CHAPTER – 3

STATUS OF WOMEN IN NAGA SOCIETY
3.0. STATUS OF WOMEN IN NAGA SOCIETY

Our attempt in this chapter will be to discuss the land and the people of Naga area with special reference to the status of women. The study of the position of women in any society has rightly been recognized as a true criterion to evaluate the state of its civilization. There is no doubt that it is the marriage and divorce laws and customs of a particular society that enable us to glimpse as to whether men regarded women merely as market commodity or war prices or as objects of enjoyment or regarded women as their equal partners. Similarly, the rules and custom relating to sex morality enable us to determine the ethical tone of the society as well as to judge how far men themselves are prepared to share the standard they set for the women and thereby ascertain the degree of distinction between the sexes. Unfortunately, a study of this kind relating to the Naga society assumes to be a difficult one for want of records and materials.

Before focusing our attention to the subject of discussion, we may do well to remind ourselves that there is a growing concern regarding the status of women in the society. This fact has attracted the attention of various organizations from different fields. However, it may be said that much of their concerns are more alarmist rather than analytical and pragmatic. Hence, our attentions are too often distracted from the main objective of the problem. The present exercise is purely an academic endeavour and it attempts to project an objective understanding of the status of women in the Naga society.
3.1 LOCATION AND PHYSICAL FEATURES

How did they come to be called Nagas? The name has attracted many scholars and anthropologists. How does one qualify to be called a Naga? These questions have never been answered satisfactorily. J H Hutton, who was for a couple of decades Deputy Commissioner of Naga Hills, remarks, "It is generally assumed in a vague sort of way that those tribes which are spoken of as Nagas have something in common with each other, which distinguishes them from the many other tribes found in Assam and entitles to be regarded as a racial unit in themselves. The truth is that, if not, possible, it is exceedingly difficult to profound any test by which a Naga tribe can be distinguished from other Assam or Burma tribes which are not Nagas."  

According to Elwin, "The name was not in general use among the Nagas until recently. It was given to them by the people of the plains and in the last century was used indiscriminately against the Abors and Dafflas as well as for the Nagas themselves. Even as late as 1954, I found the people of Tuensang rarely speaking of themselves as Nagas but as Konyaks, Chongs, Phoms and so on. Gradually, however, as the Nagas became more united they began to use the name for themselves until today."  

If we glance through the map of India on the North-Eastern extremity, we find a number of spanned-out states, namely, Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh, which are linked with the
rest of India by a narrow corridor in eastern Bihar and West Bengal, winding its
way between Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan on the North and Bangladesh, on the
South. And the people whom we call “Nagas” collectively are living in the
present state of Nagaland, in the Naga Hills of Manipur, in the North Cachar and
Mikir Hills, Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Nowgong of Assam in the North-East of
Arunachal Pradesh, in the Sourat tract and its contiguous parts of Myanmar
covering an area of some 20,000 square miles. The Nagas, an authoritative social
anthropologist writes “are bounded by the Kukawng Valley in the North-East,
the plain of Brahmaputra valley to the North West, of Cachar to the South-West
and of the Chinnun to the east, in the South the Manipur valley roughly marks the
point of contact between the ‘Naga’ tribes and the very much closely inter-
related group of Kuki tribes.”

John Butler, a British explorer, describes roughly the topography of the
Naga areas in these words, “Of all the numerous tribes Garos, Khasis, Syntengs,
Mikirs Kacharis, Kukis, Nagas, Kachins (Singphos) and Khamptis- inhabiting the
west tract of mountainous country which hems in Assam on the South, the largest
numerically, as it is territorially, is the “Nagas”. Under this comprehensive term
is included the whole group of cognate races, dwelling along that broad stretch of
hill and upland, which roughly speaking, is comprised between the Kopili river
on the west, and the Bori Dihing on the east, and which lies between the parallels
of 93° and 96° longitude. This tract extends northwards to the low hills bordering
the alluvial plains of the district of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Nowgong, and
overlooks the broad waters of that noblest of all Indian rivers, the sacred
Brahmaputra”. 4 Again the census of Assam (1901) also mentions that “Naga Hills extend geographically eastward to the Patkai but the Dikhu is our frontier for political purposes, Government resolutely declining to undertake the thankless and costly task of keeping order amongst the tribes living on the further side of this river.” 5 The Naga area in Burma, according to Stevenson, covers “from the Patkai range in the North to the Thaungdut State in the South and from Assam frontier in the West to the Chinwin river in the east.” 6 T. C. Hodson, in his book, the Naga tribes of Manipur, writes; “The State- contains about 80,000 sq. miles, of which 7,000 sq. miles are hill territory as opposed to the valley territory are inhabited by Naga and Kuki tribes- hill people who number slightly more than 1,00,000.

