The focus on women in tribal societies, fueled by the emergent interest on women’s issues the world over, is very recent. Today, developments and change in tribal societies, particularly the change in the mode of living reflected in the change from swidden (Jhum) to settled agriculture and the subsequent shift from communal and collective ownership of land to private ownership have led to a critical examination of the idea of tribal society as an egalitarian one. Emerging studies show that of the forms of inequality in tribal society in its traditional setting, gender inequality is perceived as being most pervasive (Xaxa, 2004,:354). Naga society is no exception. Like many other tribal societies, the Nagas have a patriarchal social structure that is characterized by the notion of male superiority. The unbalanced gender relations in tribal societies like the Nagas’ is made possible by a rigid dichotomy between the private and the public spheres represented by home and the domestic affairs in the former, and the outside world of governance and decision-making in the latter. This paper seeks to address the issue of Naga women trying to create a domain for themselves in the public sphere through a plethora of women’s organizations within the patriarchal social setting.

Engendering Public Space in Naga Society: Tradition and Modernity

TOSHIMENLA JAMIR
Lecturer, Sociology Department, NU, Lumami, Mokokchung

The focus on women in tribal societies, fueled by the emergent interest on women’s issues the world over, is very recent. Today, developments and change in tribal societies, particularly the change in the mode of living reflected in the change from swidden (Jhum) to settled agriculture and the subsequent shift from communal and collective ownership of land to private ownership have led to a critical examination of the idea of tribal society as an egalitarian one. Emerging studies show that of the forms of inequality in tribal society in its traditional setting, gender inequality is perceived as being most pervasive (Xaxa, 2004,:354). Naga society is no exception. Like many other tribal societies, the Nagas have a patriarchal social structure that is characterized by the notion of male superiority. The unbalanced gender relations in tribal societies like the Nagas’ is made possible by a rigid dichotomy between the private and the public spheres represented by home and the domestic affairs in the former, and the outside world of governance and decision-making in the latter. This paper seeks to address the issue of Naga women trying to create a domain for themselves in the public sphere through a plethora of women’s organizations within the patriarchal social setting.

Naga women in traditional setting

Tradition and customary law play a pivotal role in determining gender equations in Naga society. Historically the public image of Naga society has been a male one, women’s role being largely confined to the private sphere. While the public and political sphere remains a male domain, women are responsible for looking after the domestic affairs where they are indeed the ‘mistresses’ of the house. This is often interpreted as ‘freedom’ by many outsiders. The flip side however, is that such a social arrangement severely restricts the mobility of women in the public/political and social spheres rendering them politically incapable and even ignorant of many civic issues that concern them. A recent study shows that despite the much touted ‘freedom’ in the domestic sphere, when it comes to taking major decisions, the husband or father has the last say in the matter (Jamir, 2005).
The socio-cultural system that systematically excludes women from the mainstream, keeping them less able and denied equal opportunities is based on and strengthened by the values embodied in patriarchy, the traditional power structure that operates at the core of Naga society, i.e. the village. The traditional governing system of the Naga is either chieftainship, under the Village Council or a selected council of elders. Only males have the right to chieftainship while memberships in village councils are on the basis of clan, which only males can represent. Further, a common traditional feature of most Naga tribes, i.e. the annual citizens’ conference, comprises only the men folk of the village. Women are not allowed to participate in such traditional gatherings as if only the men are ‘citizens’, and can exercise their rights to decision-making and shaping the polity of the society. Till date, calls for ‘public’ meetings elicit response only from men with women generally shying away from them. It can be argued that the perception that only males constitute the ‘public’ is a logical outcome of the customary practices of female exclusion from traditional meetings and decision making institutions.

The dichotomy of spheres based on sex may have been justified as a necessary division of labor in the early evolution of Naga society characterized by frequent raids and wars, but the system has long outlived its relevance in the contemporary era with its focus on human rights and social justice for all. As John Stuart Mill argued in 1869 in his essay ‘The Subjection of Women’, the question today is whether women must be forced to follow what is perceived as their natural vocation, that is, home and family, often called the private sphere, or should be seen, in both private and public life, as the equal partners of men.

