

Comprehending the Role of Tribal Women in Rural Economy: A Case Study of Mishing Women

Nayanjyoti Hazarika*

Abstract

In the Indian tribes which are at different stages of economic development, women have always played a very notable role. Over the time a number of significant changes have taken place in Indian tribal villages but the most common form of economic activity in all tribal societies is agriculture or allied activities. In agriculture centric economy both men and women play an important role, though in recent times the importance attached to this role is changing. These changes are not always visible and they have also not maintained an even pace over the time but they have brought a significant change in society which eventually includes the tribal society in India.

The socio-economic and socio- cultural life of a community is always related with the economic activities of those communities. The economic activities of a community on its part are dependent on the availability of the existing resources both upon human and nature as well as ready market. Mishing economy is based on agricultural. In earlier days, they were shifting cultivators even when they had settled in the Assam plains. In Mishing community different forms of economic activities – traditional and modern – co-exist. The present study attempts to throw light on the changing roles of Mishing tribal women in economic activities in the wake of modernization.

Keywords: *Women, Tribal, Rural, Economy, Mishing, Change.*

Introduction:

A number of significant changes have taken place in Indian tribal villages and these changes have contributed to its transformation. These changes are not always visible and they also do not maintain an even pace over time and space. But they brought about major structural changes in society, including tribal society in India. Many of these changes concern women in big ways and alter the balance of power in gender relationships, which means alteration in the

* Assistant Professor, University of Science and Technology Meghalaya. Mob: 8134076722, nayanhazarika90@gmail.com.

nature and extent of women's participation in social activities. In India, enormous changes have been noticed among tribal women due to contact with non-tribal culture, mainly due to change in subsistence pattern due to the impact of agricultural technology and industrialization. At the same time, the influx of non-tribal into tribal habitats has made fundamental alteration in the tribal ecology, especially due to large scale deforestation for commercial purpose. Non-tribal were also able to wrest land from the tribal through clever deals. The result has been double pauperization of the tribal who lost their means of subsistence both ways – loss of forest produce and loss of arable land. The impact of both has been on women whose entire occupation was based on tribal ecology. Deforestation and land alienation made women subject to wage exploitation, bonded labour and even flesh trade.

Tribal women are found to be active partners in all economic activities of their community and have to their credit significant contributions to development. Women's work in tribal society is always more than that of men as women have round the year work, unlike men who enjoy seasonal and periodical leisure. Unlike in the non-tribal society where women attend to housekeeping, child rearing and cooking, tribal women attend to all productive activities as well.

In any society, economic activities constitute the main source of survival and sustenance. The nature of economic activities in a given society is determined by number of factors, among which the most important is occupation followed by the majority of its members. In every society different ways of earning a livelihood have a fundamental influence on the type of lives people lead. This is true of tribal societies also. The simple nature of tribal economy is a major determinant of tribal values, life style and tribal culture itself.

In the Indian tribes which are at different stages of economic development women have always played a very significant role. The most common form of economic activity in all tribal societies is agriculture or allied activities. In agriculture-centered economic activities, both men and women play an important role, though in recent time the importance attached to this role is changing. The status and role of women differ from tribe to tribe and also from region to region. In a tribal society the status of women is generally determined by the role they play in their social organization and the tribal women enjoy a relatively better position and working conditions.

Tribal Women in Development:

The status of any given section of the society is intimately connected with its economic role which in turn depends on rights and opportunities for participation in economic activities. The economic status of women is now accepted as an indicator of society's stage of development. Development has become a keyword in the contemporary dialogue on human conditions though the dialogue on development contains different models and approaches. Local participation is a prerequisite for the success of any development programme. People's participation is undoubtedly a pre-condition for the success of development programmes and there must be an in-built mechanism to involve people in the conceptualization, planning, implementation, monitoring and management of resources. In the case of tribal communities, the influence of the New Forest Policy is an important factor that determines their participation in politics and programmes, especially in forest conservation. In the later activity, tribal women play an important role especially through engagement in vermicomposting. Discrimination against women is incompatible with human dignity and the welfare of the family and society. Prevention of their participation on equal terms with men in political, social, economic and cultural life is an obstacle to the full development of the potentialities of women in the service of their country and of humanity.

The structural adjustment programmes like the economic reconstruction programmes, new economic policy, economic adjustment programmes etc. have affected almost all sections of the Indian economy and the forest wealth is not an exception of this. The majority of the activities for the economic development of the tribal of the country are undertaken in the forest ecosystem. In many cases though the tribal communities bear the cost of socio-economic development, the benefits are largely cornered by non-tribal. Moreover, deforestation has forced the tribal communities to change their livelihood pattern from a system based on stability, reciprocity and subsistence to one based on accumulation. The forest based tribal economy in most parts of the world, including India, is also women-based. Hence, any change in the forest ecosystem affects the tribal community in general and their womenfolk in particular. The destruction of the forest and environment clearly poses the biggest threat to the marginal culture and occupation of the tribal, which have always been heavily dependent on their immediate environment. The worst affected section of the tribal population in this regard is tribal women.

