

Status of Naga Women in Politics and Customary Perspective

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Abstract

Women around the world at every socio-cultural level find themselves under-represented and far removed from decision-making levels and thus excluded from the political and legal realm. Recently there has been an increasing consciousness regarding the status of women which is amply reflected in the global debates over the issue of women empowerment. It is widely acknowledged that, one cannot hope for gender equality unless women have a share in the decision making process in the family and in the public sphere. Women's status also depends mainly on their rights and privileges and the roles assigned to them by the society most often on the basis of gender because of the fact that, women's roles can vary at different levels of society depending on caste, class and religion. Though there is a steady upward trend in women's political participation and representation, it differs from country to country and from society to society. In Nagaland, Patriarchy as a system of male domination shapes women's relationship in politics. It transforms males and females into men and women and constructs the hierarchy of gender relation where men are more privileged. Thus, the ideological tool used by patriarchy place women within the private arena of home as mothers and wives and men in the public sphere. Thus the paper discusses the present scenario on the status of women in Nagaland and the customary perspective towards women's status by looking into the level of women's participation in political and developmental aspects and the decision making process. The main objective of the paper is to identify whether customary perception of women is hampering their participation in different decision making bodies and if at all women's representation is seen, is there a change in their status.

Keywords: *Status, Women, Customary Perspective, Political Participation.*

Introduction:

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The problems of women arise due to the unequal access of men and women to society's resources and their distributive processes. Further there is the social and cultural heritage and the strong tradition of patriarchy which has a direct connection to male- domination. However, one needs to question as to whether men alone are responsible for gender inequalities. On the other side of argument women themselves obstruct the path of other women. For example, mother- in- law suppresses the daughter- in- law at home and colleagues at work suppress junior women workers outside the homes. Some women opine that they are given equal treatment within the home and outside as well therefore slogan for gender equality has no meaning to them. At the same time, all women are not equally suppressed or exploited neither do women get equal privilege. Thus, studies and interaction with different sections of women like unmarried women, young wives, mothers, old women, working and non- working women across societies would provide a mixed picture on the dimensions of women's problem as it covers variations in the status' of women. A closer examination of gender issues would provide a better and clearer picture.

Status is often referred to a position or a rank in relation to others. In the case of Women's status, it is referred to the position of women vis- a vis men in the society. Status is determined to a great extent in terms of socio- economic indicators, such as income, property, education, skills that open up opportunities for women for employment, ability to determine important events of life, such as marriage, divorce, etc. It is widely acknowledged that, one cannot hope for gender equality unless women have a share in the decision making process in the family and in the public sphere. Women's status also depends mainly on their rights and privileges and the roles assigned to them by the society most often on the basis of gender because of the fact that, women's roles can vary at different levels of society depending on caste, class and religion. Indeed, women in different classes, castes, religion have different roles, and consequently enjoy different status in relation to one another. Further women are only able to access to the rights and opportunities provided to them by the state and the society as well as by the socio- cultural institutions. Thus, to assess the status of women of any group or category, one has to analyze the roles women are being called upon to play, and how they perform it, examining it vis-à-vis to men in order to determine whether or not women are subordinate to men.

Jyoti Sen (1974: 12), rightly points out, the status of women is not uniform among all the different communities and varies from tribe to tribe and sometimes within the tribes. The term

Status of women obscure many variation depending on the dimension of stratification and the institutional sphere as, though all women are subordinate to men, women of higher social strata enjoy advantages denied to other women. Status of women is also highly variable across cultures and within any society. For example, in the United States White women had better advantages than the Black/ African American women. Today, the emphasis on the status of women includes not just the discussion on gendered differences which is socially constructed but also the changing attitudes and roles of men.

Women around the world at every socio-cultural level find themselves under-represented and far removed from decision-making levels and thus excluded from the political and legal realm. Recently there has been an increasing consciousness regarding the status of women which is amply reflected in the global debates over the issue of women empowerment. Women's quest for equality has become universal. 'Thus during the course of the 19th century, women's life in India too gradually began to change with the question of women's status when the colonial and Indian thinkers debated on women's relationship to modernity. The forces of colonialism and accompanying modernization brought both benefits and challenges to the hitherto static society of India. Other problems addressed included child marriage, dowry, sati and the neglect of widow in the family and the society' (Tamuli, 2014: X). Education was considered vital for women to know their problems and social limitations. Thus when doors of education became open to women, women with interest that went beyond house- hold was produced.

