

A Comparative Study on Status of Garo Women in Pre-Colonial and Colonial Days

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Abstract:

The word status comes from the Latin status "condition, position, state, manner, attitude", from the past participle stem of stare, "to stand". In simple terms, we can say that status term referred to a position or rank that a person or a being holds in society or a particular organization. The status of women is mostly determined by the structure of the family. When we speak about the status of women, we refer to the treatment given to women, their legal status, the opportunity provided to them for social participation, and the extent of work in a particular society. The Garo belongs to an ethnic group of Meghalaya and they belong to a matrilineal society. However, this society is not matriarchal and is purely patriarchal. Therefore, women in this society although matrilineal, yet do not enjoy certain rights as the power is vested on men. This paper aims to focus on the status of Garo women before India's Independence. The word "status" in this present topic will try to encompass the personal and proprietor rights of Garo women and their social status during the pre-colonial and colonial periods.

Keywords: Status, Garo Women, Matriliney.

Introduction

The Garos are the ethnic group of Meghalaya and belong to the Western part of the region. The Garos had no written records when it comes to the pre-colonial period. The History of Garos had to be traced back through Oral history, folklores, folksongs, folktales, and poems narrated by the older generation people. The Garos have only faint memory of their past and most of the truths are shrouded with mysteries till today (Sangma P. , 2010).

The Garos, like the Khasi-Jaintia, follows the matrilineal culture where women are the mere owner of the property and it is the men who move into their wife's houses after marriage. Being a matrilineal society, the Garo ethnic group has its unique features in contrast with other societies from North East India. They are known for their simplicity and women in this region do all the household chores, and participate actively in agricultural activities and also in the economic field. Earlier this ethnic group was purely patriarchal. However, after migrating from Tibet to Assam, the cultural system changed. In this society, women inherit the property of their parents as women are considered to be weak in terms of physical strength (Marak J. , 2000). In some instances, if a certain family does not have a girl child, then that family will look for a girl child from their "*Ma-chong*" (motherhood) as an heir of their family. It can also be observed that once a property is given to a woman then it cannot be passed out of her lineage i.e., her biological daughters (Marak J. , 2000)

However, women all over the world has been overlooked in many aspects. Women of the past were degraded and had to face all kinds of social consequences even at their own homes. There are various scholars like Romila Thapar, Uma Chakravarti, Vina Mazumdar who had worked on Indian women. They in their work has mentioned about gender issues faced by women in the society during ancient times as well as in present day. Their work also highlighted on women movement which was led by women themselves. Whereas, scholars like Temsula Ao, Tejmala Gurung, Chie Nakane, Ameena Passah has done work on role played by women in North-East India where, they have also highlighted about the women's struggle, their resilience and also challenges faced by women challenging patriarchal norms. In the Garo society although matrilineal, the societal powers are vested upon men as the society is adhered on patriarchy. Thus, men folk enjoys all the privileges. It can be observed that the matrilineal structure of Garo society had no significant effect on the personal, economic, or social status of Garo women. This article will give a detailed study on the status of Garo women during pre-colonial and colonial period.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, historical-descriptive approach to examine the status and roles of Garo women during the colonial period. The research relies primarily on documentary analysis, using both primary and secondary sources.

Primary sources include colonial-era writings, missionary records, oral traditions, and early literary works produced by Garo women such as poems, biographies, and educational texts. Secondary sources consist of scholarly books, theses, and research articles on Garo history, matriliney, gender roles, and cultural practices.

Data were gathered by reviewing these documents and identifying information related to women's inheritance rights, economic activities, educational progress, religious participation, social restrictions, and perceptions of womanhood. The materials were analysed through thematic analysis, allowing the study to group findings under key themes such as matriliney, economic contribution, political position, and societal attitudes.

A contextual historical method was used to interpret how colonial influence, missionary work, and traditional customs shaped women's status. While the scarcity of written pre-colonial records and regional variations present limitations, cross-checking multiple sources ensure reliability.

