International Journal of Applied Social Science
Volume 6 (4), April (2019) : 899-905
Received : 14.02.2019; Revised : 28.02.2019; Accepted : 14.03.2019

RESEARCH ARTICLE
ISSN : 2394-1405 (Print)

Unanimity of Traditional and Modern Society of Naga Women with Special Reference to Political Participation

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ABSTRACT

Women have been subjugated in all corners of the world in one way or the other with the phase of time. In most societies, the norms and values of gender often favor men. The Naga Patriarchal society is no exception. Women in Nagaland have been neglected to a great extend. They have been trying to win a seat in the state legislative assembly for more than fifty years but are yet to achieve it. The objective of this study is to interpret how the traditional (Customary Law) and modern institutions impact the voting behavior of the people towards women candidates. It also examines other reasons behind the failure of Naga women in the electoral arena. It also determines why and how the women in Nagaland have failed to hold even a single seat in the legislative assembly, in spite of its rapid progress in education and its increased presence in social and economic leadership. It emphasizes on the reason behind why there are only few women candidates in elections in spite of great turnout of women voters. Historical, Narrative and Ethnographic methods have been used and further analyzed through Feminist perspective. Behind the narrow perception of the society towards women's leadership, maternal challenges, domestic responsibilities, economic barriers, and women's unwillingness to run for elective office are some of the challenges and problems towards women participation in politics.

Key Words : Gender equality, Subjugation, Customary Law, Political Rights, Patriarchy, Gender Justice

INTRODUCTION

Gender is a universal word from which status differences arises, unlike sex, which is biological in concept. It generally refers to the social role of men and women, boys and girls as well as the relationships among them in society in a given place or time. A biological difference creates different needs and capacities for men and women but does not justify the unequal social status or rights (Sen, 2002). Women have always had lower status than men and this gap differs across the different cultures and time. In most of the societies around the world, the norms and values of gender often favour men and boys. Men are usually provided with more power and status, a stronger voice in decision making, better access to resources, bigger personal liberty while on the other hand girls and women are given the responsibilities for keeping and maintaining households. Women have struggled for centuries especially for political rights.

The Naga society suffers from an illness of Patriarchy since time immemorial. With the arrival of British, the living conditions of the Nagas changed. They converted from Animism to Christianity and also formal education was given. When we compare it to the past years, a good number of people are now engaged in professional and modern works but the status of women is yet to reach its zenith. Indeed, the women have achieved in many fields like education, social status and also in economy except in politics. Since 1963, after Nagaland achieved its statehood till 2018 only 19 women have contested for the Assembly Elections. Unfortunately, none of them could succeed to get a seat in the Assembly. The political decision body is fully dominated by men because the women have been

How to cite this Article: Shijo, Averi (2019). Unanimity of Traditional and Modern Society of Naga Women with Special Reference to Political Participation. *Internat. J. Appl. Soc. Sci.,* **6** (4) : 899-905.

excluded to a great extend. A country is fully democratic only when every citizen enjoys equal opportunity to make decisions, work and live. When we then look into the participation of women in terms of voting it is increasingly high. Statistics of the past years shows that women have been actively participating in casting their votes. Nevertheless, casting of votes alone is not a complete political advancement or empowerment.

One's curiosity arises on how women in Nagaland failed to earn even a single seat till date despite its good performance in other social aspects as well as high turnout of women voters. The customary law of the Nagas is the first critical setback to be looked into with regard to women inequality in Nagaland. The traditional value system of the Nagas plays a dominant role towards the patriarchal nature. A raging violence took place in Nagaland against the 33 per cent reservation given to Women in the Urban Local Bodies, which sets the example of the attitude of people towards women empowerment in the political field. The different Naga tribal organisations stood up against the Naga women who were availing the reservations in the elections of the Urban Local Body. They supported the traditional Naga Society with the intention to preserve the philosophy of an absolutely egalitarian society i.e. the Customary Law. Looking back to the histories of the Nagas, it has a lot to tell us about how women were treated by the society which is affecting the women even today in various fields.

