

Between Tradition and Modernity: The Political Trajectory of the Ao Naga Women

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Abstract: *The journey of women into the political sphere has been challenging across the globe, with their right to participate in politics only being secured after years of persistent struggle. In Naga society too, the inclusion of women in politics has been a slow process. Despite traditional Naga society being often described as democratic and republican, it was governed by customary laws that strictly prohibited women from engaging in political activities. With modernity, society has witnessed a lot of changes in all fields, but the Nagas continue to be governed by their customary laws in many aspects. The Ao Nagas, being one of the first to embrace Christianity, is seen as one of the most forward tribes among the Nagas. However, when it comes to women and politics, the Ao Naga women have limited rights as compared to men in decision making role in the society at large. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to understand the question of whether the Ao Naga community is ready to be more flexible in their customary law and allow women's participation in all political or decision-making processes.*

Keywords: Ao Naga Women, Customary Laws, Politics, Decision-Making.

INTRODUCTION

The Nagas uphold a rich tapestry of customary practices and institutions that have been integral to their social and cultural identity. These customary practices and traditional institutions still uphold patriarchal and patrilineal values and have a strong hold in the state. Women have been excluded from these traditional institutions on the basis of gender roles. While women play a pivotal role in the management of the family affairs, and in the socio-cultural, ritualistic, and economic spheres, they are considered inferior to men when it comes to politics. Politics and the political sphere are usually perceived as the domain of the men, thus depriving women of participating in the decision-making processes. These gender inequalities produced by customary laws are thus a significant impediment to democratisation and human development. Thus, in Nagaland while men continue to hold the primary leadership roles in the political sphere, women have very little influence or role in decision-making bodies whether at the state or the local level.

One glaring example of political inequality faced by women in Nagaland is the deprivation of women in the local level of governance particularly at the village level. Governance at the village level is carried out according to the traditional laws which is handled by the male dominated Village Council. These traditional institutions are protected under Article 371A of the Indian Constitution which grants special provisions to the Nagas, enabling the preservation of the Naga society's structure in accordance with their social practices and customary laws. Therefore, in Nagaland, instead of the Panchayati Raj Institutions, there exists Village Councils which have traditionally been male-dominated institution.

The Ao Naga is one of the major tribes of Nagaland in North-East India. The Ao-Naga tribe is not a single unified group but is divided into six major clans, each with its own sub-clans. The major clans include Pongen, Longkumer and Jamir from the Chungli group, along with Imchen, Walling and Longchar from the Mongsen group (Longchar & Imchasenla. 2017). The Ao-Naga tribe constitutes the majority of the population in Mokokchung district, which is regarded as the home of the Ao Nagas. It is bordered by Assam in the North, Wokha in the West, Tuensang in the East, and Zunheboto in the South. The Ao Nagas like any other Naga community have a set of customary laws and practices according to which the community is governed. Customary practices among the Ao Nagas are deeply rooted in traditions passed down through

generations which are observed strictly. The Ao Nagas, being one of the first to embrace Christianity is seen as one of the most forward tribes among the Nagas. However, when it comes to women and politics, the Ao Naga women have limited rights as compared to men in decision-making role in the society at large. The question still remains whether the Ao Naga community is ready to be more flexible in their customary law and allow women's participation in all political or decision-making processes.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Shimray (2002) discusses in detail the role of women in traditional Naga society which is based on patriarchal social norm. He argues that today Naga women are playing a crucial role in society and they have a high and secure position.

Beall (2005) argues that Nagas being 'a hierarchical and patriarchal system', chieftaincy enforces exclusionary rules and has limited scope for representation and downward accountability.

Khanna (2009) investigates the discrepancy between low women's representation in Indian politics and constitutional gender equality. Socio-economic barriers, cultural traditions, and the influence of money and muscularity continue to impede women's political participation notwithstanding legislative provisions.

