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THE STORY OF WOMEN IN THE NORTH EAST VERSUS INDIA : LESSONS TO BE LEARNT FROM EACH OTHER

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Abstract : It is believed that men and women share the same space, but in reality women are given a lower status in the society with respect to their male counterpart. The Northeastern Region of India is considered as a backward region in terms of growth in per capita income. However, there is a perception in common that the role and status of women in the Northeast regions is higher compared to the rest of India. This paper is trying to analyze the status of women in two of the Northeastern states, namely Sikkim and Manipur in terms of female participation in education, labor market, freedom of movement and political participation. An attempt has been made to study the status of women in the Northeastern region i.e., the states of Manipur and Sikkim in comparison to the rest of India. The indicators reveal that women have a very low degree of freedom of movement and low level of control over themselves in the Northeastern region. The present paper will analyze the status of women in the states of Manipur and Sikkim in comparison to India as a whole, and also attempt to review the aspects in which women from these two Northeastern states can influence the women of India. The study has used four basic indicators of development based on secondary data. The study elucidates that the Northeastern states are better off compared to the nation as a whole in terms of gender equality and status of women per se. However, the study will attempt to review the gender inequality within the two states of Northeast as inequality between women and men exists in the Northeastern region in spite of the presence of various matrilineal and matriarchal ethnic groups who by and large do not believe in sex discrimination. The study would however reveal that gender gap exists in terms of education, labor market, freedom of movement and political participation in the region. A large gender gap exists in political participation among the populations of the two states both at the levels of state and nation. The secondary data reviewed for the purpose of the present paper reveals that among Northeastern states, Manipur shows relatively lesser degree of gender inequality in terms of work participation, literacy and sex ratio; the situation is however different in Sikkim. Although Sikkim is considered as a much safer state compared to Manipur which further helps in evaluating the indicator which involves freedom of movement and political participation of women in the region. Thus, the study concludes with a question on how these two states can influence the gender dynamics of the country as a whole and also observes that access to education and employment are not the only enabling factors that guarantees gender equality. It primarily prescribes to change the mindset of the people in order to bring about gender equality in the Northeastern states and also in India as a whole.

Key Words : Struggle, Gender, Education, Inequality

Introduction

The Northeastern region of India, consisting of the seven states and the newly included state of Sikkim, faces not just political, economic and cultural marginalization but even emotional alienation from the so-called mainland of India. Every passing day witnesses scenes of violence enacted on its soil, undermining the already fragile texture of national consolidation in the region. The turn of the century has seen turbulence of increasing intensity, adversely affecting socio-economic development and political normalization. The withdrawal of the British was not the end of the dark tunnel for India as the future posed serious challenges. The Northeast region remained secluded for multiple factors and came to focus much later in the eyes of the policy-makers in India. The people of the Northeast were juxtaposed with a window to the so-called civilized world and at the same time confined to their own areas through devices like the Inner Line Regulations and later the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958. This part of India has been witnessing unacknowledged armed hostilities over the last 60 years between the State and indigenous people's armed opposition groups. In the recent past, there has been a suspension of civil rights and a veritable state of military rule existing without a let-up. The conflict-ridden states have given rise to disturbed law and order conditions which meant that social and economic systems are also continually disrupted, and the education and health care systems are not in a very good shape, if not entirely non-existent.

Political violence and armed conflict have been largely male domains, executed by men, whether as participants in the armed forces, guerrilla forces, paramilitary or peace keeping forces. This has resulted in literatures which are largely gender blind, with women's participation simply not visible. The lack of recognition of women's involvement during armed conflict whether as perpetrators or victims means that they are doubly discriminated in re-integration interventions for conflict-affected populations.

The present paper primarily focuses on the status of women in terms of educational attainment, their participation in the labor market, freedom of movement and political participation in Sikkim and Manipur in particular with reference to the rest of the country.