But the present State of Nagaland covers an area of 16,557 sq. Kms with a population of 19,88,636 according to the census of 2001. It is one of the magnificent mountainous systems that extend from Chittagong hill tracts to the Patkai Mountains at a point where the range is joined by the North-Eastern offshoot of the Himalayas. It is bounded on the North-East by Burma and Arunachal Pradesh. Adjoining a part of the Chin Hills and Arakan Yoma Mountain system, Nagaland comprises three massive mountain ranges which run irregularly parallel to one another from North to South the Barail, the Naga and the Patkai rising from 2,000 feet above the sea level in the Tuensang area of the Patkai range over looking Burma. The Barail range broadens steeply out into Nagaland and Western Burma from the North-West of Manipur via North Cachar and culminates in the peak of Japuo, 9890 feet in altitude, a little to the South of
Kohima. The other important peaks are Padna (9,156 ft.), Kapu or Ezupu and Kapanezu (7,970 ft.). There are beautiful glacial gorges with frowning steep wooded sides, running up to the crest of Barail, which consists of the greater part wall of gray rock and precipice. From this elevated mass transverse, spurs connect the neighbouring parallel ranges which are at intervals widened apart so as to enclose the fertile cultivatable ravines and valleys flown by the rivers. Here it is met by the meridian axis of elevation prolonged from the Arakan Yana, and from this point the main range runs in north-eastern direction to the south; a low depression in the mass of hills reaches to the portion of the alluvial valley of Manipur. The Naga ranges forming bewildering series of more or less parallel ranges in Manipur enclose the Imphal valley, which rests at an elevation of 2,500 ft. above the sea level and ends in the South-West at the Mizo Hills and Sylhet which again contains a typical alternative arrangement of parallel ridges and valleys.

There are numbers of rivers and streams in Nagaland, among which the largest being the Doyang. Another important river Dikhu which too is navigable for a short distance only, is a tributary of the Brahmaputra. Other rivers are Jhanzi and Desai which flows northeast through the plains of Sibsagar into the Brahmaputra and Tizu with its tributary, the Lamer falls into the Chinwin. The Barak River springs from Yumai or Liyai village in the Mao Naga area of Manipur and flows through Cachar, Sylhet and Bangladesh before it falls into the Bay of Bengal. The chief tributaries of the Barak are the Jiri, Jatinga, Samia, Dhaleswari and Katakhel.
The climate of Nagaland is generally cool, genial and salubrious. In Nagaland the temperature ranged from 15, 6\(^0\)C and 37, 8\(^0\)C.\(^7\) It receives a fairly heavy monsoon rainfall from mid-May till early October, with about 76 inches a year at Kohima but further north at Wokha and Tamlu it exceeds 100 inches. From October, winter begins with variable winds. During the cold weather, usually in the morning hours, a dense molly fog rolling up and down appears in the river valleys from the Brahmaputra against the northern slope of the Barail and all the outer belts of hills including that of Imphal. There is air drainage in the hills as well as in the valleys and a little rainfall during the winter also. Strong earthquake happens occasionally in Nagaland as mountain formations go on but those of 1897 and 1952 were the severest. Fauna and flora of the Sikkim type are as rich as in parts of Assam.

A little is known about the potential mineral deposit of the land although coal, oil, gold, silver copper, iron, various other kinds of semi-precious stones—all seem to be present though the exploration works have not yet been properly carried out. But according to the existing data, the mineral resources of economic value are available only in some parts of the North-East. In Nagaland tufa lime deposits had been found in the Sijju valley to east of Kohima while lignite in the hills near Nichugarh. Some coal has also been discovered near Arakey village and in the hills through which the Disai river diverges into the plains but it is of inferior quality.
Different kinds of trees, plants, herbs and grasses are available for timber and medical purposes. Indigenous tea grows all along the low northern slopes at the foot of the Barail. The wild animals found in the forests around Assam and other adjoining areas in Myanmar are elephant, rhinoceros, mithun, bison, tiger, leopard, bear, badger, serow, somber, barking deer, goral, squirrel, rat, monkey, languor, hillock, porcupine, pangolin and other the flying Remur etc. There are different kinds of birds, which are almost common to all the Himalayan regions, Burma, and China among which peacock, doe derrick, derrick pleasant, Argus pleasant, jungle fowl, hill patridge, etc. are mentionable. Nagaland has the rare birds like indicator xanthomotue between 5,000 and 8,000 feet altitude.

Kohima that lies on the summit of a ridge about 5,200 ft. above the sea, with great panoramic views is the capital of Nagaland. Nagaland for administrative purposes is divided into eight districts namely: Kohima, Mokokchung, Tuensang, Phek, Zunheboto, Wokha, Dimapur and Mon. Some other Naga areas are attached to Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Myanmar.

3.2 DEMOGRAPHIC FEATURES AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The Nagas share a common homeland and belong broadly to the Mongoloid racial group. They also share a common faith. The majority of them are Christians. All their dialects spring from the Tibeto-Burman. The term Nagaland in its present form is merely a political denotation or expression for one
of the States of the Indian Union. Of the 40 Naga tribes only 14 live in Nagaland – Angami, Ao, Chakehesang, Chang, Konyak, Khiemongan, Lotha, Sema, Sangtam, Pochury, Phom, Rengma, Yimchunger and Zeliang; 10 in Manipur- Anal, Lamkang, Mao, Maram, Mayon, Monsang, Maring, Thangal, Thangkhul and Zelingrong; 3 in Assam-Rengma, Sema and Zelingrong and 3 in Arunachal Pradesh- Nocte, Tangsa and Wancho. There are also Nagas living in Mynmar- Dikhiri, Hemi, Keiemong, Konyak, Leinung, Mukhori, Pangmi, Phellungri, Shangphuri and Somra.