As mentioned above, women have significant role in tribal economy and society. In the total population in India the proportion of tribal women workers is more compared with the non-

tribal workers. K.S. Singh (1988), pointed out that the tribal women enjoy a relatively high status and role when compared to non-tribal counterparts. Tribal women play a crucial role in development due to their direct and greater participation in the tribal economy. Their interactions with forest and the traditional ways in which they managed natural resources make their role in sustainable development more prominent than that of tribal men folk.

Economic activities in any society are generally characterized by gender based division of labour. Tribal societies are no exception to this rule. Though Indian tribes are in different stages of economic development, women have been playing a very significant role in every tribal society. Tribal women contributed a lot to the family through food-gathering but the role has also been cut short due to the degradation of forest. Thus their economic status has changed considerably through they now engage in other substitute income activities like construction work, labour in plantations, factories etc.

Traditional Mode of Economic Activities among Mishing Tribal Community

The socio-economic and socio- cultural life of a community is always related with the economic activities of those communities. The economic activities of a community on its part are dependent on the availability of the existing resources both upon human and nature as well as ready markets. Mishings economy is based on agricultural. In earlier days, they were shifting cultivators even when they had settled in the Assam plains. They were, therefore, classified as nomadic agriculturists. Now a day, large-scale migrations are not common, though a few households may move to new areas in search of land.

Women in Production Techniques

Whenever we speak about the economic life of a community, we must deal with three different aspects, production, consumption and distribution. As such, to know the position of women in economic aspect of Mishing society we may look in to the role played by women in the above-mentioned spheres.

Agriculture

Agriculture is the main stay in economy of the Mishings .They mainly produce paddy, including jute, sweet potato, mustered etc. The agricultural methods of the Mishing are similar to those of the neighbouring non-tribal Assamese. The plough is the main agricultural implement, which is drawn by a pair of cow.

In paddy fields female do more work in comparison to male. Comparatively womenfolk are harder worker than the man. They plough the field, carry the harvested crops from the field to respective homes and thrash the paddy with the help of one or more pairs of cows. The women sow seeds, transplant seedlings, harvest the paddy and winnow the husks. The drying and storing of paddy is exclusively the work of the womenfolk. Mishing women also take leading part in the rituals related to agriculture.

On the very first day of plantation, which they call *am ridgot*, they propitiate the goddess Lakhi in the paddy field. The eldest male family members plants the first stalk of paddy. Similarly, on the first day of harvesting also the Mishings perform a ritual connected with a goddess Lakhi. On that day in the morning one male family member, generally the head of the family, after taking bath wears washed clothes and goes to the field with a sickle. In the field, he first reaps a stalk of paddy, carries it on head, and keeps it in the granary and bow down before the granary.

Most of the rituals and festivals performed by Mishings are related to agriculture. The *Ali-ai-ligang* is the greatest festival of them, which is observed before sowing the seeds. At the time of ritual, few *Ahu Dhan* and half pot of rice bear with other ritually connected objects are carried by the priest to the paddy field. The priest keeps it in the east side of the paddy field and pronounces some mantras. '*Dan ni poul karsing 86arting nolu*' meaning, 'today I start my agricultural work and all Gods and Goddesses remain witness of it and kindly help me in this work and save my paddy from insects and other enemies. In the festival, the boys and girls of the village dance with some musical instrument called *gumrak*.

The *sarang puja* is performed in the middle of cultivation. Another important festival of the Mishings is *Dobiur puja*, which is celebrated in the month of February. In the festival no person from outside the village is allowed to participate. The entry of the womenfolk of the village is also restricted. Impure women cannot participate on the day of the festival. On that day, the young boys of the village go door to door of every family of the village and beat the roof of the house with bamboo stick uttering certain words. This festival is performed for the better growth of the crops.

The Mishings celebrate another festival, called *Kati- Sangrankti* in the month of October. On that day, the head of the family walks around the paddy field. On that very day, the family members do not take fish or meat in their meals. They take only *Purang* (a cake of rice powder).

On the last part of the agriculture, they organize a festival called *Taleng Ui*, which is also related to Goddess '*Lakhmi*'. On that day, village women do not sit in the looms. The door of the granary is kept open on that day. *Parag* and *Amrok* are two other most important festivals of the Mishings. The Mishing women only prepare *apong* and other things which is used in *thepujaln* puja the leading part is played by man.

