



Role Of Women In Decision Making Process Of A Family: An Ethnographic Study On Women Of Matak Community In Dibrugarh District Of Assam

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Abstract

Women play a crucial role every spheres from family to society. Within family they play an active role through various images as mother, wife, daughter and so on. But reality implies that their role push as secondary rather prime. In the family decision making process their role always neglected. 'Matak' is an important ethnic group in Assam which sharing common history and cultural way from generation to generation. Basically this group lives upper part of Assam. It is an age old ethnic group of Assam but limited literature deals with its people specially its women situation. Thus, this paper attempt to focus women's role regarding decision-making process in family which define equal space for both them. The people of this ethnic group lives Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, and Sivasagar etc. district of this state. This paper select study area Dibrugarh district as most populated of this ethnic group. Problem of unavailability of literature, researcher conducted this study through ethnographic method using deep observation and interaction. The nature of this paper isa qualitative one and data have been collected from both secondary and primary sources. This study reflect women lower space in the decision making process of this community where patriarchy is the root cause to creating this. This study also reveals a specific cultural occasion gastolor bihu of this community define women important space in the family. In the concluding part, define the findings of the study. Thus, this study is hoped to help understand various facts and through it, creates an awareness and space for women in the family decision making process.

Key words: Decision making process, Family, Matak community, Patriarchy, Women

1. Introduction

The status of women in different societies has often been reflected their role in various respective fields and their socio-economic background that they belong in the earlier time. Status refers position of a particular individual or group in terms of their enjoyment of their rights and obligation of their own society. The status of woman is also measured compare with men in that particular society (Mazumdar, 1978, p.17). Various factors such as family, kinship system, participation in social and cultural institutions etc. reflect women position in that particular society. To explain about women position in the social sphere then it includes women role in the family, their role in the different social group

activities, kinship systems, societal customs and norms related participation and so on. It has been known that different groups represent their different societal customs and norms and it symbolises different status of women of their own group basis. But reality define that the women refer as second sex which have not an equal space along with men in the society. However various emergent researches have been focused about women role in various perspectives but this study particularly focus about the Matak community women which do not so much focus by the other researchers.

India represents as a diverse country to include various ethnic, tribal and non-tribal, community, religious groups and sharing various geographical differences within its states. Following distinct traditional cultural practices by these different groups which play a vital role to determine a set of distinct status and identities for women in India. Like in some thinkers define that most of the women workers have been drop out from the employment sector because Indian tradition against women for outside work (Mazumdar, 1978, p.26). However, modernization play a pivotal role to changing women better status to providing them more freedom in some matters but still traditional societal norms prevail to create women subordination in the society. The condition of women in North –east India is often considered better than the rest of the parts of India. Most of the people of this area belong to tribal background which reflect women active participation in the livelihood practices depends on forest and agriculture related activities. But reality reveals that the condition of tribal women as an exploitative one like non-tribal(Karna,2015,p.15). Because representing patriarchal societies, some ritual duties are only being perform by men and prohibited for women (Saikia, 2014, p.38). Lack of inheritance property rights, lack of active participation in the decision-making process in the family and community etc. create an inferior status for them. Although matrilineal societies refers the importance of women status. But here actual power under the control of male counterparts over women folk. Thus, it has been shown that whether tribal and non-tribal societies womenfolk push as a subordinate position within their own particular group.

Assam is a north-eastern state in India. Representing both tribal and non-tribal communities and absence of certain practices such as child marriage, dowry, widow burning(sati) etc. symbolise a better condition for women. But a closer look reflect the domination of men over women position.

Among the various communities in Assam Matak is an age old ethnic group. The people of this community has been situated in Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, and Sivasagar etc. district. Different scholars interpret that Matak and Moran are the same people and other argued that the term 'Matak' has been used to represent three words Matak, Moran and Maymora on the same purpose. It has been defined that Matak community includes different tribes like Morans, Borahis, Kacharis and Chutiyas and that they all originally belong to the larger Bodo group(Dutta, 1985, p.45). Whether the term Matak is contested one but it has

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been established that it is one of the aboriginal ethnic group in Assam with its various tribal and non-tribal features of socio-economic and cultural practices. Matak women enjoy greater opportunities to their status than the 'mainstream Hindu women' due to the absence of certain practices like child marriage and dowry and following various traditional tribal customs and norms.

Limited literature deals with this community which have been published by its own organizations on its different occasions. These available literature reflect Matak women role as sustaining of cultural identity of this community but most of them do not address the issue of women's role within the community in a critical and comprehensive manner. In this context, it is important to test women various roles within this community and how is it received. The present paper is particularly focus about the Matak women's role regarding decision-making process in the family. The family is a basic social unit of any community, ethnic group, and society and women situation important to define here because cultural customs and norms postulated and articulated here.