As already discussed the Nagas are neither homogeneous nor unified and Nagaland is a veritable tangle of clans and tribal dialects, local traditions and customary laws. But despite these diversities racially the Nagas are closer to one another than the rest of Indian tribes. Racial differences may be biologically insignificant but culturally they are very important. It must be admitted that they are culturally different. Politically though administrated along with India, Burma and Ceylon by the British their claim has never been to be an integral part of India. The Nagas have been struggling to establish a separate political identity. Alistair Lamb writes in his book Asian Frontier, “The peoples of the Assam Himalayas (like the Abors, Mushmis and the Apa Tanis), the people of the hills along the southern edge of the Brahmaputra valley (like the Khasis), and the Burmese Frontiers tracts (like the Nagas, Mizos) none of these could be described as Indian if that term were to be defined on the basis of culture.”
The population of the Naga is over two million, the area wise break-up being 19,88,636 in Nagaland, about 2,50,000 in Manipur, 70,000 in Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh and some lakhs in the North Cachar and Mikir hills, and other contiguous places of Assam and Myanmar.

Generally, the Nagas bear the Mongolian physical features and cultural traits. They have a broad head. The complexion is dark light and golden brown but black too with a yellowish tinge. Hair is black, straight, coarse, vigorous, wavy and Negrito frizzy in some cases, with scanty hair on the face. Statures short or below average in the standard way. Nose fine to broad and face characteristically flat. Eyelids are often oblique. Even though, we find considerable variations among the Nagas, some like Angamis, Chakhesangs, Tangkhuls, Maos and Morams have Caucasian or Aryan-like traits, most of them about six feet high or more; Aos, Lothas are short and some other sturdy. Some Nagas are with athletic frames. The face and bodies of the Konyaks, Chang, Ao, Phom and Sangtem tribes is tattooed by picking the juice of the bela unit into the skin in a variety of fantastic figures which they have abandoned completely now. Women are fine, stalwart, cheerful, jovial, frank, hospitable, friendly, humorous and devout. Fond of different poetic songs of the indigenous products, which are bequeathed from their ancestors, they also like their own race and are, of course fierce lover of liberty, independence and universal brotherhood. They are courageous and tenacious when it comes to defending their family and fatherland. They are not only industrious, steady and thrifty but also great nature-lovers, good entomologists and botanists having their own names for every animal,
insect and plant. Their staple food is rice, vegetable and pulses; they like to eat different types of meat.

The Nagas speak their own dialects and languages, which vary widely from one another even though their languages are derived from the same cognate stock in the remote past. Strangely, one village does not easily understand a language spoken in another village. English is not only the official language of Nagaland but also the medium of instruction and examination in schools and colleges. A new dialect called Nagamese has, of late, developed in Nagaland which is now used by a large number of people. The Nagas do not have their own original script and have adopted the Roman script for different languages and dialects as the only way out to fill the gap in communication among themselves and the others. Yet, it is amusing to note how well and how long the Nagas have managed to keep the originality of their languages, barely corrupted without a well-developed script.

The Naga society is basically rural in character. Overlooking the valleys and fields, the Nagas build their villages on the spurs of different bleak hills running down from high ranges varying much in size as some contains as many as thousand houses while others not more that fifteen. These village sites were generally chosen for their strategic advantages from attack in headhunting war. Though by doing so, they suffer much in obtaining supply of water. They were strongly fortified and well guarded by elaborately planned wooden gates with heavy stones fencing for defence against the enemy attacks and incursions. In
ancient times, it is said that the huge plank gates were constructed with grand ceremonial feasts and gennas by carrying the cut-off head of a man from enemy village in great triumph through the new built gates. The houses are built in close huddle in spite of frequent destruction by fire. Each house is constructed on a site owned absolutely and exclusively by the householder or clan. Generally the houses are large with wide courtyards in front in which domestic animals are bred and many household duties such as pounding rice, weaving and spinning are performed. The rich or important men decorate the gable and the walls of split bamboo of their houses with massive hoards of horns and animal skulls. Every house keeps at least one paddy pounding bench which is taken from exceptionally large trees and the installing of this ensures ceremony. Instead of thatch, many wealthy Nagas, in recent years, have favoured roof of galvanized corrugated sheets, cement and timber for durability and security against fire. The construction of such houses by commoners is prohibited by custom. The villagers are custom-bound to help in building the houses of the Kings or Chieftains.

As summed up by Verrier Elwin, “The basic interest of every Naga is his family, the clan, the Khel, the village. This is what he regards as his culture, which must not be interfered with. He is passionately attached to his land, his system of land tenure, the arrangements for the government of his village, the organization of cultivation, the administration of tribal justice through the village and tribal courts.”9
Being the fundamental basis of society, family comprises the father, mother, and unmarried daughters and sons living in the same home; among them father is the head of the family who performs certain political, social and religious duties. A son sets up a separate family after getting married whereas daughter goes to another clan leaving her original clan on marriage. The clan comprises a group of consanguineous families descended from a common ancestor by whose name the clan is known on the patrilineal and exogamic line. Then a number of clans compose a well-defined village occupying a definite, permanent area with sovereignty and finally, a tribe by a number of villages of the same descendants.