Garo women during Pre-colonial period and their status

The information about the Garos before colonization is not much known as there are no written records of that phase as the Garo people were not exposed to the outside world. The gained information on Pre-colonial Garos by various scholars is a purely oral tradition. Therefore, scholars like Milton Sangma, Mihir Sangma, and others have compared the tradition of Garos with the *Songsarek* (Animistic believers) Garos.

The social system of this society purely is concentrated by the clan (*mahari*) (Biman Kar, Milton Sangma, 1995). The matriliney does not protect her position and rights; therefore, a woman is not the head of the family. Earlier, the ancient Garos followed the Patriarchal culture and hence, the culture of being patriarchal is still prevalent even after the transition of matriliney took place. Although women get the position of "*Nokna*" (Heiress) yet the power is practiced by their husband who is the "*Nokkrom*" of the family and the ultimate decision are taken by the "*chras*". A woman is the ultimate position holder of

"*Nokma*" (Village headman) but the power is vested in men since time immemorial. Whereas the other daughters who are not heiresses are given another plot of land for farming and for settling with their families.

Women are not allowed to enter the Bachelor's dormitory (popularly known as "*Nokpante*") as it is against the law and considers inappropriate for a woman to enter inside the house/room of men. If any woman gets caught entering *Nokpante*, she has to pay a fine (*dai*) to the village council. This law is being practiced to date. Semeri Sangma in her research has said that there were no traditional institution facilities for young adolescent girls and girls were deprived of gaining knowledge that could teach them to be homemakers. The adolescent girls were taught to be homemakers by their mothers. The girls helped in and around the household and in the course of the chores, they were taught the various necessary skills to be a homemaker (Sangma S. A., 2012)

Women were roughly and unequally treated by their husbands, not honoured by men, and were completely under the control of men as written by Federick S. Downs in "*Status of Garo women during the nineteenth century*" (Downs, 1966). Milton Sangma has written that, according to Garo's custom, a husband can be violent against his wife if she acts against him without any reason.

Historically, Garo women were not allowed to take part in *mahari* meetings. Meetings were considered a platform and assembly for male members. In this *mahari* meeting, the male members would discuss marriages, settle a dispute, select "*Nok-na*" (heiress), select *Nokma* (headman), organize festivals, and other *mahari* issues. Women could not speak up in such meetings and be silent listeners. The role of women in such meetings or on any occasion is to cook and serve the male members, brew rice beer and serve everyone.

The pressure was given on her by society since ancient times. She has to look after her maternal uncle and when her uncle pays a visit, she has to butcher a pig for meat and brew rice beer. If she and her husband fail to provide then her uncle or brother could punish both the husband and wife. The uncle is made to sit on a traditional stool with respect and has to serve him food and rice beer. If the uncle commits adultery or is chased away by his wife then his niece or sister has to bear the consequences as the uncle would come and stay with them. Simison Sangma has mentioned that a woman should respect and obey her maternal uncle as this was an ongoing process culturally. A woman must stay under the control of her *chras* in her childhood days and after marriage, she should be under the control of her husband. If she raises her voice against her maternal uncle or *chras*, then it is considered to be an insult to the uncle and she gets severely punished by her *chras* (Sangma S. R., 2000).

When she reaches the age of marriage, she is forced to marry by her uncles as it is the uncles' responsibility to get her niece married at a certain age i.e., when she hits the age of puberty. The parents as well let their daughters get married so that the burden on them would be less and they think that once the daughter gets married then it's no longer their responsibility to look after her but it will be her husband who would take all the responsibility towards their daughter.

There are many other occasions where women are looked down upon by society. Wherever she went she had to remain silent if her maternal uncles or other elderly men were around her. She could speak only when she was asked yet she could not justify herself even though she was right. She could not deny against their will and had to accept whatever her *chras* had decided for her.

