

UPLIFTING WOMEN RIGHTS THROUGH NGO: THE CASE OF THE NAGA WOMEN OF KOHIMA DISTRICT NAGALAND

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Abstracts:

Women rights are rights enjoyed by women as a category within society at any point of time. The patterns and rights of women vary between societies and are influenced by cultural, racial, political and legal factors. The United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims " All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights", yet women freedom, dignity and equality are compromised by law and custom. The Non Governmental Organization (NGOs) is association of people working for a common cause for the society. The paper is based on the primary data collected from twenty two NGOs in Kohima district of Nagaland. Different anthropological methods were used like interview method, survey schedule and observation method. The paper attempts to explore those NGOs which try to protect the rights of the Naga Women in Kohima district of Nagaland. From the study it was found that the NGOs in Kohima district are under taking different activities like artificial flower making, beautician course, embroidery, knitting, pickle making, tailoring, etc.

Keywords: *Women, Rights, Culture, Nagaland, Indian Law*

The status of women in ancient India was low according to different literature. The preference to male child was more than the female child. In Upanishads certain rituals were performed for the birth of a scholarly girl child. In lower society the due to bride-price the birth of a girl child was welcomed. Added to this were various repressive social customs such as *sati*, child marriage, polygamy, lack of proper education and her confinement to the household. Historically, women experienced these rules and prescriptions differently depending on religion, caste, class, age and their place in the family hierarchy. Though a few women became educated, attained fame and commanded armies, most were denied men's opportunities to acquire knowledge, property, and social status.

The Indian reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chander Vidhyasagar and many other reformers were trying to elevate the status of Indian women for which there was a gradual change in the position of women in modern India. By the second half of the nineteenth century there were reform groups in all parts of British India. The reformers focused attention on *sati*, female infanticide, polygamy, child marriage, *pardah* system, prohibitions on female education, *devadasis* (temple dancers wedded to the gods) and the patriarchal joint family. The major change in women lives in modern India came from the British efforts towards modernizing them. In a modern society women were treated as equals with men, in a backward society they were treated with contempt.



Women in India continue to bear the burden of poverty, illiteracy, lack of access to resources, exclusion from decision making, social discrimination and violence at both household and societal level. Their position

as compared to men is inferior, be in the field of literacy, educational status, health, administration work, participation in politics, sports, etc. The government and non-governmental agencies has taken measures to improve the condition and status of the women over the years. Many of the legislations enacted continue to be violated with impunity. Despite their biological advantage the sex ratio in the country continues to be adverse to women. As per the 1991 census figures, there were 926 females per 1000 males in the country. In the sphere of literacy, only 39.3 per cent of the female were literate out of 64.1 per cent of the males. Despite marked progress in the levels of literacy over the decades, the gender gap between male and female literacy has widened between 1951 and 1991 from 18.3 per cent to 24.8 per cent (*India Social Sectors*, 1996: Table 176). Even in the field of nutrition, poverty takes a bigger toil on the nutrition of girls than that of boys. In rural Punjab, 21 per cent of the girls in low income families suffer from severe malnutrition compared with only 3 per cent of the boys in the same families (*Human Development Report*, 1995).

In the sphere of employment, women's participation in the formal sector has remained restricted, largely due to family responsibilities and lack of higher education. The census data from 1991 reveals that only 16.0 per cent of the women were employed as main workers against 51.0 per cent of the men (*Census of India Report, Paper 2 of 1993*). The women have been moreover

traditionally employed in lower paying jobs and narrower range of occupations as compared to men. In 1991, 80.8 per cent of women were engaged as cultivators, agricultural labourers, forestry, fishing and hunting as compared to 62.7 per cent of the men (*ibid.*). There are only 8 per cent of women representatives in the parliament and 2.3 per cent as administrators and managers. India has to go a long way towards gender equality (Krishnarao, 1996). India ranking on the two indices developed by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), namely, Gender Empowerment Measures (GEM) and Gender Development Index (GDI) was poor 93 out of 104 countries for GEM and an equality unimpressive 103 out of 137 countries for GDI (*ibid.*).

