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REVIEW ARTICLE

CUSTOMARY LAWS AND PRACTICES CURB THE RIGHTS OF THE MARAM NAGA TRIBAL WOMEN IN MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

Women have been subjugated in various ways in the patriarchal dominated society. The patriarchal hierarchy systems are not willing to accept women coming into the mainstream in decision making. Maram tribal women are also denied their basic rights under the guise of customary law and tradition. The Patriarchal hegemony strongly inculcates the mind of the society leaving the women in the Periphery. However, they have more privileges than other Naga tribal women. This paper study the customary law and practices that governs and curb the rights of the Maram Naga tribal women in Manipur, their drawbacks, social life, beliefs, customs and traditions. Traditional Customary practices never allowed the women to live a life of her own. It dominates her to live only as a mother, daughter, sister, and a wife, a childbearer, a household manager and a water carrier. A women's life is preconceived even before she is born.

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INTRODUCTION

Maram is one of the rich indigenous tribe of the Naga tribes in the North eastern region of India. The Maram are also known as one of the primitive tribes of India. The origin of the Maram Nagas is veiled in obscurity since they do not have written records of their history. Therefore, folklores, folktales, folksongs, stories, legends, sayings, proverbs, myths, plays a pivotal role in chronicling the history and identity of the people. The traditions and customs are handed down orally from one generation to another. The village is primitive, rich and very traditional in their ways of life. Though the coming of the missionaries the animistic belief dwindled away yet the tradition and customs are still strongly imbibed in them. A woman in a patriarchal society is always dominated in every aspect. Earlier, she has no voice, no rights, and no education. She has to remain within the house to cook for the family and care the siblings. Social life is restricted in her whole span of life till then. Women cannot talk to men unreservedly before her marriage, cannot go out from the house after dark. Women are not allowed to wear pants; she is only allowed to wear the traditional wrap around which is made of bark from wild plants. So she remains isolated till the coming of the Britishers among the Naga society.

The customs and traditions play an important role in Maram Naga society especially for the women folk. Women do not have any space in the society. By nature women are shy, introvert and obedient to her family and her husband. Maram Naga tribe refuses women to take up position in the society in early days. The society demands the girl child to be married off as she attains her puberty. The society fears that a girl needs to be controlled and be under a strong hand to rule her life to be an ideal typical tribal woman. Women are restricted to mingle with men, so usually marriages are arranged to a stranger. At dawn, on her marriage day, she is dropped by her friends to her husband's house whom she has not seen. She has to overcome all the obstacles under her husband's roof and live under his command throughout her live. In almost all the cases a woman is being forced by her parents to settle down, mostly against her wish since the customary law of the tribal is very strong¹. The women folk also have a *Morung*² like the men folk in the village. When a woman reaches puberty she has to sleep in *Morung* as a sign that she is mature to take up responsibilities and is eligible for marriage.

¹ The author interviewed Ngounibi, an old man of 67 yrs old from Maram Khullen.

² *Morung* is a dormitory system where the entire adult, who have attained puberty, stay under the watchful eye of the responsible couple appointed from the Kings Clan.

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The tradition of Naga society expects women to be 'obedient' and 'submissive'. "Naga women perform the role of a wife, mother, child-bearer, food producer and household manager. Naga women are required to respect and obey their husbands and clan members. Women have a greater range of responsibilities, starting from household maintenance to various agricultural activities. And they have greater work burden in both as well. It is difficult to measure women's agricultural and farming work because it is closely linked up with their social roles within the family. Women's time is divided between domestic work like cleaning, preparing food, tending to the children, and chores outside the household (collection of fuel wood, fetching water, and agricultural and farming activities)". (Shimray, 2004)

The whole life of the women in the early days is restrictive and reserved. Nothing is of her own choice. Women are not to be opinionated, she is expected to be always calm and soft spoken. In Maram, the main occupation is agriculture therefore women are expected to work in the field more than the men. She is expected to rise up early and carry water, cook and prepare baskets for field while for men just had meal and then go. According to Maram culture every girl is compulsory to carry basket on her back when she go to field. A girl is considered as womanly and eligible to get a better husband only if she follows the rules the society expected her off. The trend is followed even today.³ The Maram tribal Naga women are timid and shy by nature due to their customs and traditions. They are conservative and narrow minded. According to the president of the Maram woman society, women do not have any liberation and freedom. She is a slave to men⁴. This is the biggest drawback among the Naga Tribal women. Without men women are often considered as valueless.

