

THE ROLE OF NAGA WOMEN IN THE SOCIO-CULTURAL SPHERE OF THE TRADITIONAL LOTHAS TRIBE OF NAGALAND: A REVIEW

Abstract

This paper aims to examine the significant role played by Naga women in the socio-cultural landscape of the Lothas tribe, a prominent ethnic group residing in Nagaland, India. By analyzing various scholarly works, ethnographic studies, and local narratives, this review paper seeks to shed light on the multifaceted contributions of Naga women to the tribe's social, cultural, and economic fabric. The study explores the historical context, traditional gender roles, and contemporary changes, providing insights into the evolving status and empowerment of Naga women within the Lothas community.

Keywords: Socio-Cultural, Ethnicity, Economic, Traditional, Empowerment.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Nestled in the pristine hills of Northeast India, Nagaland is a land of vibrant cultures, diverse communities, and breathtaking landscapes. This enchanting state is renowned for its rich cultural heritage, age-old traditions, and the indomitable spirit of its people. Nagaland, located in the northeastern region of India, shares its borders with Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and Myanmar, [1] making it a melting pot of various ethnicities and customs. Ancient folklore and oral traditions suggest that the Nagas are descendants of various Tibeto-Burman tribes who migrated to the region over time. The linguistic diversity of Nagaland reflects the plethora of tribes residing within its boundaries. Over 17 major languages and numerous dialects are spoken in the state. Among these, Lotha, Angami, Pochuri, Ao, Poula (Puma Naga), Input, Range (Ruangmei), Tangkhul, Thangal, Maram and Zeme are some of the prominent languages spoken in Nagaland, [2] playing a significant role in preserving the rich heritage of each tribe. Nagaland boasts a rich tapestry of cultures and traditions, with a diverse array of tribes residing within its boundaries. Some of the major tribes of Nagaland include Angami, Ao, Lotha, Sumi, Rengma, Chakhesang, Chang, Khiamniungan, Sangtam, Yimchunger, Phom, Pochury, Konyak, Zeliang, Kuki and Kachari. [1] Among the many tribes, the Lotha tribe stands as one of the major ethnic groups in Nagaland. The Lothas predominantly inhabit the Wokha district, one of the picturesque regions in the state. [1] Known for their skilled craftsmanship, agricultural expertise, and vibrant festivals, the Lothas have played a pivotal role in shaping the cultural landscape of Nagaland.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Lothas have a rich oral tradition, with folklore and legends passed down through generations, narrating their history and ancestry. [3] According to local beliefs, the Lotha people have ancestral ties to the Mongoloid race, tracing their lineage to a single progenitor. [1]

The origin of the Lotha tribe is intrinsically linked to the legendary figure of Longkvürü, a central figure in Lotha folklore and oral traditions. According to the Lotha mythology, Longkvürü is believed to be the first man and the progenitor of the Lotha people. One day, in the early days of the Lotha tribe, Longkvürü, set out on a hunting expedition along with his younger brother, Yimthanü. As they trekked further into the wilderness, they stumbled upon a breathtakingly beautiful valley nestled amidst the hills. The valley was a sight to behold, with its lush greenery, crystal-clear streams, and abundant wildlife. Captivated by its charm and the promise it held, Longkvürü and Yimthanü decided to explore the valley further. [4]

The brothers realized that the valley offered an abundance of natural resources and fertile land, making it an ideal location for the Lotha tribe to thrive. They saw the potential for establishing a new settlement, one that would provide their people with a prosperous and harmonious life. Excited by their discovery, Longkvürü and Yimthanü returned to their village to share the news with their fellow villagers. They described the beauty and bounty of the valley, and their hearts swelled with pride at the thought of the possibilities it held for their community. [4]

With the council's blessing, the entire Lotha community came together to embark on the journey. Over time, the new settlement flourished, and the Lotha tribe prospered in their newfound home. They continued to honor their ancestors and their revered chief, Longkürü, by preserving their cultural practices, celebrating their festivals, and passing down their oral traditions to the valley. With the council's blessing, the entire Lotha community came together to embark on the journey to the valley. [4]

Various theories have been forward regarding the migration of Lothas, along with other tribe, to Nagaland. There are theories of Lothas migrating from either China, or Manchuria or Lenka. [5]

III. GENDER ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Lotha society has been traditionally patriarchal and patrilineal, with men holding dominant positions in various aspects of social, economic, and political life. In such a society, lineage and inheritance are traced through the male line, and men typically hold more authority and decision-making power compared to women. In traditional Lotha society, women have often been assigned the primary responsibility for managing the household and taking care of the family.