2. Objectives

The main objectives of this paper

- To understand the Matak women role in the family decision making process in the Dibrugarh district
- To understand the nature of continuities and changes in the Matak women position in the family matters

3. Methodology

Given the research objective and unavailability of literatures this paper is based on ethnographic methodology. The ethnographic methodology has emerged on the basis of the various discussions, debates and understandings that acknowledge the complexity of human experience through researching close and sustained observation of human behaviour (Reily, 2005, p.i).

The proposed study is based on descriptive, analytical and ethnographic method. Descriptive method has been used to describe the Matak community and family. The analytical method has been used to critically analysis women role in the family decision making process. The ethnographic method has been used in assessing opinions and behaviour of respondent people.

The nature of this proposed study is a qualitative one. Data have been collected from both the primary and secondary sources. The primary sources of the study collect from the observation, interviews whether structured or unstructured and different interaction with village people and secondary sources includes various books and chapters etc.

4. Study area

The study is selected Dibrugarh district as a majority Matak community villages exist in this district than the other districts in Assam. It is situated on the upper valley of the river Brahmaputra which runs for about 95 km in the district to the Patkai foothills on the south(Dibrugarh district, Information About, n.d). This district is bounded by Dhemaji district and a part of Lakhimpur district in the north, part of Sibsagar and Arunachal Pradesh in the south, Tinsukia district in the east and Sibsagar district in the west (ibid). It covers an area of 3381 sq. kilometres in the Assam. There are 9 towns and 1348 villages of Dibrugarh district as against the all Assam 214 towns and 26395 villages. However, there are 72 villages where Matak as a major ethnic group of this district.

5. Scope and limitation of the study

The fundamental scope of this paper is to discuss about the women decision making role in the family of the Matak community which is particularly focus on Dibrugarh district contextualising their contemporary and past status. This study attempt at providing the way for further research engagements on this issue. The limitation of this study has been inability to focus other perspectives and cover up other districts in this states.

6. Overview of the term

6.1 Family: According to Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishnaraj in their edited book 'Women and Society in India' (1987) explain the concept of the family; represent as a basic social unit of any society where a network exist among of its members men, women and children through on the basis of mutual ties and obligation. Various tools like marital norms, sexual division of labour, rights and duties determine the position of members in a family. According to Summer and Keller, "Family is a miniature social organisation, including at least two generation, and is characteristically formed upon the blood bond"(Rao,2008,p.52). In this context family represents generational ties and here construct and reconstruct new members position through socialization process. The structure of the family has been changed from earlier time to till today. In 'The Origin of The Family, Private Property and The State' by Friedrich Engels (1909) argued that the family pattern has been changed from one period to another one and in contemporary time it gets a new outlook as a monogamous family. The pattern of family not only depends upon on different period but also various geographical location as region, area and community, ethnic groups and society etc. basis. Although most of the family structure in India belongs to joint families which is a traditional one but in contemporary time this pattern has been changed to a nuclear one. In modern time capitalist industrial society represent employment-oriented life style on the basis of nuclear family pattern(Kunjakkan,2002,p.135). But it can not be ignore that still India represents most of the family in joint pattern basically in the village area.

6.2 Matak Community

Matak represent is one of among aboriginal ethnic group in primitive time in Assamese society (Borgohain,2008). It has own specific identity to practicing its own traditional customs and norms.

Implication in a historical outlook, Tai-Ahom language refers the word 'Matak' means 'knowledgeable', 'powerful' people(Gogoi, 2010). Thus, Matak signifies knowledgeable and powerful people. Dr.Karabi Baruah Gogoi in her book discussed on the basis of Gulap Baruah translation regarding definition of Matak people that –“The Matak descended from Phukhao family(a family originated from seed sewn)”(Gogoi, 2014,p.18). The word Phukhao is derived from the Tai language. The Central committee of All Assam Matak Sanmilian in their memorandum submitted to the Government of India stated that:

“The Matak is one of the most primitive aboriginal Tribe of Assam , had an independent sovereign kingdom of their own from Pre- historic period in the region known as “SAUMAR” in the north-east corner of Assam. Matak tribe has been agitating for its inclusion as a Scheduled Tribe of Assam since before independence through various representations and memorandum to the Government of India. As far as the History of Assam is concerned it is evident that there was existence of the Matak tribe at the time of Sue-Ka-Phaa’s advent in Assam(1228 A.D.). Chow-Lung-Sue-Ka-Phaa who entered into Assam from Yunan Province of China through Dihing-Patkai Hills of the very eastern part of India under whose leadership the Ahom Kingdom was started and ruled for 600yrs. Incessantly in Assam, the Matak tribe could not tolerate the atrocities of the Ahom Ruler and revolted against Ahom king in October 1769 A.D. and later on Matak kingdom was formed by Swargadeu Sarbananda Singha as the king of the Matak kingdom. Under the British period or political agent named Hemilton Vetch, British surveyor prepared the boundaries of Matak country in the year 1841 A. D. which speaks it self about the existence of Matak kingdom”(Memorandum to Prime Minister of India by the Central Committee by All Assam Matak Sanmilian of Assam, March 9, 2015).

