



The Politics of Women Empowerment with Reference to Zeliang Naga Society

Agnes Lalengkimi
Assistant Professor
Peren Government College

Abstract

The issue of gender equality and women empowerment has become a crucial agenda in global and local discourses, and its dynamics vary across different cultural and social contexts. This paper puts an attempt to study and explores the politics of women empowerment within the Zeliang Naga society, a sub-group of the Naga tribes in Northeast India. The study investigates the historical, cultural and socio-political factors that influence and determined women's roles in Zeliang society. The paper highlights the traditional customs and challenges faced by Zeliang Naga women in achieving empowerment in the process and the role of traditional institutions, gender norms and modern political movements in shaping their status. The paper also gives a critical analysis of the interplay between tradition and modernity and also seeks to understand the complexities of women empowerment in a patriarchal society of the Zeliang Nagas. The study concludes by offering insights into how empowerment initiatives can be more effectively designed to achieve a higher place for the women in the society by aligning with the unique cultural context of the Zeliang Nagas.

Index terms: Women Empowerment, Zeliang Naga Society, Gender Politics, Traditional Institutions, Northeast India, Patriarchy, Cultural Dynamics

Introduction

In the Naga society, gender breach exist still exist in all sphere of life ranging from household chores to education and socio-cultural to decision making process. The United Nations Development Program asserts empowerment of women implies transmitting powers to powerless. Although open discrimination against women in Naga society may be not visible but needless to mention that discrimination exist in all stages of the society. The position of women in the Naga society is undergoing drastic changes in recent decades as the traditional society began to take the form of modern society in the context of globalization. The topic women empowerment is a multifaceted issue and has become a much talk issue which requires a nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural and political contexts in which it occurs. In the context of the Zeliang Naga society, the concept of women empowerment is deeply intertwined with traditional customs, gender, social and political ethos. Zeliangs are the sub group of the Nagas, inhabited in the Northeastern part of India, occupying in Nagaland, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The Zeliangs, generally practice patriarchal and patrilineal system, which affects the status of the women in the society. Traditionally, Zeliang women were treated inferior to men in all walks of life. Although patriarchy exists in all Naga society, its impact on the position of women in the society varies from place to place and tribe to tribe in the Naga society (Nukshirenla and Dhanaraju, 2021).

Objective and Methodology

This paper is an attempt to understand the historical context of Zeliang Naga society and seeks to explore the politics surrounding women empowerment within Zeliang Naga society by examining the historical and contemporary factors. The paper provides an academic exploration of the politics of women empowerment in Zeliang Naga society. The present study is based on the secondary data gathered from journal papers, thesis, bulletins, news dailies, academic writings and online blogs.

Historical Context of Zeliang Naga Society

The Zeliang Naga society has a rich history with strong traditional institutions and customs. Historically, the Zeliang Nagas have been living in closely-knit village communities, governed by customary laws and practices. These traditional institutions and customs of the community have played a significant role in defining gender roles within the society. The society made no class distinction among the clans and villages. Yet women in Zeliang Naga society have traditionally been confined to domestic works and management of the households with limited role in decision-making processes at the community level. Women participation at the decision making body like Village Council is predominantly dominated by males. Customary laws and traditions generally define the gender roles in Zeliang Naga society. Men are placed typically as the heads of households and the primary decision-makers, while women are rest with the responsibility of domestic works and child-caring duties. This division of power and responsibilities is deeply entrenched in the cultural fabric of the society, making it almost impossible for women to fight and break out of traditional roles and customs and assert themselves into political spheres.

The Politics of Empowerment: Tradition vs. Modernity

Gender inequality is most visible in the field of political arena. Traditionally women were debarred from participation in the highest decision making body-Village Councils. Every village had the democratically elected body or institutions and makes all important decisions for the development and welfare of the community. A woman performs multitasking jobs in the family as well as in the society. In a typical Zeliang Naga Family, husband and wife both work and toil together but her role remains whole day and night duty. She will wake up early at dawn and began her household chores starting with preparing meals for the family after fetching water from the stream. On usual days, she will accompany her husband to the fields. Attending to the kitchen gardens, feeds the pets and pigs, collecting firewood, cleaning of the house, pounding rice, weaving of clothes were the other usual works that a typical Zeliang Naga woman performs in a household. With such busy daily schedule, she seldom gets time for leisure or other social activities. In the present day context, the politics of women empowerment in Zeliang Naga society is characterized by a tension between traditional ethos and modernity. On one hand, traditional institutions and village customary laws and norms continue to influence and often hinder the scope of women's empowerment. On the other hand, the effects of modern education, political movements and increased exposure to global discourses on gender equality have opened up new avenues for the women to speak out and assert their rights and seek empowerment. Conventions and laws of the government for the empowerment of women at all levels of the society also provide an impetus for the Zeliang women to stride forward in the political spheres. For instance, the statute of providing 33 percent reservation for the women in the decision making body is a bold step taken by the Parliament and recently implemented in urban local bodies election in Nagaland. It is not far that this policy will be implementing in the assembly election in the State. This process of empowering the women in the Naga society is expected to bring positive changes in the society.

However, the process of empowerment is not straightforward as empowering the women has been seen as undermining the role of a men by many. Often a woman who challenges traditional norms and customs faces resistance from within their communities and others. This resistance is rooted in the minds of the Nagas fearing that empowering women could undermine the traditional social order and disturb peaceful coexistence. Reservation for women in the ULBs has been resisted by many men-centric tribes and civil society organizations with the fear that this could infringe the rights and privilege for the Nagas enshrined in Article 371(A) of the constitution. so it is pertinent that the efforts to empower women in Zeliang Naga society also

must navigate these complex issues involved, considering balancing respect for cultural traditions and norms with the need for gender equality.

