

Status of the Tribal Women in Assam

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Abstract

In the tribal society, customary laws and practices have acted as the biggest stumbling block for empowering women. Zeme Naga women in Assam do not enjoy equal political and social status with men. Women perform diverse roles in the society. Traditionally, women had four fold role to play such as a daughter, wife, housewife and a mother. From the childhood women are taught to believe that they are inferior to men in every sphere of life. Traditions and religion have a strong influence on women in guiding their lives from birth to death. The Zeme follow the Patriarchal system of family, who holds the absolute power as well the full responsibilities for protection and looking after the welfare of all dependents and the maintenance of his family. The descendant is always traced down from the male members only and the supremacy of male had been the unquestioned norm of social governance since the ancient times. After the death of the father, the head of the family is taken over by the eldest son of the family. Therefore after the first child, the birth of a son is preferred and the family with more sons are respected by the people whereas the family with many daughters are regarded to be the end of the generation of that family. This paper tries brings out the different position of a women in the Zeme Naga society.

Key words: *Women position, Zeme Naga, Assam*

The Zeme are an indigenous group of people belonging to Mongoloid race and they are one of the sub-groups of the greater Naga community. They are found in Nagaland, Manipur and Assam in the district of Dima Hasao (North Cachar

Hills). Although they speak different dialects, the Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Puimai belong to one community Zelianrong as they share common ethnic origin, culture, social structure, linguistic roots etc. (NriameNakaulang, 2012).

Social Status of Zeme Woman

In the Zeme society, customary laws and practices have acted as the biggest stumbling block for empowering a women. Zeme Naga women in Assam do not enjoy equal political and social status with men. Women perform diverse roles in the society. Traditionally Zeme women had four fold role to play such as a daughter, wife, housewife and a mother. From the childhood a women is taught to believe that they are inferior to men in every sphere of life. Traditions and religion have a strong influence on women in guiding their lives from birth to death. In the Zeme society, the birth of both male and female is welcomed by the family but they prefer first child to be a girl for a reason. First, she can help her mother in the household works and secondly she can look after the younger ones like a babysitter. The Zeme follow the Patriarchal system of family, who holds the absolute power as well the full responsibilities for protection and looking after the welfare of all dependents and the maintenance of his family. The descendant is always traced down from the male members only and the supremacy of male had been the unquestioned norm of social governance since the ancient times. After the death of the father, the head of the family is taken over by the eldest son of the family. Therefore after the first child, the birth of a son is preferred and the family with more sons are respected by the people whereas the family with many daughters are regarded to be the end of the generation of that family.

Since childhood woman is taught to be obedient, quite, submissive and work hard and endure hardships without any complain to be called as a real girl. They were not allowed to argue or even fight for their rights but to surrender in every situation. If they do so they are considered as a child not discipline by the parents. A girl child started sacrificing when they are as small as 4 to 5 years of age. They carry water, look after the young ones, do the household works, cutting firewood etc. As they grow bigger they started going to field for cultivation with the parents. In reality woman are taken for granted to be the helper where the family gets utmost advantages. From childhood she is trained and expected to acquire the character of self-denial and shape up her femininity which is very important for the girl. She has to act as a constant helper and a companion to the mother.

Marriage marks the second major transition in a woman's life. Social negotiation for marriage begins with parental interactions. The boy's parents either send proposal to the girl's parents which are the usual practice. Though a girl is always consulted before selection of a groom, she does not have complete freedom in this regard. The choice of groom is closely controlled by the parents and close relatives. The customary practice of wedding begins as the process of the groom's party consisting of his parents, relatives and friends arrive at the bride's house. Usually the party comes a day in advance. At night, the bride price (*Hemipeibe*) is settled through mutual negotiation. The boy's party enquires from the girl's parents if they would like to take '*Pumsanggei*' (virginity price). The matter is confirmed after consulting the bride. Virginity is a social value. Therefore, it is prestigious for the parents to take its price.

