



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Exploring The Roles And Status Of Tribal Women: A Study Of Gender Dynamics In Traditional Apatani Society

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ABSTRACT

To understand the progress and development of a society, one of the crucial indicators is how women in that society is being treated. What are their rights, what limitations and prejudices do they face and what opportunities do they have Women constitute half of the global population. However, they are the largest excluded category in almost all aspects. The status of women in tribal society, even in the era of globalization, remains one of the major issues for discussion. In most tribal societies across the world, women are considered a weaker section of society, though women contribute to the overall social development, which cannot be denied. It is generally said that women in the North-Eastern part of India enjoy a better status than their counterparts in the rest of India. However, the customary law and practices in their application are often discriminatory against them. Understanding gender dynamics in tribal societies requires looking beyond romantic notions to examine both freedom and constraints that shape women's lives.

The objectives of this paper are to highlight and understand the status of women in the traditional Apatani society of Arunachal Pradesh, which has to be studied in the light of their work participation in social, economic, religious, and political spheres.

The primary and secondary sources have been used in the collection of data.

Keywords: Apatani, women, Arunachal Pradesh, Customary law

INTRODUCTION:

Arunachal Pradesh popularly known as 'Land of the Dawn-lit-Mountains', Located on the northeastern tip of India with its borders touching Tibet, Bhutan and Burma (Myanmar), this beautiful land. present a rich tapestry of cultural diversity, unique customs and indigenous governance systems. In this tribal society, women occupy a central place in the social and economic sphere, playing a vital role in the family life, . for a long time, anthropologist and social commentators have argued that tribal women enjoy a better status than non-tribal counterparts. There is some truth in this, tribal women in Arunachal Pradesh traditionally enjoyed a relatively greater degree of mobility and social visibility. The sex ratio among tribes has

historically been more favorable than the national average, often cited as one indicator of women's relatively better treatment

The freedom celebrated in this view is real, but it is freedom within a tightly defined structures. tribal social organization and institution remain discriminatory toward women particularly with regard to customary laws guiding ownership of property and inheritance, and the exercise of authority in both domestic and public sphere. This Freedom is operational not structural. Understanding gender dynamics in tribal societies requires looking beyond romantic notions to examine both freedom and constraints that shape women's lives. The present research work seeks to critically examine the duality of women's position in tribal society- where they are both empowered agents and structurally constrained individuals.

The Present study aims to explore not only the functional roles of women but also to analyze the socio-cultural factors that define their status within the society. Against these backdrop present study tries to address few ATaspects of Apatani culture and the role and status of women in a traditional Apatani society

STATUS OF WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL VILLAGE COUNCIL

The Apatanis organize themselves politically and legally through an institution known as *Buliang*, which functions to maintain peace, order, and ensure proper justice administration. Notably, *Buliang* does not intervene in disputes between individuals or families; such conflicts are handled by common relatives acting as *Gondu*, who serve as mediators and arbitrators. If a dispute remains unresolved by the *Gondu*, one party may appeal to the village *Buliang* for intervention, and the appellant must then accept the *Buliang*'s decision.

The presence of *Buliang* contributed to both internal and external peace and harmony within Apatani society. As the highest authority in socio-political and judicial matters, the *Buliang*'s decisions were respected and honored by the people. However, the *Buliang* did not hold absolute power to arbitrate or enforce decisions unless a dispute became a public issue or an individual formally sought their justice (Kani 1993:140-141).

Although collectively upholding tribal customs, the *Buliang* primarily represented their own clans rather than acting as village-headmen with specific administrative roles. Their responsibilities were more of arbitrators than judges, and they usually intervened only when disputes escalated to public concerns requiring community mediation or forceful resolution (Haimen Dorf 1980:130).

Apatani society is patriarchal, similar to other such societies where women are primarily homemakers, caregivers, and responsible for household and agricultural tasks. In customary Apatani law, women do not enjoy equal political or administrative rights compared to men, despite their essential societal role. Men predominantly make decisions related to village administration, and the *Buliang* institution has always been male-dominated. Women do not participate substantively in Village Council proceedings, as traditional values and customs discourage their involvement, viewing them as incapable of such roles.

