

Gender Equality and Women Empowerment in Arunachal Pradesh: A Perspective

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The State of Arunachal Pradesh is a land of rivers and forest, deep gorges and mountains. It is remarkable for its wide altitudinal range rising from the swampy riverine tracts to temperate forests and high alpine pastures and Snow Mountains. It is considered as one of the 12 mega diversity (Hot Spots) in the world. The pristine beauty of the land and the culture of a tribal world hidden deep in these hills have lured explorers and travellers since the area began to open up late at the turn of the last century. The State is a home for as many as 26 different tribes of Indo Mongoloid stock with sub tribes and minor tribes totalling more than a 100 different communities, speaking as many as 42 different dialects each having its own culture, customs and traditions yet there are some similarity amongst them in respect of some socio-cultural, economic and political aspects.

Women of Arunachal Pradesh have been striving towards gender equality and women empowerment for many decades. It is a dedicated movement meant for defining, establishing and defending women's equal political, economic and social rights and opportunities. However, the Women's movement in the state towards gender equality and women empowerment has been fraught with challenges right from the start. Due to heterogeneous nature of culture and customs in practice, no uniform developments have taken place among all the tribes yet an attempt has been made in the paper to investigate the history and role of womenfolk in traditional society and the women's movement towards gender equality and women empowerment in Arunachal Pradesh with reference to two prominent women's organizations in the state: The Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Society (APWWS) and The Arunachal Pradesh State Commission for Women (APSCW) trying to uplift the socio-economic condition of women and the society in general as well as assess its role, issues, concerns and challenges.

Both primary and secondary sources were the basis for analysis of data. Being a native of the state, the researcher employed efforts both observation and experience in validating the information so as to confirm the reliability of the data.

The Traditional society in Arunachal Pradesh had regulated their social, cultural and political affairs through their traditional form of village self government. Every tribe in the state had its own pattern of village local self government that has been functioning as effective village government and these traditional institutions are still alive. It is known differently among the different tribes and differs considerably in its working from tribe to tribe. They used to follow the constitution of their traditional village self government which was not written but passed on orally from one generation to next. The customary or traditional laws framed and practised by the village councils are held in high esteem even today.

The Society in Arunachal Pradesh is patriarchal and patrilineal. Each tribe has their own distinctive culture, customs, language and traditions. The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh are endogamous and strictly follow the rule of clan exogamy for marriage purposes. Marriage was virtually dependent upon the

payment of *bride price* to the bride's parents. It was usually paid in kind in the form of cattle, clothes and utensils. In return, the bride's parents offered some movable properties in the form of marriage gifts keeping in view the amount of bride price to balance it. Among the Miji, the marriage gift should not be more than the bride price otherwise it would lose the prestige of the groom's family. Amongst the Monpa, if the groom was unable to pay the bride price during the marriage ceremony, the couple themselves paid the bride price when they were in a position to make the payment but if they failed in doing so; their son had to pay the bride price. This indicates that the payment of bride price was transferable to another generation in the Monpa society. (Duarah, 1992)

Due to the existence of patriarchal and patrilineal system in the state, women were subordinated to men in customary laws particularly in terms of property rights as well as inheritance of property which was similar among the various tribes with minor variations. Moreover, there was a difference in the customary law governing inheritance between male and female. It did not give any privileged position to women. Women have very limited right to own property amongst the various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Normally women were not entitled to the share of immovable family property such as land and house. They were given share of only movable property in the form of ornaments such as beads, rings, lockets and necklaces, clothing, utensils, valuable brass plates and in some cases, livestock and other household articles were also given. Most of the tribes respect women's exclusive right over gifts received from parents in marriage particularly ornaments. Women generally had complete freedom to spend the income earned by them through supplementary activities such as weaving, knitting, raising poultry, cattle, pigs, selling vegetables and rice beer. The right of a widow having children over her husband's property was only usufructuary. However, a widow without any child was not allowed to inherit her husband's property. In most of the cases, she was allowed to marry the younger brother of her deceased husband in order to retain or inherit her husband's property, if they were willing to do so. In that case, the ownership of property would automatically go to the younger brother who married the widow and took care of her. Among the Nyishi, a widow could also marry her elder step-son to retain her husband's property. In case a widow was married to a person outside her deceased husband's family or relatives, she loses all rights and privileges as she could not claim any right over her husband's property. In that case, the property would go to her son, if any or if there was no son, the property would go to her deceased husband's relatives. If a widow had no male issue, the property would go to the other male heirs of the clan. A widow having a female child and remains unmarried in the deceased husband's house had no right over her deceased husband's landed property but she could use the property till her death or as long as she stayed with the family to maintain herself and her child but she could not sell it according to her own will, without the prior approval of male members of the deceased husband's clan. For instance, among the Tagin, a widow could not sell her husband's property to anyone except the relatives of the deceased husband. (Phadke, 2008:151)