Garo Women during the colonial period

The role of women in society is that of being a mother where she has to look after her children and also

take care of all her children's needs. She has many responsibilities not only as a mother but also as a sister, a daughter, and a niece. The Garos often use the term "*Noa Namchik*" which means sister and niece. This shows that she has a responsibility as a sister and a niece because the Garos always gave high respect to the *chras*. When her *chra* / maternal uncle or her brother pays a visit, she has to serve them well and make sure that she does not disappoint her *chras*. Even if she unknowingly does something which her *chras* find inappropriate, then she gets insulted in the presence of everyone in the house. Not only the sister or niece but also the parents are looked down on for their upbringing. To avoid such cases, she has to remain calm, polite, and behave well.

As a wife, a woman has to be kind and patient. Husbands are to be given the same respect to that of fathers. Therefore, a woman must treat him like a father, as well as a husband. Women's role in society has been neglected on many occasions.

Politically, Women in Garo society had no role. She was just a custodian and all the political powers were practiced by her husband in the case of *Nokma* and matters of the clan it was the uncles who resolve the entire problem. The woman acted only in the background and could not raise her voice or speak up in political matters as a proverb in Garo says, "*Do·nok wagam gri, me·chik gisik gri*" (Julius L. R. Marak, Milton S. Sangma, 2010) which means a woman is considered to be like a chicken and she is stupid in the eyes of men.

Status of Garo women during colonial period

The status of women during the colonial period did not change much from that of the pre-colonial period. Women had to face the same consequences and burdens faced during the colonial period. There were not many changes in the life of women. However, women were allowed to go to schools, churches, and weekly markets.

The thought of Garos was that men were physically stronger and can go anywhere, work and earn for livelihood, whereas women are more helpless and prone to mistreatment by in-laws, so their rights and comforts have to be secured. They knew that inheritance the property gives dignity and identity to a person (Mappilaparambil, 2015).

Marriages were held at church during the colonial period in the house of Christian families whereas; the *Songsarek* continued the ceremony of *Dosia*. Marriages were forced in the Garo society when it comes to women's rights. Women had no right to choose their partner; they had to marry the man whom their parents and uncles had chosen for them. The life of a woman after marriage in most cases is not a prosperous one as she tends to face more burdens after marriage. There was no birth control during the pre-colonial and colonial periods in almost every family and women gave birth to at least one child every year. There were also cases of miscarriages and there was no proper medical attention. She had to look after her family and her husband's neglect in matters of raising the children. Women were treated as physical needs by their husbands. Also, when a husband is found to have extramarital affairs, the woman would remain silent for she is helpless and dependent on her husband. There were cases where men would have extramarital affairs and are known by the family. However, in such cases, the *chras* (maternal uncles) from both parties would hold a meeting and make the husband-and-wife compromise with each other as there was no divorces allowed in the Garo society. A woman is to be blamed in these cases for not being able to keep her husband happy. She cannot utter a word during such occasions and has to accept the decisions made by her *chras*.

The Garo society practices the process of *on·songa* and *dokchapa* (Marak J., 2000). This was a cruel pr-

actice if it is to be looked by the perspective of a woman. A widowed woman has to re-marry a widowed man without her consent as she is forced to do so. Not just her but also her daughter gets indirectly married to her stepfather. The woman had to agree to the proposal for she was not financially independent. There were cases where step-daughters were sexually assaulted by their step-father and her mother had to remain silent although she wants her daughter to escape from such events. The *mahari* and *chra* also keep silent as the process of *dokchapa* is letting the man marry both the mother and daughter.

Certain works were forbidden for women such as ritual sacrifices, killing animals, handling fishing rods, etc. If she did anything opposing against the will of the male body which is against the law, then people would condemn it and comment that she was behaving like a man (Mappilaparambil, 2015).

In the matter of the church, patriarchal domination was prevalent and it was clergy-centered. Participation of laymen, especially of women, and a collaborative style of functioning are common, particularly in the area of decision-making.

