

Gender and the Society in Tripura: A Case Study on the Status of Tripuri Women.

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Abstract

Status of women in a community and society determines how much enriched a community is. Each and every right and dignity of a woman shows the maturity of a civilisation. Different tribal communities of North-East India have their own prejudices towards the women of their communities. In Tripura Tripuri women are consisting of both the features of Aruntawomen of East Africa and Iroquois women of upper New York. Though the society is matrilineal but women have very limited access to socio-political rights. In this case study there would be an attempt to reflect the life of women from Tripuri community. Its main objective is to find out the contemporary status and position of Tripuri women in Tripura's rural and urban areas.

Keywords: - Tribal women, Tripuri, Gender, Status, Indigenous Communities, North-East.

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I. Introduction:

The spirit of civilization and even a community can be determined in many ways, and the status of women in that civilization or community is also one of those. Even this process also appreciates its excellence and realizes its limitations. There are different features to understanding a community on basis of their treatment towards their gender. Like, to a great extent a civilization is the result of the ability of society to understand one of the strongest self-centred impulses embedded in the society. There are many customary laws and prejudices towards women which determine the essence of that community. Different instances are used to determine that customs and laws validate us to identify if women are regarded as worthy companion and also enjoys equal importance in the family or just mere war price or market commodity. Again, the degree to which women are given property rights, also describes how much a man can regulate his controlling power and lust for possession. Treatment toward widows shows the sense of sympathy developed in a society. The genuineness of a community towards education can ascertain by analysing if it's beneficial to women of that community or not. Likewise, their cultural progress determines if women have access to specializing in fine arts or not. Lastly, the nature of the administration of society is easily apprehended by the freedom given to its women for taking part in public life and also to participate in the customary proceedings. This also projects how much contribution a woman has towards her development and building her self-reliance.

Tripuri women normally resemble the women of Arunta of East Africa and the Iroquois women of upper New York. Arunta women are hard-working as they are indulged in all household chores as well as in shifting cultivation from mere childhood but they do not have easy access to social rights. On the other hand, Iroquois society is matrilineal in which men have neither economic nor political power. According to JagadishGan-Chaudhuri status of Tripuri women is between Arunta and Iroquois women¹. Tripuri women have limited Social rights like divorce and widow remarriage are permitted, but she has little influence over decisions, and society does not allow their participation in politics.

Tribal Women of North-Eastern India:

North-eastern communities practice patriline except KhasiGaro and Jaintias of Meghalaya. In all the indigenous communities in North-eastern states, women do not have access to the inheritance of land or father's or spouse's property. Sometimes widows are permitted to maintain the property of their husbands after their

¹Gan-choudhuri, Jagadis. *A corpus of Tripura*. Inter India Publications, 1990, pp.-4-5.

demise. However, she has no claim to it because the male heir of the family is the final beneficiary. Some communities like Lalungs from plain Assam used to give property rights to the younger daughter just like the tribes of Meghalaya but under the influence of other communities, this matrilineal community also transferred into patriarchy. Again, women from some aboriginal bodies inherit the belongings of their mother, like ornaments, and weaving tools, Meitei women from Manipur also inherit their mothers' market stalls. However, Meghalaya is exceptional in this case as the tribes in this state practice matrilineal succession and the youngest daughters have the right to inheritance to the property even though they also get the living house and other things of their mother. But the family's male member makes decisions on lands and properties.

For understanding the health status of the women of the North-East two most important objectives are the condition of drinking water and access to toilets. Researches find out that Mizoram in other states does not have proper toilet facilities in households and the water supply is also in a deplorable state, particularly in the rural areas of the North-Eastern states. Again, the ante-natal care system is better in Mizoram followed by Tripura and Manipur, and Meghalaya whereas Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Nagaland's conditions are not up to the mark. In rural areas, the poor transportation system also makes situations difficult for the residents for taking advantage of the health centres.