Parwez (2012) examines the marginalisation of women by customary laws in tribal societies, specifically within the Ao Naga community in Nagaland. The research highlights that these laws, entrenched in patriarchal traditions limit women's rights in areas such as inheritance, property ownership, and decision-making.

Amer (2013) in her article argues that women in Nagaland have been able to strengthen their political visibility only as voters, though they have accomplished a wide range of successes across various sectors. She asserts that the attainment of a genuinely democratic civil society is unattainable without gender balance in politics.

Jathy's (2020) paper examines the role of women in traditional Ao society before Christianity, using historical sources to explore how gender norms shaped their status and responsibilities.

Devi & Gohain (2021) in their article look at customary laws from a feminist perspective and emphasized the need for gender justice. They also argue for the creation of more inclusive opportunities for women without undermining the community's traditional values.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The role of Ao Naga women has undergone significant transformation over time, shifting from traditional domestic responsibilities to participation in various social, economic, and political spheres. Despite these advancements, they continue to face societal, cultural, and institutional barriers that affect their full participation, especially in political leadership.

This study seeks to explore the changing roles of Ao women from traditional to modern times and to assess public attitudes toward women's political participation. It seeks to evaluate the extent to which the Ao community is willing to reconsider their customary practices to facilitate greater and more effective political participation of women. Understanding these dynamics is crucial in addressing gender disparities and fostering inclusive political representation.

OBJECTIVES:

1.To study the changing role of Ao Naga women from traditional to modern times.

2.To examine the attitudes of people toward women's political participation.

METHODOLOGY:

This study has used mixed method i.e., both quantitative and qualitative. The study was conducted in Mokokchung town which is predominantly inhabited by the Ao Nagas. Simple random sampling was used to select respondents in the study area. In order to represent all population, both male, female, young (18 years and above) and old, educated and uneducated were targeted.

Sample size: A total number of 120 responses were collected. Out of the total 120 respondents, 50 were male and 70 were female. The respondents were drawn from citizens who are eligible to vote in the election i.e., 18 years and above.

SOURCES OF DATA

Both primary and secondary sources of data were used. Primary data was collected through questionnaire method consisting of both open and closed ended questions. Secondary data was collected from various books, articles, journals, newspapers, magazines, official government publications, reports, media sources or any such other materials relevant to the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Changing Role of Women from Traditional to Modern Times

Respondents were asked to express their views on whether there has been a change in the role of Naga women over the years. They were also asked if they would be supportive of a woman if she decides to join politics. When asked what kind of role the Ao Naga women played in the past, majority of the respondents viewed that Ao Naga women traditionally played domestic roles such as housewives, child bearers, domestic workers etc. However, there were some male respondents who argued that women also had respectable position in the past and they were never deprived of any rights, instead they were treated equally as men. One of the male respondents expressed that "*women cannot participate in various bodies such as the 'Yimden', i.e., law keepers/law makers of the tribe, villages or clans because the men have great respect for women and children and they feel that it is their responsibility to protect their families*". This statement represents the general opinion of men which is often used as an attempt to justify the exclusion of women from political or decision-making bodies by framing it as an act of respect and protection. This perspective aligns with benevolent sexism, where traditional gender roles are upheld under the guise of caring for or safeguarding women. While it may appear positive on the surface, it ultimately reinforces gender inequality by limiting women's roles to the private sphere such as family and household while reserving leadership and governance for men.

The research findings reveal a stark contrast between male and female perceptions on the status and rights of Ao Naga women in the past. Among men, 47 per cent believes that Ao Naga women enjoyed equal status and rights as men in the past. In contrast, only 10 per cent of women agree with this view. It shows that women are far more likely to recognize historical inequalities in status and rights.