Challenges to Women Empowerment in Zeliang Naga Society

In the present Zeliang Naga society, women have played an important role in all spheres of life but hardly people appreciate and give them recognition. Both historical and contemporary factors place various challenges to women empowerment in Zeliang Naga society which is multifaceted and complex. Firstly, by convention and customs, women were given less importance in pursuing education due to the deeply rooted patriarchal norms which continue to limit women's access to education, political participation, and economic opportunities. Secondly, traditional institutions such as the village councils, which is the supreme administrative body and which play a key role in governance, are often dominated by men, leaving little room for women's voices in decision-making processes. A woman is totally prohibited to participate in the village council of the community. In addition to these, a woman cannot inherit the properties from the family. Due to traditional norms where the Zeliang Naga follows the male dominated law of inheritance, the wife has no privilege to inherit the properties whether movable or immovable assets.

Besides, the socio-political nature of the Naga region, characterized by ongoing conflicts and struggles for autonomy by the Naga socialists groups, has further complicated the women empowerment process. In such a context, women's issues are often ignored and sidelined in favor of broader political goals, coupled with resistance for 33 percent reservation for women in the ULBs elections. All these have been making it difficult for women to advocate for their rights and interests effectively for their advancement in the society..

Present Status of the Zeliang Women

Despite many challenges, there has been notable progress in empowerment of women in Zeliang Naga society. Though traditions and customs dictate the fate of the women in political participation, everyone is treated with respect and care in the Zeliang Naga society. The absence of class distinction and caste system in the society is a clear testament that a woman occupies a special status in the society. In a family, a woman is highly regarded and respected for her image and stands. For instance, though she cannot directly participate in the decision making process in the Village councils, she play an influential role indirectly through her husband and male relatives members. In the time of festival and ceremonies, women were allowed to participate in the events alongside their husband. In the political arena, even at the grass root level, women groups and organizations has come forwarded and provides a platform for women to come together and advocate for their rights. These groups have been instrumental in raising awareness about issues such as domestic violence, access to education and health and political participation. For instance, the successful conclusion of ULBs election in the month of June 2024 in Nagaland is a clear indication that empowerment of Zeliang women in particular and the Naga women in general is moving forward to progression.

At the same time, the influence of modern education and powerful women present in the global politics has inspired and empowered a new generation of Zeliang Naga women to challenge traditional gender roles. Educated and enlighten women are increasingly taking on leadership roles within their communities, advocating for changes in customary laws and participating in local governance.

Conclusion

The politics of women empowerment in Zeliang Naga society is a complex issue which has been in ongoing since several decades if not a century. While traditional norms and institutions continue to pose significant challenges and hinders the progress of the Zeliang women in all spheres of life, the growing influence of modern education and political movements has open up their eyes which is looking for the new opportunities for empowering themselves. To certain extend, progress is visible in public administration, local administration and decision making in the community, but still requires rigorous efforts to effectively empower women in Zeliang Naga society. It is also crucial to design initiatives that are culturally sensitive and take into account the unique socio-political dynamics of the region to shape the path for women empowerment in every field. The

thrust area that requires collective effort is creation of appropriate institutions at grassroots level with the aim to develop skill, leadership and also to increase income and financial resources so as to improve women's self-esteem, self-confidence and ability to change lives. The ideals that both men and women are equal in the society need to be understood by all sections of the society. As men without women in the society and vice versa is incomplete and in it lies the importance of giving equal status to women in all spheres of life in the society.

References

- (1) Humtsoe-Nienu, E. 2023. The politics of women empowerment in Nagaland. Morung Express Published on 16th April, 2023
- (2) Nukshirenla and Dhanaraju, V. 2021. Social Status and the Role of Naga Women in the Traditional Naga Society. *An International Bilingual Peer Reviewed Referred Research Journal*.
- (3) Erui, M. 2019. Women Empowerment in Nagaland: A Case Study on the Assembly Election. Suraj Punj Journal For Multidisciplinary Research
- (4) Kenye, R. N. and Kumar, J. S. 2014. Skill Development and Women Empowerment in Nagaland: A Study. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*. Retrieve from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360775260>
- (5) Aier, A. 2013. *Women's Role in Naga Society: Challenges and Prospects*. *Journal of North East India Studies*, 3(2), 45-59.
- (6) Chopra, R. 2011. *Gender, Conflict, and Empowerment in Northeast India: A Case Study of the Nagas*. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 34(5), 429-436.
- (7) Kikon, D. 2005. *Engaging Naga Women's Rights: The Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion*. *The Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 12(1), 21-42.
- (8) Longkumer, A. 2017. *Negotiating Modernity and Tradition: Naga Women and Their Struggles for Empowerment*. In R. Baruah (Ed.), *Women in Northeast India: Issues and Challenges* (pp. 97-112). Routledge.
- (9) Zimik, N. T. 2015. Social Status and the Role of Naga Women in the Traditional Naga Society. *International Journal in Management and Social Science*. Vol. 03, Issue 5
- (10) Singh, K. 2010. *Customary Law and Women's Rights in Northeast India: The Case of the Nagas*. *The Eastern Anthropologist*, 63(4), 509-523.
- (11) Kamei, B. 2019. Zeliangrong women: Role and Status in traditional Society part -1. Epaio Retrieved from <https://e-pao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?>
- (12) Nagaland Post (2022). Women empowerment in Naga society. Retrieved from <https://nagalandpost.com/>
- (13) Alongla, A. 2016. Empowerment of Naga women through education comparative study of Mon Kohima and Mokokchung districts. Ph. D Thesis. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/322640>