

Sifting The women from Men: A study of Lotha Naga women in Traditional Society

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Abstract: *The Lotha Nagas are one of the 16 major tribes inhabiting the hills of present-day Indian State of Nagaland. The Lothas were traditionally an agricultural society and as was the case of most such societies, patriarchal. The disconcerting factor about the Lotha society however was that it was particularly suppressive toward its women. Used as little more than beasts of burden, Lotha women were at the receiving end of societal patriarchal rules and taboos. The paper draws attention to the indispensable role that women played in preserving the life of the community but whose work has been muted in academic narratives.*

Key Words: *Women, Patriarchy, Lotha, Naga, labour, household, Christianity.*

Just what was this problem that has no name? What were the words women used when they tried to express it? Sometimes a woman would say "I feel empty somehow...incomplete." Or she would say "I feel as if I don't exist." (Betty Friedan, The Feminist Mystique)

- 1. INTRODUCTION:** Recovering women's voices and placing their contribution to socio-economic production in specific historical contexts is a challenging task for researchers, not least because traditional methods of enquiry have only served to highlight men's role in society which have sought to subsume the experience of one half of humanity under the general heading of 'mankind.' Hence, re thinking history in terms of gender relations though difficult, is essential, if we hope to recover the exact position of women in society, their relations to social production, to each other and to men.
- 2. STUDY AREA:** The study was undertaken in Wokha district, inhabited by the Lotha tribe which is divided into the Liyo, the Northern Lothas and Ndrung, the Southern Lothas speaking the Lotha dialect. Wokha district is located at the latitude of 26°8' North and longitude of 94°18' East with a geographical area of 1628 square kilometres constituting 9.82 percent of the state's geographical area.
- 3. OBJECTIVES:** This paper takes up for analysis the role that Lotha Naga women of the Naga hills played in their traditional society in sustenance of their tribe but their contribution has remained invisible and undermined.
- 4. METHODOLOGY:** This Paper has used the methodology of gender history in order to place the Naga women in their proper historical and socio-economic context and understand their crucial role in sustenance of the life of the tribe.
- 5. DISCUSSION:** The Naga society in general was Patriarchal. However, what is important in the context of this paper was that the Lotha society was particularly oppressive towards women especially in the years before the coming of Christianity. The gendered oppression of girls began early in her life. The birth of a girl was followed

by a five-day period of *genna* or ritualistic observance whereas the birth of a boy was welcomed by the observance of a 6-day period of rituals. Traditional society believed that males had 6 strengths compared to the 5 qualities of women. The youngest boy in the family was given extra feeding even if he had younger female siblings probably because he was intended to grow up to be strong and famous. Female children were blessed by their elders to grow up quickly and be strong. The quest for glory was instilled in the male child early in life while a girl's role was to follow the patriarchal norms. Her labour was earnestly waited by the household because, as the paper will go on to show, women did most of the tasks of the household, the farm, and the field. At about five or six years of age, the girl started wearing the traditional *sürhüm* (wraparound skirt) and her hair was allowed to grow. The wearing of the *sürhüm* and the length of her hair, feminized the child and changed her life at a tender age. Her training to be a good wife while helping in the household began. Lotha girls married early, therefore; her training started early in life. Disobedience was not accepted and in case of any defiance the girl received a knock on the head or a blow on the back from her mother. The social life of the Lotha girl revolved on the trips to fetch water and firewood, and pounding rice with her contemporaries. With a younger sibling almost always tied to her back, even play time was not the little girl's own. The childhood of a Lotha girl ended at around 13 to 14 years when she was usually married off.

Marriages in the Lotha society involved the payment of a bride price or *hanlam* for the cost of her upbringing. The bride price also included the price for her breasts and price for intimacy. Elderly members of the tribe narrate stories that when a married woman died, her family conducted a sort of traditional *post mortem* to ascertain if there was any foul play behind the death; and, to check if the rats had bitten the corpse which would be proof that the husband had not taken proper care of the corpse. It was held that should the husband fail the *post mortem* test; he would have to pay a heavy fine imposed by the family of the deceased. This practice is also evidence of the fact that women were treated as commodities and were an economic asset of their paternal households even after their death.

