

Status and Social Position of Women- A Brief Study of the Kuki Women in Assam

Lienkhomang Changsan

Assistant Professor

Department of Political Science

Jengraimukh College, Majuli Dist. Assam, India.

Abstract: The status of a woman can be judged mainly by the roles they play in society. Their roles are determined to a large extent through the system of descent. With the exception of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo in Meghalaya, the tribals of North East India mostly follow patriarchal form of society in which women have little or no role to play in the male dominated society. The study is an attempt to analyse the extent to which women are sanctioned in the domain of the power structure of the male dominated Kuki society of Assam. It also deals with the degree in which modern developments like education and their conversion into Christianity has ushered egalitarian ideas and principles in the relationship of men and women in the society.

Keywords-Women, Kuki, Status, Assam

Objective of the study:

The main objectives of the study are-

1. To identify the gender based inequality.
2. To analyse the various dimensions and consequence of injustice faced by women.
3. To put forward some suggestions based on the findings of the study.

Methodology:

In order to make a vivid study on the role and position of the Kuki women, descriptive and analytical methods of study are undertaken. Moreover valuable information has been extracted through interviews with the leaders of Kuki Women Society of Assam, male dominated institutions and intellectual groups of the society. Secondary sources like articles in magazines, books, journals, newspapers and books of literature provided the much needed help in course of study.

Area of the study:

The Kuki community is found in most of the North Eastern states of India. In Manipur, they constitute one of the major tribe besides the Meiteis. Likewise Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Tripura have a considerable number of Kuki people. Assam is no exception to that. In Assam, the Kukis are found mostly in Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao. The present study would be confined to the Dima Hasao which is a home of 15171 (Census 2011) Kuki tribes. It is in this area that the study is undertaken.

The Kukis- A Brief Introduction

The word *Kuki* is a generic term which includes a number of tribes and clans. This generic term covers a large number of people who migrated to different parts of North East India from contiguous areas lying further east at different points of time. The origin of the word *Kuki* is not known. It first appeared in Bengal, Rawling's writing of Cucis or mountaineers of Tiperah. There are many conjectures and theories about the origin of the word Kuki. The word Kuki is said to be coined by other people rather than the Kukis themselves.¹⁸ They are known by their neighbours by different names. The British knew them by *Kookies*, *Lushais*, *Pois*, *Sindus* and *Chins*. The plain people called these tribes *Kukis* or *Kuki-Chin*, whereas the Dimasa Kacharis called them *Thanggumsa* and in Manipur the Meitei name for the Kuki is *Khonjai* or *Khongsai*.

The Kukis are one of the indigenous tribe of Assam. Since time immemorial they have been living in the twin hill district namely, Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao (formerly called North Cachar Hills). It is pertinent to note that like many tribes of North East India, the Kukis embraced a patriarchal form in which the male takes all the important decision in matters ranging from family issues to societal affairs.

Introduction:

The status of Kuki women is equivocal. They have important responsibilities at home and are accorded respect. At the same time the customary law is largely gender insensitive and restricts women's change in status in some fundamental change such as deprivation of inheritance of landed property. Although society does not exist in a vacuum and constantly transforms and invents itself, much of the earlier structure and customs continue to dominate.

In order to understand the position and role of women in a Kuki society, it is necessary to discuss the socio-cultural, economic, religious and political status.

Socio-cultural Status: In a Kuki society if a man dies without male issue, his property will devolve to his eldest/younger brother of his line or if he has no eldest/ younger brother or son, the property goes to the nearest male line. Therefore, a male child is always preferred to a female child to continue and preserve the lineage. Unfortunately the daughter has no share in landed property. The only items they are entitled to be those given at the time of marriage, which include *Tupheng* (Hoe), *Lel* (Basket with a cover in it) and *Thilbu* (implement for weaving). However of late, there has been a change and some thoughtful parents divide their property among both sons and daughters.

The institution of marriage is universal among the Kukis. Celibacy in any form was not encouraged by their cultural traditions. Celibacy was generally regarded as a social deviant, which was looked with disgrace. However, customs and culture does not always reduce women to a mere shadow. They were also honoured and were given importance in the society. Some of the customs which the Kukis follow till today are preferential marriage of mother's brother's daughter called *Nei* with the mother's own son. *Neinu* marriage (marrying a cousin

from the mother's side) was preferred as a means of cementing bonds between the concerned families. However with the passage of time *Neinu* marriage has become more and more insignificant.

