
UNIT 5 WOMEN IN TRIBAL SOCIETIES

Contents

- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Gender Perspective in the Study of Women
- 5.3 Anthropology and Tribal Study
- 5.4 Differentiating Sex and Gender
- 5.5 Gender Terminologies Defined
- 5.6 Gender as a System
- 5.7 Status of Tribal Women: An Overview
 - 5.7.1 Work-role Performance of Tribal Women
 - 5.7.2 Tribal Women's Reproductive Role and its Social Significance
 - 5.7.3 The Primary Traits that Differentiate Tribal Men and Women
 - 5.7.4 Determinants of Tribal Women's Status in Traditional and Transitional Societies
- 5.8 Tribal Women in Changing Situations
- 5.9 A General Overview of Tribal Women in India
 - 5.9.1 Instances from Some Indian Tribal Groups
- 5.10 Summary
 - References
 - Suggested Reading
 - Sample Questions

Learning Objectives



After going through this unit, you will be able to understand:

- how women and the concept of gender is interrelated;
- the nature and extent of women's control over valued resources and their labour and production;
- the work-role attachment of tribal women at various levels;
- the underlying factors influencing tribal women's status in society;
- the impact of changing social and physical environment on tribal women; and
- how to look into the reality of the world of tribal women.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Anthropology and tribal history is intimately related to each other. The nineteenth century anthropologists mostly took the pain of exploring tribal world across the globe primarily fulfilling the interest of the colonial rulers. It has quite often been asserted that in conventional anthropological literature women remains invisible though ethnographic accounts have encompassed women through extensive studies on marriage and kinship system of tribal groups. Therefore,

problem lies in the process of representing women, not essentially in availability of data. In traditional anthropological fieldwork and their interpretation, three inherent phenomena have surfaced influencing representation of women through gender perspective.

- The anthropologists happened to be outsiders hailing from non-traditional societies, came to the field with a preoccupied notion that the men of the studied society were more accessible, control significant information base and attached to almost all socio-cultural aspects.
- The men of the studied society considered women as subordinate entity and the same notion was transmitted to the anthropologists.
- Anthropologists hailing from western and non-traditional culture perceived gender system of studied societies similar to the asymmetrical gender system existing in their own society. Thus, they merely failed to understand and interpret the egalitarian or at least differential gender relations present in other traditional societies (Moore, 1988).

The women centric view points emerged in anthropological interpretation by the year 1970. In India the Committee on the Status of Women (CSWI) was set up in 1971 and a new era of investigating women's issues in gender perspective emerged in the country. Thus there emerged a trend to break the paradigm of "male reporting" and seeing women in "men's perspectives". Interpreting socio-cultural relations and actions through female points of views necessitates the reworking and redefining anthropological thoughts on women and their relation to men, work and production and reproduction etc. This reading material will introduce the students to various aspects of tribal women's relation to interpersonal interaction, social relations, behaviour pattern, work-role expectation, relation of women to the means of production and resources, the power relation in social, economic and political spheres of different levels.

5.2 GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN THE STUDY OF WOMEN

It has been asserted that in any human society the dominant group generates and controls the model of expression of social reality in their own terms. Human history shows that man dominates the world of expression to outsiders at different levels of interactions. The females, being a dominated group are expected to express their life experiences in a male defined model. But the women's life experiences cannot be expressed through such male dominated model. So the women do not get any medium to express their views and they get muted (Ardenner, 1975). Thus, there emerged new trends in analysis of social realities through female's perspectives re-looking at anthropological and ethnographic data collected through different space and time.

5.3 ANTHROPOLOGY AND TRIBAL STUDY

Anthropologists are the pioneers in classifying and defining the indigenous and tribal groups as social categories across the world. There are different views on the definition and classification of tribes among the scholars. For instance, Elman Service (1962) and Marshall Sahlins (1968) defined tribe as a phase of social

formation in an evolutionary framework of human society, acquiring a non-state character closer to other two social forms, bands and chiefdoms. Social scientists are critical in accepting the evolutionary scheme to define tribes. In general, anthropologists have forwarded several criteria like territoriality, legendary origin, language, distinct culture, incipient technology, self-sufficiency etc to define a tribe. But such criteria have been ever changing and in contemporary social scene it is a matter of question whether there is any genuine demarcation to identify a tribe as such. Therefore, while analysing tribal groups it has to be remembered that these societies are in different stages of transition and they are not homogeneous groups.

The Constitution of India does not define Scheduled Tribes as such. Article 366(25) refers to scheduled tribes as those communities who are scheduled in accordance with Article 342 of the Constitution. According to Article 342 of the Constitution, the Scheduled Tribes are the tribes or tribal communities or part of or groups within these tribes and tribal communities which have been declared as such by the President through a public notification.