Political Scenario

In the category of small states, Sikkim was among the first three best performing states in the field of law and order, health and investment and has been doing well in terms of general well being of the people. Sikkim has recorded several significant gains in the human development indicators after merging with India as a 22nd state of Indian Union. Under the measurement of HDI (Human Development Index), the women of Sikkim have been given special place in GDI (Gender Development Index) and GEM (Gender Empowerment Measures) calculations. Women enjoy freedom and recorded significant gains in the race of overall human development. However, like in many parts of the world, they still live in an unequal world. In Sikkim, women enjoy relatively greater freedom than in other parts of the country. According to the census of India 1991, close to 38% of the women participated in the work force as against the national average of 20% (National Family Health Survey II for 1998-1999). The median age at marriage is 19.8 years, more than 3 years higher than the

national average of 16.4 years. Some 79% of women have access to money as against the national average of 60% and 28% in Nagaland. Married women (42%) do not need permission to visit friends and relatives; the proportion is 24% in India as a whole. Another striking feature of Sikkim is the absence of gender differentials along many indicators of human development. For instance, in 1998-99, 83.2% of boys and 82.6% of girls between 6 -17 years attended school. In contrast to unfavorable sex ratio in population as a whole, the number of women in Government employment is greater than men. They are more visible in public sphere in Sikkim than a norm for India and South Asia as a whole. One of the most important issues concerning Sikkim is that there has been no reported case of gender discrimination, inequality, sexual harassment, infanticide or dowry related death here.

The fact that in 1999-2000 the number of women headed houses in Sikkim rural areas (142 per thousand) was higher than national average, indicates not only the impact of migration but also the status accorded to women in the state. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Indian Constitution (1/3rd reservation in Panchayat is implemented) have ensured equal access and increased participation in political power structure of women. The Panchayat Raj Institution and local self Government, will be actively involved in the implementation and execution of the National Policy for women, at the grass roots levels.

The State government has taken some important decisions for the up-liftment of women in the state. The steps taken are : one woman MP out of two to represent in the parliament, two women MLA's out of 32 to represent in the State Assembly. Both the Central and the State government have introduced a number of schemes such as Mahila Samriddhi Yojana, Balika Samriddhi Yojana, Small Family Scheme and other women-specific welfare and empowerment programmes to promote women's welfare and their empowerment.

Within these favorable conditions, women empowerment has still not reached its desired direction and women still face unequal opportunities in a variety of spheres, namely, a woman is considered to be an asset in the household and commands a bride price but she has no right of inheritance. It is only when a daughter remains unmarried that parents customarily transfers some property to her. If a Sikkimese woman married a person, who is not a Sikkim subject holder, the husband and the off spring born of that marriage shall acquire no right in any immovable property which she may hold in Sikkim by virtue of Section IV of the Regulation. Since Sikkim has become a part of India, this law has now lost all its force and has no longer any field to operate. In the present day, the regulation has not yet been repealed by the legislature. On the contrary, women in Sikkim still remain largely involved in traditional and unpaid or meagerly paid economic activities mostly as agricultural labors and in lower rung of other activities as well. Girls are typically denied the opportunity to pursue higher studies/ education since it often involves moving out of the villages, districts and even the state. Socio-cultural and family considerations often deny women the opportunity to pursue employment outside the state.

Socio-Economic Conditions

As per the statistics, Sikkim's literacy rate of 69.68% (2001) is well above the national

average of 65.38% supported by the monthly expenditure of Rs. 960 per student. This is far above the all India average of Rs. 210 per student. In Sikkim, teacher/pupil ratio is 1:19 at the primary level which was good compared to all India ratio of 1:46 in 1995. Even though the state performs well on its Gender Development Index (GDI), the enrolment of girls is lower than that of the boys at all levels except in the middle school.

In the sphere of employment, Sikkimese rural women are fully engaged in agriculture and allied activities including small farm agriculture, livestock, food processing, gathering, small trading and vending. Women successfully diversify their farm activities such as poultry farming, animal husbandry, beekeeping and tailoring. In construction sites and factories, they provide cleaning, washing services, etc. Hence besides agricultural sector, they contribute a large workforce at par with men. More than 50% women are employed in agricultural sector as wage laborers.

The women in rural areas are either engaged in agriculture or allied activities making their potential for income generations more confined. This is further depressed by involving them in small activities like sowing, weeding, and cutting of fodder, harvesting and processing which earns a small value profit. Since the introduction of considerable mechanized farming in Sikkim, the demand for farm labor (constitutes mostly of women) has reduced affecting directly or indirectly both the opportunities for work and income of the rural women.

Sikkim shares a common gender division of labor as prevalent in almost all parts of India in maintaining their household and community activities, with the women attending their home and family responsibilities as wives, mothers and home maker, with a shared responsibility of child-rearing, shopping and community activities, etc.

Thus in Sikkim, women constitute nearly 47 percent of the total population. Sikkim is probably the only state in India where instances of infanticide or dowry-related deaths have not been reported. Women also play a major role in trading activities which allows them to participate in decision-making far more than in most other States in India.