Political Status: In the political sphere, women is regarded as unfit to participate in the decision making process as reflected in the folksong, "*Numei Thusei le jana vacha ham*" which means the chattering of a woman are like birds chirping at night. This signifies that woman has no say in the running of the village administration. There is no place reserved for them in the village council. However there are instances where woman have been able to influence the decision of the court and indirectly influence village affairs. It is when they stand in for a minor son or ailing husband. Political status of Kuki women is extricably linked to and determined by the prevalent patriarchal socio-cultural values and ethos of society. It is pertinent to note that no Kuki woman have so far been elected as members of the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council.

Religious Status: In the religious affairs too, the position of Kuki women is not so encouraging. They have little or no place in the religious activity. The advent of Christianity saw the dawn of some space for the women since they began to enjoy some status. The church gives ample room for women to be leaders and to take part in the decision making process but here too it appertains only to the women organisation or society. So far, there is no such religious body in the study area in which a woman is allowed to plays the lead role except in women's wing. Similarly, the Kuki Women Society of Dima Hasao, established in 20-06-2014 have very limited role to play in the society although its President and the Secretary are entitled to cast their vote in the election of the executive members of Kuki Inpi Assam, the apex body of the Kukis in Assam.

The limited encouragement in religious affairs has no relevance in the social and political aspect of the society. It relates purely to religious matters.

Economic Status: Women have played a very vital role in the economic life of the Kuki society. All the household chores are considered as the responsibility of the women. The domestic work of Kuki women is well documented by J Shakespeare "A woman has to rise early, fill her basket with empty bamboo tubes and trudge off before daylight dawn the hills, and the supply of water is frequently so scanty that it takes her sometimes to fill her bamboos. Having conveyed her basket to the house, she has to set work cleaning the rice for the day on the shelf over the hearth and this she now precedes to pound in a mortar in front veranda, and winnow on an oval bamboo tray till it is clean enough for use. The breakfast of rice has then to be cooked, and it should be ready by the time her husband is awake. After the meal, the real work of the day begins."

This illustrates the sacrifice made by the Kuki women and at the same time shows the position and status she holds in the family. In fact there is no slack season for women. In this aspect there is another saying, "*Numei kholjin, suhtum to jin*" which means a travelling woman carries with her a wooden pestle. So even while travelling women are expected to assist the host family. The Kuki women who are able to wake up early and do all the domestic works and know the pros and cons, the ins and outs of this art are highly valued in the marriage market.

The death of a divorced woman is treated as unnatural and therefore the body was taken out for burial not through the door but through the hole made in the wall. Rites and ritual were not performed. The practice is however not relevant in the contemporary days. A married woman does not have the right to claim her children after she is divorced by her husband.

Changes and continuity in the status of women: The Kuki society of Assam has witness a substantial changes in the form of up-gradation of the status of women. Before the advent of the British and the Christian missionaries, the condition of women in the society was definitely not encouraging. In the traditional Kuki society, women have very little role to play. It is mainly because like many societies in north east India, the Kuki society is a male dominated in which customary law is still very strong.

However, this does not mean that women were completely disempowered. They are also honoured although in a different manner. According to T.S. Gangte, great importance is given to the relationship of the mother's brother and the sister's son in the Kuki society. This has significance in view of the practice of preferential marriage of mother brother's daughter. The *tucha-sunggao* relationship' of the Kukis is also reckoned from a female line *luongman* or corpse price is another peculiar system of the Kukis. This is the price for a woman when she dies. Her father or elder/younger sons have to claim the price in their father's absence as a token of love and affection between the relatives. This also reveals the important position held by a woman in a family life.

In the traditional Kuki society, the women may not be given due recognition of her role but the existence of *Lom-Upanu* (female leader of a labour corps) itself is her important character as priestess. Among the many ceremonies and festivals that they celebrate, *Chang-ai* (rice festival) is the only one where the Kuki women play the leading role. While the role of men in human capital formation has been stresses and studied, women's role has been ignored though their roles were substantial. The economic role played by women in the traditional rural society particularly in the field of agriculture and the cottage industry is significant. Even in the past, the role of women, especially in the economic sphere was necessary. Her primary duty is to be a helpmate to her husband and to provide a warm and safe haven for her family.