5.4 DIFFERENTIATING SEX AND GENDER

While delineating about women, an immediate requirement arises i.e. the clarification about sex and gender identities and concepts related to them. Sex identity is an ascribed status of a person attached with the chromosomal, hormonal, anatomical and physiological structure. On the contrary, gender is an achieved status which refers to psychological, social and cultural components of a person. People learn what behaviour, role and attitude they should have according to their label – male and female. The universal sex difference is interpreted and experienced through culturally defined symbolism and gender identity in all human societies. Thus identity of men and women is culturally recognised through gender relations in various aspects of life. Any discourse on women thus attracts the need to venture in to gender system of a given society.

5.5 GENDER TERMINOLOGIES DEFINED

- a) ***Engenderment and Gender Differentiation:*** Through social learning, inculcation and internalisation, men and women learn differential gender roles and gender specific behaviour defined by the society, a process called ***engenderment*** leading to ***gender differentiation***.
- b) ***Gender Division of Labour:*** Across the globe men and women do different works on a categorical average. This is because the notion of gender is intimately related to certain work-role expectation from a specific gender. This differential work-role performance is termed as ***gender division of labour***.
- c) ***Gender Stratification:*** Men and women in every society are not always equal in having access to scarce and valued resources. The extent of access to such resources among the genders can be termed as ***gender stratification***. A higher level of gender stratification signifies the greater inequalities between men and women in various spheres of life. Empirically, gender stratification is always attached with some degree of female disadvantages and superior power for males.

- d) **Gender Ideology:** In every human society there are belief systems that explain how and why men and women should differ from one another. On the basis of such beliefs in every society attempts are made to explain different rights, responsibilities, restrictions and rewards given to each gender and to justify negative reaction to nonconformists. Such belief system related to gender identity is called **gender ideology**.
- e) **Authority:** Gender ideology mostly helps legitimise men's superior power over resources including women. Such legitimised power is called **authority**.
- f) **Gender Stereotype:** In a society, when gender differences are perceived as the real differences, such belief system constitutes **gender stereotype** when they are shared by collectives.

5.6 GENDER AS A SYSTEM

Gender is not a simple notion in a cultural context. It is a system in every human society. Division of labour, work-role performance, production and reproduction, distribution and re-distribution of goods and services and many other social, economic, cultural and religious aspects are intertwined with gender. Thus it forms a complex web of social action and relation forming a system in it. Now that we have talked about some of the basic areas of tribes and gender, we now proceed to delve into an elaborate discussion on the intricacies of stratification observed in women inhabiting tribal societies.

5.7 STATUS OF TRIBAL WOMEN: AN OVERVIEW

Traditional anthropological and sociological literatures assign higher status to tribal women compared to women in many non-tribal societies. The general view forwarded for this perception includes tribal women's greater involvement in subsistence and market economy, their ability to possess some landed resources for economic activities, existence of the system of bride-price (or bride-wealth), ability to choose one's own life partner and relatively free venture in male dominated domains.

These conventional criteria for assessing tribal women's status have been questioned by present day anthropologists and social scientists while they find that under the umbrella concept of "higher status", the tribal women's life is not so pleasant. They are dominated by men's dominant paradigm of gender system in various social, economic and political fronts. Women are deprived of the right to inherit valuable resources, if at all they are official heirs; in practice the men control those resources. Despite their greater involvement in work-role performance, the tribal women mostly lack power to control the benefits of their labour, production and reproduction. In terms of health, education, decision making and political participation etc the tribal women are mostly found to be lagging behind their men counterparts. Thus an analysis of the situation of tribal women through gender perspective promises a better and unbiased depiction of life of tribal women.

5.7.1 Work-role Performance of Tribal Women

It is worth mentioning that the tribal societies across the world are in different stages of transition – from their egalitarian nature to their involvement with the

complex capitalist and urbanised non-traditional societies. Thus we find lots of variation among the tribal women regarding their work-role, their nature and extent of involvement in work spheres — domestic, extra-domestic and public domain, their relation to resources and their control over production and reproduction etc.

The general perception about women's work reveals that women are primarily involved in works related to household and family responsibility, child care, family food security, caring cattle and supplementing family's subsistence economy. Land and forest, remain primary resources on which the tribal women depend for fulfilling most of such responsibilities. But instances drawn from across the world show that these are not exclusive work of women. The role of women may venture into the domain which is usually perceived as men's domain.

Instances showed that in many tribal societies having a traditional setting; women could do a lot of activities having social and economic importance in their society. Pre-colonial and pre-capitalist Lovedu women of Zambia could become socially a father of child and husband of a girl. She could assume both masculine and feminine kin roles. Iroquois women used to control the food supply and even could decide the nature and extent of men's involvement in warfare. Women among the !Kung Bushmen of Kalahari Desert were engaged in hunting activities. The association of all wives of lineage men in every Igbo village in south eastern Nigeria used to perform the role of setting prices for markets and protected the interests of the in-marrying women. They could even punish husband's interference in women's domain of control (Poewe 1980; Brown, 1975; Leacock 1977; Van Allen 1972). In contemporary world also the Mbuti people of Zaire conduct hunting where willing women can take part. Agta women of Philippines often hunt, using knives or bows and arrows. In the Tongan Islands women arrange the marriage of their brother's children. Among the Walpiri of Australia, the initiatives and arrangement of marriage are in the hands of the prospective mother-in-law (Turnbull 1978; Bell 1980). All these work-roles are otherwise perceived as males' job in general.