The Nagas consider marriage as a vitally sacred institution of society and the race ordained for the procreation of child for the continuation of social unit. The question of marriage is generally an affair settled by whims of parents although girls and boys are given considerable freedom in choosing their lifelong partners. Marriage within the same clan is strictly forbidden under their unwritten customary code. According to traditional Naga custom price for marriage is given by the parents of the boy and the girl in the form a new family. All these vary considerably according to social status of the families concerned, though in most tribes this too is prescribed by custom. Servitude marriage is rare. Marriage according to traditional Naga custom is not compulsory, but prolonged celibacy or unmarried man is certainly considered to be a disgrace and that does not entitle one to social marital status and consideration. If an unmarried man is dead, there is no genna for the whole village except the clan.
The Nagas produced everything they needed. Theirs was a self-sufficient village economy. They made both useful and artistic objects. They were very efficient in the ironwork. They made beautiful pottery without using the potter's wheel. Their extraordinary skill is manifested in bamboo work. The *dao*, something like a hatchet, has been the multi-purpose tool in war and peace. They have spears with ornamental handles.

Feast of merit formed an important feature of traditional Naga life. All the splendour and colour of Naga culture along with their inborn sense of extravagance are exhibited at these functions. When a person has gained sufficient wealth according to village standard, he decides to entertain his village in the traditional way. Only a married man can be the host at such feasts as his wife has an important and conspicuous role to play. The host expects honour for himself in the present and future life. He could wear special clothes and ornaments and decorate his house in a special way.

Verrier Elwin finds similarities in these feasts to that of Vedic religion. "In the elaborate sacrifices of the later Vedic age, sheep, goats, cows or oxen and horses were killed. The ceremonies lasted for days and the householder and his wife had to take part. The bull killing and the killings of *mithun* in the Naga feasts are done almost in the Vedic manner, in each case the animal being killed by a sharp stake of wood which pierced its heart, and the important place given to the wife of the person performing these sacrifices is another point of contact."
3.3 STATUS OF WOMEN: CONCEPTS AND ISSUES

Early ethnographic materials suggest that studies on the status of women have always been dominated by the male bias. This is because administrators turned scholars and so also other scholars have basically been males and therefore could not find easy access to the domains of women. It is now perhaps time to realize that a new perspective is needed so that woman in society could be studied through women’s viewpoint. And if this is developed in terms of methodology, we will be able to get a clearer picture of the human society where man and woman play an equally important role where one cannot do without the other.

In societies throughout the world and throughout recorded history, women’s primary roles have been family oriented. The activities and relationships that are basic to their lives are within the context of the family. This does not mean that women’s lives are entirely limited to home but their outside activities tend to be extensions of their familial roles and their extra familial relationships are secondary to those based on kinship. Thus study of familial roles (daughter, wife, mother and sister) is fundamental for the understanding of women and their place in the society.  \(^{11}\)

“Undoubtedly more value is placed on motherhood than any other female’s roles. It is her most vital contribution to society. Motherhood even shows her role as wife, for her primary obligation as a wife is to provide
continuity to own or her husband’s lineage.” The issue of whether men ought to do work that is culturally assigned to women is a matter of personal volition and culturally determined values. Men’s capabilities are never questioned. They may first have to master the feminine skills but there is no doubt that they can do if they want to. On the other hand, women are often excluded from men’s culturally assigned roles because it is assumed that they lack capabilities. There is no evidence for such innate capacity on the part of women. In the first place, women engage in a wide variety of economic activities. There is virtually no task that is not performed by women some where or at some time by women. Cross-cultural evidence indicates that the kind of work women cannot do in one society is just what they are called upon as a matter of course in another.

It is good to remember that in the traditional societies, the status of women was usually in relation to her family as a daughter, wife, sister and mother. In the new emerging situation, a women’s status is described more in terms of her achievements in education, carrier, and position etc. in a society. In fact, we can see that her role is not limited to the home as was in the traditional society but also outside the home.

The position of women in home and outside the home to determine the status is closely interlinked which cannot easily be separated. The status of women is not uniform among all the different communities and varies from society to society and sometimes within the societies.
Historically speaking, it is said that women in India had freedom to move about in the family and society and took part in the public affairs during the Vedic Age 2500 – 1500 B.C. They occupied a prominent place in social and religious gatherings. In a family, the status of wife and mother was an honoured one. The status of women took a gradual change during the time of Brahmanc Age, 1500 – 500 B.C. It was only in the age of the Sudras and the Epics that the status of women changed considerably. When women played important role in controlling the production operation, their position was significant and dominating. With the emergence of new productive forces and transformation of their ownership, distinct class emerged and in the process women were relegated to a backward position. It is due to the results of contradiction existing in the society, which accounted for the low status of women.

During the British rule, legislations aimed at raising the status of women were passed due to the pressure of various social movements initiated by the reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Gandhi, Annie Besant, etc. Consequently, education was encouraged, age at marriage was raised and employment was made available. By virtue of various acts and statutes such as the Child Marriage Act 1929, the Special Marriage Act 1954, etc., women could claim all the rights and privileges just like men.

