

Women: Trailblazers of the Lushai-Hills

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ABSTRACT

One of the primary indicators of a progressive society lies in its democratic character displayed by the principles of equality, liberty and the rights enjoyed by the citizens under the backdrop of good governance. The status of women has remained a crucial subject of concern in the context despite modernisation. The Indian sub- continent with its multi - lingual and uniquely diverse social fabric portrays an intriguing status of women who despite their greater mobility and liberty compared to women from the plains, have actually been accorded a lowly position both socially and legally. The paper tries to highlight the status of women from the tribal Lushai community, now Mizoram, who for ages having borne the consequences of the overarching patriarchal social structure, finally created a space for themselves by reforming the customary law that had denied them the right of inheritance. The arduous struggle in attaining the historic victory has been a milestone in empowering women from an underprivileged society, that too tribal in character. Lushai women have thus sent ripples across many such communities which need real democratisation by abolishing discrimination, augmenting the process of global justice.

Key Words : Governance, Equality, Modernisation, Lushai, Discrimination, Justice

INTRODUCTION

Women: Trailblazers of the Lushai-Hills:

The degree of progress in any society has often been reflected by the status of women therein. Indeed the belief that educating a woman is equivalent to educating an entire family, goes a long way towards building up a progressive world at large.

Unfortunately however, due to biological and social constraints, female members have always been relegated a secondary position world over. The only period when women were treated with dignity and esteem, was the Vedic era, as per evidence in the Rig- Veda, the source of Hindu Philosophy (Kesang Degi, "Changing status of women in Mongpa Society", in Lalneihzovi, Changing Status of women in North-Eastern States, Mittal Publications, 2009, p.11).

However, it was the suppression and subjugation of women in family, communities and societies which over a period engendered the cause of claims for parity, recognition and rightful place with regard to her tireless of not only raising children but providing all comfort and necessities of leading prosperous lives. The most difficult challenge before the feminist- movement has been the age- old

patriarchal social - system, whether in the western or the eastern part of the globe. Ultimately the 1980s did open the floodgates for the feminist protagonists voicing gender - justice not only regarding theory- building, but also in analysing concepts and interpretations from the feminist perspective, thereby adding richness and making social sciences wider in scope.

Interestingly the voice for gender- justice did precede the modern movements but in the form of protests and resistance not in an organised manner. Quite often such movements or demonstrations sprang against urban background considering mobilisation and awareness as compared to rural or peripheral areas. However in countries like India, it was always the peripheries which became the centres of mass- mobilisation, be it the indigo planters of Champaran or the Santhal uprising against atrocities of the British rule, or even the Chipko and Appiko movements for protecting the environment against developmental- destruction. Women have displayed active role in all such movements, whether in colonial or post- colonial era. Associated primarily with child - bearing and rearing, bound within home and hearth, female in every social system have been overtaken by the overarching patriarchal social structure that spread its tentacles in various spheres of human life.

Ultimately, the flame of resistance did ignite in terms of gender sensitisation, seeking parity between the masculine and feminine. The process of surmounting multiple impediments in achieving the goal of equity has been particularly complex within the tribal communities of far-flung hilly areas where rigid customary laws rooted in the patriarchal lineage have long been prevalent, marginalising women in many ways.

Tribal women have largely been portrayed as simple, unsophisticated, illiterate, lacking refined behaviour, compared to the urban ladies. However, women of the north- eastern part of India present a different picture, quite forward, open, liberal and progressively modern.

The region has been home to innumerable tribes and sub-tribes with multi- ethnic origin, having migrated to India from the neighbouring China, Burma, now Myanmar and Bangladesh, all belonging to the Tibeto-Burman race.

This part of the Indian subcontinent differs from the rest in being ethnically diverse while other parts represent linguistic diversity. Geographically the northeast is connected with the mainland only by 4% of land or the chicken- neck, a narrow corridor of eighty kilometres, while 96% of the region's borders are shared with Myanmar, China, Bangladesh and Bhutan (Sanjoy Hazarika, "Writing on the Wall: Reflection on the North East", Penguin Books, India, 2008, p.9).

Comprising of eight states, namely, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura, the region has long been a sensitive one, being vulnerable to frequent inflow migrants from across the borders. Of all these states, Mizoram, formerly known as the popular Lushai Hills, represents a unique amalgamation of a homogenous culture despite its heterogeneous component of multi - ethnic composition. One of the last of India's frontier states governed by the British, Mizoram stands out with certain unique features like having an egalitarian social fabric with 98% of its population having embraced Christianity under the evangelising activities of the missionaries since the colonial era.