5.7.2 Tribal Women's Reproductive Role and its Social Significance

Importance of women's contribution in pregnancy and subsequent child birth is not equally valued by different tribal societies across the world. Instances drawn from among the !Kung bushmen of Kalahari, the Murngin Aborigines of Australia, the Ilongots of the Philippines show that the theme of motherhood and sexual reproduction are not central to those people's conception of women. Men, in such societies, also assume an important role. Social fatherhood and social motherhood subsumes biological mother and fathers in many societies. Contrarily, Guajiro (a tribe from Columbia and Venezuela) ideology gives women a central place in the creation of life. Women create life from a drop of her menstrual blood. Though the father put his semen as a part of reproduction, his contribution diminishes in the child's body as it grows and replaced by mother's substance like flesh and blood and become truly a 'mother's child' (Collier and Rosaldo 1981; Maria-Barbara 1985). These socio-culturally defined roles of women in reproduction have certain impact in acquiring their position in the society.

5.7.3 The Primary Traits that Differentiate Tribal Men and Women

Irrespective of work-role performance, men and women have separate domains in each society. They are separated from each other through a complex web of deep rooted social, cultural and religious beliefs and practices. Excretions during menstruation and child birth remains the major factor to separate men's world from women's in most of the traditional societies. The concept of pollution and danger attached to it plays a major role to see women as a separate entity and to determine social and interpersonal interaction between the two genders. Plenty of examples are available in the ethnographic accounts.

Kaulong culture of New Britain considers women polluting, dangerously polluting during menstruation and child birth. A polluting woman is dangerous to adult men. Sexual intercourse is perceived as equal to marriage among the Kaulong and is thought to be a polluting act. They perform marriage or intercourse to reproduce. The danger of pollution debars a Kaulong man to be dominant in courtship with woman. It is the girl who takes dominant part in this respect. Male's initiative towards a woman is considered as a rape. Such dominant cultural definition helps controlling resources and the product of their labour. Among the Gimi of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, women are considered polluting. While the forests seem as a male realm, men wish to identify with the non-human world and be revitalised by its limitless, masculine powers. The instances of Hua society show that all children are born partially female. Adult males give masculine substance to male children through ceremonies. In this process they lose their maleness and thus old males become female-like, lose their status and work in the field with younger women. Women lose their femaleness through menstruation and child birth and thus adult females become male-like and get higher social status. Therefore, adult males are very much cautious about getting polluted by female substances and try to distance themselves from female world (Goodale 1980; Gillison 1980; Meigs 1976). Majority of gender related work-roles, beliefs and practices center round such differentiations which puts a cultural aspect to such physiological happenings.

5.7.4 Determinants of Tribal Women's Status in Traditional and Transitional Societies

It was conceived, in general, that in pre-colonial or pre-classed societies, where notion of private ownership was relatively lacking, women and men were autonomous individuals who held equal positions or equal value and prestige through their work-role performance. Contemporary tribal societies where community mode of production is prevalent, men and women have same relationship to the means of production and hence they stand to each other as equal members of a community of "owners". In a kin-corporate mode of production, kin groups collectively control the means of production, and women's status varies according to whether they are primarily defined as sisters or wives, where sisters have more power and control over resources compared to wives (Sacks 1979).

Among the Australian aborigines women's position is directly related to the importance of and their control over their economic contribution, their participation in women's rituals valued by both men and women. Men's and

women's worlds are substantially independent of each other in economic and ritual terms, have equal power base, not necessarily implying inferiority or subordination (Leacock 1978; Phyllis Kaberry 1930; Diane Bell 1983). It has also been stressed by scholars that mere involvement in crucial work force of production and reproduction and the resource owned by community do not assure women's higher position in their society. Among the Mbowamb of central New Guinea, contrary to their intense involvement in work-role, the women have no *de facto* control over the land due to residence rule and they have *de jure* control over their children due to the descent rule. A mother is socially separated from her children only because she belongs to a different descent group. Their cosmology also says that men created life out of shoots. Women have no part in creation. Contrary to such situation the Guajiro women as stated in the foregoing part of this writing, has almost absolute social control and possession of their offspring because women's contribution in reproduction is highly acknowledged and the role of the father is unclear.