According to 2001 census data Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura are leading in female literacy rates along with other states in North-Eastern India. Moreover, there is less discrimination between males and females in providing education in this region. However, there are many instances of female dropout students in these states, and a key contributing factor to this is the dearth of qualified female teachers in primary and secondary schools, particularly in rural areas.

Economically North-Eastern used supplementary activities as their way of earning since the beginning and also in contemporary times. Those activities included cattle rearing, selling surplus jhum vegetables and most importantly weaving handloom is the main source of their income. However, times are changing as more women pursue higher education seriously and work as skilled craftspeople. North-Eastern tribal women are now part of health sectors, educational sectors even in MNCs. Thus, economically women are becoming more self-reliant and making a strong position economically.

Additionally, the political participation of women is the ultimate yardstick to determine if women are empowered in a community or not. Nevertheless, when we are referencing North-East, we must be aware that all states have not conquered their statehood at the same time. Hence participation of women in the election process is different for different states as stages are various. Although the participation of indigenous women in electoral politics is really poor some of the states have sent their women representatives in the Lok Sabha and Rajyasabha. Regarding Lok Sabha Assam is leading as during the timeline of 1952-1977 it has elected only 9 female representatives and more than three female representatives during the time frame of 1985-1999. While Manipur and Nagaland sent only one woman representative from each state from attaining statehood, Tripura also sent one non-tribal female member in the Lok Sabha. Again, in Rajyasabha Assam send three women members and Arunachal Pradesh sends one female member whereas Tripura sends one non-tribal female representative in Rajyasabha. Other states naturally do not have any female representatives in Lok Sabha or Rajyasabha. Additionally, women's involvement in state legislative elections is quite low. From the beginning of the electoral process to now, merely 50 women are elected in Assembly elections. Moreover, Meghalaya and Tripura have elected nine to eleven female candidates to the Assembly since becoming states, whilst other states in the region have only sent five or fewer female legislators to the Legislative Assembly. One-third of seats are booked for female representatives in village, blocks, and district levels under the 73rd and 74th Amendments of the constitution. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, and Tripura come under these Constitutional Amendments. Lastly, some areas in this region come under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution where participation of women is least. Some of these regions are Karbi, Anglong and North Cachar district of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura Tribal Area Autonomous District Council (TTADC).

An Overview of Tripura and Tripuri Tribe:-

They came from the Lauhitya dynasty and lived in Kirat, which is said to be in the east of the Indian subcontinent. Then over time Kirat changed into Tripura. The genesis of the name Tripura occurred from different sources. Mythology suggested that Tripura came from "*Tripurashur*" or the name of the goddess "*Tripurashundari*". Again, it is also popular that the origin of the name of the state is connected to the name of Tripur, who founded this kingdom and is also related to Dhurya. According to the legends Dhurya was the banished son of the Yayati, the king of the lunar race. Additional to those people from Tripuri or Tipra community used to call water 'Twi' in their language and gradually 'Pra' enjoined it and it became 'Twipra'. After several reconstructions and deconstructions of the word 'Twipra' it became Tripura.²

²Singha, Kailashchandra. *Rajmalaba Tripurar Itihash*. Akshar Publications, 1896, p-1.

Even though the British put questions to the use of the word 'Swadhin', Tripura during the Princely era used to be also termed as 'Swadhin' or 'Independent' Tripura. The rulers of Tripura liked the term 'Swadhin'. In 1920 Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya requested the British Government to change the name of the region to 'Tripura', formally it was also known as 'Parvatta' or 'Hill Tripura'.³