A divorced woman had no right to inherit her divorced husband's property. However, in most of the tribes such as Tangsa, Nocte, Singpho, the husband was liable to pay the bride price to the parents of the woman. In most of the cases, a woman had the right to claim equal shares of properties that have been earned during their conjugal life. When a wife initiated a divorce, she could neither put any claim on her husband's property nor ask for or demand any compensation. In case of mutual divorce, no compensation or fine was required to be paid. Among the Khowa/Bugun, if the divorce was by mutual consent then all their movable personal belongings was divided equally between them but if it was initiated by the wife and then she remarried, her new husband would have to pay double the amount of the original bride price to the divorced husband. (Deuri, 1975:81-82) An unmarried woman had absolute right over her own earnings and personal belongings in all the tribes.

Women were generally free to take part in social, cultural and religious functions. There were well known women priests and practitioners of traditional medicine. In some of the tribes, the active

participation of women in the religious performance was restricted and the priestly functions were performed by men only. But amongst the Buddhist tribes, there was no hard and fast restriction in participation. Women could become nuns by taking an oath of celibacy. They could perform religious services like the monks but they were debarred from having the vision of certain images of wrathful deities who were kept covered with linen (Norbu, 2008:179-180). There were also a few *gompas* run by the nuns. In religious rituals and ceremonies, women's role was generally confined to brewing rice-beer, supply and distribution of food stuffs and entertaining the participants. However, among the Khowa (Bugun), strict prohibition was imposed upon women during the preparation of home brewed liquor that was required for the celebration of their annual festival kashyat sowai. Such drinks were prepared by young boys or girls who have not attained puberty (Deuri, 1975:82). Cutting of big trees, touching of dead bodies and digging graves were also strictly prohibited for women in the Khowa society. Women could freely participate in the singing and dancing associated with the festivals except purely religious dance as amongst the Monpa and Sherdukpen. In the monastic dance or Aje Lhamu dance, the participants were only men. Even the Dhormjih dance which was solemnized for the welfare of the Miji community, women were not allowed to participate in it. Religion played almost no role with regard to food habits except among the Buddhist tribes. Although during pregnancy and child birth, some restriction were prescribed on women such as she could not touch the hunting gear of men or anything associated with neither ritual purpose nor cook food for others. Besides, her movement was restricted to certain areas of the house and the meat of certain animals such as squirrel, wild boar or animals killed by poison arrows were avoided. The period of taboo varied from tribe to tribe. In Idu society, women did not eat fish, onions, wild animals and birds when a person died in the same village. Women in Idu society were also restricted from eating meat of four footed animals like pig, goat, mithun, buffalo, or deer until they became mothers.

During community festivals which occurred almost every month in the state, women actively and freely participated in the celebration. Women were also the backbone of the traditional economy as agricultural activities like sowing of seeds; transplanting and weeding were done by women. Women had to work in the irrigated paddy field throughout the day. Other secondary means of traditional livelihood such as weaving, rearing of livestock and poultry were solely dependent on women. Weaving was an exclusively household craft of women amongst all the tribes of the state. They had their own distinctive dresses. Each tribe had a distinct pattern or design which reflected the social and religious systems.

In the Political organization, the traditional village councils were composed of male members only. Women were generally deprived of active participation in the decision making process as their participation in the proceedings of the village council was very much restricted. Though they were allowed to participate, they had no part or say in important matters. They could grace the council's meeting and could express their grievances when they were asked for. B.B Pandey in his book, *The Buguns, a tribe in Transition* had pointed out that women were allowed to participate in the village council proceedings in the absence of the head male member of the family in some cases. But they were not allowed to participate in the capacity of *Thap-Bukhaw* or head of the village council (Pandey, 1996:75). There was notable exception among the Aka tribe where the Aka Rani could attend and actively participate in the village council known as *Mele* and the views expressed by her had much importance. However, the actual role of the Aka Rani in the political and administrative sphere was very formal (Sinha, 1988:83).