In the contemporary Kuki society the condition and status of women have often seem to have improved. In one way domestic appliances like washing machine, rice cookers, water heaters, rice mill etc reduce the work time of the women but in reality it would be more pertinent to say that although the nature of work is different the workload of women still continues. To be more precise it is only a shift from old wine in a new bottle. As in the past, all domestic works are regarded as unproductive and do not form part of the family income. The traditional notion of clear cut division of labour still persists and it is taboo for man to do a woman's work. What is considered to be the job of a woman would not be touch by man, probably fearing of being dubbed as 'henpecked'. The workload of working women is greater as they bear a double burden, working at home and outside as they are expected to. This is perhaps the reason why women are not prominent in

the public domain. Also the laws, norms and mores customs of society are framed in such a way that to have a control over the women and to prove authority over them.

However it may be noted that with the coming of Christian missionaries and the spread of western education the position of women in the Kuki society witness some transformation. The Christian missionaries who brought education among the hills tribes has greatly benefitted in the empowerment of the life of the people of north east in general and the women in particular. However mention can be made that the untiring effort of the missionaries took time to create awareness on the necessity of educating both boys and girls. Therefore in many Kuki villages in the Dima Hasao district of Assam educating a girl child was considered by many parents as a waste of time and money.

Impact of Christianity and Modern Education: There were no fundamental or radical changes either in the status of women or the functioning of society, economy and politics until the advent of Christian missionaries who introduced not only a new faith to the Kukis but introduced them to modern education. The missionaries often exalted the Bible as the ultimate source of authority and made it as a condition that if an individual had to worship God he must be able to read and write. In other words, conversion into Christianity necessitates the Kukis into mass literacy campaign which benefits both men and women.

Today, changes have been witness in the sense that more and more women have been inducted in schools and in most cases it is found that the girls have perform better than the boys in boards and competitive examinations. In this connection mention may be made to the academic achievement of the next generation women of a Kuki village called Songpijang which is situated in the vicinity of Haflong town and their largest village in terms of the number with 349 house hold. This includes- Indian Administrative Service (1), Indian Engineering Service (1), Assam Civil Service (5), Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery (8), Bachelor of Engineering (1).

It is to be noted here that when the foreign missionaries came to the Northeast India, they not only brought the gospel but also brought education and enlightenment. They taught the importance of education and opened schools wherever they established their mission. When the missionaries opened School at Haflong, the district headquarter of N. C. Hills, many of the first generation Kuki Christian studied in the Mission Schools.

The British government did not give so much of importance to education or development works in this region. Even the works of education was handed down to the missionaries which was why the missionaries shouldered this responsibility. Therefore the impact and influence of the missionaries was great, especially on the Kukis who attended the mission schools. Literature too played an important role in creating a new tribal culture. This led to translation of not only the Christian scriptures but along with education, the Kukis of Dima Hasao seemed to have benefitted tremendously from the languages which produced in a written form.

Major Findings: From the above discussion, it has been observed that on the surface it would appear that Kuki women are empowered. But when one delves deeper, it is opponent that there is a bias in the customs and more which degrade the status of women. The study shows that (a) Kuki women hold a high position in the family but not in the society (b) Kuki women are subordinate to their husband in all aspects of life (c) they are subjected to unequal division of labour (d) with the introduction of modern education and the coming Christianity, the position of the Kuki women has undergone substantial changes.

However Kuki society is still bound by inherited laws of customs and the Kuki women continue to be affected by the absence of codified law. Kuki women are not entitled to inherit their father's or husband's property. It is true that Christianity has ushered in egalitarian ideas and principles particularly in the relationship of men and women in the society but the basic societal laws have not undergone any change.

Suggestions: Following are the few suggestions for the upliftment and protection of the Kuki women.

1. The age old custom and tradition should be revisited so as to empower women.
2. Women should be motivated to participate in political representation.
3. Both electronic and print media can play a very significant role in restructuring the tribal society in general and the Kukis in particular, acts as agents of political socialization for inculcating the values of gender equality.
4. There is need for more research and study on the status of women which can help in establishing society based on gender equality.

Conclusion: Education has also brought significant changes in the Kuki society by uplifting the status of women. In all the head hunting societies tribal women has no position in the society. This was mainly because while men led risky lives in hunting, women were left to do the household chores. Today, there is no discrimination between male and female child because importance is given to the education of both male and female. Kuki women today hold high post in the government offices. The old adage of women's place being the kitchen, seems to be no longer holds true in the Kuki society of Dima Hasao.

However, it is pertinent to note that women empowerment in the Kuki society is still a distant dream. The real empowerment of Kuki women could be achieved if their economic and social status is improved and when women take part in the decision making process. In a nutshell, if women can run their family successfully, one cannot doubt their capacity to lead the community nation. As Swami Vivekananda had said "that country and that nation which doesn't respect women will never become great now and nor will ever in future.

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