Gender ideology plays a crucial role in defining women's social status. For example, the conventional male version about Mbowmb women is that women are like slave to males who serve. The women are also like a road and by marrying a woman the road to extend a male's status and position in society gets opened up. They are seen as physically strong but mentally weak enough to hold control over land and other important resources and make social contract etc. All these notions show that the male is the model and measure of perfect human being. Their mythology depicted women as the servant of the creator of life and later on were given to the created Mbowmbs as wives. Women are seen as dangerous because they take the power they possess with them at the time of marriage to strengthen another group, and the group who receives the new life is afraid of her since she carries power which is derived from another, potentially dangerous group.

The value attached to certain works and control over the skill to do those works possesses crucial importance to determine women's status. For example, the Guajiro women are sole producers of several items highly prized in this society, like weaving, hammocks, bags, belts, daily used items etc. The skill required for these works are absolutely controlled by women only defining their equal or higher status in society.

Descent rule prevalent among the people also help define women's position and control over resources. Being matrilineal society the Guajiro women have access to land even after their marriage. Women possess rights over their cattle; can exchange them for goods and services. The property of husband and wives is separate and one cannot have command over other's property (Maria-Barbara 1985). Contrary to such norms, in many African tribal societies women cannot inherit landed property. Bride-wealth transfers from groom's family to male kin of bride. They believe that such transfer of bride-wealth does not confer status to the women. Instead it is perceived as compensation to the loss to bride's family for her work and husband's authority on the woman's production and reproduction (Esther Boserup 1970; Goody 1976)

Tribal women's legal control over and access to landed resources may not be translated into their actual economic independence. For example in Ethiopia though women have access to and control over landed property, they are lacking

of required technology and equipment to produce crops effectively. Women heavily depend on men's labour '*ye equi*', who demand equal share of produce from the land. Men with oxen are able to demand more benefits from women land owners. In southern Mexico it is found that the *de jure* land rights are not the primary mechanism at work for women's gender empowerment. Because, women's formal land rights are not only limited by local land tenure pattern and opportunities, but they also do not always get translated into effective land control or actual land-based decision making (Claudia R. 2005). Evidence from across the world shows that income in the hands of tribal women is used to contribute more to household food security and child nutrition compared to their male counterpart due to the fact that women are directly responsible for feeding, clothing and housing their children. Women's attachment towards their children, their limited extra-domestic work-role opportunity compelled them to involve mostly in subsistence food production in informal economy resulting women's low productivity compared to that of men. In Eastern African Malawi seventy percent girls and women work in farming, but they have no access to the resources that men have. Women are handicapped by not having improved tools and equipments for farming and other productive works; they are devoid of required skill formation training and lack of agricultural extension services. Women are restricted from formal economy mostly. Cambodian situation shows that women's low status can be understood in terms of their undervalued agrarian labour in a rigidly patriarchal society.

5.8 TRIBAL WOMEN IN CHANGING SITUATIONS

Transition of traditional societies to capitalist ambit has introduced lots of changes in terms of status of women. Social scientists are not conversant on what makes such changes. It is argued that women's status is dependent on whether or not they control (i) access to resources, (ii) the condition of their work, and (iii) the distribution of the products of their labour.

Consistent war or internal conflict in a region may affect women's socio-political status. For example in Burundi, the long lasting internal conflict have left behind many household to be headed by women only having little or no access to land and forest. This has increased the burden of women in home and economic front more than double (Shalini Gidoomal 2010). Unfavourable governmental policies that privatise or reallocate pastoral land, the ban on certain traditional methods of farming, an increased reliance on largely unfavourable market system for meeting basic dietary and household needs are some of the challenges the tribal women among the Barana pastoral communities in Ethiopia have been facing. Women's capacity to supplement household economy has decreased because of their increased workload in day to day activities and due to the decrease in grass quality affected breeding of herds. As women and girls are responsible for household food security, decreased ability in this sphere definitely affect the socio-economic status of women, curtails their control over resources, market and earning etc. Following the governmental industrial policy tribal women in Uganda are unable to get access to forest resources. Loss of their traditional habitat forced them to discontinue their traditional income sources like piggery, rearing cattle and goat due to lack of grazing land and availability of water. Different craft including mat making, weaving etc declined due to non accessibility to raw materials. But women's responsibility to household feeding and care did not

cease at all. As a result of depleted natural resources and devaluation of traditional goods and services added with influence of monetary economy males among Husa society of Niger have to migrate to urban places in search of jobs leaving behind women to head the family. The women of such families have to come out to public domain for subsistence ignoring their religious code called *kulben* (seclusion) through which the women are allowed to enter public places only after dark escorted by the husband or close relatives. Thus poor, widow and divorced women come out to public place round the year reflecting their lower social status in the society (Marianne Haahr 2010).

5.9 A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN INDIA

Indian tribal population have been undergoing through rapid transition since colonial period. The transition has been accelerated after independence due to certain factors which include coercive development approaches by government, forest and land policies, imposition of non-customary laws and rules affecting traditional socio-political authority of the tribal people, intrusion of non-tribal population in tribal domain and exposure of tribal population to the non-tribal domain and monetary economy. All these factors have different nature and extent of impact on tribal people across the country.