Therefore, women in our state have been striving towards gender equality and women empowerment for many decades like the rest of the world. The Women's Movement in the State has been initiated by the enlightened and educated women. Though relatively new, the history of Women's movement in Arunachal Pradesh has been fraught with challenges right from the start and it dates back to nearly fifty years when a group of women led by Lomte Riba formed the Capital Complex Women Society which

laid the foundation for the formation of the Arunachal Pradesh Women Welfare Society. It was formed as a reaction to social practices such as child marriage, polygamy, bride price, domestic violence etc. The State level organization of women is known as All Arunachal Pradesh Women Welfare Society (APWWS) which was formed on 10 October 1979 with representatives of all the tribes of the state. It was officially registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860 on 21 September 1981 with Dishu Mihi Mallo as its President and Lomte Riba as member Secretary. Other prominent founding members were Promilla Tadar, Yajen Gara, Yade Riba, Gutar Tali, Gumrik Riba, Yabi Lombi, Yadek Gadi etc. Its Headquarter is at the state capital, Itanagar. From 1981 to 1985, the society had remained dormant due to lack of funds but was later revived in April 1985 under the initiative of Lomte Riba and Jarjum Ete. Under the initiative of Jarjum Ete, the membership also increased to 2000 by 1985. Since its inception, APWWS has taken up various measures for the upliftment of Women. They have given special emphasis on eradication of social evils such as forced marriage, child marriage, polygamy and for better educational opportunities for women. They have undertaken projects such as water and sanitation awareness project known as WATSAN and also organized legal awareness programme on social justice and women empowerment. The struggle of APWWS for equality of opportunities and empowerment in the field of economic, political and social to some extent has been achieved in the form of establishment of Arunachal Pradesh State Commission for Women (APSCW) in 2005, Gender Budgeting from 2011, inclusion of 33 percent reservation in Panchayat Raj Institutions, establishment of Women Police Station in the capital city, Itanagar and district headquarters, appointment of women member in the State Civil Service Commission and State Information Commission were some of the landmark achievements which APWWS has been able to highlight and enable the policy makers to implement and achieve gender equality. At present, there are more than 30 branches of APWWS and affiliated bodies which are working under the banner of APWWS. In 1994, the APWWS's prompt intervention halted the passing of the Arunachal Pradesh Customary Practices Bill which sought to give sanctions to social practices which were not in the interest of the state's womenfolk in the state legislature. The APWWS intervened by withholding assent of the President of India for re-examination of the bill to protect the rights of women and girl children.

The APWWS has been one of the vocal organisations opposing polygyny. For almost five decades, polygyny has remained a persistent issue for the organisation. They have demanded for a legislation to prohibit the practice. Since its inception in 1979, the APWWS has been unwavering in its commitment to eradicating polygamy and advocating the rights and welfare of women and children. Despite their sustained efforts, the absence of robust legal provisions continues to pose a significant challenge to their pursuit of gender justice.

After years of demand by the APWWS, the State Commission for Women known as Arunachal Pradesh State Commission for Women (APSCW) was constituted by the Government of Arunachal Pradesh under the Arunachal Pradesh State Act 2005 in accordance with the purpose of protecting the interest of women and to guarantee their progress and development. It is a Statutory Commission which had commenced work from 17th of January 2005. The groundwork was started in early 2000 with the formation of a drafting committee comprising Jarjum Ete, Mamang Dai, Yari Dulom, Tadar Yadir, Dishu Mihi Malo and Gonesh Koyu. The draft eventually took shape as a legislative bill which was passed in 2002. Though a constitutional obligation, it took almost a decade of lobbying by the APWWS for the formation of the first commission in 2005. The APSCW had organized a series of activities such as Awareness programme; Capacity Building and Workshops. They have organized legal awareness programme at various districts of the state on Domestic Violence Act 2005, Posco Act 2012, Trafficking of women and children, bonded and child labour, child marriage and forced marriage, polygamy, compulsory marriage registration, maternity benefit act 1961, importance of nutrition for women and children, importance of education, health and hygiene, livelihood, free legal aid and rights of women, women helpline and short stay home provisions, opium cultivation and its impact on women and

