

Status of Ao Naga Women From the Perspective of Feminist Philosophy

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Abstract-----

The status of women was never equal with the status of men from the early society. From the ancient time women were always dominated by the male. During British period, different reformers aimed at raising the status of women through different legislation. Education played an important role for changing the status of women in society. Among the 17 tribes of Nagaland, Ao tribe is a major tribe. It is found that the traditional Ao society was based on gender essentialism. Though initially the waves of feminism did not champion equality for women in all perspective, but gradually its started receiving positive effects in Ao society. This paper is an attempt to reflect philosophically on the status of Ao women in Nagaland.

KEYWORDS-Status of women, Naga society, Ao Naga tribe, Feminism.

INTRODUCTION-----It is from the early society, the women are always dominated by the male and their primary role was family oriented. In the traditional societies, the status of women was not high and they played the of a role caretaker. But in the modern societies, a woman's status is described more in terms of her achievements in education, carrier, and position etc in a society. In fact the role of woman is not limited to the home as was in the traditional society.

Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, M.K. Gandhi, Annie Besant etc. tried to raise the status of women by encouraging women education, widow remarriage and abolishing child marriage, Sati Protha etc.

In order to develop the society the role of both men and women are important, but customs and traditions do not give women equal rights. Women play an important part in the socio-economic development of the village in spite of the fact that they are controlled by customs and traditions. In the traditional society the economic roles of men and women were sharply distinguished because men generally engaged in hunting and warfare while women were engaged in domestic and agricultural activities. Women were not encouraged to participate in politics, administration or in religious activities because those were considered to be the domain of men.

Education played an important role for changing the status of women in society. It was only through the spread of education and inter-mixture of Western and Eastern cultures that women began to realise their status in the society.

OBJECTIVES—

The main objectives of this paper are as follows—

1. To reflect the status of Ao tribe women in Nagaland from various societal aspects, like the educational, cultural, political and post Christianity issues.
2. To assess the status of Ao tribe women in respect of feminist philosophy.

METHODOLOGY—

The study has adopted the qualitative method with the help of secondary sources. The secondary sources of the study, the data are collected from books, journals, and thesis.

STATUS OF WOMEN IN AO NAGA TRIBE-

Among the 17 tribes, Ao is a major tribe of Nagaland. According to the indigenous knowledge, the AOs came out of six stones which is LONGTROK. In Ao dialect 'Long' means 'stone' and 'Trok' means 'six'. Thus they have six Ung(chiefs) or six ancestors. In Ao language the word society is called 'Loktiliba'. The word 'Loktiliba' means 'way of life of the people'.

Mongsen and Chungli, these are the two major dialect spoken by the Ao Naga tribe. All the traditional songs are composed by the Mongsen dialect. Chungli dialect is the common language among the Ao Nagas.

The Ao Nagas are strictly patrilineal people. Their properties pass exclusively from father to son. Though daughters belong to the father's social group before marriage, but after marriage they get their identity from their husband's family and clan. They are surrounded by their husband's relatives. When an Ao woman marries to her husband, she does not lose her clan title nor can she take her husband's title unlike women in other societies.

In Ao society women are not getting equal rights like men. Though the half of the population is constituted by the women in Ao society, but still their status is not equal. Traditionally the Naga society was patriarchal society which gives importance to men. The Naga women helped in income by selling shawls and woven cloths. But they were not included in decision making process in the village.¹

Traditionally in Ao a woman is valued by her ability to work. A man valued a woman who knows how to weave cloth, does domestic work, talk politely and gives birth to baby son. For an Ao man, a good and patient wife is an asset to his family. She disciplines her children and provides healthy advice to her husband.

¹ Jamir Moanaro Imchen. The role of Ao women in Church and society. Indian journal of theology. Eastern Theological College Jorhat.

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A widow in Ao society cannot inherit property-both moveable and immoveable left by her husband. She can enjoy the benefits of her husband's property during her lifetime if she does not remarry after widowhood.

In the traditional polity and administrative system, the Naga women do not participate in the administration of the village. Women were not members of village council and hence they have no right to say anything in the decision making process.



AO NAGA WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL COSTUME (SOURCE –INTERNET)

MORUNG SYSTEM AND AO NAGA WOMEN

The morung was the traditional educational system of Naga tribe and which was an essential part of their life. It was the place where they learned discipline and also different skill based education. Young boys entered in the Morung at the age of 12/13 years and left when they were ready to begin a family. Morung were mainly for the boys, but some tribes even had morungs for girls also. In Ao tribe morung system was for both boys and girls. Ariju was the boys dormitory system and it gave the training in art and crafts, for warfare, prepared them for dangers and the like. In short we can say that it was the training school for boys.