The first impediment is cultural upbringing. Few studies have shown that the cultural attitudes and attitudes hostile to women's participation in politics as the second most challenging factor for women politicians. The Naga Customary Law has adversely affected the perception of the society towards women as they are in favour of men. The traditional institutions have never accepted the rights of women as the principal decision maker. One of the major loopholes on Naga society is the resistance towards women participation in the decision making body. It has become a centre of debate and controversy in various platforms because of the fact that traditional values are standing in the way of development and also that traditional values are losing its importance.

Naga Customary Law:

The Naga Customary law is an unwritten law consisting of moral order to maintain integrity and solidarity in the village. According to the law, chief of the village is always a man who happens to be the eldest in the village. He takes care of the village matters along with the other selected male members. They take care of the diplomatic relations and also settle various cases relating to crimes and disputes. AS no women were allowed to be a member of the council, women could never perform any of those important activities. The Naga customary law overlooked women to participate in most of the important functions. They had no place in decision making body. "In the traditional polity and administration activities of the Ao system the status of women is overshadowed by their male counterparts". (Temjensosang, 2015). No matter how high the status of a woman was, she was never allowed to participate in the administration of the village council (Christina, 2015). The basic principle in the differentiation of roles was that a man is a provider and a woman is a homemaker. In terms of administration, the Naga women were not a part of it. They were considered incompetent of holding or running a council as they could not make decisions on their own nor could they perform various rituals and stunts and was confined only to their homes and fields. Even when it comes to public debates or discussions women were not allowed to participate even to the extent that they not allowed to give any advice or suggestions pertaining to the functions of the village. It was so strict that men would go deep into the jungles to discuss the matters of the village where no women or children could hear them. In the end the women were always compelled to follow what the men folk directs them to do. The women are grouped in the category of a minor irrespective of their status, age and qualifications. The highly learned and elderly women were also grouped in the same category of a child. The usage "What does these women and children know about?" Was being commonly used by men. It has two intentions, the first is when the wanted to support or protect a woman and the other as a way of insult. This usage shows how the women were not given great expectations to perform in society especially because of their feminine nature.

Patrilineal family system was strictly followed. The line of descent passes strictly from a father to a son (Talitemjen, 2015). A woman is a part of her father's family but after her marriage her identity changes to that of her husband which is why she is not considered as a heir with the fear that the wealth will be passed down to the other clans. Therefore only the son is allowed to inherit the property .According to the law, a woman cannot inherit any immovable property and is limited to only movable

property like her attires and personal belongings. Women were expected to work hard only for their husbands which is the very reason why the women had no idea about the workings and functions of a village. A woman greatest obligation as a wife is to start a new family and therefore if she fails to bore a child, she loses the respect from her family as well as the other people. If she gives birth to a son she is been given great honour and joy. Giving birth to a daughter is also not disregarded but given lesser attention. The women were never rewarded praises or entitled with fame or title. It was always her father, brother and husband who enjoyed such privileges and honour. Folklores and songs also talked a lot about the incidences or glories of the past. Hardly any song was sung for praising women, except for love and struggle songs. Songs of honour and greatness were composed mostly for a man who was a warrior or who had great wealth and values.

Economically, agriculture had always been the soul method of survival for the Nagas. Every family was independent for its own needs and survival through cultivation. The women is said to have contributed more because while she worked equally with men in the field, she also had to work at home in which men did not help much. But even in this case, the women were not given any credit. Thou women did not have any rights over the possession of fields and lands yet they dedicated themselves to farming in order to feed their family.

The Nagas also erected Megaliths which usually indicated religious purposes as well as for ones glorification. These stones speak a lot about the status of women in the past. Women were not allowed to go even near the stones as it was considered a taboo. They were not allowed to partake in the feast after the stones have been erected. There have also been instances where rich and powerful women were being humiliated or consented when they wanted to erect stones on their behalf.