A Zeme girl starts weaving cloths from the day of her first thought of getting married. On her loom she captures her dream in the form of a special cloth '*Paiso*' for her would be groom. *Paiso* means a double shawl which will be weaved specially by the bride and will be given to the groom on the wedding day. The groom dresses up on *Paiso* on the wedding day. Though it is not counted as dowry, but the bride who did not carry much of the shawls are talked about by the groom's villagers and is looked down by them.

Once a girl is married, her ties to the natal family become weak. She has to find her place in the new family, and establish her status in the new role of a wife, daughter-in-law and mother. She looks after her husband's family, performs household and field works. She has to bring about a shift in her loyalties and habits, in order to adjust and get completely absorbed in her new family. Women after her marriage are expected to be under the guardianship of her husband. Customary and moral values demand that she treats her husband as master and head of the family. She should possess qualities like fidelity, faithfulness, devoted, loving, generous and kind-hearted. She is expected to be submissive, humble and quiet at every place of public gatherings or any functions. All her contribution and charity works are for the welfare her family. What she should think first is not about her life but her husband and the family. She compromises or sacrifices what she likes to do. Her likes and dislikes are never asked.

Women are believed to be in a delicate condition during menstrual periods and is not good for them to do hard work. However girls continue to work in the fields and home during menstruation. Women feel ashamed if others notice

that they are menstruating. Thus they live in a world of self-denial and self-restraint, continuing to act normal on all days, despite the pain and weakness they go through those periods. Because of her menstrual cycle they were considered bad men to many of men stuff. For instance, they are not allowed to touch their hunting tool like spear, dao, rifle etc. considering unlucky. Divorce is permissible, but the case is rare in the community. Divorce may be granted if the witnesses and the elders give their approval and on the grounds of breaches of commitment by either party such as in case of adultery, ill treatment etc. Both the divorcee is allowed to re-marry. In case of divorce from the wife, bride price is to be returned to the husband parents.

Death is a natural process from which no one can escape. But if a pregnant women dies during the labour or die unable to give birth are considered as unnatural and are not given normal death burial but leave her in the house and the family will lock and abandon the house. They believe that if she was not left like that and abandon the house their descendants will inherit that kind of problem in near future which was regarded as bad disease.

Woman and Inheritance

Being the patriarchal society, the Zemes inheritance of property is the right of the male child only. They not only enjoy the authority power but inheritance also. The ancestral property is divided equally among the sons. Daughters do not inherit the ancestral land and other immovable property. However, they can inherit movable properties such as their mother's ornaments and weaving tools, livestock, agricultural implements, kitchen appliances, clothes and ornaments. Thus, we notice an unequal distribution of ancestral property, which imposes further subjugation of women and makes it impossible for women to attain economic independence, which is the first step towards improving their social status. Woman remain insecure both in their natal and conjugal homes. We find gender-based stratification. Resources are unequally distributed between women and men. Women, though inactive in social activities, they are no less important in the household activities. In Zeme society, a widow has no right over her children if she goes back to her father's home. If a man divorces his wife, all the common living properties will be divided. But all the children both boys and girls will belong to the husband. The bride price will be repaid back in full. But if the wife divorces her husband, she gets nothing; she has to return to her parents empty handed.

Political Status of a Woman

Being the patriarchal society, age-old customary laws and practices always excuse to exclude women in all spheres. Women do not enjoy equal social and political status as compared to men. Being under such law since time immemorial, the women's position and power in the society have imbibed in them for long that even after so many social changes taking place in the society they live in, most of them are still chained by those laws.

The Zeme village leadership is virtually in the hand of *Pedeipeu* (landowner) who is assisted by the village priest (*Tingkupau*) and elders of the village. Newme (2010) writes that in every village there is a traditional village council called 'KeloSamkahekibe' comprising of all adult male members of the village. Despite the presence of educated women in the present times, women are not selected to be the executive member of the Village Council or Zeme Council. They are taken just as the member. Whether they come to a meeting of the Council or not are not given importance, which is the reason of the less participation of women in village council or any decision making body. The women too feel inferior to stand up and speak out in the public what they wanted to though they feel like. It is not that they are not allowed to speak but final decision is always taken by the male. Through the interview it reveals that few women who could speak out in the Council also will speak out what they thought of on any issue but they end up saying that the final decision is yours (i.e male members) which means that their voice may be accepted or rejected by the male members.

