

Role and Status of Angami Naga Women in the Pre-Colonial Period

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Abstract: Status refers to the social position that determines the rights, privileges and prestige enjoyed by an individual. Prior to the coming of Christianity and the introduction of modern education in Nagaland, the Angami Naga women like any other Naga women had lower status than that of their male counterpart. Women diligently contributed towards domestic as well as agricultural works. However, being a patriarchal society, in spite of the various contributions made by women towards the smooth functioning of the family and society at large the status of women remained to be lower than that of men. With this backdrop in mind the present paper tries to locate the economic role played by Angami Naga women in the past. The paper also presents the status of Angami Naga women in the pre-colonial period.

Key Word: Angami Nagas; women; status; role and past.

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I. Introduction

The word 'status' is often used as a synonym for role in sociological literature. While some refers to status as the legal rights enjoyed by women in marriage, inheritance and participation in public affairs whereas some others refer it to the social attitudes of men and the existing customs and traditions (Ovung, 2009: p. 94). Zehol (1998) points out that the term status refers to a position of an individual in the social structure defined by his or her designated rights and obligations. Since each individual occupies a number of distinct statuses within a society; he or she performs a variety of roles. Status is realised through role. Status also denotes the position of an individual in a social system and also encompasses in itself the notion of rights and obligations in terms of power, authority and grading (Zehol, 1998: p. 11).

According to Koseno (2018), "*An individual's role and position in the society are determined by the social structure, the existing cultural norms and the value system of the society*" Koseno (2018) further points out the fact that the position of women in the home and outside the home are closely interlinked and intermingled that the two cannot be separated in order to determine the status of women as it is evident that women in every society play different roles and status which are different from that of men. She goes on to argue that women's status in the society can be identified by studying the roles or activities performed by them in diverse fields. She maintains that in all these fields, there are some activities which are performed exclusively by women while still other activities which may not be performed by women and some that may be performed by both the sex (Koseno, 2018: pp. 2-3). Hence, it is not possible to give a clear picture of the status of women in the Angami Naga society without a proper understanding of the social, economic, political and religious life of the people. Thus, in order to understand the status of the Angami Naga women it is important to look into the roles played by women in their family and also in the society they live in.

II. Role and Status of Angami Naga Women in the Past

Jamir (2012) argues that men and women in Naga society have always worked side by side in agricultural production despite the marginalization from institutions of decision making. Jhum cultivation was the traditional mode of agriculture except in some areas where terrace farming was practiced. She maintained that in jhum cultivation, apart from the clearing and burning of jungle which was considered predominantly a male function, other functions such as sowing, weeding, harvesting, etc were carried out mainly by the women. Thus, women played a major role in the production process (Jamir, 2012: pp. 25-26). Mies (1986) argues that the definition of men as bread winners and women as dependent housewives not only means that women's work is made invisible but also that men claim control over money income even in those cases where the bulk of the money is earned by women's work (Mies, 1986: p. 5).

In the past, when the people were in constant warfare state, men served as the protectors of the family as well as the village community while women on the other hand served as caregivers for the family. Women tilled the land and provided food for the family and did all the works associated with agriculture and household chores. Male members guarded the women folk and children from wild animals and also from the attack of the enemies. Since, men served as the protectors of their family as well as the village community and for this reason they were put on a higher pedestal than that of women although both man and women made equal contributions. Ganguly (1993) narrates that, "*tribal women are directly and integrally associated with the running of the system of production*" (Ganguly, 1993: p. 71). Koseno also (2018) states:

"The notion of distinguishing certain jobs or duties as men's and certain others as women's is believed to have stemmed from the head hunting days. Those days man has to be physically fit so as to defend the village from the attack of the enemies especially during wars. That was the reason why women performed almost all the works at home so as to enable men to be free from menial jobs to carry out those obligations (Koseno, 2018: p. 76)".

