



THE GENDER EQUATION: ENVIRONMENT AND LAND OWNERSHIP

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A Case Study of the Galo Community

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Abstract

Women share a unique and inexplicable relationship with the natural environment and its various elements. She is closer to nature than her male counterpart. Practically speaking, women comprise almost 70% of the total work force in the agricultural and pastoral economy. In most agricultural communities and communities whose livelihood are based on close interaction with the nature, the womenfolk play a far greater role in sustaining, tending to and nourishing the environment and the natural resources. However it is to be noted that her willingness to exercise freewill in the management of the environmental resources is obstructed by lack of control over her surroundings. The reason for this being lack of ownership over land. This article seeks to understand this equation by highlighting the example of Galo community or the erstwhile Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh.

Keywords: Galo, environment, land ownership, property right, patriarch Handing over the newborn baby to Nyama, the doctor widened his smile and said in a voice which echoed in the small maternity ward- “congratulations, it’s a boy!” Nyama’s faint smile disappeared for a while and it returned only after a deep sigh. “Are you not pleased...it’s a boy afterall” the doctor continued to grin. “No I am happy but I’d have been much happier if it was a girl; I already have 2 boys, a girl would but have reduced my workload...having a boy means more work around the house and field, but I have to accept whatever God has planned for me graciously” Nyama replied in a matter of fact voice. Strange as it may sound, Nyama’s chapfallen attitude is not unique to her alone, she represents the women of Galo tribe and the multitude of other tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh and other parts of North Eastern India.

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Mostly inhabiting the districts of West Siang, East Siang, Lepa Rada and Lower Siang, the Galo tribe is one of the most populous and prominent communities of Arunachal Pradesh. Predominantly being an agricultural community, the tribe’s lifestyle and work practices are heavily influenced by the same. The role of a woman, in this setting is vast and varied. Their roles are defined by the traditional and cultural customs and inherited values and belief systems. The heralding of modern times and new economic and occupational systems has further created a juxtaposed image in their traditional roles and the new roles that they are supposed to play.

Field activities, spinning and weaving, husking paddy, keeping and tending to farm pets, talking care of the cultivation, tending to the land owned by her family, attending to the guests and entertaining them are some of the primary duties she has to fulfill. Her contribution in the

economic and the on economic activities exceeds her male counterpart's by a far greater margin. But despite her work participation and contribution to their families and societies, it is a recognised fact that she is deprived of her due share of social and legal recognition. It would be safe to say her work is taken for granted and is undervalued to a great degree. She is a transient member of the family who cannot claim a share in her family's immovable property.

Land rights and owning of property might initially seem as an incoherent link to the issue of the relation of women to the environment and natural resources. Diving deep into the equation, we find the answer to it. Land rights and authority goes hand in hand. And with authority comes decision making. Every major decision regarding the land at disposal is made by the patriarch of the family and the women don't get much say in this. That being said, it is also to be mentioned that she is free to give suggestions but ultimately it's up to the man of the household to exercise his freewill. This pattern is however, not exclusive to one certain community, it would be safe to say that it is a general feature observed in the greater universal scenario.

The International Labour Organisation states that "there is a tendency to undervalue women's work in rural areas/family farms where they are taken as unpaid family labour." This holds true as seen above, where these wide range of activities related to land and agriculture is seen as a part of a women's daily responsibilities which are to be carried out without being asked to. According to a world statistics by the United Nations, almost 67 percent of the world's total working hours is attributed to the female workforce, but the percentage of income share disproportionately stands at 10 percent and the ownership of property by women is a mere 1 percent. Women comprise almost 70 percent of the labour force in the Indian agricultural scenario. Her work is crucial in the entire process of a production cycle. The GNP (Gross National Product) would shoot up to 20-30 percent if all the unpaid labour is to be accounted for.

When the concept of ‘women empowerment’ was introduced and talked about for the first time at the International Women’s Conference at Nairobi in 1985, “the distribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women” was a part of its definition. It laid out 8 components as crucial to the concept of women’s empowerment, out of which one states- “equal access to opportunities for using society’s resources”. The UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) in its 2003 report also stressed on this point. It is dejecting how we are yet to realise this goal in the wake of the twenty first century.

At this juncture, we may ask how the absence of property rights for women impact the environment the natural resources around us. In 1991, the World Bank stated - “women play an essential role in the management of natural resources; including soil, water, forests and energy and have profound traditional and contemporary knowledge of the world around them.” To observe the veracity of this statement we would apply this in context to the women of Garo society. They have a closer relation to the environment around them and they play a greater part in sustaining and nourishing the environmental elements and resources at their disposal to the best of their abilities. However, her willingness to exercise freewill in the management of the environmental resources is obstructed by lack of control over her surroundings.

Her work is valued to an extent, especially by her fellow gender but is seldom acknowledged as it is rather seen natural. She is an asset to the family and the practice of paying a bride price is a testament to it. The birth of a girth child is equally desirable as a male child, more so for her mother who looks at her as her aide in her extension of activities and responsibilities. Tribal egalitarianism is however not applicable if we look at it through the lens of gender. Given the deep patriarchal set up of the society and the strong emphasis that is placed on local laws and customs, it is improbable that she can break free from it.

In the present scenario, with the penetration of modernity and a relatively changing economic and social sphere, a woman's role and position has been weirdly entangled between traditional obligations and the current practical duties that are demanded from her. They have been vouching for a neutral legal and customary law structure that gives them the right space they deserve. In the very recent times, we do see very subtle waves of changes as to regards of distribution of immoveable property and other legal rights and all we can hope for is that it accelerates further.

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