However, Tripura is now a state in India's north-east and has a total size of 10,486 square kilometres. Assam, Mizoram, and the international border with Bangladesh all share Tripura's border. According to the 2011 Census of India, the State has a total population of 36, 71,032. Tripura is home to 19 different tribal community groupings, each having their own unique traditions, social customs, religious beliefs, dialects, and occupations. There are 961 females for every 1000 males in Tripura's Scheduled Tribe population (Census of India, 2011). The indigenous population of Tripura has a versatile ethnolinguistic background. Except for Khasi and Garo, the tribal communities of the state are patriarchal. But because the indigenous community in Tripura is thought to be fair, it is assumed that women hold a greater position in the society. The scheduled tribal communities predominantly inhabit the hill areas. Ethnic affinities of the population of Tripura emerged from the different forms of mongoloid racial stock. Tribes like Santhal, Munda etc, belong to the proto-austroloid racial stock. Tripura has extraordinary diversity in ethnicity, language, religion, and culture. Multiple languages and dialects are used in the region.

Famous philologist Dr. Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay asserted that Tripuris were the extended part of Bodos and they first tried to be the inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley but later they moved from that place to explore other parts. Firstly they moved to Tripura from Assam. Then, from Tripura, they again replaced Comilla and Noakhali district⁴. They were the branch of Indo-Mongoloids group. Kokborok is the language they speak. Tripuris have their administrative organizations in their villages. Those village councils are part and parcel of their culture. They always depended on their local government while solve problems like disputes over land, breaking social norms, marital strife, or harassing women. Even before the Panchayati system has introduced, these systems prevailed in the community. Land and property rights are confined to the male members as the lineage is patriarchal. Tripuris are extended in all the subdivisions of Tripura. Earlier most of them used to stay in the hill areas but with time, they are now inhabitants of plain rural areas even in the urban areas.

Tripuris are fond of music and they have many instruments which are made of bamboo. They also use animal skin and bamboo while making the instruments. Sumui, Sarinda Kham and Chonpreng, etc. are some of the examples of their handmade instruments. Mamita, Maikatal, Garia are some dance forms that are performed along with their traditional instruments. They handcraft their attires and their ethnic attires are Rignai a long piece of cloth that is wrapped in the lower part of the body from the waist and Rikutu which is a chest cover for women. Men generally wear dhoti up to their knees. The Tripuris worship a variety of gods and goddesses, including spirits, and also revere bamboo constructions as deities.

Social status of women in Tripuri tribe:-

Tripuri women are not subjected to the Purdah system but Tripuris are originally belonging to a patriarchal society⁵. It is extremely typical in this type of society for women to not have the same status as men. In general, a boy is always spoiled in rural places, but girls are expected to undertake all the household chores and outside labour, including fetching water, cleaning dishes, and working in the Jhum fields to support their families⁶. Though this scenario is unlike rural areas in urban areas but the difference in upbringing always persists. Before, the life of women in Tripuri society used to start at home and also end at home. But this phenomenon is partially disintegrating now that society and people's mindsets have advanced, while it still has an impact in some rural places. Regarding marriage, Tripuri society is liberal and they permit the free mixing of males and females. Yet free mixing of grown-up males and females is not still so acceptable in rural places⁷. The bride price and marriage by service both these customs are less common in this society now-a-days. Dowry has become part and parcel of marriage in many cases as the groom wanted to match his educational and economic status. Regarding adultery, women are always brutally treated whereas men always get the pass as if

³Reang, Lincoln. *History of the Reang (BRU)*. EBH Publishers (India), 2021, p.3.

⁴Chatterji, Suniti Kumar. *Kirata Jana Krti*. The Asiatic Society, 2014, pp-47-49.

⁵Bhowmik, Krishna Nath. *Status and Empowerment of Tribal Women in Tripura*. Kalpaz Publications, 2005, pp.- 84-85.

⁶Chakravarti, Tapati. *Economic Participation of Rural Tribal Women of Tripura: A Case Study*. Tripura State Tribal Cultural Research Institute & Museum, Govt. of Tripura, 1998, pp.- 48-49.

⁷Debbarmann, Suren. *A Short Account of Tripuri Society*. JnanBichitraPrakashani, (2006), pp.-21-22.

he has done nothing. Divorce rights are equal for men and women and nowadays female divorce rate is much higher.

