

**Freedom is not free: A Naga Woman perspective****First author - Anna Lungbila. P****Ph.D Research Scholar****Rajagiri College of Social Sciences Kalamassery Kerala 683104****Second author- Dr. Fr. Varghese K Varghese****Director, Bharata Mata Institute of Management Bharata Mata College,  
Thrikkakara, Kochi-2****Abstract**

*A Woman literally means inferior in the patriarchal dominated hierarchy. The Naga society is a patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal. The women have been subjugated throughout their life. A women's life is designed even before she is born. She is to behave, talk, live and earned within the male domination society. The designated and structured life allows liberties within the patriarchal hierarchy. A Naga woman has rights within the family, and in the society, yet she has no Freedom. Her freedom comes with label and rules. Her education is limited with that label. A Woman has no voice in the mainstream political life. She is expected to carry out her duties faithfully sacrificing her own needs. This paper analyses the women in the Naga society within the patriarchal realm.*

**Keyword: Naga Women, Patriarchal Hierarchy, Freedom, Naga society.****Introduction**

*"Fear is experienced twice in a women's life,  
Once in her father's house,  
Twice in her husband's house."  
(An old saying of a Mao Naga tribal Women) <sup>1</sup>*

The Naga tribe known as the "Head Hunters" is one of the rich indigenous tribes settled in North East India and in few parts of Mymmar. The Naga society is a classless and caste less society. They have no written script of their own. Oral tradition plays an important role in their socio-political and economic life. The philosophical beliefs, customary and traditional law, habitual life, and their culture, social systems of the Naga's depend on the oral narration. Folklores, folktales, folksongs, myths, and legends chronicled the histories, and identity of the Naga tribe. The Nagas have rich culture and tradition but in this traditional ridden society the role of women is at the minimal positions with non-involvement decision making body. The society allocates roles, status, rights, and responsibilities to men and women respectively. Customary and traditional law plays an important role in determining the status of the women in the Naga society. It is in the name of customs and tradition women are regarded as inferior and subjugated. The restriction comes as a taboo for women in the family and society.

Women face discrimination, exploitation, and marginalisation more in their own family and society than outside. The suffering and humiliation between the tribals and non-tribals women are different. Substantially, the Naga tribal women have better positions and status, they are almost equal,

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<sup>1</sup> An old saying of the Mao Naga forefathers about a women's life. The oral narration holds a strong place within the Naga society. Sayings, proverbs, Idioms and phrases of the forefathers within the tribe teach and guide the society in their daily life.

yet not equal. Since their tender age, women are taught to be quiet, gentle and submissive and perform entire household chores.

Urbanisation has caused a change in the attitude of the people and the status of the women has been alleviated to a certain extent. More and more women are taking part in the socio-economic and political scenario in the society today. Education comes as a boon for the Naga women. It is through education they attained a place within the family and the community. Traditionally and even today, many social restrictions are imposed upon the women and as she grows up, she naturally adapts social norms and traditions of the society for which she has no choice but to accept it as her destiny for she was brought up in a male dominated society. With time she learnt to bear the brunt of man's chauvinistic attitude. They work hard side by side with the men and still is blamed if there is not enough rice or water. Even today, looking after the children and carrying the baby on the back is still a woman's duty. The men think it effeminates them to carry water or look after the baby or cook. Women are regarded as an asset to the Ao society and "They are respected and highly esteemed and enjoy considerable degree of freedom although their activities, especially in the traditional society were restricted to certain clearly defined areas" (Zehol,1998). This paper studies the Naga women in three aspects:

1. Social system
2. Economic system
3. Political system

### **Social system**

A Naga tribal woman in particular has no voice of her own within the society. Within the patriarchal hierarchy, she is a daughter in her father's home, a sister to her brother, a wife to husband, a mother to her children and a grandmother. The patriarchal Naga tribe follows the principle of primogeniture strictly. The eldest son inherits the property and succeeds the father as the head of the family after his death. The Naga tribal women still do not have the right to inherit her ancestral property though the property bought by her parents is sometimes given to them. The descent is traced only through the father. The society never ceases to remind her of her inferior roles. Her roles are reduced to fetching water, cooking, weaving, wife, mother, child bearer and rearer, agriculture and household manager. A woman is not even allowed in the periphery of the decision-making in the clan or the village. Even in Morung<sup>1</sup> girls have their separate places. In the case of Maram tribe, "It is a rule among the Maram's that the girls cannot come and sit on the sleeping place of the morungs<sup>2</sup> of the boys. If they sit perchance, they have to pay a fine of a cock", (Athickal, 1992). In most cases, women are not even allowed to touch the weapons and tools of the menfolk. It is said that it brings bad omen even if the women walk across the weapons or tools.

The women are stereotype for domestic work and procreation. They are engaged in a large number of activities and work in the agriculture field for long hours during the day to come back home and cook for her family. Her work never ceases by the end of the day. "A woman is not to live in the light, love, and laughter but in darkness, sadness, and misery,"<sup>3</sup> an old saying among the Naga tribals. A recent study has revealed that Naga tribal women work hard within her household and in her society but her status is comparatively very low even today. Her predestined role in the family and within the society paid the price of her inferiority complex. "The woman is the last to retire to bed and first to rise long before the break of dawn. If the household goes hungry or if the grain falls short due to any mismanagement of domestic affairs, the accusing fingers point at her disapprovingly. Not only should she

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<sup>2</sup> Morung is a place where young boys and girls are sent to learn the traditions, customs, social behaviours and norms of the Naga tribe after attaining a certain years of age.

<sup>3</sup> An old saying of the forefathers describing the duties of a Naga woman.

be an example by her hard work but she must also learn to extract work from her children.”(Horam, 1977)

Within the structural system of the patrilineal, a girl child and the women are often subjected to violence. Domestic violence becomes her nightmare in her father’s home and in her husband’s house. “Every Naga Woman has experienced humiliation and insults from the men on the basis of her womanhood. These men are not outsiders or strangers. They are their ‘respected’ uncles, cousins and in some cases their fathers and brothers who never fail to remind them about the predestined inferior roles that have already been slated out for them” (Kikon, 2012). A woman is often ridiculed if she is unmarried, barren, and opinionated in the society. A barren and unmarried woman is looked down upon as an empty shell and they are often rendered with shame and guilt all through their life. A woman who cannot give a male issue is also pitied and their position is lower than that of the other women.

Women throughout the world have always been oppressed by the patriarchal hierarchy and deprived of their rights irrespective of geographical locations. In many cases women often sacrifice their own joy and comfort for the family yet the preference is always given to the male gender in every field and every aspects of life. In the family, the boy child is preferred to the girl. Among the Maram tribe, stricture rules are not imposed on women but a woman who has gone into hard labour at childbirth is thrown out of the house to let her die. They society believed it as a disgrace to her womanhood and to her family. Thus, there has been series of cases where women are thrown out of the house to die alone in the open space. The so-called disgraced women are not given a proper burial too. Recently with few reformations brought about by the Maram Queen that has been abolished. Though the participation of women in the household work is relatively high, the mainstream social life is still lacking the active contribution of women. The women among the Tangkhuls also enjoy certain privileges. She is allowed to choose her own husband and marry according to her wish yet her roles include all the household works and tend the children including the works with her husband. In general, the Naga woman suffers silently and is expected to behave so too by the society. However, in general, women in other parts of India may envy the Naga women for their free will and social positions.<sup>4</sup>

### **Economic System**

Traditionally, women are less economically independent. “In traditional Naga society, women were supposedly confined within the four walls of the home, whereas men were engaged in the activities outside the home.”(Sinha,2013). The Naga women make great contributions to the economy in the family. In the words of J. P Mills, he stated that the women weave cloths required for the family, and performs all kinds of drudgery. Even today most women would be seen bending to needle works when she is free. The females within the household mostly do the cloths. The illiterate woman has no means to earn on her own. The literate are not independent financially too, the earning is always subjected to her father, brother or her husband. However, the financial independent woman has better life and social condition. Many of them have the capability to take the responsibilities and manage their own life yet they are never given the opportunities.