A real breakthrough came only in the 20th century when Mahatma Gandhi launched the Civil Disobedience Movement. At the time of the inauguration of the Indian National Congress in 1885, A. O. Hume said “the political reformers
of all shades of opinion should never forget that unless the elevation of female element of the nation proceeds with equal space with the work, all their labour for the political enfranchisement will prove vain.” From 1920, Gandhi shaped the Indian National Congress, a party of the masses and favoured major reforms to raise the status of women and sought their total emancipation through education. He wanted men and women to cooperate for the welfare of India. His struggle was not confined to any particular groups or classes but to Indian women as a whole. Gandhi wanted women to be part of the Indian national movement. In his own words: “Women are the companion of men gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest details of the activities of men and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he... by sheer force of a vicious custom, even the most ignorant worthless men have been enjoying a superiority over women which they do not deserve and ought not to have.”

However, women’s position, which had deteriorated during the British rule in India regained slowly in the subsequent phases. It was only through the spread of education and the inter-mixture of western and eastern cultures that women began to realize their importance in society. Formal education has a role to play in according social status to women. Education is a major avenue of upward social mobility. Today, education has become a necessity for everyone. Attempts are made to wipe out the ignorance and illiteracy from the society. Only a hundred years ago, the movement for education for women took its birth. In the beginning women were not allowed to study, nor did schools or colleges admit
her. Women fought for this injustice and finally got the right to study and all those barriers were removed.

Today much is being written, said and heard for the changing role and status of women in order to make their participation in the process of development more effective. For each individual, status becomes a configuration or shape of the person's position within the various inter-related spheres of life and the perception of these attributes by the occupants of the position. The levels of economic equality and independence are also the indicators to measure the status of women in any society. It can thus be said that there are several indicators of the status of women in a society, which have to be taken into account to judge their position in a particular society. In the paragraphs, which follow, our attempt will be to examine the status of women in Naga society that is the area of our interest currently.

3.4 STATUS OF WOMEN IN NAGA SOCIETY

We find different opinions with regards to the position of women in the 'tribal societies'. Some say that tribal societies generally assign a high status to women while others opine that in 'primitive' societies women were no better than a mere sex object or a second sex or otherwise of an inferior sex.

Verrier Elwin remarks, "... Tribal woman is in herself exactly the same as any other woman, with the same position, love and fears, the same devotion to
the home, to husband and children, the same faults and some virtues.” While Haimendorf notes, “... many women in more civilized parts of India may well envy the women of the Naga Hills, their high status and their free and happy life and if you measure the cultural level of the people by the social position and personal freedom of its women you will think twice before looking down on the Nagas as savages.” Is this observation a myth or a reality? It is indeed not an easy question to answer. Hutton has shown that the status of Naga women is high but they are not free from the influences of traditional customary laws. Mills has also expressed similar opinion about the life of Naga women in his monographs stating that traditional laws bind the life of both men and women in every aspect of their life.

In theory the Naga women have almost the same rights and duties as men. However, they are not ordinarily allowed to participate in politics, fighting, and hunting and also in some religious functions even though they are partners of men in all their wishes, thoughts and functions. Chastity and devotion to their husbands and household affairs after marriage are considered as efficacious as to be their most priced virtues falling short of which they are divorced and also fined by the village authority. During the headhunting wars women were kidnapped to make the wines for the victorious enemies. If a man knowingly or otherwise seduces a woman and if she becomes pregnant, it is his responsibility under the customary law to make her his legitimate wife by marrying her even a few days before the childbirth.
Tribal women of this region occupy a high position in work. They work with their men folk in the agricultural field and play an important role. But, the married women have almost no right in the property of the dead father. Only the sons and unmarried daughters inherit all the movable and immovable property of dead father. The share of the property, which belongs to an unmarried sister usually goes to her brother after death. If a married daughter gets landed property from her father, in an exceptional case, she can be mistress of that till her life and it goes to her sons soon after her death. If she dies without having any sons then her brothers inherit that in case her father is dead, otherwise the father re-inherits that property. Nevertheless it is important to mention here that the position of women varies from tribe to tribe among various Naga communities.

In Lotha Naga society, women are satisfied with their position and status because they get enough protection and care from men. There are no historical evidences of women’s revolt against the authority of men. It is claimed that women were not looked down upon nor viewed as mere sex objects. Today they are expected to play various in the society. The traditional disparity between the sexes is narrowing down with the spread of western education. However, the relatively subordinate position of women may continue because the tradition, customs and norms of the society still determine their position.

In the Zeliangrong Naga society in bygone days, women were happy with their position in society because they were given adequate protection. Since women were considered to be weaker than men, they were not required to do any
It was expected of a man to do all the hard work. They even worked for the helpless widows without expecting anything in return. Women were also free from danger and physical tortures even during the time of inter-village feuds. Torturing or killing of women and children were considered to be an act of cowardice. To avoid harming women and children, the Zeliangrong Naga warriors would always give a warning bell before they attacked the village of their enemy.

