

The Status of Tribal Women in Northeast India: Responding to India's Social Challenges.

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INTRODUCTION

Northeast India, considered as one of most culturally diverse regions of the world, is a land inhabited by more than 200 fascinating tribes. It is no wonder the region has ever since captured the imaginations of anthropologists from all over the world.

The north eastern part of India shares its boundary with China, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Northeast India comprises of eight states. They are Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Tripura. Nagaland and Manipur share their boundary with Myanmar. Meghalaya and Tripura share it with Bangladesh whereas Assam shares it's with Bhutan. Sikkim shares its boundary with China, Nepal, and Bhutan. Mizoram shares with Bangladesh and Myanmar, and Arunachal Pradesh have their boundaries shared with China and Myanmar. The closeness of the region so many international borders have left the region much unexplored due to its sensitivity.

The entire area of northeast India is full of lush green valleys, mountains, springs and green vegetation. The land with its natural beauty and cultural heritage has always topped the list of an ideal destination for travellers from India and World. Vast research and studies are also done by scholars and research groups who wish to learn about the life, food habits, culture, tradition, language and source of living among the tribes. The Indian Government has also started taking keen

interest in developing the living standards and tourism among these tribal occupied states.

Different ethnic groups and tribal groups inhabit the region of northeast India. They all have their own culture and tribal tradition and all speak their own tribal languages. This has made Northeast India one of the most culturally diverse regions of the world. The cuisines and attires also vary among the tribes. Each tribal community has their unique way of living. Tribal people mostly live and earn through the hills and forest areas.

ORIGIN OF THE TRIBES

North East Indian tribes have originated from the ethnic groups of Tibeto-Burmese, proto Austrioloids and some groups of Indo Mongoloids. The trend can be seen in the looks, traditions that are visibly followed by these communities. They also show a cultural bridging with the neighbouring countries. And India has till now provided them with a safe haven, compared to living in neighbouring communist nations of China and Burma.

TYPES OF NORTH-EAST INDIAN TRIBES

North-East tribes constitute a major part of Indian tribal community. They are all scattered over all the states of North East. Arunachal Pradesh consists of around 25 types of tribes. Manipur consists of around 33 types of tribal community. Nagaland has around more than 16 major tribes even. Some examples of

prominent tribes are Garo, Khasi, Jaintia, Adi, Nyishi, Angami, Bhutia, Kuki, Rengma, Bodo and Deori. They are scattered throughout the region. Christian-ism is followed among many of the tribes and some also follow Hinduism and Buddhism. The rest still have their indigenous beliefs and practise animism.

Some major tribes of North Eastern India and the position of their women are:-

- The Bodo Tribe is a vast tribe and shares a good number of populations in Assam. The tribal people have also migrated to other parts of India as well as to neighbouring countries. It's said that Bodo tribes have introduced rice cultivation, tea plantation, poultry farming, and silkworm rearing in the North Eastern parts of India. Bodos are non vegetarians and rice is considered a staple food, and the traditional favourite drink of the Bodos is Zu Mai (rice wine). Rice is usually accompanied by a non vegetarian dish such as fish, meat or pork. Weaving and silkworm rearing is another part of Bodo culture. Many families rear their own silkworms. The cocoons of the silkworms are spun into silk. Bodo women teach their girls the art of weaving from a young age. One can always find a Bodo courtyard with a loom. Women weave and wear their own Dokhnas, which is the traditional dress of the Bodo women with shawls. The Bodos are also expert in making beautiful crafts from bamboo.
- Kuki Tribe or the migrant ones can be found all over the northeastern states. The language of the tribe varies but are all similar in a way, and can broadly be termed as the Kuki Language. They prefer to live on hilltops. The villages of Kuki tribes are a cluster of closely constructed houses. The tribe cultivates dwarf

cotton and spun yarns. Using vegetable dye, beautiful and intricate designs are woven which are mostly geometric in nature. Kuki men wear colorful Sangkhol, a jacket and a 'Pheichawm' (short dhoti). Sometimes a Chaddar or a wrap is used. They also wear Tuhpah (head cover). Women wear a nih-san underneath a pon've or a wraparound. The dress is worn from above the chest. Ornaments include earrings, bracelets, bangles, necklace and a typical ring shaped earring to stretch the ear lobe. Smoking is enjoyed among these people. Extensively crafted pipes are used for this purpose and are made up of stone and brass-metal. They prefer cross-cousin marriage. Mimkuut Festival is the major festival celebrated by Kukis and falls in the month of January.