Till today there were only two women candidate among the Zeme who contested in the election of District Council i.e MAC (Member of Autonomous District Council). According to one candidate age 46, she decided to join politics because she was not satisfied with the work of the Zeme(male) politicians whom the public have selected. She being the social worker earlier believes in herself that she could do better than the male politicians. But she also being a women have to experience the force to pull her down from her decision. She said that there were some who believe in her that she could do far more better than others but at the same time some have criticise her that she being a women is not fit to be a leader as women have a chicken heart. A woman is not fit to be a leader or to rule us etc. She said that she is like a peacock who wanted to show that she can do what other (male) politicians cannot do. She has a heart to develop the Zeme people living in Assam which is the main reason for her to join politics.

Another woman politician age 38 in her in-depth interview revealed that she had never thought that she herself will become a politician though she involved herself in social works. She joined the party and work for the party with a hope of getting job. Despite her dedication and hard work she was never given what she had asked for i.e a small job. The political leader helps only those whom they favour overlooking what she had done. With all the difficulties she faced, she realized that she herself should join and contest and help many people who had been like her. When she join the politics she learn more about it and realized however educated you have been, political leader who may not be educated much have the same power and that is why she stood up and contest against men politician. She also realized that in order to get equal status with men, women have to really get good education and know about their rights. She said that in the areas where she contested, she found women voters more than men. They were approximately 80% when men are 60% (approx). Politician as a woman, have to work more harder than men as it has been always men all those years so to convince and change the people the way they look at women have to be told in a convincing way is what she commented. She is confident that if the public supports her then she could bring more development in the area because as women she knows every little thing which is overlooked by many men.

Although there were women (though few) stepping out to join politics, they get less support due to the male dominion in the Zeme society. They have stood up to contest but they could not win which shows that women are not favoured in politics or decision making body. In government sector, they may be trying to give equal status but when it comes to the social life like marriage decision, land, village administration, family, religious activities etc. women are powerless. In the recent times, Zeme women started enrolling themselves as members of political parties and working for it though the numbers are still very few. Some opined that if women stand up and give a wise suggestion, men may accept to what she say, but the society norms and system have made the women lack confidence in herself and dependent on men.

Economic Status of Zeme Woman

In the olden days, since the head-hunting practice was there, the protection of the village and the people from enemies was the first priority of men. Therefore it was the women who did all the cultivation in the fields. Men do the heavier works like hunting, building house, fishing etc. but all the works that a woman

does have more economic value. They cultivate the land, they carry, they pound the rice, cook, they carry water and firewood, spin, dye and then weave the clothes for the family use. It is the women who do all the works to raise the family and give the daily food.

In earlier times, men never do the household works or cultivate the land for a reason of giving safety and protection. But at this age, when there was no more headhunting or war, the womenfolk still continue to do all the duties and responsibilities they perform before but on the other side the men folk stay away from domestic works and have more leisure time which a women hardly get to enjoy tied with all domestic works. Since they have no more duty to guard the village or protect the family from enemies men got more leisure time. They pass their time gossiping and drinking rice beer which was again prepared and served by women like a waitress.

Women gets up early in the morning and goes to fetch water from a far stream, she returns home, pounds the rice and cook food, feed their pig or chicken etc. and get ready to go to their field with a lunch pack. After a hard day work she returns home and again cook for the family again then retire to bed. She wakes up before anyone gets up and sleeps when everyone asleep. A woman who wakes up late is talked about by the villager as lazy and considered not to be feminine which is a shame for them. If a man wakes up late, the reason given to them is that they are men, so it can be. A men look up to women for their wife not based on their beauty but by their skill and hard work in all work they perform. Women due to her full participation in household economic activities are regarded as important asset. Therefore when a man marries a girl they have to pay a bride price as a compensation to the girl's parents.