Based on nation wide NSS data Nilabja Ghosh (2008) shows utter dependence of Indian tribal women on forest based resources, she finds that the nature of forest based economy where the tribal women involved in is mostly informal. It can help them meet food security of the family to a great extent, but it can hardly satisfy the economic requirement of the tribal people who are entering into the non-traditional economic and socio-political domain.

Nation wide, more than 25 percent tribal women belong to completely illiterate household and nearly 50 percent in households in which no female is literate showing greater illiteracy problem of tribal women. It is found that 78 percent of tribal women above the age of 15 years are illiterate, and 13 percent have rudimentary education. NSS data show that tribal women are far more participative in economic life than other women. Contrary to such high work participation as high as 43 percent of tribal women belong to low expenditure class and lower the expenditure capability lower the economic empowerment of women compared to men. Nearly 18.6 percent tribal women are engaged in household production having potential of marketability. Tribal women are largely engaged in agricultural works and 50 percent of them are casual workers in this sector. Another 40 percent work in family enterprises with no formal payment and only 9 percent women are entrepreneurs leaving 2.6 percent tribal women as salaried job holders.

In forest related subsistence economy, women are mostly engaged in collection and extraction. To some extent tribal women also manufacture using certain forest based raw materials. In forest based economy gender neutrality is quite evident and skewed towards women for higher work-role participation.

The health indicators of tribal women reveal that they are the victim of traditional bias and superstitions towards health care and health seeking behaviour which

ultimately affect maternal and child health, nutritional status, over burden of pregnancy and child birth etc. Traditional beliefs and practices inhibit their drive for seeking modern and proper treatment.

5.9.1 Instances from Some Indian Tribal Groups

Bhils are the third largest Scheduled Tribes living in semi-arid tribal districts in Fifth Scheduled areas of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. During colonial period the Bhils have lost control over their forest and land affecting availability of fodders for their cattle. Community grazing lands or *gauchars* have either been degraded or encroached or have been closed for open grazing. Men have to migrate to distant places for earning. In this situation tribal women have to look after their family – do household chores and also collect fuel and fodder from distant forest. Depleted forest and ecology has made it harder for women to collect forest produce which constitutes a part of their subsistence economy. In Jharkhand, the Kolarian tribes including the Santhals, Mundas and Hos are undergoing continuous changes in social, economic and political front. Women among these tribes, where agriculture is not intensive, do a major part of the labour — at home, in the field and in forest too. During colonial rule land became private property and got attached to males only. Women's right and control over valuable resources have been curtailed to a great extent affecting their authority and decision making power. Male dominance is found increased as one moves from food gatherers to fully settled agriculturist tribes.

In those regions where productive resources are owned by the community, women exercise central role in family economy and production. Tribes living in hilly areas of North East region of India exhibit such characteristics. In matrilineal tribes both descent and inheritance are drawn through women. Distribution of land for cultivation among the families is decided by village council formed and headed by male members alone. Women take charge of cultivation and organise work in the field only after the family head allots land to each woman. Thus from a gender perspective; the division of work between men and women is more equitable than in settled agriculture.

Effect of emergence of individual ownership of productive resources has lots of impact on traditional tribal women's status and authority in their society. The 5th Schedule in the Constitution of India advocates individual ownership in contrast to most of the tribal ethos of communal ownership emerging clash of values and norms. It has been revealed that more than 48 percent of tribal lands are in the hands of non-tribals in Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh (Laya 1999, Pradhan and Stanley 1999, Mander 1998). In Sixth scheduled areas in N.E. India, community ownership is recognised by law. But the state system favours individual male ownership and class formation. In traditional Garo society of Meghalaya, a matrilineal society (Marak 1997) shows how male relatives acquire more economic and political power compared to the past when maternal uncles had an important role to play in management of land and property of a woman. Contrary to the portrayal of women as official heiress of land, their husbands manage the issue of inheritance.

Tribal habitats have been affected greatly by mining activities across the globe and India is no exception. Mining has great impact towards impoverishment of women's life among the traditional societies. Citing example from Orissa, Taliher,

K. Bhanumathi (2011) highlights that women displaced by mining have lost the right to cultivate their traditional crops and unable to collect forest produce for consumption or sale. Stopping of cash flow from forest produce and breeding livestock, women have been forced to walk miles away from their villages leaving behind their children, either to collect forest produce or find wage labour. The compensation given, if any, was directed only to the men folk of the family as women never own land in their names. In mining activities tribal women are hardly given jobs by large scale companies due to their lack of skill. The living conditions of women displaced by mining activities have been seriously affected along with their other private and cultural space, infrastructure facilities, protection from social custom etc.

