Examining the Status of Women in Garo Society: A Survey Conducted in Pritilata Village, Tripura

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ABSTRACT

This research paper focuses on analyzing the position of women in Garo society through a survey conducted in Pritilata village, Tripura. The study highlights various aspects such as family, Mahari, village, and village administration. The findings suggest that Garo women have made significant progress in terms of education and empowerment. They are actively participating in decision-making processes, challenging traditional norms and expectations. The research also emphasizes the need for localized studies to capture the nuances and specific factors that shape the position of women within the Garo society. Overall, this research contributes to our understanding of gender dynamics and the changing social landscape in Garo society.

Keywords: Position of women, Garo society, matrilineal structure, Women's roles and expectations, Mahari institution, Decision-making processes, Social progress.

INTRODUCTION

The position of women in society is a topic of great interest and significance, as it reflects the status of gender equality, access to opportunities, and overall social development. In the case of the Garo community in Tripura, understanding the position of women within their society is particularly crucial due to the community's unique cultural context and social dynamics. This research aims to explore and analyze the position of women in the Garo society through a survey conducted in Pritilata village, Tripura.

The Garo community, with its distinctive cultural practices and traditions, offers a rich landscape for studying gender roles and dynamics. By examining the position of women within the Garo society, this research seeks to shed light on various aspects such as Family, Mahari, Village and Village Administration. This research also acknowledges the importance of conducting localized studies to capture the nuances and intricacies of specific village of Tripura. Pritilata a Garo concentrated village, located in Tripura, is chosen as the focal point for this survey due to its representation of the Garo community's socio-cultural fabric. By focusing on this specific village, the study aims to provide insights into the position of women in Garo society at the grassroots level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review provides an overview of existing research and scholarly works related to the position of women in Garo society. It aims to highlight key findings, themes, and debates in order to contextualize the present study.

1. Cultural Context of Garo Society:
Several studies emphasize the cultural context of the Garo community and its impact on gender dynamics. For instance, Chatterjee (2018) notes that Garo society is influenced by matrilineal kinship systems, where inheritance and descent are traced through the female line. This unique social structure shapes the role of women and their position within the community.

2. Gender Roles and Expectations:
Research indicates that despite the matrilineal lineage, Garo society still maintains certain patriarchy and gender roles. Bhowmik and Das (2019) argue that while women have significant influence in family affairs and decision-making, societal expectations often limit their participation in public and leadership roles. Kar and Haldar (2020) further explore the multiple roles that Garo women undertake, including care giving, agricultural work, and household management.

3. Education and Empowerment:
Studies have also examined the educational opportunities and challenges faced by Garo women. Sen and Debbarma (2017) highlight the importance of education for empowering women and enabling them to participate fully in society. However, research suggests that access to quality education remains a concern, particularly in rural areas (Dutta and Marak, 2018).

4. Marital Practices and Women's Agency:
Scholars have examined the impact of marriage customs and practices on women's autonomy and agency within Garo society. Debbarma (2019) discuss the customary practices such as bride-price and its implications for women's bargaining power and decision-making in marital relationships. They emphasize the need for reimagining these practices to ensure greater agency for women.

5. Challenges and Opportunities for Empowerment:
Research identifies various challenges faced by Garo women, including limited economic opportunities, gender-based violence, and discriminatory social norms (Momin and Sangma, 2020). However, there are also efforts to promote empowerment and social

change. Ahamed and Reang (2019) underscore the importance of community-based organizations and initiatives in empowering Garo women and facilitating their active participation in development programs.

Gaps in Existing Research

Despite the valuable insights offered by previous studies, there is still a need for more localized research within specific Garo communities, such as Pritilata village in Tripura. The literature highlights the importance of accounting for regional variations, diverse perspectives, and community-specific factors that shape the position of women within the Garo society.

METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the methodology employed in conducting the research on the position of women in Garo society, specifically in Pritilata village, Tripura. The research design incorporates both qualitative and quantitative methods to gather comprehensive data and insights.

1. Research Approach:

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. This approach allows for a holistic understanding of the position of Garo women in Pritilata Village, capturing both subjective experiences and numerical data.

2. Sampling Strategy:

A purposive sampling technique is utilized to select participants from Pritilata village. The sample includes women from various age groups, educational backgrounds, and socio-economic statuses. The sample size is determined based on the principle of data saturation, aiming to achieve a level of saturation where collecting additional data does not yield substantially new information.

3. Data Collection Methods:

1. **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews are conducted with key informants from the Garo community, including women leaders, elders, and community activists. These interviews provide in-depth insights into societal norms, cultural practices, and challenges faced by Garo women.
2. **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** FGDs are conducted with groups of women from different age groups to collect their perspectives on various aspects of their lives, such as education, marriage, livelihoods, and decision-making power. FGDs facilitate interaction and generate diverse viewpoints.

4. Ethical Considerations:

Ethical guidelines are followed throughout the research process. Informed consent is obtained from all participants, and their privacy and confidentiality are ensured. Participants are informed about the purpose and nature of the study, and they have the right to withdraw their participation at any time. Data collected is anonymized and stored securely.

5. Data Analysis:

Qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions are transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. Common themes and patterns regarding the position of women in Garo society are identified. Data gathered are analyzed and generate descriptive information.

6. Limitations:

Acknowledging limitations is an essential part of the research process. Limitations may include sample size restrictions, limited generalize ability to other Garo communities, and potential biases in participant responses. These limitations are considered in the interpretation and discussion of the findings.

The methodology employed in this research aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the position of women in Garo society. By utilizing various data collection techniques and considering ethical considerations, this methodology ensures a robust approach to understanding the position of Garo women in Pritilata village, Tripura.

V. Field Survey of the Study Village:

The village under study has been visited several times in early 2014; but an intensive survey has been conducted in December 2014. The respondents cooperated gladly; but two elderly gentle men, namely Sri Jerum Marak (1939 -) and Sri Jatin Marak (1941 -) and one elderly lady, Srimati Shanti Marak (1943 -) spent several hours for each day of this survey for furnishing various information. There are about 25 Garo families in this village, out of them, 25 families have been personally visited. Sri Jerum Marak is a political leader and a sober gentle man, Sri Jatin Marak is an ex-army man and a reputed Ojha.

Scenario of the Pritilata Village:

1. The Economy : All the 45 families have home and homestead, 17 families have in addition, salary and pension; 16 families have domestic animals and birds; all the families have been drawing rice etc. from ration-shops, most of the families derive income from casual jobs under the scheme of MGNREGA. 03 families practice plough cultivation and shifting cultivation. A few families house resorted to rubber plantation. The ancestral property is now equally divided among the sons and daughters.

2. The Social Life : All the 45 families have abandoned the traditional house built with bamboo, thatching grass, cane, etc, on a raised platform. Instead, they are living in houses made of mud walls and tin shuts. The tin sheet has been supplied by government. There are 36 cases of marriage between Marak and Sangma, 5 cases of marriage between Garo and Bengali, 2 cases of marriage between Garo and

Nepali, and 2 case of marriage between Garo and Debbarma. There have been found 7 (seven) bride grooms (=Nokrom) on this village. No bachelors' dormitory (=Nokpante) has been found. The traditional Joint family is now microscopic in number.

3. The Religious Rites & Rituals : The Garo families of this village are divided into two groups, out of the 45 families, 12 (Twelve) families are Hindus; while 33 families are Christians. There are 2 Churches in this village. The Christians families occasionally assemble in the Churches; the Hindu families have been worshipping some of their prominent gods and goddess. Akshay Ojha (c.1865-1950) and his son Mahendra Ojha (c. 1900-1980) and his son Jatin Ojha (1941-) have a great reputation as ojha and vaidya. Numerous people flock in the courtyard of Jatin Ojha on Saturday and Tuesday. But the available modern treatment has reduced the belief in the malevolent deities.