- Adi Tribe (have two divisions namely Bogums and Bomis) are found in Arunachal Pradesh. They live on the hills and have their own village council. This group is again divided into various small sub tribes. The dress for women and men are naturally weaved by the women folk of the tribes. Men wear helmets made from cane, bear and deer skin, depending on the region. Older women wear yellow necklaces and spiral earrings. Beyop is worn by unmarried girls (ornament consisting of five to six brass plates fixed under their petticoats). Tattooing of hands, arms and face is very popular among the older women of the neighboring Apatani Tribe. Rice cultivation is practiced by this community and rice serves as the staple foods for the Adi. Trapping and hunting is also popular and the Adi people keep pigs, chickens and grow vegetables in their home.
- Nyishi or Nishi Tribe has originated from the Indo-Mongoloid stock. They

are mainly inhabited in the lower region of the Subansiri district in Arunachal Pradesh. They are considered a large tribe according to the area and population in Arunachal Pradesh. Their spoken language is different from the other tribes, which is a part of the Tibeto-Burman language family. The hairstyles of the tribe's are unique. They plait their hair and tie it neatly at the forehead using a Tibetan thread. Skewer made up of brass is passed horizontally through the tied hair. Rings made up of cane are worn around the waist, arms and legs. Additional decorations vary from a person to person. Men wear sleeveless shirts made from thick cotton cloth. Striped gaily with blue and red together with a mantle of cotton or wool are worn around the throat and shoulders. Strings made of beads are also worn, mainly for decoration purpose. The Nyishi women generally wear a sleeveless mantle of striped or plain cloth. The upper part is tucked tightly over the breast. It allows the body to envelop from the armpits to the center of the calves. A ribbon is tied at the waist. A girdle and cane garters are worn at the waist. Hair is parted in the middle, plaited and tied. The ornaments for the females include colorful bead necklaces, brass chains, metal bells, silver earrings and heavy bracelets of various metals.

- One of the major tribal communities of Nagaland is the Angami Tribe. This community is also found in Manipur and has a total population of 12 million. The tribal community follows Christianity and speak Tenyidie. They cultivate rice and grains on the hilly areas. The pattern and design of the clothes worn by the Angami men and women are almost different from each

other. Men wear shawls and women wear Mechala. It's a wrap around skirt and shawls with unique designs and patterns. Both men and women enjoy wearing beautiful ornaments which comprise of beads, pendants, bangles and bracelets. Angamis are popular for their woodcraft and artwork and are famous among Indian people as producer of bamboo work, cane furniture, beds and shawls. Music is a part of this group and is played with the help of drum and flute. This art is passed on from one generation to the other. Music plays the important role in their rituals and festivals. Traditional dancing is also performed by the tribe during festivals and occasions. Angami women also practice pottery and basket making. Pork with bamboo shoot is considered one of the common dishes among the Angamis.

- Rengma Tribe are a Naga tribal community, and are found in both Nagaland and Assam. The total population is more than 50,000 in entire Nagaland. The community is further divided into two categories - Eastern and Western Rengma's. They are considered experts in terrace cultivation. The traditional Rengma clothing consists of various types of clothes and is worn according to the status and position of the weavers. Rhikho is worn by a man who has never been able to offer a great feast or has never killed an enemy. Rhikho is a white cloth with four narrow black bands and the number of black bands varies with the age of the wearer. Moyet tsu, another ordinary type of cloth are usually worn by the young men. It is a dark blue cloth with a very broad median band, with the red zigzag pattern at the edges. Alungtsu is a cloth worn by well-to-do men.

Rengmas are famous for making yellow dye from the flowers of a tree. They also practice painting on cloth.

- Bhutia Tribe are the prominent tribal community of Sikkim and have migrated from Tibet. The residing places for the tribes are the Lachen and Lachung areas of North Sikkim. They speak Bhutia (a dialect of Tibetan language). They are counted among the most developed tribes and earn their livelihood through agriculture, government jobs and local business. The dressing culture of the Bhutia tribes is unique compared to other tribes. Women wear heavy jewelry of pure gold with full sleeve blouses. The main garment is a loose gown. Males wear Bakhu, which is a loose traditional full sleeved dress. These tribal people live in a rectangular shaped house called Khin and follow Tantric Buddhism. The remarkable feature about the tribe is their legal framework, termed as Dzumsa. Agriculture and breeding of sheep and yaks are the main source of occupation. Bhutia tribes are mainly rice eaters. They also eat animal fat and beef. Bhutia tribes in India are famous for preparing awesome food. Some examples are Momos, Ningro with Churpi, Sidra Ko Achar, Phulaurah Gundruk, Phagshapa, Sael Roti. They are very fond of Chaang or the millet beer and serve it in a special bamboo container called Tongba which has a hollow pipe made up of Bamboo.
- Garo Tribe are the second largest tribal community of Meghalaya. They constitute 1/3rd of the total state population and mainly reside in the Garo hills of Meghalaya, some districts of Assam and West Bengal. Their traditional religion was Songserak and later was changed to