One of the respondents went on to narrate that in the past, before men were awake, women would wake up early and fetch water and firewood. Consequently, women who were honest, hardworking, love and got along with their in-laws were considered as women with high status in the society. As stated by one of the respondents: "*Women would fetch water before sun rise and then would carry fire-wood, cook and work in the fields. Infact women had no time to rest*". From the above narrations, it is evident that in the past women's status was much lower than that of men inspite of the fact that women did majority of the cultivation as well as household works. Women were the last to sleep and the first to wake up to start their chores. Similarly, Shimmry (1985) states, "*The Naga women get up early in the morning although she is the last in the family to sleep at night*" (Shimmry, 1985: p. 167).

One of the respondents articulates that in the past, about 80 percent of the household chores were performed by women and in addition to that they take up all responsibilities for the sick and old parents till death. Daughters assisted their mothers in all domestic works such as cooking, washing, cleaning, weaving, cultivation and also maintenance of kitchen garden. Zetsuvi (2014) in his study of the Angami Nagas also maintained that an Angami Naga woman as a wife, while adjusting to her new way of life with her husband and his direct relations was expected to develop good relationship with all his kith and kin. A wife had to be industrious and good in house-keeping. He maintained that the periods of girlhood are spent under the parental roof and care where they are trained in all domestic works and assist their parents in the field (Zetsuvi, 2014: p. 22).

Yano and Pande (2014) remarks that women whether, as a wife, daughter, sister or mother in the traditional Angami Naga society was made to feel inferior to man. They further pointed out that women were confined to the household works and food gathering duties within the confines of the village state (Yano & Pande, 2012: p. 70). Zetsuvi (2014) states, "*Learning the art of weaving was a necessity for every girl to meet the requirement of the family*" (Zetsuvi, 2014: p. 22). Likewise, Jamir (1999) also argues that a woman expert in spinning and weaving raised her personal status among others of the same locality (Jamir, 1999: p. 96).

The role of women as a mother and daughter in the past were to take care of the household work and provide clothing to the family. Women played equally important role as to men in the field work for the successful cultivation of the crops. In the past, women were mostly confined to household and agricultural works. However, women were not made to carry out hard labour which was the responsibility of men. A mother was expected to teach her daughters the household chores, agricultural methods and the art of weaving cloth. In the past, the role and status of women within the family was quite reasonable but the Angami Naga community being a patriarchal society where men were regarded as the head of the family, women's status was lower to that of men inspite of the various contributions made by women towards the continuity of the family in particular and the society in general. Zetsuvi (2014) states, "*An Angami woman is generally a good partner to her husband. She is the head of the household affairs and in that capacity she has to shoulder quite alot of responsibilities*" (Zetsuvi, 2014: p. 14).

One of the respondents maintained that in the past, women had a fair spirit of independence playing very central role in the family. The respondent further narrated that women were assigned to domestic works and they performed equal work with men in all agricultural sector yet they were considered to have lower status than men and were not entitled to any land inheritance despite of the work done by them. Similarly, Jamir (2014) argues that in spite of their extensive contribution, interaction and interdependence with the land and forests, the Naga women's role in land-based resource management may be considered as limited to providing mere labour in the absence of ownership rights of the land and forest (Jamir, 2014: p. 127).

While one of the respondents stated that: "*Even though men and women together made important decisions in the family, it was the men who had the main authority of the family*". An elderly respondent stated:

“*In the past, women were not encouraged to pursue knowledge or get educated*”¹. The respondent further narrated:

“Today educated women are considered as equal to men but in the past it was not the same and it was as though women had no place in the society. In the past women’s status was low. Women had no say in the social matters. Therefore, women remained silent as they were not allowed to speak their mind”².

According to Koseno (2018), women take for granted that a particular set of jobs were solely meant for them and they do not try to change things for the better even though sometimes things may be at a disadvantage to them. She argues that absence of education among women is largely responsible for their low status in the society. She argues that:

“Even when schools were started, it was not considered necessary by the parents to educate their daughters and there were quite a few superstitions which hampered the progress of education among girls. As a result of orthodox beliefs and values, the education for women did not receive encouragement either from the government or the people. It was a prevalent belief that women were only fit to work in household chores and in the fields (Koseno, 2018: p. 77)”.