The practice of polyandry among tribal communities could be one of the variables explaining the higher value attached to women. Similarly, local religious practice also plays a role in influencing the status of women. Women's work is an important underpinning of society and economy in Sikkim as it is elsewhere.

As already mentioned earlier, a woman is considered to be an asset in the household and commands a bride price, but she has no right of inheritance. Participation of women in economic activities is pretty high in Sikkim. The women, especially in the rural areas, are involved in agricultural operations from sowing to harvesting. It has been their responsibility traditionally, to collect fuel wood and fodder for the family, and fetch water from dharas (springs) in vessels which they carry in a doko (basket) on their backs. They are responsible for all domestic tasks including the caring for domestic animals. Women also work as paid agricultural laborers, construction workers, and take part in economic activities like selling of vegetables

in the market place. They contribute to the income of the family also through their traditional skills in spinning and weaving.

Traditionally there has been no discrimination against the girl child in Sikkim's society. Girls and boys are given equal status in the family. Unlike many other States, no female foeticide has been reported from Sikkim. Sex-determination tests are unheard of. Nevertheless, girls in Sikkim are underprivileged in terms of their education, early marriage and health.

The reasons for the slow spread of education among girls in Sikkim are, as else, poverty, social customs, negative parental attitudes, poor accessibility to schools and the non-availability of schools which have women teachers. The State Government is considering several measures to address these issues. These include the establishment of separate primary and junior high schools for girls, wherever there is a demand, and the expansion of facilities for higher secondary education in the exclusive girls' secondary schools at Gangtok, Deorali, Namchi and Gyalshing.

The introduction of free education in government schools in terms of books, uniform and mid-day meal up to the age of 5 years, have definitely attracted more and more girls to the schooling system. These benefits are extending to all the girls in a family, whereas in the case of boys, the benefits are limited to two per family.

Low participation of girls in education has a direct impact on their social chances and future prospects. This is reflected in the prevalence of early marriages, in both rural and urban areas, as well as in all the three communities, the Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Nepalis.

In rural Sikkim, 32 percent of the girls were married before they were 18 years and another 34 per cent got married by the time they were 20. This implies that 66 per cent (60 per cent in 1997) of the girls got married by the year they attained 20 in 1989. The average age of marriage for girls is 14-20 years, while for men it is between 18-25 years.

Women's Representation in the Government

The role of women's empowerment for a just society was highlighted in the Beijing Conference (1995). Sikkim has a tradition of collective decision-making by communities through the institution of the 'Dzumsa'. However traditional institutions do not witness a significant role for women. The empowerment of women however, has to be at the core of the state strategies and action.

Both the Central and State governments have introduced a number of programme, e.g., Mahila Samriddhi Yojana, Balika Samriddhi Yojana and the Small Family Scheme, to promote both women's welfare and their empowerment. Gender concerns have been addressed in the State through an array of women-specific welfare and empowerment programmes.

Though the stipulated one-third reservation for women in Panchayat has been fully implemented, in reality the situation is characterized by low participation in Panchayat meetings and surrogate representation. There is a need to encourage women members to meet separately and discuss major policy and development issues, as well as strategize them to tackle domestic violence. Gender issues that rose in Panchayat meetings mostly pertained to violence, such as

wife beating by an alcoholic male member and husband bringing home a second wife. These issues which are usually pushed under the carpet in other States are openly discussed in Sikkim, and it is an encouraging sign.

However, in the absence of either a comprehensive study on gender related issues in Sikkim or any gender audit of the development programmes of the State government, it is difficult to make a correct assessment of the situation of woman. In order to mainstream gender concerns into the core of development planning and action, public debate on gender issues need to be encouraged, with the involvement of media, NGOs, researchers and social activists, along with the government and international development partners. It is hoped that with the setting up of State Women's Commission, the agenda of gender equality will be placed at the centre of the State's development strategies.

Women of Sikkim over the years have changed significantly due to global flow of ideas and cultural interactions which is driven by communication, technological revolution, flourishing tourism and a cooperative society. At the same time, there is strong initiative from the state government in bringing change in the grass roots level to empower the women. The cooperative society in the form of SHG's which are the basic concept of western world are widely implemented by the state and accepted by the women community in general. There is inclusion of indigenous knowledge in preserving and promoting traditional culture and heritage which shows strong and positive trend towards empowerment among the Sikkimese women.