The Customary Law of the Nagas have neglected the women tremendously. It has failed to bring justice and equality to women. The women have been bought up with the delusion that if they want to be taken as a worthy maiden they should always listen to their elders and brothers and that they should speak less and listen more. The cultures as well as the various values of the past Naga society possess huge drawbacks to the achievement of women even till date. According Mills, the customs of the Nags is the sheet-anchor of his little sheep of state, and trivial breaches of customs often causes breaches because it is believed that if one custom is broken all the other customs will be disregarded. This gives us a reason why they would strictly adhere to the unwritten customary laws passed down by the ancestors. It is no doubt that women enjoy a considerable amount of rights and privileges yet when we compare their status with that of the status of men there is big disparity between them.

Participation of women in Political Parties:

Now taking a turn towards the modern institution like Political Parties, it still continues to portray the same picture towards Naga women. Political parties are the basic structure in a democratic country. The most common road to elected office is through political parties. In Nagaland there are parties' *viz.,* Naga People Front, Bharatiya Janata Party, Congress and National Democratic Progressive Party etc. All these parties have always been under the leadership of men who have the majority control over the functioning of the party. There are also wings especially for women which have set up to bring women enthusiast into the political arena but sadly have been given the least concerns by the party workers. Till today it has been observed that there has not been even a single documented case of political parties promoting and empowering of women in the political arena in Nagaland. Excluding the women wing in the party, there is not even a single woman holding higher post within the party. The women are usually given the traditional post such as secretary of women wing within the party which have hardly any access to the inner core of the party. These wings have been setup just for the purpose of gaining women votes. Even the selected few women in the parties are hardly given any official works for the parties, they are been called to the meeting just to prepare meals or tea for the rest of the attendees. The people believed that the higher level jobs required men effort and power therefore they are not comfortable or confident to offer important works to women. There have also been instances where the women themselves have not been able to come out of their comfort zones and are more comfortable being under the supervision of men or any higher authorities. All these ultimately shows that women are not given the due respect and attention in terms of decision making even in political parties. The political parties are yet to accept the fact that women have a significant role to play in parties as leaders, candidates and as elected representatives. Selection of a candidate in a party is also an important part. Women

have always been given the last preference. The selection of a woman candidate in Nagaland election is entirely dependent upon male politicians as in, whether there is a capable male candidates if not it can be given to a woman. The tickets for most women candidates are being denied by the party on account of their non ability to win the male dominated political arena. They are been given the ticket where the party has less chance in winning. The women who have contested the election in the past years were mostly independent candidates. It is disheartening to see that women are not taken seriously in political parties because it is only through the parties that the people are going to be influenced and motivated to vote for women candidates.

Almost every democratic country in the world tries its best to achieve a good representative government as the saying goes –'one man/woman, one vote'. The choice of casting a vote solely depends on the voter himself/ herself. So, does this mean that the voters in Nagaland are not comfortable voting for women candidates or are there any other determinants over the voting behaviour of the people? Women have failed to gain sympathy from the voters in general and also from the women voters themselves.

The answer to that would be that of the voting behaviour of the people. There are a number of institutions which plays the key role in influencing an individual to vote for a particular candidate or political party. A very common practise among the Nagas is that women rarely vote against the decisions of the patriarch of the family. Therefore, usually the choice to vote for a candidate often depends on the decision of the male members in the family. Further, in rural areas, village leader's act as a pertinent influencer in the voting behaviour of both men and women. This practise highly effects the voting margin of women against male candidates as most people are yet to accept women leadership and that such attitudes are being applied even in the village council meeting where women have no place in the decision making body. It is not only in the village councils where the women are being neglected from the higher positions, it is witness even in Naga Hoho which is considered as the apex decision making body for the Nagas as it represents the whole of the Naga tribes.