Christianity. These tribes speak the Garo language. This language is further divided into different sub-languages. The main features of the Garo tribes are the women. The Garo women are the property owners and there is a custom where the youngest daughter inherits the property from her mother. Unlike other marriages, in this tribe a man shifts to his wife's place after the marriage rituals are over. These tribes are a great lover of music and dance. Various traditional musical instruments like stringed instruments, wind and self sounding instruments are used by the tribe. The Garo men wear turban with clothes whereas women wear blouse and a cloth tied around their waist. The traditional jewelry is made of beads and other material. Garo's also celebrate different festivals and Wangala is one of the significant festivals generally celebrated in the month of October. The Garo's celebrate this festival as a symbol of thanksgiving ceremony to their deity Salijong after harvesting of the crops. The food habits of the Garo's are non-vegetarian with rice as the staple food. Liquor is consumed among this tribe and is made at home from food grains. The main cultivation crops are rice, ginger, millet, bananas, vegetables, chilly and cotton.

- Khasi Tribe are one of the major tribal communities and occupies almost half of the total population of Meghalaya. They reside in the Khasi and Jaintia hills of Meghalaya and follow the matriarchal society. Their language is known as Mon-Khmer which belongs to the Austro-Asiatic Family. In this tribe, Women are given more importance than men. The youngest daughter inherits the property from her mother. Men wear Jymphong, which is a long sleeveless coat without

collar. They also wear turbans. Women are very fond of wearing jewelry and earrings. They have a tradition of wearing silver chains around their waist. U Blei Nong-thaw, Ulei Longspah (god of wealth), Shnong and many other gods are worshiped by this tribe. Rice is the staple food and they also consume fish and meat. Rice beer is used as liquor. Nongkrem is a famous festival celebrated amongst the Khasi tribes. This festival falls in the month of November and is celebrated for five days.

OCCUPATION AND CULTURE OF THE TRIBES OF NORTH-EAST INDIA

Agriculture and farming are the biggest occupation between the tribes. Along with agriculture, they also depend on weaving and rearing of woolly animals. The women's community does the job of weaving. These woollen products are very famous among tourists. Another source of income lies in making and selling of tribal arts and crafts, which is widely loved by tourists and visitors. The tribal art and craft shows the rich culture, creativity and tradition of the tribal communities. Some major developed tribes like Bhutia's, Nyshis and Adis earn their livelihood by working in Govt. Jobs and some have also engaged themselves in local business.

The cultural trend of the tribal community is reflected beautifully in their dance, food, festivals, arts and other social occasions. The tribes are very lively and energetic people and enjoy dance, music and drama with great enthusiasm. Each tribe has its own distinctive way of dressing, jewellery designs, and dance. They all have their separate festivals grouped with tribal songs in their own language. Some of the festivals celebrated are Nyokam, Ngada, Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem, Ka-Shad-Kynjoh Khaskain, Wangala, etc. Ponung, Reklam

Pada, Ajima roa and Chambil mpa are some among the major dance forms found among the North-eastern tribes.

North East Indian tribes are undoubtedly one of the most colourful and culturally rich communities of India. They represent a totally unique trend and living among the Indian tribal community.

STATUS OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN INDIA

Tribals or adivasis, as they are popularly known as a symbol of self-assertion, comprise of around 8.2 per cent of the national population. The tribals are concentrated mostly in the central belt of India and parts of the North-East. The status of women in the tribal societies is comparatively better than that of the women in general society—apparently so. The sex ratio of the tribes in India during 2011 showed 990 females per 1000 males while it was 940 females among the general population. Mitra and Singh write that discrimination against women, occupational differentiation, and emphasis on status and hierarchical social ordering that characterise the predominant Hindu culture are generally absent among the tribal groups. Bhasin (2007) also writes that though tribes too have son preference, they do not discriminate against girls by female infanticide or sex determination tests.

The status of tribal women can be judged mainly by the roles they play in society. Their roles are determined to a large extent through the system of descent. The families try to pass their property by the line of descent. The family surnames too are traced on the basis of the system of descent. In an unilineal system the descent is traced either through the male or female line. When the descent is traced through the mother's line, it is called a matrilinear system and when it is traced through the father's line, it is called a patrilinear system. Most of the tribes in India follow a patrilinear system. There are exceptional cases like the Khasi, Jaintia, Garo

and Lalung of Meghalaya in the North-East who follow the matrilinear system. The Mappilas of Kerala too are a matrilineal community. There are very rare cases of bilineal descent.