4. Polity : The Garo people of this village have traditional village council. But the bifurcation of the society along the lines of religion has considerably weakened the authority of the traditional system of social control. Now the modern units of administration like Gaon Panchayat, Police, B.D.O., S.D.O and Political Parties have been the legal instruments of social control.

VI. Position of Garo Women
The progress of a society is deeply intertwined with the roles played by women within that society. The position of females within a community is often used as a measure of its development. Neglecting the well-being and empowerment of women hinders the advancement of any region. Charles Fourrier, the great French Idealist, famously stated, "One could judge the degree of civilization of a country by the social and political position of its women".[1] In societies adhering to patriarchal norms, the role, status, and position of women are typically confined to roles such as mother, daughter, and wife.

However, in matrilineal societies, the position and status of women differ, as they have social rights to continue living with their parents after marriage.

Indian society, at large, retains a male-dominated structure. Women in India were historically assigned a secondary status and confined within the boundaries of their homes.

However, the status of women has evolved over time.[2] Now, women play vital roles in both patriarchal and matrilineal societies. The recognition and improvement of women's status have been acknowledged worldwide as crucial aspects of national progress and development.[3]

When it comes to traditional tribal societies in North East India, the prevalence of prejudices commonly observed in the broader Indian context is relatively lower. These societies, with their household economic systems, practice of shifting cultivation, landholding patterns, and egalitarian

ethos, do not suffer from the same level of discrimination against women. Particularly in Garo society, the matrilineal system serves to protect women to a significant extent.[4]

Position of Women in the Family: Historically, Garo society exhibited a matrilineal structure with clear patriarchal tendencies. Women were subjected to rough treatment and were considered inferior to their husbands, with the wife being completely under the control of her husband. Despite Garo society being centered around women in terms of composition, men held the power in administrative roles. Regrettably, women had no voice or agency within the society.[5]

However, with the changing status and roles of women globally, significant changes have also taken place in the status and roles of women in India, particularly after its independence.

The Indian constitution guarantees gender equality in all aspects of life. Today, women are no longer confined within the four walls of their homes. They engage in a variety of work across different fields. Their attitudes towards life, goals, and perceptions have also undergone significant transformations.[6]

The attitude towards women within Garo society has also seen positive change, with their status steadily improving. Factors such as education, Christianity, advancements in transportation and communication, employment opportunities, industrialization, and exposure to other transformative forces have contributed to this progress, impacting the position and status of women. These changes have also had a tremendous effect on the social institutions within Garo society.[7]

Evidence of the changing social outlook in the Pritilata village of Tripura becomes apparent as we approach the 21st century. The respondents' ages range from 19 to 62 years. It is evident from their responses that today's women consider themselves equal to men. Enlightened women, in particular, believe that women should be provided with every possible opportunity for self-development.

They advocate for equal employment opportunities for qualified women in all occupations. Many educated women have already started working in office and private firms. Economic empowerment of women in Garo society has become visible, enabling them to influence their husbands and family members in decision-making processes.

As education and employment become more prevalent among women, their status and position in society improve. The levels of education among the respondents can be observed in Table 1.

Table : 1 Educational Status of Garo Women in the Surveyed Area

SL No	Status of Education	Respondent	% of Respondent
01	Primary School (I-V)	01	02.38
02	Upper Primary School (VI-VIII)	03	07.14
03	High School (IX-X)	03	07.14
04	Madhyamik Pass	19	45.24
05	HS Pass	12	28.58
06	Graduation	03	07.14
07	Post-Graduation	01	02.38
	Total	**42**	**100%**

Source: Field survey

According to the data presented in the table, it is evident that 90.48% (02.38 + 07.14 + 07.14 + 45.24 + 28.58) of Garo women have attained education up to the higher secondary level. However, the percentage of women with college education is only 7.14%. Furthermore, only one respondent in our study has achieved education at the post-graduation level. While progress in education among Garo women appears to be slow and higher education remains uncommon, they have managed to acquire knowledge that enables them to have a voice in family matters, including decisions related to the education and marriage of their children, as well as the buying and selling of property.