Till today a women play & a very important role for the economic development of the family. They fully involve in domestic affairs. Nowadays, women have stepped up to take care of the activity outside the house as well. Women handle all the household tasks, irrespective of traditionally ascribed gender roles. Women have started doing small business or selling the vegetables for helping the family economically which provides not only for daily food but for their children education too. They mainly cultivate paddy, yam, chilly, wheat, maize, beans, ginger, brinjal etc. In the earlier days the people produce only for their consumption but these days we can see women working harder to produce more for sell to meet the economic needs. We also can see women buying the village produced vegetables with a cheaper price and selling again with little

profit. Spinning and weaving were significant industry among the Zeme. But in recent years, mill made yarn by virtue of its easy availability and cheapness, is substituting the thread spun locally. Indigenous spinning is less practiced but weaving however continues to be popular.

Religious Status of a Woman

Women have no place in the religious activities. They are considered unclean due to the menstrual cycle she undergoes every month. All the religious activities are performed by the male members of the community. She cannot even go to the temple during her menstrual period. Coming of Christianity bring some changes like they could pray or attend church during their cycle but they have no power or authority in the church functioning or activities. Women may study a theology but they cannot become a pastor or church leader. Women were not given to share the sermon in the Church except in their own fellowship. They were given only for Bible reading but not more than that. According to some women, a woman is like a housewife even in the church. They have no say over the bigger issues except to nod down to what men decided. In the present times everyone realised the importance of women role in every sphere of life but they are not given equal status in every area.

Educational Status of Zeme Woman

In olden days morung is the only social institution where the youth learn the spirit of community living, moral values, social etiquettes, other skill like weaving, spinning etc. But with the introduction of modern education, the morung is not as active as in earlier days. Parents started sending their children especially the boys to school. But parents, mostly in rural areas fail to see why their daughters must be educated, as for her training in household chores is considered important. Even in terms of investment, parents find it more reasonable to spend on sons' education than the daughters as the daughters will become the part of husband family after their marriage. They considered her to be the others property saying that bringing up the girl is like taking care of other pig(which is to be taken away some day). Although they are sent to schools, girls and young women are expected to manage both educational and domestic responsibilities which often results in poor academic performance and early drop-outs from educational institutions. The Zeme believe that the daughters are not their real children but they are the care taker before they find their real home.

At present time, in a village women education is also encourage and ask the parents to sent them to school but when it comes to family level it is not so practical. Family wanted to enjoy the girl's service before they go away from their house. If the girl complete the education level i.e LP available in their village, the parents will no longer sent them out for higher education, even to M.E or High School. Thus they become the baby sitter while they are small and as they grow bigger, they join in all the works of family equally with her mother and become like a small mother.

Now a days, parents are also becoming a bit wiser than earlier days. They sent their children in better institution and we could also see many small girls going to school. But till today girls who are doing higher education and studying the professional course are still countable among the Zemes in Assam. If the family is facing financial problem, and one has to sacrifice from doing higher studies, the parents will request their daughter to give up but never the son. Till today the parents in the Zeme society give more preference to boy's education than girl. They give more important to the gender than the brain.

Conclusions

The Zeme Society has undergone many changes. They have entered into modern era. But till today the Zeme society have not developed much. Some opined that when men suppress women from exercising their rights, problem and conflict starts in the family. Men in the Zeme society did not treat their wife as a servant but still they expect them to do the work according to them, as if they are paid for their daily work. When comes to the family matters, a women have no say, if they wish and say anything they will asked them to keep quiet and say that their voice have no weight. Many men say that they have to do what they were ask to do not interfering in other things. If men and women have same freedom and equal rights and respect each other there will be peace and development is what few women suggested. Therefore, women can play a very important role in development of the society. Once society recognise the importance of women and give them equal status, and empower women and encourage women education, then ultimately it will lead to the development of the whole society. An active grassroots leadership is also emerging slowly among the women. If properly harnessed, this can be very effective and catalytic agent for transforming the social conditions of women as well as the community. Women in the rural area do not even know their rights and so

never know it was violated. They just think that they are made to be in this or that way and just accepted their condition. Awareness programme on gender equality and women rights and also girl's education is the need of the hour in the Zeme society residing in Assam. Many suggested that women education can only do away with the gender inequality.

(Data is collected through interview, review of literature, informal interaction and personal observation)

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