The position of *Buliang* is hereditary and permanent, traditionally held only by males. Women cannot inherit the post because, upon marriage, they become part of their husband's family. Women are not allowed to witness the proceedings of the deliberations. Physical disability is also cited as a reason for the gender distinction since the *Buliang*'s role involves arbitration and negotiation during conflicts, which are believed to require physical strength that women lack. Additionally, *Buliang* meetings are held in a traditional public space called *lapang*, which women are forbidden to enter during menstruation, as it is considered impure. Women's involvement in village affairs is typically limited to supporting roles such as food preparation (*Aping*) and making rice beer ('*O*') for male members during important discussions.

When a *Buliang* member dies, his widow temporarily assumes custodianship of the post on behalf of their minor son. She convenes and attends meetings and implements decisions made by the *Buliang* members. However, her authority is nominal, and she passes the position to her son once he reaches maturity. In the

absence of a male heir, the nearest male relative from the Buliang clan takes over the post. Daughters or females are not permitted to inherit the Buliang position.

MARRIAGE:

Traditionally, in Apatani, one has to follow the social codes of the tribe endogamy and clan exogamy. once the marriage of a couple is accepted by both the parents, the marriage has to be solemnized through a series of ceremonies, which includes *Mabo-inchi* (visit of bridegroom to bride's parents); *Biinii-ari Pahniing* (exchange of goods); *Ruhutii Piniing* (collection of paddy from the fields of brides relative in return for *(Biinii Ari Pahniing)*; and finally *Eli- Bahniing* (procession from brides' house to that of the bridegroom's house).

There is no practice of Polyandry in Apatani society. Though monogamy is the rule, the practice of Polygamy or bigamy (*mihi anye-hinge lanii*) cannot be ruled out. Polygamy is practiced if the first wife is barren or the man has no male child. In such case it is practiced with the consent of the first wife. However, there are many instances of polygamy in Apatani society even if the man has male child. Marrying many wives was seen as a sign of affluence.

Forced marriage (*Mihi -Senii*) was prevalent in the Apatani society. In such case most girls would give her consent to stay with the boys as his wife simply because of the fear of her image or reputation being seen as spoiled.

Discrimination among Apatani women was also prevalent in divorce (*tatu swnw*) cases. Though the divorce is looked upon as bad and undesirable, the divorce is allowed in the Apatani Society if both husband and wife desired mutually. In case of a divorce, all the children belong to the father. The children can stay with their mother but Women cannot claim ownership of the children. Moreover she is not entitled to any of the marital property they owned during the marriage after divorce.

OBSERVATIONS:

Women in Apatani Society are still dominated and guided by traditional patriarchal arrangements that keep women out of all major decision-making apparatus. Societal structure is devised in such a way that women are not disrespected or subjugated, but their position in society is still low. Despite the significant contributions of women across all sectors of society, customary laws continue to demean and marginalize them, often exhibiting inherent bias. Women's rights are sidelined, and their representation in decision-making bodies remains minimal. Patriarchal values, perpetuated through generations via customs, traditions, and culture, serve as the foundation of this system. The customary laws and social practices of the Apatani tribe define their identity and are integral to their culture, primarily aimed at maintaining peace, social order, and community harmony. However, the current system is discriminatory and biased. Apatani women do not hold or enjoy the same influential roles as their male counterparts. Meaningful change will be challenging unless women are actively involved in matters affecting them. Therefore, fostering a reflective mindset within the community and critically reassessing existing customary laws—especially regarding women's status—is essential. The notable achievements of women must be recognized, and women's issues prioritized at all administrative levels. Progressive change can only be realized through collective effort.

At present with the advent of education has ushered remarkable changes and empowerment among the Womenfolk which brought new era of changes among the societies by adoption of modern life style which brought changes to the outlook of the people with more women getting an education and taking up jobs, they are becoming financially independent.

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