The women's ideas are never accepted. Women are to obey the menfolk and the elders. A woman is often ridiculed and mocked if she remains unmarried. When men, especially the leaders die, they are given a place within the village with huge boulders to be place on their grave. Women are not given a place for burial within the village; she is buried in the common cemetery. In pre-marital relationship if a girl gets pregnant the girl is panelised and expelled from the village while the boy no penalty to face, he is free to stay in the village.⁵ In early day's head counts are done only on men, women and children are not included. Men are given better education and every boy in the family is sent to schools while the girls are force to remain at home.

The Maram Naga society feels that women are voiceless, weak, incapable and not able to stand on their own without the support of the men folk. Among the tribe, in a family when the wife have better job than the husband, the man is often ridicule as female dominated family. Even when a woman takes up leadership within the society, the society do not think kindly of

³ From the authors own observation within the society among the Maram tribe.

⁴ The Author Interviewed Lubisa, a 35 yrs old woman from Maram Centre, Women Society President.

⁵ The Author Interviewed Karaikangba, a man of 50 yrs old, the Chairman of Maram Centre.

her. The tribe feel threatened to be dominated by women or to be working under the leadership of a woman⁶. In the case of a widow if she takes decision her without consulting her husband's family, she is often termed as destroying the family unity and tradition. Maram society is strongly bounded with strong traditional norms and values, traditional practices women are always discriminated and equality is neglected in all aspects.⁷ By nature Maram Naga women do not share her emotions and feeling freely fearing of been scorn and losing her dignity. In early days women never show off their ability or her talents, she hides her capability in guise of modesty and being a women.

In typical Naga society women practices more customs and rituals than the men. More restriction is also imposed on the women. A man has more freedom even in traditional practices. Like in the case of death of near and dear ones, men are free to move out after the burial while a woman has to be in the house mourning without talking to anyone. She cannot socialise and mingle with the society out at least for about a month. Women do not take part in any activities for one year while men begin their normal live within few days. A pregnant woman is restricted to go out after the sunset for fear that something bad would befall on the baby. She is forbidden to kill snake, go to big ponds. The society believes that evil spirit would befall on the baby resulting in disability of the baby. Also while she goes out she should cover her stomach with shawl for fear that the baby would grow up to be very bold and spritely. Customarily women are not allowed to walk across men and not allowed to touch the weapon of men. When men folk go for hunting women should not wish them.

Conclusion

Customs and traditions are the main hindrance towards the progress of women in Maram Naga society. The mainstream traditional social practices and beliefs govern the whole attitude of the mindset of the tribe. Today with the coming of the British the society has transformed and modernity came into the live of tribals especially among the Naga tribals. Modernisation upgraded the life of the Nagas in many fields. More emphasis has been given in education for women. The women folk are also send to educate themselves in order to bring changes within the society. The coming of missionaries within the tribal areas has broadened the mindset of the people. Women are able to come out triumphantly without much complication compare to earlier days. Till today traditional practices is very strong among the Maram Naga society especially on women. Women are not given any property especially the unmovable like land, house, field etc. She can get only her ornament and traditional necklaces. A woman's position in the family even after her marriage is not essentially secured until she gets birth to a child. A woman is respected if she gives birth to many children. "A woman or wife would be made the scapegoat if the married couple failed to beget children. A woman was valued not by her looks but by her ability to work and produce many children". (Tiba, 2013). The women are still trying to have a foothold within the structured

⁶ The author interviewed Poihingba, an old man of 70 yrs old from Maram centre.

⁷ From the authors own observation.

patriarchal society. Though much has improved the women are still looked as inferior to men. Few women against the stricture of the patriarchal norms have emerged to live beyond the rules but the rules are still applied vehemently within the society even today.

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