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Women in Garo Society: An Anthropological Perspective

Abstract

The Garo society is a matrilineal society, where a female is always positioned as head and treated as the centre of the household. Though inheritance and succession follow the mother's line, the male is always regarded as the sole authority of the Garo household. Earlier, the practice of shifting cultivation is the only means of subsistence, in which the role of women was very significant. These days, with a decline in the practice of shifting cultivation, agricultural activities have become solely a male's affair. However, with educational improvements, the status of women has undergone certain changes and the paper aims to discuss the present status of Garo women residing in the villages bordering Assam and Meghalaya.

Keywords: Garos, women, matrilineal, status, education, inheritance.

Introduction

Social progress is closely linked with the role played by women in the society. The progress of a community is judged by the position of females in the society. No region is said to be developed if the women folk are neglected. The great French Idealist, Charles Fourier said, "One could judge the degree of civilization of country by the social and political position of its women" (1989). The role, status and position of women can be observed as mother, daughter and mother-in-law etc. in the matrix of patriarchal societies in India, where as in matrilineal societies the position and status of women is different because the girls have social rights to stay along with the parents after marriage.

As far as the traditional tribal societies of North-East India are considered, the prejudices noticed in Pan-Indian scenario, are relatively less. With the household economic system, practice of shifting cultivation, the land holding pattern and egalitarian ethos, the society does not suffer from prejudices against women. Particularly in Meghalaya, inhabited by the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos, the matrilineal system protects women to a large extent.

Generally, it seems that in matrilineal society women enjoy high status compared to their sisters in patriarchal society. Further in a Garo society, the women do not have any decision making authority either in the household or in the socio-political system. The matrilineal system does not protect their position and rights, which indicates that the status of women is not better. The matrilineal society, is 'female oriented but not female dominated' (Marak 2009). However, it does not imply that they dominate every aspect of family life. In a matrilineal Garo society, mother or the wife is not the head of the family or the household. It is the father or the husband who is considered as the head of the family. In Garo language the head of the family is known as '*Nokgipa*', '*Nokgipa*' means owner of the house (Goswami and Majumdar 1972). The *Nokgipa* is given the top most priority in every respect and the wife is considered as subordinate to him. The household works are normally shared by both men and women. But men's workload is confined to only those that are considered to be tough for the women. The type of men's work includes constructing of houses, planting and harvesting, etc. while the rest of the work is done by the women. The woman cooks for the family, fetches water, nurses the young one, collects firewood and so on. Apart from these household works the woman is engaged in harvesting works along with the husband.

In a family, women are expected to give due respect to the elderly male person, who may or may not belong to the same sib. A woman who does not show respect to elderly male is despised by saying, "*seko pako mande raja*" which means "she does not honour the father and husband" (Goswami and Majumdar 1972). Further while walking on

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the road along with her husband, the wife is however allowed to walk few steps behind him. However, allowed to walk in front or along with the husband during insecurity.

A woman cannot practice divorce at will and must first consult her *chra* or the male members of her Machongand and consent *Chra* decision is final and has the right to separate a wife from her husband if the concerned couple wants to do so.

In the Garo society, like in many other societies, the intellectual capability of women is underestimated, a popular male attitude towards female. It is expressed in the following way, "*me.chik suri gisik gr*", which means women are like torn garments and are without the power of thinking. It clearly indicates a poor estimate about the Garo women.

Perfect freedom is observed among Garo women when they attended religious services, visit the weekly market, visit neighboring villages and accompanied with male relatives, often visit distant places. The woman's name is mentioned first which reflects the respect shown to women. Owing to the fact that property descends through the female instead of the male line (the Garo social structure is matrilineal), the woman seem to have great honour (Downs 1998).

This paper tries to discern the status of women in the Garo society. Where women are under complete control of her husband. Garo society is women centered in composition but men centered in administration. In the first half of the 20th century, women's condition in the Garo society seems to remain the same, and they were completely under the male domination.

With the change in status and role of women throughout the world, today the Garo women are not confined to the four walls of their home. Now a days, the Garo women are also performing various types of works in various fields. The attitude towards the Garo women in their society has changed, their status is improving.

Methodology

To study the changing trend of the Garo women, field study was conducted in 3 villages of Meghalaya, under the Resubelpara sub-division; the villages are Nogol, Cichism, and Chima Apal. And in the plains the villages are Nidanpur and Bakrapur in Goalpara district of Assam. The total populations of these areas are shown in table-1. Household survey schedules were used to collect demographic data. This was supplemented by observation, interview and case study methods to collect indepth information about them.

Table 1 shows that the total population of female (1557) is higher than the Male population (1493). The current study shows that the number of female population is more than the male population.

Table-1 depicts the total population among the Garos of the study villages,2013

Name	Male	Female
Plains	775 (51.90%)	807 (51.83%)
Hills	718 (48.09%)	750 (48.16%)
Total	1493 (100%)	1557 (100%)

It is clear from the study that today women consider themselves equal with men. Many qualified women are engaged in various works like men. Most of the educated women (Table 2) have now started to work in government offices and in schools. It helps them in smooth running of the house and in upbringing of their children, and also influences their husbands and family members while taking decisions. A change is also noticed regarding occupational pattern through generations (Table 3).