In recent years, educated Indian women have realized the need to take up employment outside the household and even within the household women have started to demand equality with men. In general, what exists for men is demanded for women. Thus the demand for equality with men itself speaks of the notion of man's tyrannical hegemony over woman. But the question is how women can have equality within the framework of the existing highly rigid patriarchal society, unless they are given the choice to adopt an independent path for their upliftment. As a result of these social problems connected with women, International Women's Day (March 8), International Women's Year (1975), Conferences and Seminars on women and women's studies have been instituted since the late 1960s and 1970s along with the provisions made in the Constitution of India regarding equality of women with men. In addition, during the freedom struggle, women of all ranks participated in various capacities which gave women a new impetus and encouraged them to view the role they could play in the social and political

life. Notably, the government of India too, after Independence constituted a committee to look into the status of women in India, (CSWI) in 1971 by a resolution of the Ministry of Education and Social Welfare (MESW) which submitted its report in 1974.

In spite of the many benefits of engaging women in society, women still face significant barriers to entering government and shaping the decisions and policies that influence their lives. Often, the barriers to women's participations are social, economic or structural. Sometime the barriers are legal as it can be seen from the example around the world where women had to advocate and lobby for the right to vote. Thus, the first country to grant women the right to vote was New Zealand in 1893 and women in Kuwait were not enfranchised until 2005. Then, globally, women's education and literacy levels are lower than men so even if women are not legally prevented, education requirements or candidate's registration processes may, in practice, excluded the majority of women.

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The nature of politics is an important factor for the inclusion of women in politics. Vicky Randal (Khanam, 2013: 4) defines politics as an "articulation, or working out of relationships within an already given power structure" this definition is in contrast with the traditional view of politics because, it is considered as an activity, a conscious, deliberate participation in the process by which resources are allocated among citizens and political activities is restricted to public arena. This public-private difference in traditional societies excludes women from public political sphere.

Women's participation and access to formal political power Structures vary across countries and society. Thus, though there is a steady upward trend in women's political participation and representation, it differs from country to country and from society to society. In Nagaland, Patriarchy as a system of male domination shapes women's relationship in politics. It transforms males and females into men and women and constructs the hierarchy of gender relation where men are more privileged. Thus, the ideological tool used by patriarchy place women within the private arena of home as mothers and wives and men in the public sphere. Throughout the world, this is one factor that shapes the levels of women's political participation. These lead to women to negotiate their entry into and claims on public space according to the opportunities available in a given culture and society.

According to Kramer (2004: 146), “The political system provides people with a stable social structure and a point from which they can act as agents to change the structure. It includes government, oriented toward the maintenance of internal order and external defense, and all other activities aimed at changing or maintaining power arrangements in the society”. This is aptly observed because, political institution, in its regulation of organizations and individuals and its allocation of resources and responsibilities, government influences and sometimes dictates personal decisions and actions. However, diversity of beliefs and life styles among the population are not always supported by public policy. Ideas and values about what is the common good are represented in the laws and policies of a society but these ideas and values may not represent a consensus, because access to political power and influence is not equally distributed.

It is widely acknowledged today that one cannot hope for gender equity unless women have a share in the decision making process in the family and in the public sphere, thus enabling them to access the various rights and opportunities. No doubt today, women are consulted in the decision making of important family matters, such as negotiating a marriage, purchase and sale of land, improvement and construction of house, matters relating to children’s education and health care. However this does not imply equality of status because women’s status is often described in terms of their level of employment, income, education, health and fertility as well as their roles in family, community and society which is far behind men. Women come into the political system with many gender related handicaps like illiteracy, responsibility of house work, child care, social and familial oppositions to their involvement in public life, poor self image, lack of self confidence and ignorance about the political system.