The status of a person quite often depends on the system of authority he/she enjoys in the community. When the authority is held through the male line, it is called 'patriarchy' and when it is held through the female line, it is called 'matriarchy'. Quite frequently one mixes up 'descent' with 'authority'. Not surprisingly, the Khasis are often believed to follow matriarchy. But in reality though the property is inherited through the mother's line, the final authority of the household vests with the mother's brother.

The position of a woman to a large extent depends on the kind of family one is placed in. In a joint family system the eldest woman usually enjoys a prerogative in the decision-making process. The type of family differs to a large extent with the type of marriage prevalent in the community. The nuclear family formed through monogamy is the most common type of family prevalent in the tribal communities in India. The extended type of family is also quite a common norm wherein the daughters leave the natal home after marriage to distant places. The older sons too leave the parents after marriage to set up new homes in the near vicinity. It is common to find the youngest son residing with the parents even after marriage. Some of the tribes in India enter into polygamy. When one man marries more than one wife, it is called polygyny. Polygyny can be of two types. When the wives are sisters, it is called sororal polygyny and when the wives are unrelated, it is called non-sororal polygyny. When one woman marries more than one husband, it is called polyandry. When the husbands are own brothers, the type of marriage is called fraternal polyandry. When the husbands are unrelated, the type of marriage is called non-fraternal polyandry. The Todas of Nilgiri or

the Bhutias of Ladakh and Sikkim are polyandrous. It is quite often found that two or three wives marrying four or five brothers. This system is called polygynandry. This system is quite common among the Jaunsaris of Jaunsar Bawar in Uttarakhand. In such marriages the eldest woman usually wields greater respect and command. Among the Jaunsaris each family is usually found to have dwellings at different elevations along the hill ranges. The dwellings at the central village are called 'sadar'. The eldest wife usually resides there. While the younger wives have to toil hard between the farm houses located close to the valley or the ones at the higher reaches, divorce is quite common among the Jaunsaris and it is usually the younger wives who desert their husbands.

◆ Since women in the tribal communities toil hard, they are considered to be assets. Not surprisingly, the practice of bride price during marriages is quite common among them. This is in sharp contrast to the general caste-Hindu population. Sometimes when the prospective groom is not in a position to pay the bride price, he has to render physical labour and service at the wife's house. At times he even stays back at the wife's house throughout his life to reside as a 'ghar jowai'. In recent years as the capitalist economy is setting in and women are being deprived of their traditional role, their economic value is decreasing and the practice of 'bride-price' is giving way to the system of dowry as witnessed in the general society. Among the Jaunsaris, the new husbands have to pay the suit money or the amount paid as bride-price by the former husband to the girl during earlier marriage. This amount becomes quite large as interest is also added to it. In order to repay the 'suit' money, the wife is often sent away seasonally to the cities like Dehradun, Meerut, Sahranpur, Moradabad, Lucknow and Delhi to work as prostitutes. They virtually turn into 'bonded' labourers.

The status of the tribal women usually depends on the economic roles they play. The tribals in the past were usually forest dwellers and their livelihood to a great extent depended on the food-gathering economy. More than the men, the women walked long distances to fetch wood and fodder. Besides, they also collected fruits, roots and tubers, lac, gums and leaves for self-consumption and sale. The men also complemented them by collecting timber and logs. They climbed the trees to shake down the fruits that were gathered on the ground by women. As there has been large scale deforestation, women have to slog harder to retain the gathering economy. Chaudhary (2010) observes that in the tribal areas of Betul in Madhya Pradesh, collection and marketing of firewood is generally the domain of tribal women. They sell it at Sahpur and whatever income they have, they immediately spend it on meeting the basic requirements such as rice, pulse, edible oil, soap, detergent powder, tobacco, bidi and so on.

In many parts of the country, swidden cultivation or slash and burn cultivation or jhum cultivation, as it is called in the North-East, was in vogue. Boserup calls swidden cultivation as a women's enterprise since it is they who almost entirely managed the show. While the men mainly felled the trees and spread them around on the ground to dry before collectively kindling fire, it is the women who were engaged in broadcasting the seeds, weeding and harvesting. It is the women who preserved the seeds at home and took the decisions about the crops to be cultivated every season. The men mostly guarded the crops from wild animals and trapped wild-life games, big and small.

In recent years, due to the population explosion and in-migration, the jhum cultivation is gradually losing its viability. Besides, due to the capitalist policies of the state jhum cultivation is giving way to permanent terraced wet-rice cultivation. Multi-cropping practices too are getting lost and the

emphasis on mono-cropping is being laid. Cash crops and horticulture are also being preferred. In the process women are losing their labour work and in many places of the North-East like Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, migrant male labourers are being employed.