With the progress and development in the field of education, many women avails the opportunity and are doing quite well in all the departments. Education brought about development and it elevates the life of the women in many ways. The educated and enlightened women of today want to be equal with the men in every sphere of life but the men are not yet ready to adjust to this situation. Education is limited to the girl child in most of the Naga’s family. They refer to the girl child as the would-be property of another family so they do not see the need to give her higher education. In most cases, women are not

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<sup>4</sup> Apei Hinga, the Maram queen is one woman who brought about reformation among the Maram tribe. She abolished many evil practices and social norms and taboos which hampers the growth of the community especially the women. She was the woman to ever become the Queen after the King died among the Naga tribe.

allowed to have any responsibilities within and outside the families and society. Therefore, the women lack trust in themselves to be able to take any legal obligation. The financial independency of the married women still depends largely on the husband. The Naga tribal women are lagging behind the male folk not because they are weak or uneducated but because of the lack of opportunities and the lack of trusting responsibilities and duties to them. The women are always referred to as a person who is to live under the shadow of the male folk.

Today, with the progress of the age economic independence comes in various ways. The woman grows vegetables and sells out for her own profit in the market. There has been a growth of women vegetables vendors in the markets everywhere, "This group dominates the market; the approximately 340 vendors are clustered in 12 locations, among them they sell about 60 vegetables species. The produce is mostly organic and comes from neighbouring villages as well as some more than 100 km away. Most of their vendors are producer themselves."(Gante, 2011). In gaining, the economic independence they have control over the household decision making in the family to certain extends. However education qualification and economic status the women has one cannot denied the fact that she cannot overrule her husband's authority and right even today. Perhaps the strong dominating patriarchal hierarchy will ever overrule the rights and status of the Naga women. The strong cultural dominance and a patriarchal hierarchy will ever have a strong hold in the status of the women.

### **Political System**

Broadly speaking, the Naga tribal tradition does not allow women to actively participate in the political scenario. The whole execution of power and judiciary is taken over by the menfolk and the village elders. In the words of Gante, "Mao women have no part in political institutions either in the council of twenty or both in khii and khel bodies. So the women political empowerment process has not yet taken a practical shape in the present Mao society".

The village council comprises of male village elders of about twenty or more depending on the houses in the village. They are elected to act on the will of the people much like the system of democracy. Yet in all its democratic administration, "Majority of the Naga women were debarred from political activities. In rare occasions, women would approach village council whenever they have a complaint and also to give witness for or against any case in the village court or council" (Ajailiu, 2012). They are prohibited to be within the spheres of the council meetings. A woman is not allowed to attend nor listen to any of the serious discussions. A woman is not even supposed to enquire about the meeting. The man who discloses it to their wife is often criticised. The attitude towards the women is the same in all the Naga tribes. "Women are prohibited from having any say in both social and family for the simple reason that the Zeliangrong Nagas believe that the presence of women in such affairs is a bad omen for the whole society"( Mr. Xavier Mao in Dr Zehol,2012). With the coming of age and development, a certain percentage of women can also be seen taking part in the mainstream politics. Thought they are not allowed to be in the centre of the stage, the campaigns are actively participated by women. A women candidate is still unheard off within the tribal Naga women. They are believed to be incapable of making decision within the male dominated society. The important decisions making are still within the men. A woman is often a bystander. However, inspite of the constraint put on the women, Rani Gaidinliu<sup>5</sup>, a brave Naga woman has fought against the British rule to free the Nagas. There has been two or three women among the Nagas who have contest in the election but so far only Mrs. Hangmila Shaiza have been victorious in the Manipur State Assembly election in 1990 yet she was not given any portfolio in the ministry.