The Assam Census Report, 1891, records that in the Lotha society polygamy was allowed, but was practised only by the rich. An important reason for polygamous marriage was that a man's status in society and in the village was determined by the number of wives he had. It was a proof of his ability to be able to feed many women when a poor man could not afford to keep more than one wife. In fact, the larger the number of wives, the greater was the Man's influence in the society. Men are believed to have jeered one another as to how many wives one could possess. Polygamy in Lotha Society also had a strong economic factor to it. With greater number of wives and children to work the fields, man could get more food with free labour. Little wonder, then that Lotha Women were accumulated like commodities. Lotha men rarely divorced their wives. Even barren women were not divorced. Multiple wives were advantageous, particularly where cotton was the main crop since women and children were of great help in the plucking season.

Bride price, *hanlam*, was also a deterrent for divorce since *hanlam*, once paid could be reclaimed even upon divorce. This is believed to be one of the reasons why Lotha men rarely divorced their wives and kept multiple wives. It is open to debate whether this constituted in any way to enhancement of a women's position because keeping of multiple wives only points to the precarious position of the women in her marital home.

The Lotha Woman was extremely hard working. British administrator Historians noted that, the work of a hill woman was never ending and her position was 'nearly that of slaves.'

The woman's day began before sunrise, with trips to the water source walking down and uphill 300 -500 feet. Other than hunting, men considered most work including housekeeping, weaving and pottery as effeminate. Hence the task of performing those activities shunned by men fell on women. These included raising of crops like rice, cotton, and tobacco, as well as growing of several kinds of vegetables. The tending of cows, goats, pigs, and fowl likewise devolved on her in most places, as well as cooking, preserving of food for use in the winter season and performance of every other household work.

Amid her busy life the woman bore her children abundantly and reared them alongside her daily chores. The missionary, Mrs R.B. Longwell, living among the Nagas observed that, "Naga women live much of their lives, out of doors the year round." If she was not in the field, she would be in the forest gathering firewood and searching for edible foods of the forest; with the native basket slung over her back held with woven cord of barks of trees over her head. Agriculture was the main enterprise among the Nagas, more so for the Naga women in general. Men were chiefly concerned with their duties of head hunting and there were times when men were engaged in warfare and headhunting and a whole agricultural year had to be taken care of by the women themselves.

Women were responsible for clothing the family. Since the tribe depended on their own produce for survival, cotton was extensively cultivated by the Lothas. In the Lotha society, though men rendered their services in agriculture, cotton plantation was an occupation left entirely to women. Picking of cotton and ginning the cotton, spinning, and dyeing, all tedious work, was done entirely by women. From the cotton plant, women rolled thread and made cotton cloth for the entire family. British records attest to the large amount of cotton traded by the Lothas, with neighbouring Assam and within the Naga Hills. This is clinching proof that Lotha women not only clothed the local population but also played a very important role in bringing economic returns for the the community. This important contribution, however, was not acknowledged or rewarded by the traditional Society. Perhaps the most dangerous work for the Lotha woman was quarrying of the proper clay for making pottery. Quarrying was a risky business and many women are supposed to have died due to caving in of the dug-out caves. As women carried on their tedious chores within and outside the household, carrying loads on their backs, (often with a baby slung across the chest), to and from the field, the men performed their traditional role of ‘protectors’ following the women with their spears. It must be noted at this point that although women played an indispensable role in agriculture, they were given no special role in performing agricultural rites and had no claim over the produce. As one can see, the labour that women engaged in, from about the age of about five, never ceased; it continued till she was decrepit with age. Both infant and maternal mortality was high probably due to lack of proper midwifery. Many Women gave birth in the fields in treacherous condition. Moreover, married off at a very young age, the women were denied their normal biological development, which was detrimental to their health.

The missionary Mary Mead Clark, observed that the life of the Naga woman was made worse from exposure in all kinds of weather, sparse clothing, and poor diet.” The exposure to the sun and rain, and the constant carrying of loads on their heads ruined their features with premature wrinkles. Added to all these, was the Naga kitchen, the centre of a woman’s life, which was ill-ventilated- with no escape route for the smoke- where she worked day and night with smoke getting into her eyes which could have contributed to her aging.