While rest of the country is characterised by caste- factor, this state is multi- ethnic but homogenised under the common identity of ' Mizo', imparted by the British administrators. Mizoram has had the highest literacy-rate in entire NER and ranked second till 2014, after Kerala, now surpassed by Lakshadweep. Besides, the zo community, as it is known, has been the only tribal belt in the north-east to have a script of its own, developed by the two pioneers Rev. Lorraine and Rev. Savidge, missionaries from the west. Again, Mizoram had long been categorised as an 'excluded area' and still comes under the 'inner- line' permit, nevertheless its socio- cultural component

makes it an inclusive area considering its essentially marginalised rather tribal content.

The name of Lushai Hills is a derivative of Lusei, one of the many tribes of which Mizos have been the descendants, in view of a renowned historian, Rev. Liangkhaia. In course of time the term underwent distortions and was pronounced as Lushai by the British rulers (Lalrintuanga, 2009 p. 28). Indeed Mizo is a collective name given to all the tribes that had migrated from the Chin Hills of Burma, an effort of the colonial rulers towards imparting a common identity by integrating the multi- ethnic group of people in a single strand.

The objective of the paper is to highlight the long- arduous struggle of the zo women in elevating their status, which, for ages remained subjugated, despite modernisation and economic independence. A glimpse of the public places of the state may simply create an impression of women being profoundly dominating since majority of the business enterprises and shops are owned and run by the women, however a deeper look into their actual status would reveal deprivation not only from participating in public gatherings but also from decision-making whether within family or outside.

The seeds of change:

Mizo women have often been described as ‘crab’ or a ‘rotten fence’ without any religion, which can be changed anytime, as per the age- old local expression (Lalneihzovi, 2009). The expression is enough to project the lowly status of female members of the marginalised community of Mizos. Despite having been the frontrunner , domestic as well as outdoor, collecting water , fuel wood and other articles to run her family apart from running petty or big business, in most cases, Mizo women could not enjoy the liberty of spending her earnings in her own way.

The arrival of the British brought about a revolutionary change in the mind-set, perceptions, life and activities of the indigenous, rustic, pagan and nomadic highland people. Indeed the process of modernisation and the idea of formal education introduced by the colonial administration, turned out to be a breather, particularly for women of the society.

The western concepts of modern liberal ideas based on liberty, equality, democracy and rationalism brought a sea- change in the attitude and conduct of the natives, replacing their age- old fear of the unknown with hope, reasoning, knowledge and awareness. Infact, the process began with rapid evangelisation, one of the significant aspects of the missionary activities intended to spread the new religion through the ‘ gospel’ . The western liberal aspects of Christianity emphasised the need to educate women for their emancipation but also to make them economically independent through vocational training, as part of the programme. Thus, one of the initial schools for educating girls came in 1904 (Sinha and Lalrinchhani, 2013, p.37).

However it was not an easy task to pull out girls against the wishes of the overarching hierarchy of patriarchal traditions, more so due to the legacy that tied down females with the routine domestic chores. Nonetheless, the initial seeds of empowering the demure and suppressed members of the society had been sowed with amazing dedication of the missionaries. Formal education included knowledge, awareness as well as activities like weaving, knitting, healthcare, sewing, nutrition and of course childcare, thus an entire package with the objective of making women self-sufficient and capable of serving both family as well as the society. Besides, the Christian values inculcated among the superstitious ritualistic people, a sense of hygiene, cleanliness and a sense of wellbeing.

Economic independence with salaried jobs went a long way infusing a sense of self- esteem among these women liberating them from moral, social and psychological subjugation. Today not only do Mizo women constitute highest female work - participation with 47% record, compared to other states of the region but also feature as one with highest literacy among females of the NER.

Thus female literacy rate of Mizo women records more than 89%, compared to 70.26% in Manipur, 76.11% in Nagaland, and the lowest in Arunachal Pradesh, being 57% (Census of India, 2011).

The great transformation:

The arrival of the British in the region brought a fresh breath of life through the wave of modern western ideas of rationalism, commercialisation, emancipation and economic advancement based on the Christian value-system. The foundation of modernization was laid essentially by the Christian missionaries with the introduction of formal education. The impact was deeply felt in terms of changing not only the perception of the pagan, animistic and primitive local people but also their lifestyle. The concept of reasoning and knowledge helped in pulling out the tribal natives from the age- old darkness of pessimism and bigotry.

The influence of modernisation was indeed revolutionary in case of women folk, elevating their status from mere “crabs” and “rotten fence” as per the local analogy used for them into the most enterprising and capable members of the society with forty - seven percent of contribution to total work- participation in the state (Lalnehzovi, 2009, pp. 51,78).