Perception of the voters towards women candidates:

Considerations of kinship ties and clans also play an important role as a determinant of voting. This is seen in villages where clans/kinship holds a strong sense of togetherness. A person tends to vote and give support to his own clan or relatives as a sign of respect to brotherhood or bloodline. This very practise affects the voting pattern towards a women candidate since they hold a very strong aura to uphold their brotherhood, they become very preservative of how a woman can stand on their behalf. Thus women are not very much encouraged to contest for elections or she is often been discouraged by what the outcomes will be.

There are also other various deterrents to why Naga women are likely invisible in the political society. A woman often comes across specific and practical challenges when it comes to any participation outside her household. Some of them are maternal challenges, domestic responsibilities, economic barriers, and women's unwillingness to run for elective office. All these somewhat prevent women from achieving the practical status comparing to their male counterpart.

Considering how a Naga woman is being portrayed in the society *i.e.* a good Christian woman, is one that follows the traditional values. A conservative girl is always taken as reliable one, hence most women prefer been inside the cocoon because she will be respected and loved in the society only if she accomplishes these things.

Over the years of election in Nagaland, the ethics and values have deteriorated to a great extend. Corruption such as bribery, promising a person a good job, persuading someone for a luxurious future and also other violent crimes like capturing a booth or taking away the voter card of the people are some of the common scenes seen during the elections in Nagaland. Therefore coming back to being a good Christian woman, it is not advisable for a woman to be a part of a corrupted setting which involves an aggressive and combative culture. The women are often caged around by moral and religious values which in reality have been misinterpreted to a great extend.

Looking at the factual reality of election, many women find the political arena unwelcoming and hostile which overall hampers their political status (Pujari, 1994). The characters of women candidates are often been assessed with the double standards of morality (Jamir, 2008). When any women show any sign of interest or stand up for contesting in the elections, firstly their morals and characters are subjected to scrutiny by the political parties as well as the electorate in general but it is not the same for the male politicians. This attitude of double

standards towards women results from the patriarchal roots of Naga society that seek to keep the women as an inferior being. Stigmatization of the role of women is a major obstacle, coupled with lack of support from the political party, whether financially or in terms of canvassing. Naga women get the maximum customary bindings and less customary privileges (Tatongkala, 2014). As long as this practise continues without positive attitudes towards progress and change, Naga women will always have a lower social status.

Gender role stereotyping is still highly prevalent in the society where man and woman are accustomed by society to play their specific roles and this attitude is quite prominent when it comes to politics. Naturally, participating in politics is viewed as an activity related to public arena and such activities which are publicly held are assigned to male members of the society and female members are been assigned to roles centred around the family and private life. In the 33 per cent reservation protest, a member of an organisation commented "Naga women work at home and in the field whereas men go to war and make decisions. That's Naga culture for centuries and we won't allow anyone to destroy our culture". Now, if you ask a Naga man especially from rural areas about women taking leadership roles, they will always give a sceptical answer about how women are bound to work only at home because of their physical traits as compared to man. Most people have this mindset because in earlier days most of the important works required man power and strength unlike today's working environment.

It is not only the men who are cynical about women leadership but also women themselves who are acting as a barrier towards equality. These are mainly because there are still many women who are not educated. Most of the older women are more conservative and tend to discourage the younger women from standing up in front of the crowd.