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<sup>5</sup> Rani Gaidinliu is a 16 yrs old who fought against the British rule for the Nagas. She was capture in 1937 and remained in prison until India got Independence. Pandit Nehru was inspired by her work and she was granted her release by him.

The woman in the family has the burden to look after her children and her husband. She is responsible for the upbringing of the children and as well as her husband's needs. The women who are indulges in the social life do not have time to look after the family and most of them are unmarried. These women are criticised and condemn in most of the Naga villages. In some cases when the husband died, the entire property has to be looked after by the women. The responsibility on her shoulder increases as her children grows up. The property of her husband becomes her responsibility until her sons grow up to take incharge and it is her duty to make the decision until then. Yet in many cases women are drawn into penury stage with the obligation to her sons because the mainstream decision within the family is left to the other male members from her husband's family. The women are always mal-treated and they have no relief, no escape from the constant social calumny, contumely, and ridicule often for their inferior roles in the society. As in the opinion of H.B Rowney, a Naga woman is a model of labour and industry who does everything what her husband will not do, for he considered it effeminate to do anything but fight and hunt. The cultivation labours are performed by the women.

The Naga society also believed that on big festivities and occasions any unmarried women pregnant out of wedlock is a taboo. They bring bad omen for the villages and slow down the growth of the village population. Therefore, they would be ostracised and the woman would be made to reveal the man who is responsible for it and be married off before the big event<sup>6</sup>. Though many organisation and NGO has started programmes to animate the women, the deep acculturation of the traditional mind is still strongly incalculated. An educated woman is often sham for her too qualified qualification because she is not a good candidate for a wife. A well qualified woman is seen as a feminist and the society especially the men fear that they will not be able to control this opinionated woman. A woman after her marriage is to live under the guide and protection of the husband in the tribal Naga culture.

### **Conclusion**

Women today try to co-exist with the dominating male hegemony. She has so much of freedom but freedom within the structural patriarchal hierarchy. Their ways are designed and moulded; they are predestined before they are actually born. The Mao Naga women's fate also remain the same as in all the other Naga tribes, men do not respect them. According to Gante, 'Yet Mao Women are "looked down as untouchables in certain cases." For example, they should not jump over man" nor are allowed to touch weapons meant for fighting.' Today there are few cases where a woman breaks free from the chain and clutch of the pratrilocal. The ascribed society do not believed in the educated women ruling the society. An unmarried woman is often criticised in the society by young and old alike. In Sema community when a women commit adultery, all her ornaments and belonging are taken by her husband, also a cattle head a penalty from her father while if it is the reverse the husband still has the right to claim the property. In all, the Naga society women have certain rights within the family, their opinions are revered by their husband but out of the kitchen she is just another woman in the society living under the shadow of the men.

The society does not kindly accept women who speak her mind. In few instances among the Maram tribe, women who have finished their Masters are married off to men who is just passed class ten but serving in the army and in few more cases to lesser educated man. The parents and the society is more concern for the security of the woman because they believed that a woman cannot live on her own without a husband. They do not trust the woman to earn and survive on her own. So a man who is willing to marry her is much better regardless of her education qualification. As a wife, the woman is expected to obey her husband and live under his command. She goes from the protection of her father to the protection of her husband. "But all through her life, her identity as a member of the particular clan is very strictly and properly maintained. That is why, when she is, about to leave her old home for the new

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<sup>6</sup> Interviewed Kapesa, an elderly woman of 60yrs from Mao tribe. A pregnant woman out of wedlock is heavily ostracised by the society and referred to as bad omen. Every year before any big celebration pregnant unmarried woman are married off against their will to the man responsible for the pregnancy.

one the father, in all solemnity and formality, declares to all present, "from this day onwards, this daughter of ours is yours. Her duty, her devotion, and even her physical being will be yours." (Ao, 2013-a). The patriarchal society demands that the women behave well and live virtuously within the social customs and tradition. Though through the eye of westernisation and urbanisation women's status has really improved yet the deep traditional aspect structured in their mind still remain to be so in the case of many of the women. They still follow the authoritative rule of the patriarchal system.

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