In Uttarakhand hilly areas the trees used by the tribal women for their day to day requirements have been cut down and replaced by exotic ornamental forest to attract tourists. Restriction has been imposed in collection and exploitation of forest resources for the local tribal people which in turn forced the men members of tribal families to migrate to urban places. Forest dependent tribal women have to look after household works, food security of the family members, the livestock and marketing etc. Women have to venture a long distance to collect fodder, the leaves and branches of *baaz* tree and fire wood on their heads. They have to leave behind the infants and younger children back at home. In case there is no person to look after, the small children have to be tied with ropes to a pole or put them in bamboo made big baskets. Easy availability of liquor as an impact of tourism development have made the men folk addicted to it creating a lot of familial problems among the tribal people of the area (Sonowal 2009).

Among the plains tribes of Assam, for example the Sonowal Kacharis, agro-products and cattle herding and silk worm rearing had significant importance economically and women's involvement was indispensable in such activities till thirty years back. Women's better position in society was well recognised. But inflow of monetary economy, relative devaluation of agro-products made women's work less productive in terms of earning money. Social and physical environment did not encourage tribal women to by-pass their traditional domain to do extra-domestic earning jobs. Such situation had profound impact on formation of new gender ideology and defining women's relation with labour and production etc. This was also reflected in gender selectivity in educating children, providing scarce resources, health care and world view of women folk. However, in recent years, improved road communication, increased social interaction of younger generation of different communities, government incentives etc have influenced the tribal people a lot and tribal women are coming out of their traditional domain physically and mentally reducing the gap of gender division of labour, work role expectation and also social status (Sonowal 2010)

Customary law has something to do with defining the status and position of tribal women in their society. In Arunachal Pradesh customary laws indicate patrilineal property inheritance favouring male children in the family. Most of the tribal people are attached with the custom of Community Property Resource based *jhum* cultivation. Thus women have some control over her sustenance. Daughters get some gift in marriage from parents depending on the amount of bride price received from the groom. Movable properties including livestock can be inherited by a daughter in marriage. But many tribes allow daughters some rights over immovable property till they get married. They also produce

marketable items through their craftsmanship like weaving, bag and basket making etc, but their works are devalued because disposal of articles are usually done by men in the distant market. The custom of bride price many a time has placed the women in difficult situation in the event of any dispute with husband and his family because she cannot come back to her parental house without repaying the amount of bride wealth and fine imposed for such activity.

In Assam, Rabha tribes are partly matrilineal. Youngest daughter inherits the lion's share, while other daughters share the remaining. But managerial control over land are in the hands of men. Same is the case among the Lalung (Tiwa) tribe of Assam. Here the elder daughter inherits the parental house while other daughters get share in land. Among the Mising tribe, in case of parents having no son, daughters can inherit landed property. Bodos have least gender difference following their almost equal share of work-role in day to day life.

Naga women are rather free in mixing with their men folk, have the independence to choose their own life partners etc. Many social scientists see women's better position among the Nagas observing these characters. But in terms of gender relations in the domains of religious and socio-political domains the Naga women are not in a better position when compared to women of non-tribal society (Zehol 1998). Nipa Banerjee (1996) also highlight that in Nagaland tribal women, especially in rural areas, do not have the right to inherit landed property. Among some tribes like Angami, women can be given a certain share of parental property, but an adulterous will lose the inherited landed property. Gift of land (*asouzu*) can be given by parents to daughters in certain Naga tribes. In traditional political and religious sphere women play very little role. The council of elders in every Naga village is devoid of women and decision taken regarding land and agriculture hardly considers women's role. Thus when women play a critical role in agricultural activities, men's decision affects women's interest sometimes negatively. The rule of reservation of 25 percent of seats for women fund allocation etc is hardly followed. Lack of rights on resources denies women's participation in many other political-economic decision making spheres.

There is no denying the fact that Naga women despite the present apolitical role have come out in an organised manner as pressure groups or social organisations and are playing significant and effective roles in fighting against substance abuses, army excesses etc and have been able to put effective check to a great extent on a variety of social abuses against themselves, men and children (Zehol 1998). At present Naga women have been able to enter public domain through some women's organisations, especially under the initiative of churches. Likewise, the participation of Meitei women in Manipur, in commercial and socio-political aspects is well known in contemporary days like *Meira Paibis*- the Women Torch-bearers.

Among the Khasi matrilineal society, Tiplut Nongbri (1984) explicitly draws attention to male-dominated power structure in politics, as well as cultural conceptions of men and women which asserts male superiority. For example, a man is said to have twelve units of strength while a woman has one. Authority in household is shared (which may cause conflict) between a mother's elder brother and her husband. But the sole inheritress of ancestral property is the youngest daughter who is thus less dependent economically on her male relatives than a woman in a patrilineal society. It must be noted that the youngest daughter (*Ka*

Khadduh) also inherits significant responsibilities including cremation of her mother and the provision of welfare to any family members in need. She is actually only custodian of the ancestral property since she is not permitted to sell without consulting her mother's brother and father. Further, Nongbri notes that the institution of *Ka Kadduh* is blamed by some for the lack of responsibility taken by divorced husband for the welfare of their children; they assume the youngest sisters will take care of them. The divided loyalties of men between their natal households (MB) and affinal households can result in unfortunate women being neglected from both sides.