Women in the Northeast and Manipur, in particular, enjoy a unique status in society. Like most women, they perform the triple tasks of housework, agricultural and livestock labour and meet socio-cultural obligations of the family. Yet, they are socially visible outside the home front. Indeed, in the fields of education, health and work they are known to have done far better than their counterparts elsewhere.

Historically, women in this region played a major role in the affairs of governance, economy and civil society. There was an exclusive court for women called the 'pacha court', where the queen conducted the trials. Even in the king's court, where he was the ultimate authority, only a woman could convert his order of death penalty to life sentence.

Later the spate of invasions and conquests compelled the male members to leave their homes due to their involvement in the war. The void caused by their departure and the uncertainty of their return led the women to take upon themselves the task of bringing up children, taking care of their economy and ensuring that the social order was maintained. In 1904, the women of Manipur rose against the British political agent Lt.Col.Maxwell, who ordered the people of Imphal to supply teak wood from Kabaw valley for reconstructing the house of a British official. They forced their entry into the Residency, thus compelling the British to withdraw their order. In 1939, in protest against the British decision to export rice in connivance with the local traders which led to acute shortage of foodgrain, the women gheraoed the British Residency. This was the second ' Nupilan', a women's movement directed against the British.

In recent times, their activism has been demonstrated in social movements to combat drug abuse, alcoholism, child marriage, etc. The blatant forms of sexual discrimination that prevail in many other parts of the country are not found in Manipur. The discriminating practices are subtler in nature, though needless to say, this does not make them any less serious.

In terms of education, according to the 2001 figures, the male literacy rate increased to 77.87 per cent and that of female to 59.7 per cent while the overall rate remained at 68.87 per cent. Senapati and Tamenglong districts are traditional under performers in this respect. There has been a marked disparity between the male and female literacy rates, especially in the lower income groups. The achievements at the primary education level are almost diluted by the high rates of dropouts in the secondary and higher secondary levels. Manipur has the lowest dropout rate (43%), though there is a wide gap between girl and boy dropout rates. This is mainly attributed to household responsibilities and the high cost of education, which has barred girls from attending schools. By and large the education status of girls (in terms of their enrolment) is far from satisfactory.

Economy for Women

Manipuri women contribute substantially to the economic development of the state. A notable example of such an activity is the Ima-Keithel or an exclusive women's market. The only one of its kind, consists mainly of women vegetable vendors and cloth merchants who mostly sell their own products. The vendors are backed by strong organizations, which protect them from any harassment by the police authorities. Historically, it has played an important role in serving as a launching pad for the women's movement against colonial rule.

In the famous women's market, known as Nupi Keithel at Imphal, a large number of women from different parts of the valley engage in household economic activities. The period 1971-1991 saw a significant increase in the participation of women agricultural workers in the total workforce rising from 1.31% to 3.98%. In respect to the other services, their share raised from 0.76% in 1971 to 2.47 % in 1999. By and large, women are confined to lowly paid labor intensive jobs like paddy sowing, while more skilled jobs like ploughing and harvesting are handled by men.

In the farming sector, teams of women workers undertake transplantations, weeding and reaping, and work as collective labourer in rotation for each member's field. In Manipur, very few women participate in industrial activities, except for Imphal where the participation of women in non-household activities was the highest. The participation rate in these activities increased from 4.27 % to 8.88 per cent in 1991, while in household sector it correspondingly declined from 13.19 % to 10.01 % per cent. In all other districts it was almost negligible.

In the valley of Manipur, an organization named ' Meirapaibis' is involved in initiating various measures like banning the sale of alcohol, drugs, etc. It demonstrated its potential for achieving social objectives, following the extension of ceasefire in the state between Government of India and Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland and the vehement protest against the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Power Act in Manipur.

However, despite these initiatives the position of women with regard to social and political

rights is far from satisfactory. Unlike sons in a family they are not allowed to inherit property and can exercise property rights over their father's land, only till the time of their marriage. A widow can exercise her right over her husband's land till her death and if she remarries, she ceases to have such a right (especially among the Naga Tribes). However, women have full ownership right on their wealth, which is even returned to them after divorce. A woman who is widowed or divorced is given landed property by her parents so that she retains her links with her parents' home.

There are very few women representatives in the Assembly. In 2000, only one woman candidate out of nine candidates put up by the political parties was elected. However, at the local government level, women are well represented, sometimes crossing the 1/3rd mark. Their capacity to exercise political influence is restricted because their husbands act on their behalf. In the hilly districts women are not allowed to have any representation in any political institution.