On the proposition that “patriarchal norms restrict women’s political involvement” majority (72%) of respondents expressed agreement with it. The study however shows that there is a strong consensus among the respondents as more than 90 percent of both male and female believes that the status of women has improved as compared to the past. Respondents noted significant progress of Ao Naga women, particularly in education, employment, and decision-making. Greater access to quality education has enabled women to pursue careers, achieve financial independence, and actively contribute to society. Many were of the opinion that women now are increasingly taking on leadership roles in various organizations, churches, politics, and government offices. They are also excelling in corporate, civil, and private sectors as well as in sports and entrepreneurship.

Attitude of People toward Women’s Political Participation.

Attitudes play one of the major roles in determining political behaviour of the people. Attitudes are the feelings of likes and dislikes, attraction or repulsion, interest or apathy towards some objects (Jamir, 2012). Attitudes are developed gradually over time through various experiences, either consciously or unconsciously. They can change, be influenced, and become standardized based on the social environment in which a person lives (Russel, 1964).

Considering the marginalisation of women from the traditional institutions even today, respondents were asked to share their views on whether traditional institutions should be made more flexible to open up spaces for women as well.

Table 1: Attitude of people towards women’s political participation.

Questions	Options	Male %	Female%
Do you agree that reservation for women should be extended to Village Council (VC) besides VDB or ULB?	Yes	68.08	86.81
	No	31.92	13.19
Would you be open to a woman becoming VDB Sec./ member of VC?	Yes	78.72	82.41
	No	21.27	17.58
Would it bring any positive changes if an Ao Naga women can attend senso(citizen) meeting and have the right of voicing their opinions?	Yes	72.34	89.01
	No	27.65	9.89
Do you think that the increased representation of women in ULB will affect/have an impact on patriarchal structure among the Ao Nagas?	Yes	33.91	38.46
	No	62.7	59.34
	No Response	3.12	2.19

Source: Fieldwork, 2024

The above table represents the opinions of people on women and political participation. The findings reveals that a substantial majority of both male (68%) and female (87%) are in favour of extending reservations for women in Village Councils and not just in Village Development Board (VDB) which has one-fourth reservation for women at present. Similarly, they were in favour of women taking the leadership role such as VDB Secretary or Chairperson in the council.

The Senso Meeting which is a traditional gathering of adult male typically held to discuss community matters, governance, and decision-making remains deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions. However, on the question of women

and their participation in this traditional institutions, the respondents’ views offer a more progressive outlook. A significant portion of both male (72%) and female (89%) respondents believes that if Ao Naga women were granted the right to attend and participate in senso meetings, it would create important opportunities for them to express their views and contribute their opinions. They also suggest that women’s inclusion in these patriarchal spaces could lead to meaningful changes in the dynamics of village-level governance, promoting gender equality and amplifying women’s voices in important civic matters. This shift could potentially challenge the traditional gender roles and foster empowerment of women. The data also shows overwhelming support among both men (95%) and women (95%) when asked if they would support or encourage their wife/sisters/daughters/female relatives’ involvement in politics (contest in election). This strong consensus shows acceptance and encouragement for women’s political participation within families across both genders.

Another interesting finding was in regard to the recent Urban Local Bodies (ULB) elections held in 2024. The respondents were asked if they believe that increased representation of women in ULB will affect/have an impact on patriarchal structure among the Ao Nagas. Majority of the respondents- male 63% and female 60% did not believe that increased representation of women in Urban Local Bodies (ULB) will have an impact on the patriarchal structure among the Ao Nagas. Only a minority- male 34% and female 39% respondents believe that it will have an impact on the patriarchal structure while some respondents refused to answer this question. Thus, the data reveals a divided opinion on the potential for women’s representation in ULB to challenge patriarchal structures in the Ao Naga community. It suggests a prevalent view that patriarchy within the Ao Naga community is deeply ingrained, and political representation alone may not be sufficient to bring about substantial change in gender dynamics. While majority of the people remains unconvinced of the transformative power of female representation in local governance, some respondents acknowledge the possibility of change.