It is interesting to point out that even after the advent of Christianity and western education, the position of women has not changed in the Zeliangrong Naga society. The only exception is that women are now allowed to attend public meetings and give public speeches. However, parents still prefer boys than girls because they believe that girls are not capable of preserving their ethnic identity. Even educated parents still do not encourage their daughters to go for higher education as they are convinced that any investment on their daughters’ education is not worthwhile since they will not be able to enjoy the fruits of their education. However, the same parents expect their daughters-in-law to be highly educated so that they may add more to the family earnings. Unquestionably, this is a paradoxical situation - but it does exist in the contemporary Zeliangrong society. The growing number of gainfully employed women now faces more responsibilities as the only bread-winners of the family, thereby indicating that the womenfolk in Zeliangrong society are being increasingly overburdened.
Let us now discuss the status of women in another major Naga community. The facets of Angami women in the traditional and modern society are briefly discussed below:

(a) Property rights: Women enjoy the least privilege in this matter; a daughter is not entitled to own any of the ancestral property (land, houses etc). This property is called Siephruo, which can be owned only by the male child. If a woman is the only child, the ancestral property will be given to her father’s immediate male relatives. This possession of ancestral property by next of kin is called Kanjie. However, property bought by the parents themselves can be given to the daughter and she also can dispose it off at her own will. This system remains rigid even today inspite of the many social changes.

(b) Occupation and livelihood: The primary occupation of a woman in the past was that of a housewife and a mother and secondly, farming. Because of a strong social stand a girl’s duty was to work and not to earn; the girl child remained illiterate and hence ended up as a somewhat ‘working machine’. Much of this practice is still retained in the less developed families. Even now, if we look into the division of work within the traditional family, the women’s situation is pathetic. The mother has to manage the household chores as well as much of the fieldwork, though the male folk help to a certain extent. At home, the woman drudges with her household chores with little or no help from her husband/brother. An
example of a women’s bigger share of work within the traditional family circle can be illustrated with the picture of a woman coming back from the field with her loaded basket on her back and her baby in the front, accompanied by the man smartly tagging along scot-free.

Owing to nuclear nature of the household, for every matter husband and wife discuss the problem before taking a decision. Although man is regarded as the final authority in decision making, his decisions are always greatly influenced by the woman, who actually runs the household. Many males admit that they know little about family matters and it is the wife who is the actual decision-maker.

However the formal political structure in Angami Naga village is fully dominated by men folk. Hammond expresses “By definition political organization is the very essence of public domain. Its basic concern, allocation of authority, setting of a policy and decision-making are sufficiently removed from the domestic realm so that it is the aspect of traditional society in which women participate less, whatever impact women do have on political process is indirect, through the exertion of influence on their men folk. Official positions in the formally organized governments of the world are entirely held by men. There are cases of women holding office, these are exceptional and do not invalidate the rule.” 17
This exclusion is also true for Angami Nagas as women are virtually absent in political domain of the village. In the formal political structure women simply do not exist. Head of the household being male, he enjoys the prerogative of final decision-making; women's role has been a passive one, of that of persuader. Women can mould the public opinion of the male members of the household, thus influencing and affecting the political decisions. However, the ultimate decision is always in hands of a man. To put an impact on village affairs indirectly a woman can cajole, nag or manoeuvre her male relatives to support publicly the action she favours.

The formal authority of *Gaonbura* and the Village Council is strictly within the village. It does not extend beyond the local group. Thus within the village the distinction between public and domestic spheres are almost irrelevant. To the extent that the authority women wield within the household has repercussions outside it. Issues like disputes among kinsmen, marriage negotiations, inheritance and land rights easily spill over into domestic realm to affect the women and therefore women voice their opinion and manipulate decision-making.

Many males observe that women have weak mind and their major functions are to bear children and work in the fields. Therefore they do not get time for political activities. On the other hand, women are of the opinion that political activities are actually meant for men folk, because they have less
responsibilities and are capable of doing it. Nevertheless most of the villagers admit the fact of influence of women on the opinion of the men.

Other factors which effect decision-making are age, status and personality. Wife of Gaonbura is in much better situation to make her opinion felt. Age is counted as an important factor as middle aged or old women who are supposed to be interested and peyupichu (well versed, knowledgeable and wise) are selected to form a body of pichumipfu. Although not allowed to attend meetings, opinion of these women is privately sought in matters of disputes or women related issues.

Thus looking back to the bygone generation Angami women has been confined to the four walls of the house. However, with the passage of time, she is given more liberty even in the other spheres of life, apart from her household chores. With many social changes and development, she is given more privileges, but still she remains fettered with many traditional ‘do’s and don’ts’. In fact, in spite of her competency and abilities, a woman is still considered inferior to men in many areas of life even today.

Today education has given opportunity to girls to become economically independent and this has encouraged girls to go for higher education. With the progress in the field of education, more and more women are becoming salaried wives/daughters. However, the conservative view has slackened giving more scope to girl education. But inspite of the increased number of working women,
more financial dependence still rests on the men. The wife’s earning is a sort of supplement to the husband’s earnings. Today, a woman in salaried job is not looked down upon, as was the case in earlier days. In fact, to keep up with the fast changing society and the increased needs of the family, it is rather encouraged that a woman should do whatever is in her capacity to support and share the family finance.