In yet another area of life, i.e., political, Lotha women were denied their rights. The Men’s dormitory played a very important part in the life of the various tribes of the North East. It is here that they were given training in crafts and trained in customary practices including administration and warfare. The Lotha Nagas had the bachelor dormitory in the form of the *Chumpo*. What is more important in the context of this study is that, the Lotha woman was not even allowed to set her foot in it or go anywhere near *chümpo*. The Lotha chief, *ekhüing*, was assisted by a council of administrators who were chosen from and by adult males only. It was held that females had no need for any learning and their presence in the dormitory would undermine the education of men and hence they were forbidden from entering the *chümpo*, and a fine was imposed on any woman who dared disobey the rule. Women were normally regarded as unreasonable and impulsive, and feminine traits were held to be contrary to the ‘strong, ‘brave’ and ‘powerful’ traits that a man is supposed to possess. It was also taboo for Lotha men to touch any weaving tools, or use woman’s cloth upon the belief that he would be jinxed in all manly occupation, like headhunting and hunting for game. in the context of hunting, one can point to the total irony of the situation wherein women were dismissed as the weaker sex but in the actual act of the hunt, men would go forward with hatchets and spears, clearing the jungle while the women followed a little way back, behind the men, with wooden clubs about 1 ft long and stones, encouraging the men to move forward to the kill. The women would throw the clubs and stones into the undergrowth to keep the tiger from coming out and pouncing over the men who were clearing the undergrowth. This bravery of the woman and their contribution to hunting was never acknowledged, let alone, appreciated.

Not only were women kept out of this democratic process, they were also forbidden to visit the open-air sitting platforms where the men of the tribe gathered in the evenings to socialize. Women were also forbidden to go anywhere near the head tree, --*mingitong*. (A tree of the Ficus family) which was found in every Lotha village, planted at the time when a village was set up. where the heads of the enemies were hung, with the belief that the sacred tree would be polluted and any further venture of men in headhunting would be jinxed.

The traditional Lotha Naga society was patriarchal like most agricultural civilizations. Property was inherited exclusively by the male heirs. In the absence of sons or grandsons, brothers, brother’s sons, first cousins in the male line, and so on, inherited in that order. Women were not provided for: the widow inherited nothing as her right and the unmarried daughter lived with her mother and was supported by the

youngest male in the family or were at the mercy of male relatives. The only right to inheritance that a woman had, was possession of articles of dress or artefacts made and used by her, such as earthenware vessels and weaving tools which generally passed into the hands of daughters or other female kin. The Lotha women were not allowed anywhere near about when a ritual was undertaken but they could watch from afar. The presence of women near about when a *chiimpho*, bachelors' dormitory, was under construction or when a stone dragging ceremony was carried out was believed to pollute the ritual. They were also barred from participating, in the main, in social functions and ceremonies of the tribe; Lotha women were barred from attendance at any dances as it was a display of man's courageous acts in headhunting. Though women did take part in singing folk songs, as "they were sung for men; in adulation of men and encouraging men in their manly pursuits." Lotha women were also barred from taking part in clan meetings as lineage descended from the fathers. To this day, every Lotha clan meets to read their history and in such a conclave of patriarchs, no woman is allowed to attend.

6. CONCLUSION:

In the early part of the 19th century, when British colonialism was making its way into the Naga Hills, Christian missions followed, heralding Christianity and education, turning the world of the Nagas upside down. Under the influence of the west, some of the traditional practices came to an end; headhunting ceased and Naga men, who were otherwise engaged in warfare, began to share the agricultural duties with the women. The spread of Christianity, with the message of brotherhood, brought the Nagas to live at peace with one another. Under the British rule, an important reform initiative was made for the Lotha Naga women when the government passed an order in accordance with the Sarda Marriage Bill 1929 which came into effect on 1st February 1930. The husbands concerned were made liable for one year's rigorous imprisonment. Parents who hid the age of their daughters to marry them off were compelled to pay the bride price to the government as fine. This however did not deter the practice for many escaped the law by raising the age of their daughters for marriage. In 1933 an order was passed by the government to stop the practice among the Lotha men of turning out their old wives on payment of *losuman* Divorce payment of rs. 10 only. It cannot be denied that Christianity, introduced by the missionaries, for the first time opened the doors of education to women too. Despite this, the patriarchal setup of the Nagas did not change and as a patriarchal society, the customary laws and traditions still triumph over modern laws. This is vindicated by the fact that even in the contemporary period, there are no women members in the state legislative assembly, and the tribal organizations such as, the Lotha Hoho, and the Naga Hoho, the apex body of the Lotha and Naga tribes respectively. Patriarchy operates in both overt and subtle ways and nowhere is this so apparent as in Lotha Society as the paper has highlighted.

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