (Baruah, 2007, p. 45). She writes that in times of war a woman named Maram Harkhosita was the supreme commander; village Kangpot and Thowai had a woman chief; and Tolloi village council members were also women. Women were given the responsibility of the village granary. There seems to be penetration of hegemonic patriarchal notions of major religion seeping in over a period of time among these communities. In the present scenario, barring

the ritual importance given to women over the protection and decision over the granary, they have not been recognised as chiefs or commanders of their villages.

3. METHODOLOGY

In the Buddhist period also 2, we do not find much courageous and firm parameters of women rights. The Buddha sanctioned the establishment of Buddhist nunneries although reputedly with reluctance and after imposing eight special rules that subordinated nuns of any age to male monks. Reinforcing this unequal status, the Buddha reportedly said that his doctrine would last only half as long in India since he permitted the ordination of women. Still, Buddhist nuns were known as teachers of Buddha's dharma to other women and are given credit for composing a text known as the Therigatha or 'The Psalms of the Sisters'. By 200 BCE pre-pubescent marriages became the order of the day. The general belief was that if women were given freedom, they would transgress the limits. The Kautilya and Smriti writers like, Manu and Yajnavalkya began to favour seclusion of women. During the Mauryan times we come to a number of evidences of women in society from the text of Arth sastra . According to Shastri 3, the author himself admitted that he took account of all the literature existing at his time and also of the statecraft prevalent in contemporary states. Accordingly, P.C.Jain 4 also throws significant light on dasis as a labour class in ancient India. Lallanji Gopal⁵ discusses that there is nothing to show that the women slaves were exclusively used for economic enterprises or that upon them depended then economic life of the times. Rekha Rani Sharmahas presented Kautilya as a very liberal lawgiver who took a bold step to abolish this institution of slavery, "Kautilya's ideas on slavery reflect a revolution of the slaves for freedom and a systematic attempt to abolish this institution for all in a secular state⁶."

Ganga had eight sons, Madri had two, Kunti had three, Hidimba had one, Subhadra had one son and so on. None of them had daughters? Draupadi gave birth to five sons from the five Pandavas. Madhavi bore four sons to three kings and a sage Viswhamitra. Women generally accompanied their husbands to retire into the forests (like Sita, Gandhari and Draupadi). But they had the option to stay with their children (like Subhadra). We also see widows like Satyavati, Ambika, Amb ālika, Satyabh āma retiring to spend the rest of their lives in the forests. It is believed that Draupadi and Madhavi had daughters too, but having a son was a religious matter, and they had to give at least one son to each father. The Mahabharata presents a detailed text on female vices, including the following: 'Fire is not contented with fuel, the ocean is not contented with rivers, death is not contented with creatures, and women are not contented with men.' 15 Thus we get a strong evidence of patriarchal ethos from the verses of the great epic.

Traditionally, a Naga village was an independent entity having its own governance systems and laws, with varying traditions across villages and tribes. Given that such functional traditional systems existed in each Naga village, the government built upon it and enacted the Nagaland Village and Area Councils Act 1978 to give it legitimacy and recognition as a local self-governance institute. Every recognised village in Nagaland is required to have a Village Council (VC). The Village Councils are empowered for carrying out administration, and administration of justice as per local customs and traditions. VC Members are chosen by villagers in accordance with the prevailing customary practices and usages and as approved by the State Government. Hereditary village chiefs, Anghs and Gaonburas (GB) as per usage and customary practices of the community are to be ex-officio members with voting rights of the VCs. The VC is required to meet at least once every three months or as and when the situation requires. It is also required to form the Village Development Board (VDB) for the overall development of the village. The VDBs are involved in all phases

of developmental activities as a part of their responsibilities. These include receipt of allocation of funds, selection of beneficiaries or schemes, monitoring of progress of works and expenditure and completion of schemes. This is the only body which has a woman representative.

4. FINAL ANALYSIS

According to a woman civil society member in Shillong, the argument that women in Meghalaya are free to participate in politics is neither here nor there. Women everywhere in India are free to take part in electoral politics. But there are some well-defined gender roles that society has cut out for them which make it difficult for women to become active participants in electoral politics. The well-defined gender roles, more than their reproductive ones, make it difficult for women in Meghalaya, as it does for women in Bihar or Uttar Pradesh, to contest elections. Politics in India is very much a male domain. The resistance that the Women's Reservation Bill has encountered from those very states that have the worst sex ratios is not surprising. But the irony is that when Meghalaya was asked to give its opinion on the Women's Bill, the state government shot down the idea of reservation of seats for women on the plea that this was a matrilineal society and women here were already empowered. A rather large section of people in Meghalaya are led to believe that this state is a beautiful island, safely cocooned from the sea of devastating patriarchal societies around them. But just because a myth is repeated it cannot become a reality. Curiously, it is the men in a matriliney who always proudly showcase women as liberated and empowered but who ostensibly 'choose' not to get involved in the murky world of politics. Men continue to believe women are happy with their domestic roles.

The recent general elections in Meghalaya to the state legislatures turned the tables, may be not upside down but tilted it a bit when four women got elected, one of them acquiring the so called masculine portfolio of home ministry. Appreciating the emerging trend of more women coming forward to actively participate in the politics in Meghalaya, legislator Ampareen Lyndoh said, 'Brave women who stand by their own principles and believe in themselves can perform much better than male representatives in serving the public, as they have more passion to work.'⁶ 'We have to think a hundred times before taking up the responsibility as public representatives,' the first-time MLA and minister said. 'Women are mothers and they are the ones who run and look after the welfare of the house,' she pointed out.

CONCLUSION

The South East Asian trajectories of martial women, horse riders, and women of great beauty, the chieftains, and also powerful mothers as well as market vendors have been sublimed in the broader notions of patriarchy over a period of time but have not been eroded. Two forces are at work here, the feminisation of masculinity as well as the masculinisation of femininity, if we take the western notions of what it is to be a male as well as a female. But if we take our indigenous notions of the two concepts then there is no binary and instead we understand that every male and every female has both femininity and masculinity within them and this is how we understand ourselves, our bodies, our cosmos and our society⁷. Such an open notion of gendered self is conducive to building a society with greater understanding, sympathy, creativity, exploratory spirit and opening up of imagination and making it more peaceful and less violent. Therefore, people in Northeast are good in performing arts, are creative weavers, committed and talented sports-people and even have their own novel ways of protests in expressing their collective grievances.

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