Indeed the missionaries introduced formal education with a view to laying the background of civilizing the wandering natives which was meant to enhance the process of proselytization. Thus primary education served as the cradle for spreading Christianity, adding refinement and betterment to the content of rustic hill dwellers. Within a short period the youth displayed a lot of enthusiasm towards evangelising activities followed by rapid spreading of the gospel. Eventually the schools established by the missionaries started producing scholars and teachers from among the local people, keen on spreading education through the gospel throughout the entire region.

The two eminent Welsh missionaries who continued the task of educating the tribal population along the path of pioneers, Lorraine and Savidge, were D.E. Jones and Edwin Rowlands. Needless to say that the most significant contribution of the mission- schools was the introduction of the Roman script as the Mizo alphabet, which the community had never known earlier. Such was the way in which the foundation of literacy had been laid, imparting a common identity to the pluralist character of the tribal community. As per record of census 2011, rate of literacy males shot up to seven hundred and thirty - six, while females numbered twenty - five in the hills as per census of 1901.

Mizo academicians like Prof. Lianzela have attributed emancipation and empowerment of the womenfolk of the community to the dedicated preaching of the Gospel, by the missionaries.

The task had not been easy in a male- dominated society as stepping out to attend school at the cost of daily household chores meant huge loss and inconvenience for every family since every girl had to fulfil the requirements of the family members ensuring all-round comfort.

Lives of women in the Lushai Hills had been one of hardwork, with no time to rest, waking up early and the last one to retire late at night. Household chores included maintenance of piggeries, hand- spinning and weaving, and spending hours in the fields husking paddy and of course fetching water from distances of the mountainous stretch. The long suppression of women and their laborious activities within the overarching patriarchal norms sometimes ignited explosive events demanding gender - justice.

According to folk- tales, the Mizo princess Laltheri, revolted against the rigid tribal law prohibiting socialisation with common people. Not only did she marry a commoner but also publicly expressed her disgust against victimization by the male dominated customs (Ruth VL Rinpuii, in “Women in Mizo Society”, Harendra Sinha and B Lalrinchhani, 2013, pp.17-21).

The process of modernisation introduced by the foreign rule by way of integrating the vast and complex ethnic groups under a centralised regulated system of administration for the first time was a significant step, followed by a common nomenclature of 'Mizo' as the identity for the entire community, and the last instrument was formal education through Western - Modern Christian values. All three acted as medicines not only generating awareness among the ignorant nature dwellers, but also acted as the homogenising factor, eventually emancipating the marginalised population.

However, the process once begun with the painstaking efforts of the western pioneers of change, spread with rapidity in remote areas of the hills too, much due to the benefits attached to the act of evangelisation. Apart from free medical assistance, education and vocational training for girls, salaried jobs within the religious organisation ensured a promising life to the unsophisticated local people so long unaware of material comfort based on commercialisation.

The new religion and its interaction with the tribal forms of expressions like emotional highs, music and dancing offered a new dimension to the socio- cultural transformation. The sobering effect of peaceful gatherings in church services added a touch of refinement to the wild passionate rusticity. Indigenous writers Malsawmliana and Ralte emphasise the charitable aspect of the Christian value system in enhancing the growing aspirations of the forest dwellers (Malsawmliana and Ralte, 2011, p.200)

The close connection between propagation of the new religion and rising level of literacy in the Lushai Hills imparted a separate position to the district compared to rest of NER. Thus Professor Lalrintluanga traces the growth in literacy- rate of Mizoram from 1901 at 0.93, eventually measuring 3.98 in 1911, 19.48 by 1941, 53.79 in 1971, 82.27 in 1991, finally rising upto 88.80 in 2011 (Lalrintluanga, 2009, p35).

Not only has the state claimed highest rate of literacy in the NER but also one where women outnumber their male counterparts in most work-places. A survey undertaken by the Presbyterian Church highlights presence of sixty- two percent females in stone quarries, seventy- one percent in shops vegetable marts and restaurants, thirty- six percent in higher and middle level teaching and fifty- four percent in the government jobs (<http://news.webindia123.com/news/articles/India/20160308/2811827.html>).

Economic independence in organised as well as unorganised sectors have boosted the position of women equipping them with the weapon of fighting for their rightful place within the close- knit patriarchal tribal set-up. Women- organisations like the Mizo Hmeichhe Insuikhawm Pawl has been actively involved in the welfare activities of Mizo women and children seeking elevation of women in every aspect of life through various reform movements.