Indian women are seen participating in political activities as such women groups have taken various issues like atrocities against women, rape, alcoholism, domestic violence, health issues, etc. The facts mentioned above clearly bring out the dismal position of Indian women. Indeed, women may be said to be the largest disadvantaged class of the country; the disadvantage being so pervasive that it cuts across caste, creed, state and religion. While government interventions in this sector are operated largely through the VOs, the initiatives, innovative experiments and alternative models that the VOs themselves have developed are rich and diverse. These efforts have demonstrated the success of alternative models in the empowerment of women and development in the areas of welfare, support services, employment, income generation activities, awareness generation, gender sensitization programmes, and organizing women into self help groups (SHGs). Although things are changing from modernization of education and western



influence, yet women in India still suffer from social disabilities due to lower status, educational backwardness, social customs, tradition, poverty, etc. 'It is important to note that the position that Indian women occupy today is the result of earnest endeavour of the social reformers, educationists and political leaders. Twentieth century ushered in an era of dynamic changes and new concepts which fundamentally affects the status of women giving it a fresh dignity and importance' (Gupta, 1989).

1. WOMEN OF NAGALAND

The Nagas have folklore and legends regarding their origin like other tribal inhabitant of the north east India. Each and every tribe in Nagaland has its own system of self governance. The paper is mainly based on the primary data collected from the selected NGOs, working for the welfare of women in Kohima district of Nagaland. The data for the present study has been collected from 22 selected NGOs which were working actively at the time of data collection for women in Kohima district of Nagaland. Intensive fieldwork is applied for collecting data from the NGOs in the study. Primary data was collected using different methods like interview method, survey schedule method, case study and observation method. Secondary data was also referred.

'Nagas belong to Indo-Mongoloid race living in the extreme north-eastern hills in India. Each tribe has its own customs, language and dress. In some areas dialects vary from village to village. Nagaland is a state that does not confirm to the general perception of women status in India. Apart from traditional practices that have generally cared for women and girl child, the state has successfully achieved in the field of literacy

and increasing sex ratio, health and entrepreneur development' (*Nagaland State Human Development Report, 2004*). Naga society is a casteless society where there is no distinction like other societies. As the Naga follow patriarchal system, there is not much distinction between men and women in regard to their roles, position and status compared to Indian women. Human society changes from generation to generation. Old practices and belief systems get changed; tradition and customary laws are redefined for a better change. The degree of overall changes and advancement is due to the spread of modern education, Christianity and globalization. Due to such forces of rapid change, the role of women, their positions dignity and status are changing tremendously (Lalnehzovi, 2009). In the past when education was first started in the Naga Hills many young girls have to forego their studies, so that their brothers might have the privilege to go to school. Despite, the young girls learn to weave, cook, work in the field, chop firewood, feed the animals, etc. In religious matters the Naga women also performed some sacred rituals. In ancient times when head hunting was practised the women play an important role in saving the lives of the people. There are even examples where the women took a leading role in social and political movements. There are also areas where intervention are required from the government like higher education for women, employment opportunities for younger generation, financial support for women's development, violence against women, health related issues like HIV/AIDS and substance abuse (*ibid.*). The present situation is different as the girls enjoy the same privileges as the boys. In Naga society women did not suffer from the social evil practices like *purdah*, *sati*, child marriage, dowry system and caste system rather they



attract bride price at the time of marriage which is a symbolic of their importance in the society. They enjoy equal freedom and had the right to choose their husbands. The Naga family being patriarchal, the men being the head of the family, yet the women has an important role to play in the family specially running the household and up bringing the children (Shukla *et al.*, 2006).

According to Horam (1977) 'The mother plays the main role in running the households. Indeed the position of women in the Naga society is far from being inferior. The majority of domestic affairs are in her hands and all her life a women enjoys a considerable freedom. She participates freely in singing and dancing during festivals. She is never made to feel that she belongs to weaker sex. Most marriages are love marriages. The young choose their partner and then marriage negotiations are conducted through an elderly lady. A girl is free to choose her life partner and rarely is any pressure brought upon her in this matter. The wife is consulted by her husband in all domestic and family affairs. She helps him in making decisions, performs domestic duties and share household responsibilities with him'. Yet, most of the women are illiterate, poor health, poor nutrition, lack skills, etc. In the ancient times when head hunting was practised, the Naga women were given a

very important role to play in saving lives. When there was fighting or war between two villages, the women act as mediator to stop the fight, the women in the past played a leading role in social and political movements like Rani Gaidiliu (Shukla *et al.*, 2006). Naga women have played a limited role in politics yet, the women remained active participants in the electoral process since attainment of statehood. At the

local bodies the Naga Village Development Board Act has reserved 25 per cent seat for women representation.