Apart from the hill areas, tribals have also in present days opted for settled cultivation in place of the forest-based economy. They are also preferring to raise cash crops and exotic high-breed crops. In the process the women are getting displaced from their work.

The tribal women in the North-East were famous for their weaving skills. Almost every tribal girl used to learn weaving at home. They usually used to weave in their leisure time and for self-consumption. Each textile used to portray a certain history of the respective tribes. But now with commercialisation of the products, the women have lost control over the designs as the market has come to be the decisive factor. Besides, in many cases Marwari traders have taken over the business and are getting the textiles woven by migrant non-tribal persons. Tribal women as such enjoy very little control over immovable property. They hardly ever inherit land, particularly in the patrilineal societies. Among the Khasis as well, it is mainly the youngest daughter or 'khadduh', as she is locally known, who inherits the house and property. The tribal women generally inherit the ornaments from the mother. The customary laws do not permit them to own land. It is mainly due to this reason that often the Santal widows are declared as witch and murdered by close relatives. (Kelkar and Devnathan: 1993) Lalhriatpuii (2010) writes about the Mizo women in Mizoram that they were extremely discriminated against with regard to the inheritance of property as they were never given rights over the landed property. If there is no son in the family, the family property including ancestral home should go to the nephew of the father. It is, however, seen that the kitchen garden is controlled by the wife.

The pigs, goats and chicken too are owned by her. The sale proceeds of the domesticated animals are retained by the housewife and she makes purchases of her own liking when visiting her parental home. Women are also adept at selling fruits and forest products in the weekly markets. Vegetables and horticultural products are usually sold by them in the markets.

Women among some of the tribes of the North-East are very proficient in doing business. It is mainly the Khasi women who run shops in the markets of Shillong and Nongpoh in Meghalaya. Many women in Mizoram too manage big shops and large business. Lalhriatpuii (ibid.) observes that the women workforce in the State of Mizoram is concentrated more in the primary sector and many of them are turning to become agricultural labourers. She further observes: "Many women run small family businesses, called micro enterprises, which require very little initial capital and often involve the marketing of food articles and handicrafts produced under the domestic system. No doubt women's limited access to capital leads to higher rates of return on their tiny investments. But the unbelievably low capital-labour ratios confine women to low productivity undertakings."

The tribal women in India have virtually no role to play in the social and political spheres. Even in the past though for many tribes in central India and in the North-East there were bachelor's dormitories, there was hardly anything for the girls. The girls used to fag around for the boys residing in the dormitories. The tribal women had no place in the village councils. The women were never represented in the traditional panchayats. It is only now, due to the mandatory provisions of the state, that some women are getting elected in the panchayats. But even in such cases, usually the women are dictated by husbands or relatives who already wielded enough power in the locality. Even then there is hardly any tribal

woman MLA or MP in the country. In the case of Agatha Sangma, the Union Minister of Social Welfare, she is an exception; her father Purno Sangma happened to be a prominent politician of the country and also served as the Speaker of the Lok Sabha in Parliament for one term.

During the recent upsurges in the North-East or central India, many tribal women have joined the underground army. They are found leaving their homes and undergoing military training. In the North-East, many of the girls were known for running errands for the underground. Several of them have laid down their lives too. But even among them, the women have never been known for wielding the leadership. The Naga Mothers Association has earned some good name in recent times for becoming interlocutors between the underground and Indian security forces. Even during the head-hunting days, the Naga women acted very bravely to usher in peace between warring villages. They operated as peacemakers between the warring villagers (Zehol, 1998) - "If we recall that the Tangkhul, like other Naga society who were feuding communities, we find that in the Tangkhul society, the women are assigned some responsibilities of critical importance. In an account on head hunting among the Nagas, a special section has been assigned to women's role. It is mentioned there that, when a party was pressed very far killing a warrior or two, and the verdict was known, a neutral force come in. The neutral force belonged whether to the neighbouring villages or the neutral ladies called Pukhareila... they could not be harmed as a rule. She was highly respected for neutrality, and they were called as ambassadors of peace. In the bygone days, when head hunting was practiced, these Pukhareilas played vital role saving lives of men." Vitso (2003) also observes that among the Chakhesang Nagas of Nagalnd, the wife of the traditional village priest wielded a lot of power and respect. She also notes that though traditionally the women had no political

power, their decisions, particularly related to women's issues, were always respected.