- 1. Household Management:** Lotha women are central to the management of the household. They are responsible for overseeing daily domestic tasks, such as cooking meals, cleaning the house, and maintaining hygiene. Women ensure that the household runs smoothly and efficiently, creating a nurturing environment for family members. [2]
- 2. Childcare and Upbringing:** Lotha women play a pivotal role in childcare and the upbringing of children. They take care of the physical and emotional needs of their children, ensuring their well-being and nurturing their development. Lotha mothers are known for their affection and dedication to their children. [2]
- 3. Passing down Cultural Values:** Within the family, Lotha women are responsible for transmitting cultural values, norms, and traditions to the younger generation. They pass down knowledge about Lotha customs, rituals, and stories, instilling a sense of cultural identity and pride in their children. [16]
- 4. Intergenerational Bonds:** Lotha families emphasize strong intergenerational bonds, and women play a critical role in fostering these connections. As mothers, daughters, and grandmothers, they create a sense of unity and continuity within the family, ensuring that traditions are carried forward through generations. [2]
- 5. Family Gatherings and Ceremonies:** Lotha women are instrumental in organizing and hosting family gatherings and ceremonies. They ensure that family members come together during festivals, weddings, and other significant events, strengthening familial ties and community cohesion. [14]
- 6. Contributing to Livelihood:** In addition to their household duties, Lotha women often contribute to the family's livelihood. They may engage in agricultural activities alongside

men, helping to cultivate crops and tend to livestock, thus contributing to the family's subsistence. [1]

- 7. Role of Elders:** As women age and become elders, their roles within the family take on added importance. They become repositories of wisdom, guiding the younger generations and providing counsel in matters of family and community affairs. [6]

IV. ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS

Naga women have long been active participants in the tribe's economy, both in the traditional subsistence agriculture and in modern economic activities. The women of the Lotha tribe have made significant contributions to various aspects of their society, including agriculture, weaving, handicrafts, and the informal market economy. Their expertise and hard work have been crucial in sustaining their communities and preserving their cultural heritage.

- 1. Agriculture:** Naga women have played an essential role in agricultural activities, which form the backbone of their economy. They actively participate in farming tasks such as planting, weeding, harvesting, and crop processing. Women have traditional knowledge about agricultural practices, including the cultivation of crops like rice, millets, and vegetables. They contribute significantly to food production and security within their communities. [1] [13]
- 2. Weaving:** Naga women are renowned for their exemplary skills in weaving, which is an integral part of their cultural identity. They use traditional backstrap looms to create intricate and beautiful textiles. Each tribe has its unique weaving patterns and designs, reflecting their distinct cultural heritage. Women take pride in weaving Naga shawls, loin-cloths, and other traditional garments that hold cultural significance and are used during festivals and ceremonies. [13] [16]
- 3. Handicrafts:** Naga women are skilled artisans who engage in various handicrafts, including basket making, pottery, and beadwork. They create baskets from locally available materials, such as bamboo and cane, for various purposes like storage and transportation. Pottery-making is another traditional craft, producing utilitarian items like cooking pots and water containers. Beadwork is an intricate art form used to decorate clothing and accessories, showcasing the women's creativity and cultural pride. [15] [16]
- 4. Informal Market Economy:** Naga women have been actively involved in the informal market economy, which plays a vital role in their communities. They engage in activities like selling agricultural produce, handicrafts, and traditional clothing in local markets. Women are known for their entrepreneurial skills, and their participation in the informal economy provides economic opportunities for them and their families. [1]
- 5. Cultural Preservation:** Through their contributions to weaving, handicrafts, and traditional practices, Naga women actively preserve and pass down their cultural heritage to future generations. Their craftsmanship and artistic expressions are not only a means of livelihood but also a way to maintain and celebrate their unique cultural identity. [1] [16]

- 6. Social and Community Cohesion:** Naga women play a significant role in fostering social cohesion and community bonding. They actively participate in cultural events, festivals, and rituals, which serve as platforms for strengthening community ties and reinforcing shared values and traditions. [14]

V. RITUALS AND CEREMONIES

In the Lotha tribe, Naga women play essential roles in various religious and cultural ceremonies, reflecting their integral position in the community's spiritual and cultural life. Their involvement in these ceremonies is deeply rooted in tradition and serves to preserve and pass down the tribe's cultural heritage.