Horticulture

Besides producing paddy, the Mishing women also produce their essential vegetables and fruit in their kitchen garden. The women exclusively take care of it. In the kitchen garden essential vegetable likes chilly, garlic, ginger, papaya etc. are grown. But sometimes men also help them. Those vegetables are grown only for home use and not for commercial purpose.

Now-a-days, Mishing people have started commercial production of potato in large scale. Cultivation of such crops is done in the field. While the male members plough the womenfolk do the cleaning to make the field ready for planting of the crops. Further the women stay in the field for the whole day to protect the crops from damage by animals or others.

Weaving

Weaving is another means of livelihood of the Mishing tribe. It is entirely a domain of women. Taking part of a man in this particular work is treated as taboo. By means of weaving, a Mishing woman contributes a lot to their family's income. At least one loom is found in every household. Every female member (grown up girls and elderly women) produce her own cloths as well as for the members of her family. Among them, it is essential for a grown-up girl to learn the art of weaving. Indirectly, this is a great help to their economy. They can produce their requirements in cheaper rates than the market rate. Mishing women are presently playing a vital role in the marketing of their production. Some articles of the Mishings are very popular among Assamese people. Now such productions have captured a good market among the Assamese people and such items are also exported to the foreign countries.

Fishing

After agriculture, fishing takes maximum time for the individuals in the Mishing society. Rice and fish constitute the people staple diet. Mishing villages are situated on the riverbanks and thus there is a regular supply of fish. In every household, one person is entrusted with the responsibility of procuring fish for the day's consumption. The men and women of the family do fishing in nearby river and ponds with the help of various fishing methods and fishing tools.

Both fresh and dried fish constitute their delicious meals. They make a fish item call ‘namseng’ which is a type of powder. Fish are baked in fire until dry. Then the dried fishes are hammered in ural (a kind of wooden mortar). Namseng is prepared exclusively for family consumption only, and the female members of the family prepare it. Sometime Mishing men reserve some ponds and one part of river. Mishing men supply dry fish to the market. The women help the men in such work. Women take care of the dry fish and protect these from birds and others.

Poultry and Piggery

In agricultural communities with traditional means of cultivation, possession of animals is of economic value and importance. The Mishing generally use bullocks for traction. Every household in the village owns two to three pairs of draught animals besides a number of cows, pigs, and poultry. Women of the household take care of them. Now a days some people rear pigs for commercial purpose. They sell pigs mainly in the local market. Pork is an indispensable item for the Mishing people in all the ritualistic celebration. In addition to the above- mentioned activities of Mishing women are now engaged in some other occupation such as teaching, wage earning, small scale business etc.

The economic aspect of animal husbandry is linked with the value system of the community. In a Mishing household, the value of a milking cow is rather low since the people neither drink milk nor use for making any other item such as curds, ghee, or cheese. The main aim of keeping cows is for their male progeny, which are more valuable in agricultural operation. Pig and poultry are a source of substantial income and there is a steady demand for them. Many itinerant traders from the nearby towns come to buy poultry, which they sell at a profit in the towns. Pork is greatly relished by the Mishings and for this reason; pigs are needed for every social feast. There is also an institutionalized demand for the pig. It is needed in all the Mishing rituals for sacrificial purposes. The pig is also an article of gift at marriage. In ancestor worship, pigs must be sacrificed and pork constitutes an essential food at funeral feasts. In each and every Mishing festivals pork is a necessity.

Importance of Animal Husbandry in Mishing Community

In agricultural communities, cultivation is the most important production system but draught animals are of immense economic value. Every households of the village owns two or three pairs of draught animals besides a number of cow, pig and poultry. Those entire animals

maintain by the women only. From morning to evening women work at home taking care of their children as well as animals. Women also looks after around 12/13 pigs in a house.

Every household has a number of animals, which are mostly owned by the female member of the household mainly by the married women. Pigs and poultry are a source of substantial income for them. Similarly, fowls are essential in some of the rituals which are held periodically. Fowls are also use as offerings to many spirits when it need for it arises. Thus, pig and poultry have not only ritualistic value but also have economic value. Therefore, pigs are very important. From a pig, they collect more than three thousand rupees. This income of women is for the household.