Economic consideration is another factor that harshly affects the participation of any candidate in the election. However women in particular face this obstacle because they have to start from scratch as most of them do not have financial stability. According to a report by the Women's Environment and Development Organization, women candidates face high financial problems for election campaign. Women have less money as compared to men as they do not have much access to powerful and moneyed networks. Elections campaign in Nagaland plays an important role hence the requirement for finances. Considering the fact that the elections in Nagaland is among the most expensive in the country, only few women run for elections because of financial constraints and lack of support from families. They often find their efforts to break into politics marginalized by the failure of the parties to support their viability as candidates (Amer, 2015). The women in Nagaland are making great economic progress and improvements but it still has a long way to go. The Customary law supports the passing down of property only from a father to son which is practise even today in most of the cases. Inheriting a property is not only about gaining status but is a direct or indirect means of production where income and subsistence can be managed like the right to credit, mortgages and other loans. And all these benefits become inaccessible to Naga women because of their lack of security in the form of property or other immovable assets (Amer, 2015). This practise has gravely affected the economic background of most women as she is bound to gain properties and riches only with her hard earn money which most Naga women are yet to achieve. Adding up to it, most Naga families are not very comfortable to finance a woman candidate because they feel that it would be a waste as they as also aware of the fact that women have hardly any place in the political arena.

When it comes to the resistance of women in any decision making body, it rests in the mind-set of both men and women there women are also partially accountable for their failure in the political arena. There are still just a handful of Naga women who are taking the initiative to empower women and take up the status of a leader. Some of them are either not confident enough to come out of the cocoons as they are still very much attached with the norms and cultures the have grown with. They do not want to go against the notion of ' a good Naga woman'. Some are of the view that it is better for the men to lead in politics and other spheres of life as the traditional patriarchal cultural system is still deeply imbibed in the minds of Naga women. Naga women were mostly invigorated by their parents to become economically independent and also most women study hard as they know that they have no property rights. She is barely encouraged to become a leader or take decision for the society.

A woman is also naturally a child bearer of the family. Therefore maintain a household and looking after a child or children becomes the must responsibility for a

mother which is why women tend to stay away from other activities even if they are interested. The same goes to mother's participation in politics, They have very little time to engaged themselves in electoral activities because of their primary role as mothers and wives.

Lack of political efficacy is also another concern among women. Political efficacy is a subjective political competence of women that leads to effective participation. It is very important for a woman to believe in one's political competence so that more will be encouraged to participate in the political affairs of the society. The lack of political efficacy among Naga women has led to the feeling of indifference and disillusionment, alienating them from the political process. According to a study conducted on one hundred and fifty Naga women, only ten per cent believed that they were contributing positively to the political process through their active participation. The electoral process in Nagaland is surrounded by muscle power and money power, therefore the women feel uncomfortable by such typically masculine representation and thus alienating the women from the political process, instigating their perception of political inefficiency and helplessness. The lack of political socialization among women stands as a big blocking stone for progress towards political participation.

Conclusion:

All those various restraints and deterrents have limited the participation of women in the political arena in one way or the other. It clearly speaks out the perception of Nagas towards women leadership. There still many people who are yet to understand that women have been ostracised in many way even if they were not mistreated directly. After analysing all these problems and glitches in the political and social behaviour of Nagas towards women we can forlornly say that it all comes down to the patriarchal system of the Nagas. "A truck to a tree"

On the positive side, many changes and progress has taken place in the Naga society. Most parents are now considering even the girls in terms of inheritance rights, they are also getting the same attention as guys in terms of education and also other extra – curricular activities. All these small changes will slowly change the mind-set of the people. The Naga customary law defines the identity of the Nagas, there one cannot expect the collective values of keeping Naga women out of the political arena to be resolved within a short period of time.

According to a study by UNICEF. It has been noted that cultural biases against women can be address through sensitization, education and public awareness. Therefore in order to convince the people about women's role in societies and politics, awareness campaigns and proper education should be provided. As for the women who are interested in politics but are being hold up just because of domestic responsibilities and obligations, solutions should be initiated so that they can balance their daily life with social and political activities. Initiating support system by providing good services and facilities to look after their children will ease the work for women.

Government should also take up the initiatives of providing women with early money (required Funds for campaign by a candidate). This will greatly increase their chances to raise more money and thereby increasing their chances of winning.

At the midst of all these changes and progress, women should continue to contest in elections no matter if they win or lose as it will encourage more women to participate. In demand for the various opportunities for women, a woman should not just fight to win her rights but also prove that her right is worthy to be given.

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