children. Workshops were also conducted on status of customary laws on marriage, divorce and inheritance and its implication on the status of women, sexual harassment at workplace and strategizing advocacy for effective implementation of women friendly laws. Further, the APSCW had approached the state government to increase the women's reservation quota in the gram panchayat to 50 percent from 33 percent to strengthen women's participation at the grassroots level governance¹ There are also a number of NGOs working for the welfare of women in the State such as The Arunachal Pradesh Social Welfare Advisory Board and Oju Welfare Association are some of them.

The Arunachal Pradesh women's Welfare Society (APWWS) supported the Arunachal Pradesh Monogamy Election Eligibility Bill 2023 which seek to address a fundamental issue in our electoral system by establishing monogamy as a criterion for election eligibility in Arunachal Pradesh as polygamy is practised by the financially, socially and politically powerful members and minor girls often end up victims of this practice as there is no law or legislation on this issue to stop this social malpractice against womenfolk of the state. The state government is yet to pass any strict law to declare polygamy/bigamy illegal. A strong legislation against this social practice is imperative to uphold the dignity, rights and well being of women in the state. The highest cases received by APSCW relate to domestic violence followed by cases of polygamy, family maintenance and rape.²

The Arunachal Pradesh State Commission for women (APSCW) has advocated equal rights of women over property and inheritance hence in collaboration with Arunachal Pradesh State for protection of Child Rights (APSPCR) and Arunachal Pradesh Women Welfare Society (APWWS) drafted the Arunachal Pradesh Marriage and Inheritance of Property Bill (APMIP) 2021. The Bill aimed to address the broader issues of socio-economic conditions and rights of women. The bill proposed to regulate marriage registration, alimony and divorce. It also pushed to treat polygamy as an offence and ensure property rights for legally married wives and widows. Section 43 of the bill has advocated for securing immovable property ownership rights by Arunachal Pradesh Scheduled Tribe (APST) women married to non-APST man. It stated that, "an APST women married to non-APST man shall enjoy the legal right over any immovable property inherited or acquired by her in her lifetime. In the event of her death, her husband and her heirs would have full rights over it for disposal and alienation to any indigenous tribal of Arunachal Pradesh". The clauses are self-explanatory. Nowhere is there any mention that a non APST spouse or heirs will acquire property which seems to be the bone of contention for most people.

The draft bill when made public in mid august 2021 evoked wide response on women inheritance in the state and was intensely opposed by various community based organizations, political parties by slamming the draft bill as anti-tribal, anti- Arunachal, violative of customary laws and invitation to outsiders to take over tribal land through marriage. Several students unions of the state have opposed and demanded scrapping of the Arunachal Pradesh Marriage and Inheritance Property bill stating that section 43 in the Bill was anti-tribal and would bring about a structural change in the customary laws/traditional settings of the tribal people of the state.³ They argued that the bill would allow a non APST to settle permanently in the state by marrying APST-women, potentially polluting the demographic structure and creating political unrest and resource depletion in the long run by invoking customary laws and Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation 1873 to defend their opposition to the bill. Masculine approach of tactics such as threats of protest and aggression, trolling, rape threats, abuse of women online supporting the bill to a mere draft bill proposing equal rights for tribal women was used to pressure the state government to reject the draft bill without following legislative procedures and debating the bill. Eventually the Bill was stopped from being passed in the assembly without any deliberations or debates by relying on customary laws and completely ignored the more significant questions of gender equality in the name of protecting customary laws and tribal identity. However, the public discourse around the bill has unmasked the gender fault lines and highlighted the deep rooted patriarchal structure of tribal societies in the state.

Therefore, the debate over property rights of APST women and gender equality in Arunachal Pradesh requires more mutual engagements and an intersectional approach to address these issues. The interpretation and narrative of gender equality among tribal societies needs to be re -imagined and interrogated. It requires collective action from individuals, communities and governments. Hence, more women representation at both grassroots and law making levels is needed to make gender sensitive laws for the welfare of the womenfolk in the state.

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