Just like the Ariju , Tzuki was the girls dormitory system for the Ao naga girls. Tzuki was a feminist cultural institution, where unmarried girls used to stay under the guidance of a widow or an unmarried woman from the same clan . The widow was not a simple widow , but was a rich widow and she serves as an matron .Tzuki was established in the house of the widow . The widow who was real honour of the Tzuki was popularly known as Tzukibutsula. Tzuki occupied an important place on the unmarried Ao girls. It trained them cultivation, weaving, domestic work, economic matters, socio-cultural activities and education.

However, in present times, the traditional ariju and tzuki have been replaced by classrooms filled with desks and benches. The oral method of education has also been replaced by text books and notepads. The introduction of formal education provides an opportunity even for the girls to avail equal education. Their role as women has shifted from simple caretakers and home makers to providers too.



MORUNG SYSTEM OF NAGALAND (SOURCE –INTERNET)

AO NAGA WOMEN IN VILLAGE ADMINISTRATION

In past every Ao village was regarded as Republic and every village was an independent state, sovereign state. It was a pure form of democracy where every individual gets the the freedom of speech. The Ao village government is known as “Putu Menden” in Chungli pharty and Sonen Menchen” in Mongsen pharty. Putu menden was constituted by Tatars , who were the selected leaders or elders. Putu menden was engaged in all matters of law, justice and administration.

But there was no part of women in village administration in the Ao Naga society. From the time immemorial, the Ao womendidnot get membership in the village administration. Putu menden was only for the male people. Female were not getting any role in the political sphere.

ROLE OF AO NAGA WOMEN IN HEAD HUNTING

The practice of head hunting was an unique feature not only in Ao naga society but also entire Naga community. In olden days , their status depended on their gaining of heads. No young man from Ao naga tribe could marry a high status woman, unless he became a head hunter. This practice was officiallybanned in 1960.

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The Ao women not directly involved in the practice of head hunting, but indirectly they were involved in the practice by singing the song of praise for the warriors. They welcomed the warriors by singing the song of praise.

POLITICAL STATUS OF AO NAGA WOMEN

Political status means the degree of freedom and equality in political matters. Though the Ao women actively participated in many fields of activities, but they are not still at the forefront in political matters. Nagaland is the only state which never had a women MLA even after the four decades of statehood.

CULTURAL LIFE OF THE AO NAGA WOMEN

As time changed, different socio-religious changes took place in Ao Naga society. The Ao Naga women adapted themselves with those changes, but they never forgot their traditional role.

Today the morung system is no more, but many Ao Naga women in rural life still practice cultivation. They also make their own traditional jewellery and weaves different colourful clothes of their own tribes. This becomes a source of economic avenue.



AO NAGA WOMEN WEAVING SHAWL(SOURCE-INTERNET)

DISCRIMINATION IN WAGES FOR WOMEN

Although Indian constitution has given equal rights irrespective of gender in respect of wages, but it is seen in the Ao society that they get less wages than men. The reason being moreover they are considered as weaker than men physically. The Ao Naga women who are staying in village, engage whole day by selling goods in market places, collecting firewood etc. They also work in the field with men, but they are not getting equal wages like men.

STATUS OF NAGA WOMEN AFTER CHRISTIANITY

Though the status of Naga women more specifically Ao Naga women were not high, but after the introduction of Christianity in the Naga society there is a rapid change in their status. After the introduction of Christianity the Morung system of Naga society slowly disappeared. This system of education was replaced by formal education. Modernization has changed the minds of the Naga people. Now women are also getting equal opportunity in all matters like education, politics, etc.

Today education has changed their thinking. Education has given opportunity to girls to become economically independent and this has encouraged girls to go for higher education. With the progress in the field of education, more and more women are becoming salaried wives or daughters.

CONCLUSION (FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY)

If we assess the position of Ao Naga women from the perspective of feminist philosophy we find that in the traditional Ao Naga society people believed in the gender essentialism. Being essentialist they believed in the division of qualities, capacities and performance in accordance with gender. It was evident in the societal makeup of the traditional Ao Naga society that they believed in gender essentialism. Values like empathy, nature were attributed to the women and values like courage, action were attributed to men. As such there was a contrast between the feminine and masculine values. In the Morung system of the Ao Nagas it is seen that women were taught to enhance their feminine nature and men were taught to conquer and destroy their enemy with warfare. This position gives rise to a gender inequality. It is seen throughout the history and even in Ao Naga society women were paid less than men. This is a result of the division of the division of labour with respect to the gender. The gender division of labour contributes to women inequality in Ao society. The waves of feminism have always championed equality for women, in terms of political, economic, civil rights of women.

The causes, for which feminist philosophy stood for, gradually started receiving positive effects in the Ao society. Today Ao women have become more politically conscious and educationally rich. The role of women from caregivers to educators, portfolio holders indeed makes a change in their social and psychological set up. The search for identity of their self has also contributed in the advancement of the women folk so far.

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