Creating spaces for themselves
Traditionally in Naga society, women performed one function outside the home: as arbitrators in times of conflict. They played the role of peace-makers for instance, in the pitched battles between their village of birth and the village they married into. They would enter the battlefield holding up a long Y-shaped stick, and try to stop the war. Since they were related to both parties by blood and through marriage, neither side could harm them (Shimreichon, 2000). Today, the women’s organizations in Nagaland are somehow continuing this tradition through new forms.

Almost every Naga tribe has a women’s organization. Some of the prominent women’s organizations are Naga Mothers Association (NMA), Watsü Mungdang (WM), Naga Women’s Union (NWU), Angami Women Organization (AWO), Sumi Totimi Hoho (STH), Naga Women Hoho (NWH). While some of these organizations like the Watsü Mungdang arose primarily as a socio-cultural organization with the backing of the Church, others were organized as a response to certain specific events. For instance, the Sumi Totimi Hoho was formed in 1983 after a rape incident when the women decided to join forces to tackle such crimes and safeguard their rights. Except for the NMA, NWU, and the NWH, which are not tribe-based organizations, the other women organizations in the state are representative of their respective tribes and operate within their community.

One of the first instances where the women bodies of Nagaland effectively influenced public policy was in the movement against liquor. Under the initiative of the Nagaland Baptist Council of Churches, the different women’s organizations in the state headed by the NMA, pressurized the state Government to pass the Nagaland Liquor Total Prohibition Bill in 1994.

However, it is in their role as mediators for peace that Naga women’s organizations rose to prominence. A brief look at the Naga Mothers Association and Watsü Mungdang throws light on how women in Naga society are somehow carving out space in the predominantly male preserves of public life through their peace agenda. The NMA came into existence with the aim of upholding womanhood, to serve as a channel of communication for Naga women’s interests and welfare, and to fight against social evils prevailing in the state. From its very inception, the NMA has been fighting for the cause of peace. In October 1994, NMA formed a peace team to help stabilize the deteriorating political situation as a result of the conflict between the Armed forces of India and the ‘National Workers’ of the Naga national movement, fighting for Naga independence. With the theme “Shed No More Blood”, the NMA initiated dialogues with the ‘Undergrounds’ and the Indian Government to achieve this goal. Naga women have also tried to advocate the notion of neutrality in the concept of motherhood in order to facilitate their intervention in the conflict situation.

Once the Cease-fire Agreement came into force in 1997 between the Indian Government and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM), the NMA was in the forefront of strengthening the peace process.

The Watsü Mungdang is an Ao-Naga socio-cultural organization formed with the objective of recreating interest in traditional socio-cultural
values and to help women maintain their socio-cultural identity and promote self-reliance. Its activities were initially directed at aiding families with no male members or who had no resources. Gradually, it gravitated into issues of women's rights. Recognizing that the traditional practice of patrilineal inheritance threatens the physical security of many women, some of whom are rendered destitute upon the death of their husband or father, a long standing demand of the organization is for equitable distribution of the parental property amongst all children irrespective of sex.

From 1994 onwards, the WM appropriated a new role for itself by mediating between the people and the Army during conflict situations. When there have been indiscriminate arrests by the Armed forces, they put pressure on them to release innocent civilians. In cases of rape and sexual harassment against civilians by the army, the WM file cases against the security forces. They also carry out relief work during calamities, man-made or otherwise. Likewise, the other tribal women’s organizations are actively involved in raising their voice against violence in society, particularly gender-based violence. Their main objectives now are safeguarding the rights of women, besides mediating between warring factions or groups in any conflict situation.