Factors that Influence or Deter Women from Active Participation

Although the Constitution of India guarantees political equality, women in Nagaland have not been able to enjoy their political rights due to the weight of the traditional attitudes and the restrictions based on gender roles. As mentioned earlier, though women are visible in the political process as voters, they are hardly visible in various decision-making bodies whether it is in the state assembly or governance at the local level. Keeping this in consideration, respondents were asked to give their opinions on the factors that influence or deter women from participating effectively in the political process.

Figure: 1 Factors that influence or deter women from active participation in politics

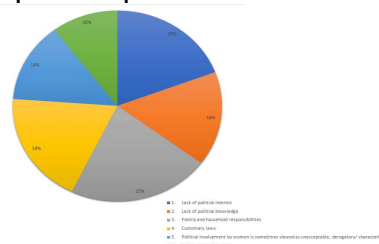


Figure 1 reflects a range of responses, which reveals the multifaceted barriers that women face. One of the recurring factors cited by respondents is “family and household responsibilities” (22%). This factor is especially prevalent in patriarchal societies where traditional gender roles confine women to domestic duties, leaving little room for political or public engagement. Another factor identified is “lack of political interest” (19%) and “lack of political knowledge” (16.03%). This may stem from deeper systemic issues, such as socialization processes that dissuade women from considering politics as a viable avenue for personal or professional development. Political apathy may also be exacerbated by a lack of opportunities for women to engage in political discourse from an early age. The “influence of customary laws” (19%) on women’s political participation is another significant reason cited by respondents. Customary laws, particularly in tribal societies such as the Ao Nagas, often institutionalize patriarchal norms, restricting women’s rights and limiting their ability to engage in public life. Moreover, the perception that “political involvement by women is sometimes viewed as unacceptable, derogatory, or characterless” (13%) also emerges as a notable deterrent. In many traditional societies, women who participate in politics may be stigmatized or seen as transgressing established gender norms. This negative perception can discourage women from pursuing political roles, fearing social ostracism or damage to their reputation. These barriers reflect both structural and cultural impediments that continue to limit the political agency of women, particularly in patriarchal and tribal societies.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the political marginalization of Ao Naga women, driven by patriarchy and customary laws that prevent them from participating in governance. Although they play crucial roles within their communities, they are systematically excluded from positions in Village Councils (Yimden), Senso meetings, and other decision-making bodies. The opposition to the 33% reservation in Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) further reflects the entrenched belief that political leadership is a male prerogative, often defended through Article 371(A), which safeguards Naga traditions.

While patriarchal norms continue to limit women’s political participation, there is broad agreement that the status of Ao Naga women has improved compared to the past. More women are now stepping into leadership roles across various organizations, churches, government offices and to some extent, politics, though they still remain marginalized. As a result, there is growing support for reserving seats for women in Village Councils and appointing them to leadership positions such as VDB Secretary or Council Chairperson. There is also increasing willingness to include women in Senso Meetings providing them with valuable opportunities to voice their perspectives and contribute to decision-making.

However, an interesting insight emerged as many people remain unconvinced that increased female representation in Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) will challenge the patriarchal structure among the Ao Nagas. While some are hopeful for change, most remain sceptical about whether political representation alone can significantly alter gender dynamics. Women continue to face multiple barriers from participating in politics including socioeconomic constraints, cultural customs, family and household responsibilities and the influence of customary laws. The Ao Naga society finds

itself at a crossroads, balancing aspirations for modernization with a strong desire to uphold its traditional laws and practices, which form the foundation of its identity. Despite Ao Naga women excelling alongside or even surpassing men in various fields, they are yet to achieve equal political status. In order to eliminate historical barriers and establish a more inclusive political environment, structural reforms are required. Women must be given more authority in decision-making positions in addition to having more representation in politics. No doubt, traditions are important for preserving the Ao Naga identity but they should not serve as a barrier to women’s rights and empowerment. Therefore, there is a need for a balance between cultural preservation and gender justice in Ao Naga society and Naga society at large.

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