A respondent further added that, “*In the past, women’s status was considered as lower to men where they were not allowed to enter certain places and also they could not speak or give their opinions in various community gatherings*”³. Supplementing to the earlier statement, another respondent also stated:

“In the past, the social status of women was lower to that of men. Women had no say in the decision making process. There was a difference in the status of women when compared to men mainly from inheritance to festival rites. The duty of women was limited to household and agricultural works”⁴.

Yano and Pande (2012) maintained that when it comes to political participation of the Angami women, they did not take part in any of the decision making or participate in the village level even in the early colonial period. Women were absent from the political domain in the village and were excluded from decision making body. The coming of Christianity enabled women to gain a representative to the village body but it was of little significance as there was more number of male than females (Yano & Pande, 2012: p. 89). Ganguly (1993) also maintains that in the tribal polity the women are not given any role to play and the subservient status of women is confined by the fact that they are not given any scope for taking part in the society’s decision making process (Ganguly, 1993: p. 71). Jamir (2012) argues that:

“On the whole, the secondary position of Naga women is nowhere more evident than in its traditional decision-making institutions. In Angami society for instance, when the villagers meet to make decisions, women are not allowed to voice their feelings. The male clubs where decisions are taken are taboo for women. Similar is the case among the Ao Nagas and other Naga tribes (Jamir, 2012: pp. 24-25)”.

In the past, women were not treated as second class citizens or mistreated but they were put lower than their male counterpart in the social ladder. The Angami Nagas has seen dramatic changes in the social status of women with the acceptance of Christianity along with the introduction of modern education and the advent of modernity. Koseno (2018) maintains that the process of modernization has accelerated social change and has been forcing Angami women in new social roles. In this context, modernization is considered to refer to an inherent change in the mode of life. It involves not only changes in the material culture of a nation but also its beliefs, values, norms and way of life as a whole (Koseno, 2018: pp. 3-4). One of the respondents stated, “*I believe women were treated differently in the past due to the nature of work and responsibilities*”⁵. While an elderly respondent in the course of interview articulated:

“By listening to the words of our elders we get to know that the status of women in the past and now is quite different. Women’s status was not equal to that of men’s status. Whatever women do their status was lower than men and their works or words were not equal to that of men”⁶.

Therefore, the Angami Naga community being a male dominated society, women in the past did not have equal opportunities and privileges to that of men. In spite of women being treated with respect in the past, they did not have equal rights to that of men in terms of education, decision making and property inheritance.

III. Conclusion

Education is not only increasing reaching out in revolutionary pace to embrace the entire span of the individual and the whole Angami society but also holds the key to a large number of their living problems. Even

¹ Interview on 20th January 2021

² Ibid.

³ Interview on 28th January 2021

⁴ Interview on 17th February 2021

⁵ Interview on 18th February 2021

⁶ Interview on 18th February 2021

the most illiterate and poor are beginning to send their boys and girls to schools and colleges because they would get opportunities for government jobs and other avenues which would improve their standard of living (Koseno, 2018 p. 82). In the past, education for women was not encouraged and women were mostly engaged in weaving of cloths for their family members and cultivation. Women were responsible for all the household chores, to be obedient to the male members in the family and leave important decisions to their men folk's discretion while they were left with little or no option regarding family as well as social matters. Not only were women forbidden to take up men's saddle in the past but women were also forbidden to enter or go to places where the men folk of the village had various discussions on various social matters. So in this way women's status has been lower than men. Hence, as stated by Koseno (2018), "*The traditional Angami women whether Christian or non-Christian, literate or illiterate and employed or unemployed were found to perform similar roles and duties where domestic work was concerned*" (Koseno, 2018: p. 75). Therefore, it is evident from the above narrations that women's status differs from society to society and even from individual to individual. In the past, women occupied a subsidiary status in the patriarchal and patrilineal society where they were denied chances of participation in various social matters considering the fact that they did not enjoy as much rights as men and were bound by certain taboos. Nevertheless, Naga women in general and the Angami women in particular did enjoy a respectable position in the society inspite of the diminutive restrictions imposed on them. Today, with the advent of modernity there has been a swift change in the roles and status of Angami Naga women compared to the past as in the present era, women are free and there are no restrictions as to what women can and cannot do.

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