The Mizo women are mostly literate yet kinship relations are strictly patrilineal. Traditional Mizo society term women as "white animals", depicts women's lower status by equating them with crabs having no social value, no religion, their words having no weights, having limited wisdom etc. The Mizo have the oldest coded customary law, the "*Mizo Hnam Dan*". Women are not usually inheritors. Widows have better position and have social security and can spend life at their own will. Male inheritance of valuable and landed property is widely practiced among the Jamatia tribes of Tripura also.

Bride-price, bride-wealth and women's status have been issues of anthropological debate since long past. Prevalence of this tradition is quite evident among the tribal and indigenous societies across the world. Opinion varies from seeing it as a means of buying the bride for prices making women a sort of commodity to critical explanation of socio-cultural status given to the bride and her family that works in complex social web of relations and perceptions. Citing example from the African tribes like Sonjo, Thonga, Gusii and the Tiv, scholars like Robert F. Gray (1960:34-57), Junod (1927), Mayer (1950), Bohanon (1955:61) shows that besides socio-cultural aspects, an economic aspect has always been there in the bride-price institution. Especially among the subsistence economies this institution serves the purpose of currency of economic activities and works as an incentive and requirement to venture into the interpersonal and inter-group domains of other categories and gives meaning to the goods and services they live on. The notion that bride-price depicts higher status of women in tribal society has not been proved anywhere if one looks it in terms of gender relations and life situation of the woman after marriage. It has been, contrarily, seen that women are the route for social interaction and transaction where the institution of bride price acquires a significant position.

5.10 SUMMARY

From the foregoing discussion we can come to the conclusion that situation of tribal women has to be looked at beyond conventional lenses. Women are an integral structure of gender system that encompasses almost every aspect of a society. Gender is an extremely important element of social structure in tribal societies. Gender relation is complex and varied. There is a need to re-look at and re-define social realities of women's world through gender perspective. Compared to the vastness of the tribal world in India, very little has been done on women's studies. Through gender perspectives a well integrated and well planned study programme can generate valuable and relevant data base which can be used for the practical benefits of tribal women in the country.

References

- Ardener, Edwin. 1975. 'The Problem Revisited'. S. Ardener (ed.), *Perceiving Women*, 19-27. London: Dent.
- Banerjee, Nipa. 1996. *Exploring Integration of Gender Dimension into NEPED*. New Delhi: International Development Research Centre (IDRC).
- Bell, D. 1980. 'Desert Politics: Choices in the Marriage Market'. M Etienne and E.B. Leacock (eds.) *Women and Colonisation*. New York: Bergin and Garvey. Pp. 239-269.
- Bell, Diane. 1983. *Daughters of the Dreaming*. Mekkbourne: McPhee Gribble.
- Bohannan, Paul. 1955. 'Some Principles of Exchange and Investment among the Tiv'. *American Anthropologist*, 57: 60-70.
- Boserup, Esther. 1970. *Women's Role in Economic Development*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Brown, J. 1975. 'Iroquois Women: An Ethnohistoric Note'. Rayna R. Heiter (ed.) *Towards an Anthropology of Women*, New York: Monthly Review Press, pp 235-51.
- Claudia R. 2005. 'Women's Community-based Organisations, Conservation Projects and Effective Land Control in Southern Mexico'. *Journal of Latin American Geography*, Vol 4, No.2,
- Collier, Jane and Rosaldo, Michelle. 1981. ' Politics and Gender in Simple Socieites'. S. Ortner and H. Whitehead (eds.) *Sexual Meanings*, 275-329. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fernandez Walter and M. Pereira. 2011. (accessed) '*Customary Laws in North-East India: Impact on Women*'. New Delhi: National Commission for Women.
- Ghosh, Nilabja. 2008. *In Search of a Canopy: Tribal Women's Livelihood in Forest Based Industries in Rural India*. IASC conference paper.
- Gillison, Gillian. 1980. 'Image of Nature in Gimi Thought'. C. MacCormack and M. Stratehm (eds.) *Nature, Culture and Gender*, 143-73. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goodale, Jane. 1980. 'Gender, Sexuality and Marriage: A Kaulong Model of Nature and Culture'. C. MacCormack and M. Stratehm (eds.) *Nature, Culture and Gender*, 119-42. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goody, Jack. 1976. *Production and Reproduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gray, Robert F. 1960. 'Sonjo Bride-Price and the Question of African "Wife Purchase"'. *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 62, no.1 Pp. 34-57.
- Junodh, A. 1927. *The Life of a South African Tribe*. London: Macmillan & Co.
- K, Bhanumathi. 2011. 'Status of Women Affected by Mining in India'. *Role of Women in Conservation and Protection of Environment*. ENVIS CENTER (accessed from <http://www.womenenvironment.org/detail.php?pageId=319>)

Kabery, Phyllis. 1939. *Aboriginal Women: Sacred and Profane*. London: Rutledge & Kegan Paul.