Earlier usually the families concerned arranged the marriages. An ironic norm of the traditional society was that the man or husband was applauded for his extra marital or illicit affairs. The more mistresses he kept, the higher his status was. The Kesheenei (loin cloth) of the male was originally decorated with three lines of white cowries but that of a married man who could have an illicit affair with another married woman or the suitor of his wife was decorated with four lines of cowries as an honour to his male prowess, whereas, the opposite treatment was meted out to the woman/wife. If a married woman was found to be infidel to her husband she was made to undergo physical punishment- the tip of her nose could be chopped off. In certain cases, even her heel would be sliced off and her hair cut. Apart from these physical inflictions, she would be socially exposed to shame. In all these, the woman was expected to silently bear the punishments as deemed fit for her infidelity. Such was the punishment for the women for doing something for which the men was showered with accolades.

Divorce was quite liberal in the pre-Christian society. However, even in this case, the existing rules are biased against women. A woman who cannot
adjust or who wants to leave her husband will be allowed to leave for her parent’s house only with her neikhro (a short white longi). Other than that, whatever she had brought to her husband’s house (ornaments, clothing etc) will be confiscated by the husband and the marriage becomes null and void. On the other hand, a husband can leave his wife without any pre-condition. Unlike the traditional norm, even divorce rules have become more rigid with the Christian tradition. Both wife and husband are bound by their vows pronounced before the God and man. Hence, the women’s position within and without the family is rising with the tide of advancement.

The traditional Chakhesang society was known for maintaining a high moral standard. It was said that a man or a woman could not even look face to face for fear of social sanction against them. Even teasing a girl by a boy was treated as an insult and the girl was considered unchaste. Love marriage was unknown. It is also interesting to note that some sort of beauty contest was prevalent among them. For example, among Lasuni villagers, on a particular feasting day, all the unmarried girls of the village would line up and the boys would give a piece of meat to the girl they admired most. In the end, the girl who had collected the maximum pieces of meat will be declared the most beautiful girl of the village.

With regard to the economic position of the women, the condition was not that pathetic and miserable, for women did enjoy a considerable economic right. At the time of her marriage, the parents would give her liina (property both
movable and immovable given to her daughters), which becomes more or less her absolute property. The *liina* was usually confined to the fields. However, her parents could give her different types of properties and for which her brothers could not challenge their parents. It was absolutely up to the will of the parents. They could give her even the whole of their *motsotieili* (whatever property has been purchased by the wife and husband). However, ancestral property could not be given to the daughter. Once a *liina* was given to the daughter it will continue to be passed down from daughter to daughter, so long as daughter continues to be in the family. The *liina* could be reverted to the reversioners only if there were no more daughters in the line.

Apart from this, *chikhe* (woodland) could also be given to the women. However, the *chikhes* were not given as *liina* but as a gift, especially at the time of the parents' impending death. The *chikhe* was given once and for all and would not be reverted back to the reversioners, unless specifically mentioned in the will for such reversion. The woman could dispose off the *chikhe* as and when she liked. However, ancestral *chikhe* of the father could not be given to the daughter. In desperate situation, when hard hit by poverty or misfortune, with the prior approval of the reversioners, the *liina* could even be sold. At the time of sale 50 percent of the sale proceeds were to be given to the reversioners and 50 percent to her. It is interesting to note here that the husband's inherited properties would be sold first. The wife’s *liina* could also be given to her son. In case the daughter married outside the village, she could still be given immovable property. However, for practical reasons, only movable properties like cow, rice, money
etc, were given. Even the whole property of the parents could be given to the daughter except for the ancestral property and the brothers could challenge the parents for such gifts.

Apart from the above significant role she played during the festival, she also played the key role in different rituals performed on different occasions at different times. In short, it leads one to safely conclude that women in Chakhesang society did enjoy a comfortable place.

In the Sema Naga society the position of women is considered very high. A Sema girl is looked after carefully till her marriage. This is due to a desire not to damage her value in the marriage market. Accordingly, the fine for an adultery with a girl of position is much higher than the marriage price of the latter which is in any case much lower than that of, say, a Chief’s daughter. The Sema women are usually a good wife and a good mother. The wife manages the house, entertains her husband’s quests, works in his fields and generally shares his entire confidence on matters of domestic economy. The position of women is on the whole far from degrading.

We shall now briefly discuss the position of women in the Ao society. The Ao inhabits the Mokokchung district of Nagaland. Like any other tribe, they are also patrilineal and their men folk play a more decisive role in the society. But this does not mean that women are regarded as secondary citizens. No doubt,
there are certain areas where women do not get recognition but in many respects, the Ao women are considered as equal partners to their men folk.

J. P. Mills has aptly remarked that “an Ao woman is very far from being a slave or a drudge. Her position is not inferior to that of a man. She always has her clan behind her and were a bad tempered husband to bully his wife he would soon have a swarm of in-laws buzzing around his ears, and his wife would promptly leave him”18 In these few lines, Mills has summed up clearly and projected the status of women in Ao society. All her life a woman enjoys a considerable freedom. Till a woman gets married her parents act as her protector and after marriage her husband takes over the responsibility. Even after marriage, a woman does not lose her clan identity. Till her death, her clan men are always there to back her if the need arises.