Now a days in many of the household both husband and wife use to take decisions jointly. They neither depend on their husband nor on the *maharies* for taking decisions on matters concerning her. Thus education has definitely brought about some economic self dependency to the Garo women. The most important change in the present day Garo society is seen in the attitude of husbands to their wives. They do not treat their wives as inferior to them. Rather, they consider their wives as equal with them.

Table-2 Educational pattern of Garo women in study villages, 2013

Sl. No	Degree of Education	Plains	Hills
1	Too Young (0-4 yrs)	79 (9.78%)	36 (4.8%)
2	Up to Primary	77 (9.54%)	135 (18%)
3	Up to M.E.	109 (13.50%)	123 (16.4%)
4	Up to HSLC	196 (24.28%)	121 (16.13%)
5	Up to HS	58 (7.18%)	65 (8.66%)
6	Up to Degree	27 (3.34%)	30 (4%)
7	Up to Master Degree	8 (0.99%)	0
8	In Primary	87 (10.78%)	69 (9.2%)
9	In M.E.	46 (5.70%)	63 (8.4%)
10	In HSLC	75 (9.29%)	54 (7.2%)
11	In HS	24 (2.97%)	23 (3.06%)
12	In Degree	14 (1.73%)	15 (2%)
13	In Master Degree	3 (0.37%)	1 (0.13%)
14	Nursing	1 (0.12%)	3 (0.4%)
15	Law	0	1 (0.13%)
16	Illiterate	3 (0.37%)	11 (1.46%)
18	Total	807 (100%)	750 (100%)

In the Garo society, it is observed that, the male offsprings have to leave the parental household after marriage as they practice matriliney, and after marriage the male offsprings do not offer any economic help to the parental family. The money spent on the education of the male offsprings do not pay any dividends in the long run, and hence parents do not pay much interest in the education of the male offsprings. But this is totally a wrong calculation. There is a widespread belief that in matrilineal societies women dominate over the males. This is a wrong notion. In the Garo family the authority is always in the hands of the males. However, in this traditional pattern the women did not suffer. After marriage she continued to get protection from the male members of her lineage.

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Division of Labour in Garo Households

Married women who do not work outside homes are involved in cooking, looking after children and domestic animals. They also need to plant paddy and help in harvesting crops. The load of unmarried women is also similar. Only those women who work in offices or other avenues are lucky enough as their husbands also sometimes help them. In recent days more women are engaged in various services and so either husbands or other family members help them. The division of labour regarding married, unmarried and working women in the households among the Garos can be shown as follows:

Married Women

1. Cooking,
2. Bringing firewood,
3. Looking after small children,
4. Looking after domestic animals,
5. Planting of Paddy seeds,
6. Harvesting,
7. Carrying paddy to their home.

Unmarried Women

1. Looking after infants during absence of parents,

2. Helping the mother in washing cooking utensils,
3. Helping the mother to look after domestic animals,
4. Helping their parents in paddy field,
5. Fetching water from the stream in hills.

Working Women

1. Cooking,
2. Going to their workplace.

It is evident that in the families where, both the husband and wife are working, they keep student helpers (known as *mipal chagipa*). *Mipal chagipa* is an adolescent boy or a girl, who is expected to help in all domestic chores in return for which the family will provide him/her food to eat and the expense of education.

It has been found that, most of the families have this kind of student helpers; they either belong to the husband's relative or the wife's family. The parents of those student helpers cannot provide food to eat, nor can they afford to send them school.

Table-3 Occupational mobility of women among the Garos, 2013
(Mo refers to Mother)

-Within bracket figures are in percentage

Role of Women in the Mahari

Mahari was a very important social institution of

Marriages are settled by the Mahari and the opinion of the girl is not considered significant. The Mahari can

Sl.no	Occupation	Plains			Hills		
		Mo	Mo's mo	Mo's Mo's Mo	Mo	Mo's mo	Mo's mo's mo
1	Teacher	11(13.92)	6 (7.59)	1 (1.26)	8 (10.66)	2 (2.66)	0
2	Shopkeeper	3 (3.79)	1 (1.26)	0	0	3 (4)	0
3	Daily Wage Earner	1 (1.26)	2 (2.53)	3 (3.79)	1 (1.33)	2 (2.66)	0
4	Nurse	1 (1.26)	1 (1.26)	0	0	0	0
5	Lecturer	1 (1.26)	0	0	0	0	0
6	Anganwadi Worker	3 (3.79)	0	0	0	0	0
7	Govt. Service	1 (1.26)	2 (2.53)	0	0	0	0
8	Computer Instructor	1 (1.26)	0	0	0	0	0
9	Gram Sevika	0	0	0	0	1 (1.3)	0
10	Housewife	57 (72.2)	67 (84.8)	75 (94.93)	66 (88)	67 (89.3)	75 (100)
11	Total	79 (100)	79(100)	79 (100)	75 (100)	75(100)	75 (100)

the traditional Garo society. It played an important role in the activities of its members. Mahari was a male dominated institution and still remains to be so. In this social institution of the traditional Garo society, women had no role to play. She had no voice at all. Status of women in relation to the Mahari in the traditional Garo society, was quite disheartening. In the affairs of the Mahari, the women had no voice at all. Such matters are decided exclusively by the male elders. The males do not consider the opinion of the women as regards the Mahari affairs, except through her husband. Even regarding matters concerning women, the opinion of the women or the women in general, is not considered essential. Women must always abide by the decisions of the male elders.

decide to give a very young girl in marriage to an elderly person, and the girl has no redress (Goswami and Majumdar 1972). A woman is expected to abide by the decisions of the mahari. If the Mahari decides that it is not proper for a particular girl to stay with her husband, they can even force the couple to get separated.