There are instances where educated young men blame matrilineal culture for economic backwardness in society. Caroline Marak has said that some are of the view that the Garo young men have the desire to change the system into a patriarchal society to raise business plans. Because in the patriarchal culture, it is the sons who follow the footsteps of their father when it comes to business and keep the legacy going on. Similarly, if the Garo society was patrilineal then the sons would have been able to put on the legacy by following the footsteps of their father. As the culture is matrilineal, the Garo sons know that the family business does not and will not belong to them. Hence, they take no keen interest in it. Neither the boys nor the girls are trained for the specific purpose of succeeding their fathers. Sons-in-law for obvious reasons cannot take place of the sons (Walter Fernandes, Sanjay Barbara, 2002).

The male remained taking themselves as superior to women and some men did not like when their spouse goes to work and earn for living. Most women remained housewives as they were not allowed to work as government officials by their spouses. Some men are of the view that if the mother of the house works then who would look after the children their upbringing would not be good if the mother does not stay at home. Yet some women had gone to sell goods in the market as it was not enough for them to survive because most men in the Garo society were labourers who worked as daily wage earners so therefore, women helped their husbands to earn for the betterment of the family. However, in the colonial period, a man working as a government official can easily provide daily bread for his family so it was not necessary for the wife to work as well. A wife is expected to serve the husband as soon as he returns home from work as there is a saying in Garo that husbands are considered as "*Se-apa*" which means "husband is like a father", so, therefore, a woman is to respect and obey her husband in any means.

Such was the mentality of the men towards women. They took women as someone who is lower to their level and a woman has no right to be higher than her husband. Some are of the view that a girl must not get educated higher than her husband as it is not good for the family if the husband is least educated and the woman has higher educational qualifications than that her husband. Therefore, the husband does not allow his wife to get more educated than himself.

Perception of Garo Women towards the society

A woman in Garo society is a silent figure and they cannot express their feelings openly as it is considered to be an insult to men. Many women face difficulties but they remain silent for there was

none to bother them about their emotions. Some women expressed their thoughts and hardships through writing. On behalf of every woman in Garo society, a poem *Anga Me-chik* (I, A woman), was written by Jonmoni Shira (Dec, 1941) where she mentioned many hardships that women have faced. The poem tells us how women were deprived of certain things in the colonial period. The poet expresses her grief for being born as a girl because she could not do things her way and had to be under the control of men. She could not dream of achieving her goals as she was not allowed to travel places because she was a girl. A woman who could not speak up about her feelings for a girl is considered to be stupid. She knows what was right and wrong for her yet she could not speak up as her consent was ignored. When a woman reaches a marital age, she is forced to be married and after marriage, her burden increases more as she had to look after the family. The husband overlooks the problem of his wife, the pain and burden she carries, he looks at another woman once her beauty fades away yet she bears patiently as she is helpless. It is a woman's responsibility to bring peace and harmony to the family and if she fails, she is blamed. She curses the men for their wrongdoings. (Marak C. R., 1997)

There are other poems written by a woman which express her sorrow for being born as a woman. The poem *Do-kru* (March, 1941) written by Jonmoni also narrates the life of a woman who dreams to wear wings like a bird and be free from all the things she has been bearing. The following are the lines that express a woman's grief:

*Changja Do-kru! Mandede ka-sana nang-gita,
Me-a me-chik nangrime dongrimna jringjrotna;
Ra-bia na-mang manden' changja ka-sana,
Mesoka kamchi nike kratcha-china* (Shira, 1983)

The lines say a man does not know how to love, a man and woman cannot bond together with love, a man is always aggressive towards his wife and if a wife tends to speak up for her then the husband humiliates her with his doings. Such were the things women had to face in the Garo society. Although they want to express their emotion to the world, they could not say so for the word of women was forbidden. She could share her emotions only with her daughters and on rare occasions with her son else she has to keep within herself.

Conclusion

Status of Garo women during pre-colonial and colonial period does not have many changes. They were not given much importance. Women remained to be the weakest member of the society regardless of holding a position like custodian and *Nokma*-ship. She was just the pillar of her lineage or her motherhood. Women had to remain silent in many occasions bearing all the consequences. The status of women could be only understood through few women who expressed their feelings through poems and writings during colonial period. However, these women could not fight against the male dominance during those days. The status of women in the Garo society changed gradually only during post-independence period.

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