The main occupation of this ethnic group people is agriculture and they are basically live in rural area. On the religious practice they believe 'Ak-Horon' dharma(Vaishnava religion) and at the same time follow certain Sakti dharma(Sakta dharma) practices. Apart from this they have distinct ancient monument and places and some different terminology of languages and dress pattern and following some distinct festivals apart from main national festival of Assam bihu.

7. Analysis and discussion

Family is a fundamentally acceptable basic social unit. It reflects different roles of its member. Socialization is a process where teach proper gender defined role among of its member and legitimising it through societal norm. Family is one of the among important

socialising agency where social and cultural customs and norms transfer to a socially accepted norms, values, customs, practices, tradition, faith and belief etc. from one generation to another generation and maintain it through a line (Rao,2008,p.52). Women is an important member of a family. Within family her images symbolises as a mother, wife, daughter, sister etc. which reflect their position and role within this group. It signifies who play supreme authority role, who is more responsible towards that particular group's cultural customs and norms and who are mostly binding such role within family and community and so on. Most of the time women have been reflected as a subordinate position within a family because of the patriarchal notion. Public and private dichotomy, women neglect about their position, deny women's authority role, men domination over women, traditional cultural customs and norms preference women four well role etc. are some of the patriarchal notion have been followed by this group does not except from other groups. However in modern time a changing attitude has been given importance on girl's education, women empowerment, gender equality etc. help to improve the women status in their society. Although in legal situation their status to some extent satisfactory but in real situation define differences are not changed from the earlier context(Bhattacharya & Kirpalani, 1978,p.209). To discuss about the Matak women position in the decision making process in this study using ethnographic method conducted by the researcher focusing with various factors.

7.1 Family pattern

The word patriarchy, as stated by Kamala Bhasin in her book 'What is Patriarchy', literally defines the rule of father or the 'Patriarch' and generally, this term focus on the structure of 'male-dominated society', where various members are father, mother, husband, wife, brother, sister, children, domestic servants etc. present in family but ultimate control of power under the hand of men whether elder or younger(Rao,2008,p.120-121). Thus, patriarchy creates men domination over women and push them lower space not only society but also at the same time within family. As V. Geetha explains the meaning of the term of patriarchy that refers absolute rule of father or other eldest member over other members in a family (Saikia,2014,p.16). Through the family pattern patriarchy exist with its norms. Interaction with different respondents define the family pattern reflecting women position to the decision making process in the family in this community.

One of the old age women respondent who live in a joint family told about her status on this.

"I am an old women. Before my husband died, he had taken head of the family and after that my son had taken this 'family head' position (his father position). Our community also giving preference the responsibility of family through the male lines."(An interaction with Lima Chetia(name changed)).

Another interaction with reflect about the nuclear family pattern.

'I live in a nuclear family where my husband, two daughter and one son live. Although we (husband and wife) both discuss some important matter but ultimate decision has been taken by my husband. It is the economic position of my husband which creates ability for him to take decision and I have nothing; because I am only housewife."(An interaction with the Mrinali Baruah(name changed)).

Another interaction focus a different issue.

"I alone live in my home. My daughter married to another village and two son living separately with their own family. I get 'Biridha Pension'(old age pension providing by government) which to some extent help me to getting my necessary food. So I do not dependent my son. I free to choose where and what is doing for me or not."(An interaction with the Phuleswari Baruah(name changed)).

The above interaction define that both joint and nuclear family deny women important position in the family decision-making process. However women get some space in the decision making process within a nuclear family but it is not prime rather secondary. In this discussion reflect that it is quite possible woman plays a major role in the decision making process when she lives alone. But it is not happened to lives with her family because family reflecting patriarchal notion where supreme authority under the men hand.