Naga women’s organizations have over the years evolved from being mere socio-cultural organizations into political entities, capable of negotiating for space in the institutionalized political process through calls for peace and efforts to stop violence in the society. The activities of the NMA and the WM highlight the ways in which Naga women have appropriated a public role which hitherto was denied to them. However, there is a lack of proper networking among the different tribal women’s organizations whose interactions and associations are often constrained by parochial tribal considerations. There is a need for better coordination and concerted effort, if Naga women are to challenge the traditional hierarchies and ideologies that kept them subordinated and out of the mainstream of governance.

**Concluding remarks: The way forward**

While women in Naga society have made great strides in almost every field, their traditional role has remained largely unchanged. The fact of the matter is that despite an apparent veneer of ‘modernization’ in the urban areas, all Nagas still derive their identity from a village which constitutes their focal reference point. Notwithstanding the differences in lifestyles of the people, all share a common heritage of customary law encompassing the critical concerns of inheritance and laws of governance which determines the gender roles. As long as the customary laws and traditional power structure remain unaltered, it is unlikely that there would be any substantial change for women in the fabric of Naga society. It is worth noting that the cultural practice of gender marginalization and exclusion from decision making bodies have impacted negatively on their political socialization. After more than fifty years of the modern democratic electoral system, no woman has succeeded in entering the hallowed portals of the State Assembly. There were few attempts but the women lost miserably in the male-dominated elections.

While modern education and related developments are gradually awakening a feminist consciousness amongst many Naga women who are trying to work for meaningful change, the goal remains elusive in the face of patriarchal obstacles. Along with the educational, economic and other social attainments of the women, a concomitant social consciousness in the Naga males regarding gender stereotypes is a prerequisite for gender equity. The state government can also help initiate positive changes in existing customary practices particularly with regard to traditional governance and the hereditary system. It is pertinent to point out that Article 5 of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women hold governments responsible for taking steps to modify practices based on stereotypes about women’s role as well as beliefs about women’s inferiority (Chatterjee, 2005:86). The inaction of the state government in this regard is a matter of grave concern today to for Naga women. Any attempt in this direction would mean undoing the very foundation on which Naga society stood for generations. How responsive would an all-male legislature be in engaging with the demands of the Naga women for distributive justice? The various organizations have made some progress but it will be a while before patriarchal mind-sets relent.

**References**


Trophies*

BY TEMSULA AO

* Refers to the ancient Naga practice of chopping off the heads of slain enemies in warfare and bringing them home as trophies, for public display at a central place. Head-takers were considered to be heroes and such warriors earned the right to wear special ornaments and give Feasts of Merit to the entire village as a mark of their elevated status in society.

It is one of those crazy nights yet again; the air is rent by blood-curdling yells of the warriors come home with enemy heads which will hang from the skull-tree in the village field. The heads will sway gently with unseeing eyes, and hair matted by their own blood, and standing below them the warriors will hurl insults at the gory trophies and caper wildly shrieking with the madness of new wine. But the merry-making will only worsen the fatigue of warfare, overcoming the weary, blood-caked warriors; they will soon shuffle about, too weary to sing and dance and will collapse in ungainly heaps in drunken stupor, and at first cock-crow will stumble unsteadily home.

These men, the father of my child among them, are an absurd lot, rejoicing over some ugly severed heads, stupidly unmindful about marauding animals devastating standing crops and threatening women and children. All they seem to ever care for is the glory in bringing home an enemy head to prove that they are heroes while the home-fires often go unlit.

I’ve witnessed this sorry spectacle countless times and shared the misery with other women whose husbands too indulge in such meaningless heroics. I do not know what the other women think but I can no longer remain silent about this senseless pursuit after vain glory and vacuous reward. This dawn when he staggers in I shall ignore him and pinch my sleeping child to make him cry and when he asks me why I shall confront him and say, ‘You may rejoice over your bloody trophies but enemy heads will never fill my child’s empty belly, nor quench my need for a body untainted by another’s blood to douse the heat of summer and ignite the cold of winter and if you do not heed me I may soon return to my parents a widow and your son the orphan of an irresponsible father.’