- 1. Ceremonial Dances:** Naga women are prominent participants in traditional ceremonial dances performed during festivals and other significant events. They are skilled dancers, and their graceful movements add a touch of elegance and beauty to these performances. Ceremonial dances often depict mythological stories, historical events, and aspects of nature, and women play essential roles in portraying these narratives through dance. [14]
- 2. Ritual Offerings and Prayers:** Naga women actively participate in ritual offerings and prayers during various religious ceremonies. They are often responsible for preparing offerings such as rice, meat, and other traditional food items to be presented to the deities or spirits. Women's involvement in these rituals reflects their spiritual devotion and commitment to maintaining a harmonious relationship with the supernatural. [7]
- 3. Traditional Music and Song:** Women are skilled in traditional Naga music and song, and their melodious voices contribute to the enchanting atmosphere of religious and cultural ceremonies. They sing hymns, chants, and traditional songs, enhancing the spiritual ambiance of the occasions. [14]
- 4. Preservation of Ritual Knowledge:** Naga women serve as custodians of ritual knowledge, passing down sacred songs, chants, and prayers from one generation to the next. They ensure the continuity of the tribe's cultural and spiritual practices by teaching younger members about the significance and nuances of each ceremony. [14]
- 5. Attire and Adornments:** During religious and cultural ceremonies, Naga women wear traditional attire, including intricately woven shawls, ornaments, and beadwork. Their dressing is an essential aspect of these ceremonies, representing their cultural identity and paying homage to their ancestors. [18]
- 6. Ceremonial Roles:** In some cases, women may hold specific ceremonial roles, especially in rites of passage and life-cycle events. For instance, women may have essential roles during childbirth ceremonies, marriage rituals, and funerals, contributing to the overall sanctity of these events. [14]
- 7. Cultural Transmission:** Naga women act as transmitters of cultural values and norms during religious and cultural ceremonies. They pass on knowledge about their tribe's history, myths, and traditions, ensuring that these aspects of the culture continue to thrive. [6]

VI. CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES

Breaking traditional gender barriers and achieving gender equality in Lotha society, as in many other traditional societies, is not without its challenges and obstacles. While progress has been made, there are still significant hurdles that Lotha women face in their pursuit of empowerment and leadership roles.

1. **Deep-Rooted Patriarchy:** Traditional gender norms and patriarchal attitudes are deeply ingrained in Lotha society. Challenging these norms requires a gradual shift in mindset and attitudes, which may take time. [7]
2. **Lack of Access to Education:** Despite efforts to improve access to education, some girls and women in remote or economically disadvantaged areas may still face challenges in accessing quality education, limiting their opportunities for personal growth and leadership development. [1] [15]
3. **Gender-Based Discrimination:** Gender-based discrimination can manifest in various forms, such as unequal opportunities, biased treatment, and stereotypes that limit the roles and capabilities of women. [7]
4. **Limited Support Systems:** Women who aspire to break gender barriers and pursue leadership roles may face resistance or lack support from traditional structures or even within their own families. [9]
5. **Socio-Economic Factors:** Socio-economic factors, such as poverty and traditional gender roles, also play a role in hindering women's empowerment and leadership aspirations. [15]
6. **Lack of Female Role Models:** The limited presence of women in leadership roles can result in a lack of visible role models, making it challenging for young women to envision themselves in such positions. [9]
7. **Balancing Multiple Responsibilities:** Many Lotha women juggle multiple roles, such as household duties, childcare, and agricultural work, which can limit their time and energy to pursue leadership opportunities. [15]
8. **Cultural Constraints:** Cultural norms and practices may restrict women's mobility, visibility, and participation in certain public forums, limiting their ability to engage in leadership roles. [7]
9. **Resistance to Change:** Some segments of society may resist or question the changing roles of women, fearing that it might disrupt traditional values and practices. [7]
10. **Lack of Policy Support:** The absence of gender-sensitive policies and institutional support can also pose obstacles to women's empowerment and leadership opportunities.

VII. EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT

The education and empowerment of Lotha women have gained increasing attention in recent years as efforts are made to promote gender equality and inclusivity within the community. Education is recognized as a key driver of empowerment, enabling women to break traditional barriers and participate more actively in various spheres of life.