In the words of Liza (2005: 7), ‘Gender, being a cultural construct, is also like, and class, a contending force in cultural politics’. To reduce the gap of differences between men and women all are to fight together for democratic principles in politics and more freedom should be given for equal participation in the process of decision making to bring about a desired change. So looking into the political scenario of Nagaland in general, an adequate representation of women would ensure the equal say in all matters relating to governance. However, study reveals that, even women who have joined politics in the past and present is mainly because of familial ties and family legacy that is to say their fathers or husbands are/ were active politicians. Women of this background participate in politics because these women have been provided necessary exposure and typically have more confidence without training than the one without

any familial ties with political parties. Meanwhile, some political party's strategists explain the lack of support as symptomatic or suggestive of women's preference for male candidates. This presumption by party leaders is used to justify the underrepresentation of women as candidates. Thus, if the party leaders and potential financial contributors believe that even women voters won't support a woman, a woman candidate will find it more difficult than a man to receive a party's nomination. With the cost of campaigns skyrocketing in Nagaland and the ideological bias about what women candidates can accomplish and how women voters will behave, can effectively remove candidates from serious considerations.

Policies also change in more conventional ways through the gradual shifting of legislative, judicial and executive perspectives influenced by the more institutionalized routes of the ballot box and the purse strings. Thus, the low number of women in law-making and enforcing agencies has long indicated women's relative political powerlessness. It also explains the slow pace of change relative to the changes in the public attitudes. This is where reservation of seats become important where common women may be involved in the decision making of day-to-day governance but the inadequate representation of women in Nagaland in general, in decision making bodies has been a historical reality and a consistent feature of the societal structure, dependent very much on the disempowerment, patriarchy and criminalized politics at all levels which enforce the marginalization of women in other spheres as well.

When Naga people speak of someone being elected to any of the organizational bodies, they are not talking of full elections with universal adult franchise. Members of these bodies are in most cases selected by consensus, some villages have devised mini electoral colleges, and in others there are nomination committees. And crucially, women are absent from the village and tribe's apex decision making bodies. Women are not "invited" to attend the council's. Today, in India, the government appoints women even as judges of law courts and yet, interestingly, as observed by Echa (2014: 6), "Ever since the inception of the recruitment the only Office and the exceptional Department in the whole world where female is legally and strictly restricted to appoint. No right at all for women to enter except summon to appear either for related Law Suit or as eye witness evidences". This exclusion in the appointment of women in the Customary Law Courts as Dobashis and its justification that this is not intentional suppression of any Fundamental Right due to the complex role of Naga Customary Law remains questionable. Thus, none of the traditional institutions of governance accept women as an integral part. If women constituting half of the population are not given the chance to cooperate, democracy is

just a charade where laws and policies will remain only in papers and justice will not prevail. It is often opined that other societies in India have caste based problems and discrimination whereas Naga society is an egalitarian society but discrimination need not necessarily be caste based because it comes in different forms. Thus, the above discussion is an example of one such discrimination against women in Naga society.

Nevertheless, attempts are made for women's emancipation in Nagaland for example, introducing 33% Reservation Bill for women in Municipal Council in compliance with the 108 (Amendment) Act, 2008 (Women Reservation Bill), the Nagaland Municipal Act 2001, Amendment 2006, in practice this equality elude a majority of women. These are positive steps taken by the State Government (DAN) to pave way for women to participate in decision making process. What is important and interesting is, whether enough women from political parties represented in those crucial meetings in order to argue from women's view point and shape women's interests into the reservation issue? The inability on the part of the government to pass the bill giving various reasons based especially on customs and traditions. Thus, it may be difficult to see through the gender lens, as decision makers are male dominated. However, efforts should be made by one and all to implement the enforced policy through consultative meeting.

Decentralizing government functions and authority ensures democratic governance at the local level. Decentralization implies developing political administration, and fiscal responsibility to the local levels. It is based on the ideas that certain functions such as, education policing, and some public services are better and more efficiently managed at the local level. Local government is a powerful force in people's lives as local people rely on local government for the provisions of services, the maintenance of public infrastructure and resources, and the resolution of disputes. Women and men come into contact on a daily basis with representatives of their local government than with the representatives of the national government. Thus, both women and men should be represented and gender- sensitive policies be made.