The Administrative status of women in Tripuri tribe:

Basically, Tripuri women have no political or administrative rights, whether they are educated or uneducated. In earlier days, the wife of the head of the Village Council was respected in the community. However, they lacked any authority to intervene in administrative actions. They even do not have any right to take any decision in the contemporary society. Though 50% of seats are reserved for women in local government bodies, there is no instance of participation of any Tripuri woman⁸. Even till now, they cannot take any decision regarding selling or mortgaging lands neither they can purchase. The inheritance system is patrilineal, though sometimes fathers used to give some land to the daughters. Even a wife cannot inherit her dead husband's property fully if she has any child as she has to distribute it to her ward. Though there are drastic changes in the community regarding administrative rights of women in urban or rural areas, the scenario is still primitive.

Educational status and Financial independence of women in Tripuri tribe:-

Many forces are responsible to generate a positive effort in educating women, such as different state policies, social context, culture, and public discourse. According to the 2001 census, it is clear that 56.5% of the population is recorded as literate and it is higher than the national average for STs which is 47.1%. The Tripuris with a 73.7% male literacy rate and 50.2% female literacy rate shows how negligible the community is regarding educating their girl child. However, it's important to note that by the time of the 2011 Census, the tribal literacy rate had increased from 56.50% to 79.05%. There are different reasons behind this development including the government's efforts and voluntary literacy workers (VLW) who worked with full dedication to make illiterate people literate. Nowadays, with the change in the scenario, the status of Tripuri women getting slightly better both in urban and rural areas with the understanding of the value of education. They are now indulged as Teachers in both schools and colleges, efficient workers in the offices, dancers, singers, etc. Even some of them proved themselves on the National level also. With this, they have become financially independent and economically well settled and possess independent status. Many other girls in the community and beyond now look up to them for inspiration. Previously women used to earn some money by selling goats, pigs, etc. the picture of rural areas has not that much changed but now Tripuri women indulged in weaving "PACHRA", their traditional dress, and earn a heavy amount each. In the present day, Rignai Rikutu and Risha have a great demand beyond the country. Even their hand-made bamboo handicrafts are now an important source of income for the makers in which women are majorly involved with the help of Self Help Group (SHG).

II. Conclusion:

The history of women in Tripura is very versatile. From the very beginning, the indigenous women of Tripura played an important part in shaping society. The same applies to Tripuris too. Though the community is the largest in the state and they have advanced their lifestyle in different spheres but the behaviour towards women is not modernized in many aspects. The main root of this problem is that Tripuri women in rural areas are highly ignorant of the importance of education. They also don't have easy access to economic empowerment. They somewhat accepted their lives as it is which merely depended on the patriarchy⁹.

In urban areas also maybe women are more educated than in rural areas but have not reached remarkable statistics yet. A very ignorant number of Tripuri women are now empowering themselves to fight the problems. However Tripuri women have to come forward and be more cautious about their status in which their involvement is very important with the support of the opposite gender. Women have to play many roles in their lives, that a daughter, mother, sister, and daughter-in-law. With all these roles come responsibilities which they should maintain but in some dignified manner. Tripuri women have to educate and empower them for the sake of the community as they are the first teacher of the future generation.

Ultimately, this case study shows that the lifestyle of urban Tripuri women is gradually improving, while it is still in a very minimal level. Additionally, the circumstances of Tripuri women in rural areas have not significantly improved for decades. Therefore, the gender portion of the Tripuri community has a lot to reach and do in order to maintain their standing.

⁸Ghosh, Bholanath. *Women in Governance in Tripura*. Concept Publishing Company, 2008, pp.-38-39.

⁹ Interview of Purnalaxmi Debbarma, a Tripuri housewife and senior citizen from Bachaibari, Khowai District, Tripura on 22nd August 2022.

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