- 1. Increasing Access to Education:** With the introduction of Christianity, efforts were made to increase access to education for girls and women in Lotha society. Schools and educational institutions are being established or improved to provide better educational opportunities for girls. [1] [13]
- 2. Promotion of Girls' Education:** Awareness campaigns and community initiatives aim to encourage parents to prioritize the education of their daughters. The belief in the value of educating girls is gaining traction within the community. [15]
- 3. Girls' Hostels and Scholarships:** To support girls' education, hostels and scholarships are being provided to help those from remote areas or disadvantaged backgrounds access quality education. [15]
- 4. Focus on Skill Development:** Apart from formal education, there is an emphasis on skill development and vocational training for women, enabling them to acquire valuable skills for economic empowerment. [15]
- 5. Empowerment Workshops:** Workshops and training programs are conducted to enhance women's knowledge about their rights, health, and financial literacy, thus fostering their overall empowerment. [15]
- 6. Women's Leadership:** Efforts are being made to promote women's leadership and participation in decision-making at the community level. Women are encouraged to take active roles in village councils and local governance structures. [9]
- 7. Economic Opportunities:** Initiatives are being undertaken to create economic opportunities for Lotha women, supporting entrepreneurship, self-help groups, and income-generating projects. [15]
- 8. Awareness and Advocacy:** Awareness programs and advocacy efforts are undertaken by NGOs, women's organizations, and community leaders to sensitize the community on gender issues and the importance of women's empowerment. [15]
- 9. Role Models and Mentors:** Successful Lotha women serve as role models and mentors, inspiring and guiding younger women to pursue their aspirations and ambitions. [9]
- 10. Balancing Tradition and Modernity:** While promoting women's education and empowerment, efforts also recognize the importance of preserving and respecting traditional values and customs that are meaningful to the community. [13]

VIII. CHANGING SOCIO-CULTURAL DYNAMICS

As with many indigenous communities, the Lotha tribe has experienced changing socio-cultural dynamics over the years. Factors such as modernization, globalization, education, and external influences have contributed to shifts in various aspects of Lotha society.

- 1. Economic Shifts:** The shift from subsistence agriculture to a cash-based economy has impacted Lotha communities. Economic activities now extend beyond traditional agricultural practices to include small businesses, wage labor, and involvement in the informal market. [19]
- 2. Infrastructure Development:** Improved transportation and communication infrastructure have connected Lotha villages to the outside world, enabling access to markets and opportunities beyond the immediate vicinity. [19]
- 3. Cultural Exchange:** Increased interactions with neighboring communities and the wider world have resulted in cultural exchange and the adoption of external influences. This has led to the blending of traditional practices with elements of modernity. [19]
- 4. Impact of Media:** Access to mass media, including television, internet, and social media, has exposed Lotha youths to global trends and ideas, influencing their outlook on culture, fashion, and lifestyle.
- 5. Language and Communication:** The widespread use of English and other dominant languages for education and communication has impacted the preservation and transmission of traditional languages among the younger generation.
- 6. Migration and Urbanization:** Migration to urban areas for education and employment opportunities has led to changes in the demographic structure of Lotha villages and communities. This has also resulted in a shift in lifestyles and cultural practices. [19]
- 7. Religious Shifts:** While the majority of Lotha tribes continue to practice their indigenous beliefs and traditions, some individuals have adopted Christianity as a result of missionary efforts. This has led to a blend of traditional beliefs and Christian practices in some communities. [19]
- 8. Preservation Efforts:** In response to the changing dynamics, there has been a conscious effort by Lotha elders and cultural organizations to preserve and promote traditional customs, rituals, and festivals to maintain a sense of cultural identity. [6]

IX. CONCLUSION

In the socio-cultural sphere of the traditional Lotha tribe of Nagaland, Naga women play indispensable roles that are deeply woven into the fabric of their community's existence. Despite the historically patriarchal and patrilineal nature of the society, Lotha women have been the backbone of their families, preserving their cultural heritage, and contributing significantly to various aspects of tribal life. Throughout history, Naga women have been the

custodians of their cultural traditions, passing down myths, stories, and rituals from one generation to the next. Their expertise in weaving, handicrafts, and agriculture has not only sustained their communities but also showcased their creativity and skills, forming essential elements of their identity.

In recent times, there have been encouraging developments in the education and empowerment of Lotha women. Access to education has expanded, enabling women to challenge traditional gender norms and take on more active roles in politics, leadership, and decision-making. While facing challenges and obstacles, Lotha women's determination to overcome them is evident in their endeavors towards empowerment and gender equality. As they break through traditional norms and embrace new possibilities, they emerge as agents of change, contributing to the preservation of their heritage while charting a path towards a more inclusive, equitable, and vibrant future for their community.

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