◆ In the course of history one comes across the name of queen who had fought against the enemies. The name of Rani Gaidinliu, the Naga leader who headed a revolt against the British. She also led the Zeliangrong Nagas for a homeland in the contiguous areas of Manipur, Nagaland and Assam. She was named as a Rani by Jawaharlal Nehru who came to learn about her during the freedom movement. Gassah has stated that women rulers had appeared even among the Jaintias in Meghalaya, (Downs: 1996) In recent times, the Bhotia tribal women of Kumaon came to the fore when they led a forest movement—the Chipko Andolan—against the timber contractors. The tribal women of Reni village in particular became famous as they hugged the pine trees to save them from the saws of the loggers.

Christianity has brought about a significant emancipation of the tribal women. While earlier the women were restricted from attending schools, it is the missionaries who opened schools and encouraged the girls to attend them. They also opened up church forums where women could participate and also take the lead. The Protestant Church took a lead over the Catholic Church in these matters. The Roman Catholic Fathers offered lesser space to the tribal women in the parishes. No wonder that the Protestants became much more acceptable in the matrilineal tribes like the Khasi and Garo. They gave trainings to the girls to be not just good home-makers but to become teachers, doctors and nurses. But Lalhriatpuii (op. cit.) states that the women in Mizo society are excluded in all decision-making bodies in both social organisations and church life. They get no representation in the church administration in spite of playing a crucial role in the evangelical work. She concludes: “Church plays a dominant role in Mizo society. Therefore, the criterion of judgement of a

developing church or State is the condition of women, the way they are treated and regarded and the type of jobs they are given”.

It may be stated once again that though the women in the tribal society in Northeast enjoy a greater freedom to mix and move around, their social organisations and institutions are still discriminatory particularly with regard to the customary laws that guide the ownership of property and inheritance or also with regard to exercising authority both in the domestic and public spheres.

POLICY OF INTEGRATION OF TRIBALS

The Government of India has adopted a policy of integration of tribals with the mainstream aiming at developing a creative adjustment between the tribes and non tribes leading to a responsible partnership. By adopting the policy of integration or progressive acculturation the Government has laid the foundation for the uninhibited march of the tribals towards equality, upward mobility, and economic viability and assured proximity to the national mainstream. The constitution has committed the nation to two courses of action in respect of scheduled tribes, viz

- Giving protection to their distinctive way of life
- Protecting them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation and discrimination and bringing them at par with the rest of the nation so that they may be integrated with the national life.

Thus by the Constitution Order 1950 issued by the President of India in exercise of powers conferred by Clause 9 (i) of Article 342 of the Constitution of India 255 tribes in 17 states were declared to be scheduled tribes. Besides enjoying the rights that all citizens and minorities have the member of the Scheduled

Tribes have been provided with special safeguards as follows:

Protective Safeguards

- Educational safeguards-Article 15(4) and 29
- Safeguards for employment -Articles 16(4), 320(4) and 333
- Economic safeguards -Article 19
- Abolition of bonded labour -Article 23
- Protection from social injustice and all forms of exploitation -Article 46

Political Safeguards

- Reservation of seats for ST in Lok Sabha and Assemblies-Article 330,332,164
- Appointment of Minister in charge of Tribal welfare
- Special provisions in respect of Nagaland, Assam and Manipur - Articles-371(A),371(B) and 371

Developmental Safeguards

- Promoting the educational and economic interests of the Scheduled Tribes-Articles 46
- Grants from Central Government to the states for welfare of Scheduled Tribes and raising the level of administration of Scheduled Areas-Article 75.

Following the reorganization of states, the list of STs was modified by the Scheduled Castes and Tribes List (Modification) order, 1956 on the recommendations of the Backward Classes Commission. In the revised list 414 tribes were declared STs. Since the revision of the list in 1956 there have been several proposals for fresh inclusions and deletion from the lists of the SC and STs.

LAND RELATIONS, CUSTOMARY LAWS AND TRIBAL CULTURE

Apart from their legal status and the presence or absence of protective mechanisms, the general state of the tribal customary laws varies according to the nature and extent of their application and the manner in which they are invoked and adhered to. Besides, changes introduced in the colonial age and continued after 1947 have modified their customary law and traditions, and have, by implication, changed many values governing their culture. Among the first to change are land relations because except in the Sixth Schedule areas, the formal law recognises only individual ownership while central to the culture of most tribes is community control over the common property resources (CPR). Since the culture of equity and the relatively high status of women depend on the CPRs, changes in the management have implications for these values.