With the aim of developing and improving the social and economic life of the rural people, the central government has taken up various schemes implemented through the Village Development Board (VDB) under the Village Council (VC). This has led the VDBs to initiate in developmental activities such as construction of link roads, water supply, street lights, bridges and culverts etc. in general. Development leads to a weakening of traditional values, increased urbanization, greater education and work force participation for both men and women and

attitudinal change in perceptions regarding the appropriate role for women. All of these factors increase women's political resources and decrease existing barriers to political activity. Thus, a society's state of development correlates with women's representation levels. For instance, women moving out of the house and into the work force can create consciousness and development increases the number of women to have formal positions and experience. Further, since culture is related to development, it increases women's standing in the society relatively equal to men with the change in the culture. In addition, more women start to acquire the resources needed to become politically powerful such as, education, salaried work force experience and training in the profession that dominate politics.

VDBs are supposed to be the important democratic and decision- making body at the grass- root level where the status of women can also be directly linked to the level of participation. But the lack of fair representation of women in the local bodies is unjustified and the lack of knowledge about the roles and responsibilities impedes women's effective and fair participation in decision- making processes of governance. The male dominance in these local bodies is also due to the coexistence of the customary laws and thus, traditional patriarch continues to wield power and influence over the people in the Sumi villages. When such traditional customary practices interfere with the elected members, it is bound to impede women's political participation.

Conclusion:

Every bonafide citizen of India has the right to vote in the State/ Union of India election under the ambit of the Constitution of India. Freedom to exercise franchise is guaranteed by the Constitution of India irrespective of gender. However in the context of the present study, often said then not, women are seen deprived to fully exercise their franchise. This is mainly because male domination over women in all walks of life is prominently in existence. It also holds true, that women's right to vote remains restricted, principally because the only candidate to vote for are so far only male and even voting is done by male with or without the consent of women in Nagaland through the so called general consensus of the village. In simpler understanding, the whole of the voting process is rigged which has become a clichéd culture among Nagas in general. This is a violation of women's democratic right and as such, of their basic human rights. Further, in Nagaland, women play important roles in campaigning and mobilizing support for their parties, yet they rarely occupy decision making position in these structures. Thus, these practices stand against the principle of universal adult franchise.

Further, voting behavior of the large majority continues to be determined by primordial loyalties and patriarchal relations and therefore when gender quotas are instituted, they do not bring gender equality. The contention here is that, within this patriarchal context of modern democracy gender quotas alone cannot lead to women's political empowerment without the transformation of the wider politics.

Today, women in general are demanding autonomy by seeking their identity as a persons or member of the society equal to men. More representation and reservations in civic bodies, state legislative and Lok Sabha are being sought but the demand has been in doldrums for quite some time in many societies including Nagaland. The general apex bodies in Nagaland such as the Naga Hoho and various tribal Hohos where certain important decisions are made have no women members. Here the question arises as to why the state government, Hohos and local decision making bodies not willing to share space with women? Further, women are not homogeneous groups as they are divided along the line of class, religion, rural and urban background. Thus, gender gap in politics cannot just be redressed simply by bringing more women into the system because, even through quotas, there would be domination of elite women in the political structure. This calls for quotas within the framework of diversity and differences to ensure the full political participation and women's political empowerment. At the same time, the wider context of politics and democracy is important to determine the success of gender quota because without addressing the structural constraints to women's political exclusion, their inclusion through gender quota cannot lead to an effective representation as well.

The patriarchal values which dictate that women should be protected by men can be a source of inequality to prevent women from realizing their full potential. Patriarchy which is considered to provide a secure environment does not allow the full participation of women, particularly in areas that development dimensions seek as key driver towards gender mainstreaming. Khanam (2013: 34), rightly observes that, "gender mainstreaming is a strategy for ensuring that women's and men's concerns and experiences are considered and represented in the design, implementing, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs so that women and men benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate aim is to achieve gender equality". Thus mainstreaming is meant to recognize that women enter the democratic process having had different access to power and resources. Yet this is not enough, men need to understand how they are also affected by gender inequalities and what they can do to help. It is imperative that gender parity is reached in politics and governance, or else women cannot reach

full equality with men in any sphere. The absence of women's voices in shaping the most important political instruments ensures the preservation of gender inequality throughout society.

Women's advancement today in every field is a clear example of how women have, can and continues to contribute to the society at large. There were in the past many female-headed households and even in the present context doing extremely well taking the responsibility of both the father and mother. However, when the men are taken as the household heads, female headed households get excluded from the scene. Thus, culture and tradition that change with the passage of time should not be the excuse to exclude women's political career if advancement is going to benefit the households in particular and the society in general.

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