In case of selecting a *Nokrom* i.e. resident son-in-law, the concerned girl has no right to choose by herself. The *Nokrom* is selected by the elderly male members of the Mahari. The girl has to obey the collective decision of the elderly male members of the Mahari. Customarily resident son-in-law must be the nephew of her father (son of father's sister). If such suitable boy is not available, she must marry only man from her father's Ma'chong. Such a daughter has no free

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choice to select her male, because she will have to marry the proper blood kin of her father so that the marital alliance between her mother's lineage and her father's lineage remain unbroken. It is not regarded as obligatory for them to marry a close kin of her father. The Mahari also arranges remarriage for widow or divorced women from among the Mahari members.

In the earlier days women could not take part in Mahari meetings. Mahari meetings refer to the assembly of the elderly male members of the Mahari. In the traditional Garo society Mahari meetings were considered to be the platform of the male members. The elderly male members of the respective Maharies used to discuss different issues like settlement of girl's marriage, selection of *Nokna*, inheritance of property, dispute between members within the Mahari or inter Mahari disputes. Women could attend such meetings just as silent listeners. But in present times things have undergone a change. Now women can actively take part in Mahari meetings. It is found that, most of the respondents take part in Mahari meetings, and some of them even protest Mahari decisions whenever it is necessary.

In present day, Garo girl finds greater freedom in choosing their life partners. In the earlier times young girls were compelled by the Mahari to marry an old man. But in recent days girls can raise their voice against such decisions of Mahari.

Present generation girls would not agree to get married with an old man or a widower. Rather they prefer to marry suitable boy from other communities. The educated sections get opportunity to mix up with people from other communities and hence the chance of selection of partners has also been broadened (Tables 4 and 5). These days many males from the other communities are getting married with Garo girls.

Table-4: Males from other communities married with Garo girls

Sl.No	Communities	Plains	Hills
1	Rabha	2 (12.5%)	0
2	Muslim	3 (18.75%)	0
3	Bodo	2 (12.5%)	1 (50%)
4	Assamese	4 (25%)	0
5	Khasi	1 (6.25%)	1 (50%)
6	Mizo	2 (12.5%)	0
7	Manipuri	1 (6.25%)	0
8	South Indian	1 (6.25%)	0
9	Total	16 (100%)	2 (100%)

Table-5: Garo woman brought through marriage to the study areas, 2013

Villages in K.M	Plains	Hills
1-5 km	4	4
6-10km	3	5
11 -15km	5	0
16-20km	0	5
21-25km	0	4
25km+	14	13
Within the villages	14	13
Total =	40	44

Inheritance of Property

The study villages, being matrilineal, the Garo traditional system of inheritance of property is only

through the female line. A daughter inherits her property from her mother and her daughter will inherit the property from her mother, and in this way the property is inherited from one generation to the next. No man may possess property, unless he has acquired it by his own exertions. No man can inherit property under any circumstances whatsoever. A man can use his parental property, but he cannot inherit, nor his son's will, only the daughter can.

But now a days in all the villages, it is seen that the traditional mode of inheritance has loosen its grip, and found that in the family where there are no daughters, the property is equally shared among the sons. It is also seen that in both the areas of study, where there is no girl child, the parents asked for a resident daughter-in-law for their sons and the resident daughter-in-law inherit the property of her mother-in-law.

In case a woman dies without any children, then the husband cannot inherit the property, but his wife's relatives must provide him with another wife of the same ma'chong as the deceased women. Then the daughters of the second wife will satisfy the rule.

Conclusion

It can be noticed that the Garo society is changing in recent years. In traditional Garo society, women are ridiculed with the saying that just as a goat is without teeth, so a woman lacks brain (Zehol 2003). With education and avenues of employment for women, more women are now being educated and are engaging themselves in various government or non-government undertakings. As a result, they are now free from the shackles of typical household duties. Shifting cultivation has also given way to permanent cultivation. This has also made agricultural activities male oriented. Being educated, they now feel quite free to select their life partner not only from their own community but also from outside the community. In recent years there has been a steady increase in inter-community marriages, specially among the Garos of the plains. Some of the Garos of the study areas have adopted Christianity and this has also widened their outlook. They are now being educated by the Christian missionary schools, preferably in English medium. Education in English medium, Christianity and contact with other people, especially the plains people have widened the outlook of the Garos and brought about change in the status of Garo women.

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