Despite the commonality of a community ethos, the land tenure system is not uniform all over the region. Some tribes have complete community-based ownership and others combine individual with clan ownership. Among the former are the Aka who lacked the very concept of individual ownership till recently and only had usufructuary rights. Each family cultivated as much land as it needed in the jhum season after which it reverted to the community. However, a family could use wetlands on the banks of the river for settled agriculture but it continued to belong to the village (Fernandes and Bharali 2002: 22-23). Among the latter are the Angami of Nagaland and the Dimasa of Assam who combine community with individual ownership. The Garo of Meghalaya made a distinction between the regular residents of a village and strangers. The former could cultivate as much land as they needed but the latter required the nokma's (chief heiress) permission and had to pay a tax. In theory land remained with the owner-lineage but was in practice with an individual family as long as it cultivated it (Majumdar 1987: 158-159). Traditionally the Karbi villages did not have a

fixed boundary or name since they kept shifting. Communal ownership was the norm among them (Saha 1987: 21-23). The Boro followed the Ahom custom of allotting 3 purahs (about an acre) of land to each family in return for free labour for about a third of the year (Roy 1995: 27).

Community ownership was basic to intra and inter-generational equity as well as the relatively high status of women. When a community controls the resource, every family is able to use it according to its need since it cultivates land according to the number of mouths to feed. Community ethos ensured inter-generational equity because they treated even individually owned land as their community livelihood coming down from the ancestors that they could use to meet their needs but had to preserve for posterity according to ecological imperatives (Baviskar and Attwood 1998: 255-264). Studies show that tribal natural resource management was by and large geared to this need. For example traditionally jhumia tribes cultivated only up to 20-degree slopes and planted root crops before the rains to ensure soil protection. Then followed other crops harvested in different months in order to ensure food supply for most of the year till fruits, edible leaves and roots became available (Das 2001: 8-10). Most tribes left the plot fallow for 18 years after cultivating it for 3 years in order to let forests regenerate. Only the Tripura and some other tribes in the predominantly bamboo growing regions followed a five-year cycle suited to that crop (Banerjee, Das Gupta and Roy 1986: 26-27). Some tribes in Mainland India practised also bush-fallow jhum. They left the plot fallow for 5-6 years for bushes, not forests, to grow (MRD 2006: 46). One is not aware of this system anywhere in the Northeast. Jhum is considered environmentally healthy for the hilly terrain.

Before the jhum season, the village council made up of men alone decided which area was to be cultivated that year, which

family was to get how much land according to the number of mouths to feed, which family with excess labour would help which one with very few adults and the day before which cultivation would not begin. After it the man of the house chose the plot and performed the worship to mark the beginning of cultivation. At this stage the woman took charge of production and organised work. As a result, gender-based division of work was more gender friendly among the jhum cultivators than in settled cultivation-based communities (Fernandes and Menon 1987: 68-70). In settled agriculture, the man does what is considered difficult work such as ploughing and digging. Back breaking work like transplantation and harvesting that involves long hours of standing in wet fields is left to women. In jhum, on the contrary, hoeing, digging and other difficult work is shared by men and women. Even keeping watch at night that is considered dangerous work is shared in the sense that the whole family shifts to the jhum field at that time (Fernandes 1994: 135-137).

Differences did exist so did inequalities. For example, the tribal woman's status was higher than in caste societies but she was not equal to men. That too had exceptions. For example, despite their CPR based jhum economy, traditionally Aka women's status was low (Fernandes, Pereira and Khatso 2005: 94-98). So one cannot make a statement about all the tribes with no exception. One can only say that if resources like land, forests and water bodies are community owned women have a say in their management. The relatively high status it confers on them is based on their role as economic assets in the family, not in their society. Most tribal traditions kept a clear separation between the family and society. Women were in charge of the family production and economy while men controlled social power (Menon 1995: 101). Even the matrilineal tribes like the Khasi, Garo and Jaintia of Meghalaya are patriarchal. Descent and inheritance are through women, they are uxorilocal but social power is with men. They

control the village council and other decision-making bodies and also take decisions concerning land alienation (Barak 1997: 162-163).

Impact of the Interface on Tribal Culture

The interface of the customary law with the formal systems has to be situated in the context of an egalitarian society that also had seeds of inequality. Some inequalities such as women's subordinate status have been modernised. Among the forces influencing these changes are the individual-based formal laws, administrative systems, education and religion. Most changes began in the colonial age. For example the office of the village leader or gaonburah created two centres of power since he is rarely the same as the traditional chief. Its other examples are colonisation and appropriation of their common lands and forests through military campaigns or legal fictions, and their eviction from their territories. These changes are at times accelerated by the rapid integration of their economies with the national and global markets especially today in the age of globalisation. This rapid integration continues to expose them to economic exploitation because they are either excluded from the processes of trade and governance or are marginal actors in them (Roy 2005). This section will study some of their implications for land relations, equity and women's status.