The Contributions of Irom Chanu Sharmila and the Movement against Armed Forces Special Powers Act

Manipur was formed as a constituent state of the Indian Union in 1972. There was a discontent among the Manipuri's right from 1949, the widespread perception that the Indian nation state had forced the merger upon Manipur. This was also a moving factor for insurgency in Manipur. The systems introduced by the colonial rulers seemed to continue even under the jurisdiction of the Indian government. The one nation theory and the colonial divisive policy were particularly designed to construct integrity through projections against the threat from external enemies which the Indian state experienced from other nations. This was not the need of the Manipuri people and nationalist feelings were also imposed on the indigenous people which were gradually resisted by them through various means, both violent and non-violent. Violence, barbarism and exclusion embedded in colonialism penetrated into indigenous people's lives. Forceful integration, as in the case of Manipur, unleashed a series of movements for secession from the Indian Union.

In Manipur, Irom Chanu Sharmila was born on 14 March 1972, the same year Manipur got the status of a separate state. From her childhood, she used to listen to the tales of Manipur, its history and culture from her grandmother. She learned that Manipur was a home to a self-sufficient economy and grandeur of peace and non-violence which she constantly looked for. As she grew up, she became an example for the youths of Manipur. In Manipur, Irom Sharmila ruptured the equilibria through her struggle for love, peace and justice by questioning the hegemony of the Indian state and its strategies of oppression through AFSPA. Her, 'worldview' emerges from her lived experiences, her deep understanding of people of Manipur and her belief of the innate goodness and empathy for all human beings.

Sharmila's protest was the protest of the common people, although her protest was not planned or organized. It was a reaction against the oppression, which she refused to accept. The Malom massacre was the deciding event, which acted as the precipitating factor for her to end the oppression which was meted out to the civilians in the name of security and defence. The AFSPA Act needs to get nullified because of its draconian nature. It has led to the

militarization of the state due to which mostly women, children and youth have suffered tremendously. The Malom massacre acted as reaffirming and legitimizing the hegemony of the Indian state and Sharmila's voice echoed the voices of dissent of everyone. This was the strongest part of her struggle and the weakest part-strong, because it reflected the praxis and transformation of an individual and combined beautiful poiesis.

At the same time, it was weakest because the collective transformations did not follow with equal verve and intensity as it should have been, which reduced this legend into a symbol of people's movement, non-violent protest, emancipation for women with her main demands still manipulated by the Indian state. Sharmila's image is deliberately distorted in the public through mainstream media to shed the demands laid down by the people of Manipur.

Irom Sharmila's struggle today requires a process of rigorous conscientisation, dialogue, articulations compounded with organized action to counter this political domination through hegemony, combination of consent and subtle repression of 'public' rather 'people' voices. Thus, Sharmila has portrayed considerable strength against the AFSPA Act and the struggle continues to grow with each passing day.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that the status of women in the states of NER is better in some indicators than the status of women in rest of India. However, puzzling contradictions occur within each state. Workforce participation is considered to be an important variable of women empowerment. The statistics show that the percentage of married women who usually participate in household decisions is more in the states of the Northeast than the national average. The level of freedom in terms of entrepreneurship which a Manipuri woman enjoys is beyond the national standards. The percentage of women having a bank or savings account that they themselves use is less in Assam, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland than the national average. These indicators reveal that the women have a very low degree of freedom of movement and low level of control over themselves and ability to make change in NER. Economic development does not guarantee gender equality.

The level of freedom of movement in Sikkim and Manipur for women varies greatly, due to political and social factors. In informal sector, the status of women is even more vulnerable. Only gender aware policies of the policy makers and change of the mindset of the people can help in this regard. The change in the mindset will come about through education and creating the concept of oneness among the Northeastern states where each state will make an effort to learn from each other and also from the country as a whole. The need of the hour is to collaborate on policy initiatives to bring about constructive change and development in the lives of women living in the Northeastern regions. A rise in the share of regular wage employment could signify an improvement in the quality of female employment only if this rise is faster than the rise in the share of other two categories namely, self-employment and casual worker.

Therefore, it requires state specific own individual policy to achieve gender development and gender equality within its borders. A detailed examination of women's status even at the district level is necessary to have the right information for effective planning and

implementation of government policy. A more gender sensitive approach towards law making concerning NER should be adopted both at the State and National level, since development in the NER is dependent on the development and growth of the women population within the region due to their socio-economic role.

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