In the Ao society, where physical strength and prowess, courage etc. are respected, women were considered inferior because they belonged to the weaker sex. Nonetheless they were far from being a slave. Women are regarded as assets in the house because without them the domestic works can not be completed. They are respected and highly esteemed and enjoy considerable degree of freedom although their activities, especially in the traditional society were restricted to certain defined areas.

Traditionally, the Aos have an agricultural economy and the women have always been actively involved in the agricultural activities. Both men and women
are equally responsible for the economic stability of the family. Moreover, the position of women in economic matters may best be understood by having a clear idea about the inheritance system and property rights enjoyed by the women. In the Ao society, women have no rights of inheritance. She cannot inherit property, movable or immovable, though she may be given a gift. If a woman receives immovable property or otherwise from her father in the form of gifts during his life time, it remains hers till her death, after which it goes back to her father’s heirs. For such gifts, if she had made even a nominal price to her father, it becomes her absolute property and she has the right to sell it if she so wishes. But if the transfer of the property were not done during her lifetime, at the event of her death, the property would go back to her father’s heirs. However, if a woman is wealthy enough she can even buy and own land. Although women are not allowed to inherit property, she can enjoy a considerable degree of independence as she has the right to buy, to own, to manage and to sell property.

In the matters of social and religious importance, women are treated with respect and fair opportunities are given to express their personal opinions. In matters of marriage and divorce, the Aos strictly follow the rule of clan exogamy. The marriage ceremony varies from village to village but payment of bride’s price, which is called tenmen, and is always paid in kind. But whatever prices are paid, such prices are very nominal and therefore pose no problem if the couple desires to divorce.
J. P. Mills in his monograph *The Ao Nagas* wrote that divorce is amazingly common and very rarely does one meet an Ao man or a woman who has been married only once and that couples part on the least provocation. There is no ceremony connected with divorce and the couple simply separates after dividing the household properties according to the customary laws. The fact that there is no such rule that binds a woman to marry her dead sister’s husband or husband’s brother speaks volume about the degree of independence of women in the society. Though re-marriage after divorce or after the death of one’s spouse is considered normal and natural, practice of plurality of wives or co-wives does not exist.

No festival is ever observed without the presence of women. The people observe an unaccountable number of religious ceremonies and sacrifices in order to dispel superstitious fears under which they live. In all the public and private ceremonies, men play the major role. In the family ceremonies, the husband acts as the family priest and he performs all the family sacrifices. While performing the family sacrifice, the presence of the wife is also very essential, as the sacrifice is thought to be more effective if she is present. In case of a widow, she can perform any necessary sacrifice and ritual in the field for good crop and harvest.

Every Ao village is like a democratic republic in which a citizen irrespective of wealth and rank has the right to participate. But only the male member performs the role of citizens. The administrative body of the village is known as *Pitu Menden* and it is constituted by chosen representatives of the
different clans. Women could not be a member of the Putu Menden or participate in any policy making matters.

Women did not go to the war front. In a headhunting raid, the heads of women were highly priced because women were regarded as a symbol of fertility and therefore utmost care and protection of the women and children were always taken in order to prevent losing the village fertility.

The Ao tradition does not exhibit any discomfort with the birth of a female child and female infanticide is not known. Usually, it is taken as a gift from the creator as much as a boy and no discrimination is known in bringing up. Of course in rare cases her husband may divorce a woman even only on the ground of not bearing a male child. Apart from laws and customs, this is perhaps dominated by the sense of having a successor in the patrilineal society as well as for the paramount desire of increasing the strength of the clan.

3.5 CONCLUSION

On the whole it can be suggested that the Naga society following the patrilineal and patriarchal system has the norms and attitudes of patriarchy, which affects the status of women. Institution and tradition are inspired by the belief in male dominance and female inferiority. Although patriarchy persists in all the Naga communities its impact varies from community to community. The patriarchal values are reflected in notions such as the 'birth of a male child being
However it can further be safely inferred that all Naga communities are passing through transition. Change from tradition to modernity is taking place. We now see that the rural people have started taking to urban version of their culture as their model. Urbanism has caused a change in the ethos of the tribal culture. This finally has led to the changes in the female roles. In modern times, women are working side by side with men in all kinds of jobs. It can further be said that education is the main indicator for the development of women’s status in a society. Much progress has been made in the sphere of education and they are occupying high positions in the government jobs.

Modernization brought about by the adoption of Christianity and spread of education has gradually altered the contemporary situation among the Naga women. They have begun participating in diverse modern activities like the participation in the Village Development Board meetings, which has immensely helped in ameliorating the condition of women. The process of bringing about change in the traditional set-up has been going on since the introduction of Christianity, which has rendered some of the traditional laws completely obsolete. The conversion to Christianity is the main factor for the change in tribal culture both in terms of economic and socio-cultural life of the people. However, despite the changes in the Naga society due to the introduction of Christianity, it can be easily seen that customary laws still influence the life of the Naga people.
References:

2. Ibid.
4. Ibid.p.2
5. Ibid.
10. Ibid. p.11.
12. Ibid. p. 154
14. Ibid., p. 13
16. Quoted by Lucy Zehol, Ibid.