7.2 Economy

In the above interaction with Mrinali Baruah defines about lack of economic sources of women hand. Dichotomy of public and private space of economy creates a serious problem of lack of economic access on women hand. In modern time following capitalist societal pattern gives important more exchange value rather use value. Mohini Chatterjee in her book 'Feminism & Gender Equality' describe(2005) that modern time exchange value gets more importance includes production which usually relate with exchange rather use value includes domestic products in a home like cooking, knitting, weaving etc. which all are produced by women (Chatterjee, 2005). On the occupational basis Matak community is an agricultural based society(Dutta, 1985,p.62). Women play an active role in this field. But they represents as agricultural labour rather cultivator. On the other side some involve as unorganised labour. However most women play as a role of housewives. In this context, lack of economy creates dependence of women over men and it push them a low space for decision making process in the family.

7.3 Following Cultural customs and norms

An interaction with an Ajenwadi worker of this group focus that Patriarchal notion deeply has been internalised by the gender socialisation process which support and given preference by both men and women with intentionally or unintentionally.

“I am doing a job but my father is not. But all of the member of my family has been supported his decision. He has been taking all the decision of the family and all the members support it. Because he is the eldest male member of the family; so we all obey his decisions.”(An interaction with Sima Gohain(name changed)).

Another interaction defines

“I live with my son, daughter-in-law and grandson. My son Babu takes all the decision for the family.”(An interaction with the Silpa Gohain(name changed)).

When researcher asked her why she does not take decision for her family as she is the mother and eldest member of the family. Then she replied:

“Dear, you do not know women are not taking decision. My mother, my grandmother even my great grandmother following this. It is our responsibility to obey men’s decision.”(An interaction with the Silpa Gohain(name changed)).

Thus these interaction define that women of this community always are not dominated because they have lack of economic sources rather they give preferences traditional community’s cultural practices which is the outcome of gender socialization process. They even do not feel about their lack of participation in the decision making process which equal space both for men and women rather they accepted it as their daily part.

7.4 Mentality

The above interaction with the Silpa Gohain(name changed) and Sima Gohain(name changed) define their lack of mentality and awareness about women space and gives importance about the community’s cultural customs due to cause of internalization of patriarchal norms among the family members through gender socialization process. However modernization effect women status in the family. It creates awareness among women about their changing status and creates a mindset to changing the earlier superstitious beliefs. However modernization negatively affect women position in the economic sphere but positively it influence women participation in the family decision making process. An interaction focus such issue

“Our community also give preference women to wearing Makhala-Sadar(traditional dress of Assam). But when my daughter-in-law will come my house I will tell her to wearing what she like. I do not force her to wear traditional dress if she will not comfortable it. It is her decision what is wear or not. Because modern time a changing outlook define women decision matter regarding this”. (An interaction with the Jyoti Gohain(name changed)).

7.5 A Specific Festival Gastolor Bihu

Gastolor bihu [bihu (a national festival of Assam) celebrated under the tree] is one of the festive occasion of Matak community celebrated during the Bohag Bihu/Rongali Bihu(one of the national festival of Assam) which reflecting an important place of women both family and society. However women get a subordinate position within the family in the Matak community. But to some extent they get an equal position to taking up decision about their marriage. On this occasion girls select a place which far from their village covered by a big tree and they are dancing bihu on there. Boys are also come to look bihu dance of the girls. On that time both boys and girls try to know each other through the bihu songs. During that time Matak community girls are free from their parent restrictions (Chetia, p.116). So, on that time they are free to choose their life partners. Thus it can be argued that the consent of the woman is deemed must for necessary to the decision of the marriage within this ethnic group. It provides an equal opportunity both boys and girls to choose their life partner freely. And define that only girls' parents and boys do not have to take the decision for the girls. Respondents in this study define that they enjoy freedom within this community to take decision regarding this matter. They also focus that various group neglect women role in the decision-making, but at least they are free to take decision regarding their marriage through this occasion. Thus, this traditional cultural customs which prevalent of this community from earlier time to till today define an equal space for women of this community rather created a subordinated space.

8. Conclusion

On the basis of ethnographic method this study highlight the following conclusions:

- 1) Pattern of family whether joint or nuclear created lack of space for women in the decision making process but it quite possible for them taking decision when she lives alone. But generally family structure of this community men takes supreme position in the family decision making process.
- 2) Men get higher position in the family decision making process due to the cause of economy because men have economic resources but mostly women engage as a housewives.
- 3) This study reveals that all the time economy is not the prime factor to create subordinate space for women. It is the patriarchy which reflected through the traditional cultural customs of this community push women inferior position through a socialising agency of family.
- 4) Although generally define that traditional cultural norms push women lower space in the decision making process but a specific festive occasion gastolor bihu of this ethnic group creates women important and equal position along with men in the family decision making process which gives liberty for women to takes decision about their marriage.

- 5) In present day modernisation creates a changing mentality to aware about women important position in the decision making process but still patriarchy occupies within both men and women mentality which creates lack of women space in the family decision making process even today also.

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