Internal Alienation and Individual Ownership

Among the forces facilitating this change is the mode of implementing the Sixth Schedule. The administration uses its individual-based culture in these areas too. For example, by treating the gaonburah as the owner of all land though he only represents the village. Besides, decisions on land have been transferred from the village council to the DAC. Both the DAC and one person, the gaonburah can be influenced to give pattas to individuals as one sees in the N.C. Hills and

Garo Hills. The individual-centred approach of different State bodies is another step in the culture of pattas entering their tribes. In the N. C. Hills the Coffee Board gives subsidies and loans only to individuals (Barbora 2002: 1287). However, a voluntary agency has introduced oranges on a commercial basis in some of their villages without changing the ownership pattern. Some families in these villages accept individual ownership and also confer inheritance rights on women. Thus the trend towards individual pattas goes hand in hand with new land use without changing the ownership pattern drastically (Fernandes and Pereira 2005: 37).

Impact on Women's Status

Since, as stated above individual ownership also reduces the little power women have in their tradition over their CPRs, gender relations become an area of concern around modernisation. For example, before the Rubber Board began to provide subsidies and loans only to individual owners and heads of families understood as men, the Nokma or chief heiress used to take decisions on land though men played an important role in them. With the State dealing with men alone in decisions on land transfer, the Nokma's husband has become the main decision-maker especially in the distribution of individual pattas (Fernandes and Pereira 2005: 201-202).

The tribal leaders, especially the elite, consolidate such change triggered by external inputs like the formal law and education, by internalising the dominant ideology. More than in the past, men interpret the customary law in their own favour. For example, during the Naga Nationalist Struggle, most Angami Naga men who led it went underground. Women took charge both of the family and of their society. They also gained access to schools that were built in their area in the 1970s. As a result two thirds of the graduates among them are women. However, men continue to demand adherence to their customary law

according to which the husband has to be better educated than the wife. Since there are relatively few educated young men among them, a large number of women remain unmarried (Kekrieseno 2002: 182-184). The State too seems to take the man as the breadwinner though two thirds of their graduates are women. 75 percent of the persons having a salaried job in the administration are men (Fernandes and Barbora 2002: 108-112).

Another example of modernising the tradition and consolidating social power is elections to the legislature. For over a decade after its formation, Meghalaya did not have a single woman legislator though all three of its major tribes are matrilineal. At present it has 3 or 4 in a total of 60. But for one Rajya Sabha member Ms Rano Shaiza in the 1970s, Nagaland has not had a single member of Parliament or of the State legislature. Some women wanted to contest the parliamentary elections in 2004 but they were dissuaded from doing so in the name of their customary law that confers all political power on men. Even the DACs have not had any women members. A few who contested the Karbi DAC but could not win (Fernandes, Pereira and Khatso 2005: 97-98).

Religious conversion can add to men's power but it remains ambiguous. Both Hinduism to which sections of tribes like the Boro and Adivasi have converted (Roy 1995) and Christianity that many tribal groups have embraced in recent decades are male dominated. There is, however, a difference between the two. Being a religious body with an organised structure, Christian churches have gone beyond religion to education. Access to schools depends on the situation of each tribe. As stated above, Angami women gained access to them because in the 1970s when many schools entered their area, a large number of men had gone underground. Since Hinduism lacks such structures and investment on education has been low, relatively few

schools were opened among them and women's access to education was limited. Despite religious change, Garo access to schools is less than that of the Angami. It is true particularly of women. Where there was access to education, for example among the Angami, women have gained greater awareness of their rights but men continue to interpret the customary law in their own favour. Thus, it is not religious change as such but the access they gained to education after it, that has made some change possible (Fernandes and Barbora 2002: 171-172). Because of this divide between the religious and secular spheres women gain access to education without necessarily becoming equal in the Churches.

CONCLUSION

For modernisation to be just, one has to begin with their triple value system of equity, resource sustainability and women's status and push them towards class and gender equality.

In practice, instead of taking the tribes towards such equity many modern inputs introduce class formation, strengthen patriarchy and force their communities to make a transition from their constructive to a destructive dependence on the natural resources. It shows that if measures are not taken to counter these impacts, modern inputs can modernise the negative aspects of their tradition. For example, a hierarchy existed in most tribes but every family was provided access to the resources and social systems required for its sustenance. That hierarchy seems to have taken the form of a ruling economic class. That discrepancy can be avoided if one begins not with their customary law understood as rules and regulations but with the value system guiding it. Its objective is to take it towards the type of equity meant for today's society. In other words, the solution lies neither in imposing modernisation nor in romanticising their past. One has to find ways of building a future on their past values by adapting them to the present

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