In all ages of every society education is found to be a major tool for the empowerment of women. Educational opportunities to women have brought changes for entry in the occupational field. It has brought tremendous changes in mental attitudes and human behaviour in understanding the social position of the women. Christianity has played a pivotal part for the present position of Naga women. The church also play important role for the welfare of the women. Today women in the Naga society lead a different life as compared to the past. Women are enjoying a better status in the society because of Christianity and western education and with the change of time; there has been a shift from agricultural to non agricultural occupation. Now, Naga women are IAS officers, engineers, lawyers, academicians, etc. Even in politics the Naga women are actively participating. According to National Human Development Report 2001 sex ratio in Nagaland was 909, female literacy was found to be 61.46 %, girls enrolment in school was 68.2%, women in agriculture was found to be 38.2% and in service sector it was found to be 90.8%. Female literacy rate improved from 61.46% in 2001 to 76.69% in 2011 which is higher than the national average of 70.04% (*Census of India 2011, Provisional Population Totals, Paper 2, Vol. 1*). Agriculture is the main occupation of the people as 90 per cent of the populations are engaged in agriculture and rice is the staple food. Area under *jhum* cultivation is about 73,000 hectares and terraced cultivation is

61,000 hectares during 1993-94. 'The Nagas were once famous as head hunters. Animists until the arrival of the missionaries, they



believed that the soul was lodge in the head and that decapitation was the only way to release it from the body' (Sajani, 2001). Nag women are also traditionally known for weaving, handloom and handicrafts.

2. ROLE OF NGO FOR THE RIGHT OF WOMEN

In Kohima the highest number of NGOs (40.9%) was established from 1995 to 2000 and only 1 NGOs (4.5%) was established in Kohima before 1980. There is an increasing trend in the establishment of the NGOs in Kohima from 1980 to 2000. The NGOs of the present study are operating their activities at different level namely, state level and district/local level. About 59.1 per cent NGOs are operating at district/local level and 9 NGOs (40.9%) are operating at the state level. Highest number of the women activities are operating in local level i.e., their activities are confined to one or more villages or within the Kohima town. The NGOs are organizing their programmes and activities in rural and urban areas of the district. The NGOs included in the study are not operating at national or international level as the NGOs are mostly small women society (*mahila samiti*). In the study area out of 22 NGOs there are only 63.6 per cent NGOs which have been particularly working for the right of women by organizing different activities and programmes for the women like the awareness on decision making, rights, status, health and hygiene, etc.

Data for the study is collected on different activities/ programmes from the selected NGOs for a period of five years, i.e., from 2007 to 2012. For data processing activities undertaken by the NGOs for the welfare of women are categorized as educational,

vocational training/ income generation activities, relief and welfare services and others activities. The executive member and personnel of the NGO have given multiple responses. In educational activities it is found that 20 NGO (90.9%) have implemented awareness generation programme on domestic violence, health, hygiene, rights and status. About 86.3 per cent of the NGOs have implemented the condense course of education programme under which free education is provided to school drop-out girls and illiterate women at primary level.

The study NGOs are undertaking various vocational or income generating activities like artificial flower making (86.3%), beautician (81.8%), cutting, embroidery, knitting and tailoring (81.8%), handicrafts (40.9%), preserved food items (40.9%), toy making (86.3%) and weaving/ handloom production (63.6%). The activities are generally organized with the funds of the NGOs, which benefitted the whole community. About 63.6 per cent of the NGOs are found to participate in social issues like women rights, violence against women, agitation against corruption, peace in the state, etc. The NGOs to organize sports and cultural activities are 68.2 per cent. The NGOs also plans to take up activities in the future, 15 NGOs (68.2%) mentioned to continue the same activities, 4.5 per cent wants to upgrade their schools and 27.3 per cent plans to take up new activities like socio-economic programmes and vocational activities. The NGO of the study is found to be involved in fighting for the rights of women due to which there is 33 per cent reservation of women in municipal and town council election due to the effort of the NGO like Naga Mother Association. The government of Nagaland endeavours towards



empowerment and upliftment of Naga women has already enacted the Nagaland State Women Empowerment Policy 2007, Nagaland Municipal Act 2006 and Domestic Violence Act 2005 for the protection of women from domestic violence.

3. CONCLUSION:

NGOs in Kohima district of Nagaland is found to be small organization at the grass root level operating in rural and urban areas of Kohima district Nagaland. The NGOs are organizing different programmes for the women who are devoid of education. The studied NGOs are trying to educate the women and make the poor women to know about the different rights in the society. The human right activities and awareness generation programmes are undertaken by the NGOs. Through the different activities the NGOs try to make the uneducated women aware of the different rights given by the constitutions of India. Thus, from this paper it can be concluded that small NGOs at the state level are trying their effort to make the women are of their rights and at the same time through the different activities they are educating the women.

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