Laya. 1999. *Land Alienation in Tribal Andhra Pradesh*. Vishakapatnam: Laya.

Leacock, Aleanor. 1972. 'Introduction'. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. New York: International Publishers. Pp 7-67.

Leacock, Aleanor. 1978. 'Women's Status in Egalitarian Society: Implications for Social Evolution'. *Current Anthropology*, 19 (2): 247-75.

Leacock, E.B. 1977. 'The Changing Family and Levi-Strauss, or Whatever Happened to Fathers?'. *Social Research* 44, 2: 235-259.

Mander, H. 1998. *Tribal Land Alienation in Madhya Pradesh: A Brief Review of Problem and the Efficacy of Legislative Remedies*. Bhopal: Government of Madhya Pradesh.

Marak, C. 1997. 'Status of Women in Garo Culture'. S. Sen, (ed.), *Women in Meghalaya*, pp. 56-72. New Delhi: Omsons.

Maria-Barbara W.F. 1985. 'Production and Status of Women: An Anthropological Interpretation of Historical Materialis'. *Anthropos* 80:1-14.

Marianne, Haahr. 2010. 'How Land Scarcity is Eroding Women's Rights: The Case of Female Seclusion'. Shalini Gidoomal (ed.) *Reclaiming Rights and Resources: Women, Poverty and Environment*. Nairobi: CARE International.

Mayer, Philip. 1950. *Gusii Bridewealth Law and Custom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Meigs, Anna. 1976. 'Male Pregnancy and Reduction of Sexual Opposition in a New Guinea Highlands Society'. *Ethnology*, 15: 339-407.

Moore, H. L. 1988. *Feminism and Anthropology*. UK: Polity Press.

Nongbri, Tiplut. 1984. 'Khasi Women and Matriliney: Transformations in Gender Relations'. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*. Oct: 2004 (345-365)

Poewe, K. 1980. 'Universal Male Dominance: An Ethnological Illusion'. *Dialectical Anthropology*, 5: 110-125.

Pradhan, M. and W. Stanley. 1999. *Land Alienation in the Tribal Areas of Orissa*. Bhubaneshwar and Semiliguda: CPSW and WIDA.

Sacks, Karen. 1979. *Sisters and Wives: The Past and Future of Sexual Equality*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press.

Sahlins, M.D. 1968. *Tribesmen*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

Service, Elman R. 1971 (Original 1962). *Primitive Social Organisation: an Evolutionary Perspective* (2nd edition). New York: Random House publication.

Shalini Gidoomal (ed.) 2010. 'Women Struggle to Combat Soil Degradation'. *Reclaiming Rights and Resources: Women, Poverty and Environment*. Kenya: CARE International, Nairobi.

Sonowal C.J. 2009. 'Environmental Education in Schools: The Indian Scenario'. *Journal of Human Ecology*, 28(1): 15-36 (2009)

Sonowal, C.J. 2010. 'Transition of Gender System through Time and Space: Case Study of a Tribal Group in Assam, India'. *Global Journal of Human Social Science*, Vol. 10 Issue 4 (Ver 1.0), 16-28. September 2010.

Turnbull, C. 1978. 'The Politics of Non-Aggression'. A. Montagu (ed.) *Learning Non-Aggression*. New York: Oxford University Press. Pp 161-221.

Van Allen, Judith. 1972. 'Sitting on a Man: Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women'. *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 6 (2): 165-181.

Zehol, Lucy. (ed.) 1998. *Women in Naga Society*. New Delhi: Regency Publications..

Zehol, Lucy. 1998. 'Women's Movement in Manipur: Some Observations'. M.N. Karna (ed.) *Social Movements in North East India*. New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company:

Suggested Reading

Banu, Zenab. 2004. *Dis-empowerment of Tribal Women: Perspective on 73rd Constitutional Amendment*. Delhi: Kanishka Publishers.

Bodra, Gomati. 2009. *Empowerment of Tribal Women*. Delhi: Mohit Publications.

Janet Saltzman Chafetz. 1990. *Gender Equity: An Integrated Theory of Stability and Change*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Kamlesh, Mann. 1996. *Tribal Women: On the Threshold of Twenty-first Century*. New Delhi: M.D. Publications Pvt. Ltd..

Moore, H.L. 1988. *Feminism and Anthropology*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press,.

Sharma, S.P. and A.C. Mittal. 1998. *The Tribal Women in India* (3 Sets). New Delhi: Radha Publications.

Sample Questions

- 1) How is the concept of gender related to men and women in a society?
- 2) What sort of work-roles tribal women perform in general? Have you seen any difference in work-roles of women in traditional and transitional setting?
- 3) What are the major criteria that determines the access and control of women over valued resources, production and reproduction in different tribal societies?
- 4) Write on the scope of studying tribal women through gender perspectives.