However, barring politics and the religious spheres, Mizo women have time and again exhibited their exceptional potential in the economic, professional and the socio- cultural arena. Since religion had a patriarchal influence, women could never hold the position of Upas' or church elders and were traditionally discouraged to participate in politics as well.

Nevertheless, their contribution has been remarkable in the socio - economic advancement of the state, largely displaying their empowerment and elevation of status in the society.

The ultimate change which has uplifted the status of the Lushai women, liberating her from the age old shackles of patriarchy, has been the recent reform in the customary laws of inheritance preceded by women's right to seek divorce.

The customary law of the tribal community had not permitted the right of property inheritance to female offsprings of the family, a crucial feature in keeping them subjugated, victimised and

oppressed. The trailblazing event took place in the year 2014 as per the declaration by Mizoram Gazette, Extra-ordinary, published by Authority, vol. xliii Aizawl 17/02/2014, Agra- Haryana 26/05/1936, issue no. 570. This has been a historic reform in transforming the status of the most modernised category of women considering the literacy rate, constituting forty- three percent of total work- force in the state, besides enhancing the process of inclusive growth in the socio-economic sphere.

However the real empowerment of the marginalised but forward women of the community would require the adoption and implementation of the seventy third and seventy fourth amendment acts by the state, the panchayati raj system or democratic decentralisation which would not only augment women participation and political representation but also intensify the ongoing process of emancipation, empowerment and further consolidation of the position of the backbone of every household, the girl child, wife and mother.

Frontrunners of sustainable development:

The Lushai women has made a significant contribution towards the process of sustainable development, as envisaged by the Earth Summit of 1992. The Rio Declaration redefined 'Development' to imply the process of advancement without depleting natural resources, or destroying the environment rather securing them for future generations too. Mizoram has had a rich tradition of weaving exclusive handloom with traditional patterns and every female member inherits the art from her mother to keep up the legacy. In course of time the handloom industry has not only fetched huge profits but also revived the industry which had nearly died due to various reasons. Revival of the sector not only brought life into the eco-friendly profession, but also generated employment in far-flung areas of the region, augmenting economic growth as well as safeguarding the rich heritage of the tribal art and creativity besides aiding women with extra income improving their living condition.

The handloom industry has been fetching more than fifty crores annually within the country itself. With the discovery of local zo-loom, micro, medium and small enterprises have been emerging in keeping with the motto of inclusive growth as per the Eleventh Plan of 2007-2012. An innovative feature of the booming handloom sector has been the growth of Cluster Enterprises, wherein few looms could yield huge productivity by engaging part - timers on shift duties, that too without much investment.

The two areas setting models for micro- entrepreneurship have been Thenzawl, part of Serchhip District and Zuangtui located in the outskirts of Aizawl. The Thenzawl Cluster, established in 1982 began with only four enterprises and eight looms which by 2010 turned into two hundred and five enterprises (Study by Rama Ramaswamy and N.V.R. Jyotikumar, Indian Journal of Gender Studies, sedme, vol 37, Number 3, pp.74- 85).

These cluster enterprises have not only resolved the problem of space, but also aided employment opportunities for women who could earn livelihood within their locality while taking care of family too. The micro enterprises have enhanced greater participation of women, generated employment among unlettered, downtrodden and even elderly women in different parts of the state, adding a new dimension to the idea of empowerment of the deprived sections of the marginalised.

Yet another emerging industry has been floriculture, a suitable sector since Mizoram has been blessed with a pleasant climate throughout the year. The growth of the corporate sector and the culture of celebrations, inauguration, festivities and grandeur have laid open the demand for certain flowers like the gladioli, anthurium, bird of paradise, periwinkles and carnations, exotic varieties to

adorn ceremonies. In fact the growing demand for such exclusive varieties have proved more promising at the international market, fetching better returns than cottage industry. One of the local businessmen had started off with distribution of seeds of Anthurium , employing about twenty-four women and by year 2004 Mizoram became the largest supplier of the exotic flower (Nixon, in Lalneihzovi, 2006, p48).

The Lushai women have thus carved out a niche for themselves, in their long journey of empowerment. Today they have successfully secured thirty- three percent reservation in the administration of village as well as the district- level municipality. Their trailblazing efforts in reforming the discriminating customary laws have brought home the dignity every female member deserves to attain the much required status and respectable position at the domestic as well as public spheres of life.

The historic move made by the Mizo women would always inspire other women across the nation and beyond borders, in not accepting defeat but create opportunities of gender justice for generation next. The neighbouring Nagaland has been swayed by the profound liberation of Mizo sisters in securing at last, their right of inheritance.

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