Changing Role of Tribal Women

Modernization of the tribal is a process denoting a change in the traditional or quasi-traditional role-structure of the tribal communities and consequently promoting a dual system of values for self and social transformation, towards a certain desired form of social structure, values and norms. Anthropological studies have shown that when simple indigenous societies consisting of Adivasis and Dalits were forced to change from their subsistence-based economy to new forms of production due to the impact of market economy and globalization, adjustment occurred not only in their traditional livelihood pursuits but in their social institutions as well. The switch over to a monetized economy often results in discontinuities in the traditional subsistence practices. This happened in the case of Mishing tribe also when it began to be exposed to the neighbouring towns. Currently the Mishings are in great crisis. Agriculture could not provide those adequate means of subsistence and going back to the tribal economy also could not provide adequate supplementary income. Collection of minor forest products was curbed by the New Economic Policy and Forest Policy imposed some restriction on the collection of forest products. Women had to move into non-traditional occupations such as domestic help, working under MGNREGA, plantations and other industries and some even as daily wage labourers.

Change over the new economic activities has changed the life of tribes in a drastic way and made them to face disastrous situations. In this condition government made several interventions to ameliorate the condition of the tribes. Many non-government organizations also have launched programmes for the upliftment of Mishing tribal community, especially women.

Among the Mishing tribal community Self-Help Groups (SHGs) plays an important role in improving their economic condition, particularly of women. Majority of the Mishing women are members of SHG. The Self-Help Group provided the benefits of economies of scale, cost-effective alternatives for different financial services, collective learning, democratic and participatory culture and a platform for dialogue and co-operation. The members are actively participating in its weekly meetings and they are able to take decision outside the family. SHG has created saving tendency among them as money is necessary for starting profitable ventures. Besides these, the Mishing women are engaged in other activities like handicraft, animal husbandry, etc. In short, the economic role of tribal women have now entirely changed due to the advent of new associations and the availability of new income generating opportunities from the government's policy of upliftment of the tribals through its development programmes.

Conclusion:

The tribal women now enjoy a relatively better position and working condition with their contact with outsiders and monetization and commercialization of the economy. However, modernization has resulted in the loss of much of the status the Mishing women enjoyed prior to their exposure to the urban people. This is because of the gender inequality which is part of most developing economies. In the new setup, the tribal women who were equal partners with men in economic pursuit earlier have been relegated to the background in economic development. An attempt has to be made for integrating tribal women into the development process of the government, keeping in mind important economic role they play. But the acceptance of the ethos of the main culture by the tribals, they have also accepted the gender inequality that is part of the main culture. The positions of the tribal women in the wake of various changes that are taking place in their society deserve more detailed consideration.

The new economic policy and consequent industrialization, privatization and modernization are recent phenomena and are powerful threats to the survival of the tribal communities. The preservation of their tribal survival can be met only by concerted action on the part of the government as well as the NGOs working in the field.

References:

- Ahuja, Ram. (1999). *Society in India: Concepts, Theories and Changing Trends*. Rawat Publication. New Delhi.
- Behera, Indira and Deepak Kumar. (eds.) (1999). *Gender and Society in India: Rural and tribal studies*. MANAK Publication. New Delhi.

- Bhat, Sham K. (ed), (2003). *Indian Economy Under Globalisation Process*. Serials Publication. New Delhi.
- Chaudhari, Buddhadeb. (ed.) (1992). *Tribal Transformation in India: Socio-economic and Ecological Developmen*. Vol.2, Inter-India Publication. New Delhi.
- Dang, J.C. 2009. *Cultural Transition and Mising Youth in ProMising Action*. May-June.
- Durga, Regon. 1989. *Āli Āye Līgāng: Its characteristics*. Brigumoni Kagyung (ed.) Mising Sanskritir Ālekhyā. Lawyer's book stall. Guwahati.
- Durgeswar, Doley. 1998. *Religious Beliefs and Practices Among the Misings* in Jawahar Jyoti Kuli (ed.) *The Misings: Their History and Culture*. Guwahati.
- Gangadharan, K. (2007). *Economic Reforms and Regional Inequality in India*. Serial Publication. New Delhi.
- Jogdand, P.G. (ed.) (2000). *New Economic Policy and Dalit*. Rawat Publication. New Delhi.
- Misra, P.K. (ed.) (2004). *Studies in Indian Anthropology*. Rawat Publication. New Delhi.
- Ojha, R.K. (2001). *Selh-Help Groups and Rural Economy*. Journal of Yojana. May 2001.
- Pegu, Bibushan and Mising Simayunām. 2006. *Mising Rituals and Celebration*. ICARD. Jorhat.
- Pegu, Bilash. 2006. *Porāg festival in a Seminar on Mising Rituals and Celebrations* organized by ICARD. Jorhat,
- Pegu, Lakhi Nath. 2000. *Mising Religious Belief, Continuity and Change*. 20th session, Proceedings of the NEIHA. Dibrugarh University.
- Singh. K.S. (1998). *Tribal Women: An Anthropological Perpective* in J.P. Singh, N.N. Vyas and R.S. Mann (eds.) *Tribal Women and Development*. Rawat Publication. New Delhi.