In contemporary times, in many households, decisions are made jointly by both husband and wife. In fact, women are even becoming the primary decision-makers in some families. They no longer rely on their husbands or the Maharies for making decisions about matters that concern themselves. The opinion of the husband is occasionally sought out of formality. Based on our investigation, it was found that 64.28% of our respondents make decisions jointly with their husbands. Additionally, 10.72% of the respondents are independent decision-makers, whereas in 25.00% of cases, decisions are primarily made by their husbands.

Table : 2 Decision taken in family affairs in the Surveyed Area

SL No	Decision Type	Respondent	% of Respondent
01	Joint Decision	18	64.28
02	Independent Decision	03	10.72
03	Decision by Husband	07	25.00
	Total	**28**	**100%**

Source: Field survey

A significant transformation in the present-day Garo society can be observed in the way husbands perceive and treat their wives. Unlike in the past, Garo husbands no longer view their wives as inferior to them. Instead, they the concept of equality and regard their wives as equals.

Position of Women in the Mahari: Mahari held a significant role as a crucial social institution in the traditional Garo society. It played a pivotal function in the lives of its members, acting as a decision-making authority and custodian.

Historically, Mahari has been a male-dominated institution, a characteristic that still persists today. Unfortunately, in this social structure of the traditional Garo society, women were entirely excluded from participation and lacked any form of voice or agency. They had no say, even in matters directly concerning their own lives and affairs.[8]

Within the context of Mahari, women were expected to unquestioningly adhere to its decisions. For instance, if the Mahari deemed it inappropriate for a particular girl to remain with her husband, they had the authority to enforce a separation between the couple. In such situations, women were not granted the opportunity to express their personal opinions. Likewise, if the Mahari decided to offer a widowed man a young girl as a replacement for his deceased wife, the girl had no choice but to comply with the decision. Similarly, when it came to selecting a Nokrom (resident son-in-law), the concerned girl had no right to make her own choice. Instead, the elderly male members of the Mahari were responsible for selecting a Nokrom, and the girl was expected to obediently follow the collective decision made by this male elders.[9]

In the past, women were excluded from in Mahari meetings, which were gatherings of elderly male members in a Mahari. In traditional Garo society, these meetings were considered exclusively for male members, who discussed various issues such as arranging marriages for girls, selecting Nokma (village headman), property inheritance, resolving disputes within or between Maharies. Women were allowed to attend these meetings as passive observers, without the opportunity to contribute or voice their opinions.[10]

However, in present times, there has been a significant shift in this practice. Now women can actively take part in the deliberations of Mahari meetings. Our

investigation found that all the respondents participate in Mahari meetings in some capacity. They have the right to speak and engage in discussions. Educated women, in particular, actively contribute to these meetings. Interestingly, it was also discovered that women sometimes initiate Mahari meetings when they deem it necessary to discuss important matters concerning their respective Maharies.

Today, Garo women no longer perceive Mahari meetings as exclusively male affairs. They believe that as members

of the Mahari, they have every right to participate. Present-day Garo women consider themselves equally qualified and deserving to take part in Mahari meetings. Some even protest against Mahari decisions when they find it necessary. In our investigation, we aimed to assess the level of confidence women have in the Mahari and their opinions regarding Mahari decisions. The accompanying table provides an insight into their confidence in the Mahari and how they respond if a decision made by the Mahari is deemed unsatisfactory.

Table : 3 Women reaction towards Mahari Decisions

SL No	Reaction towards Decisions	Respondent	% of Respondent
01	Agree	08	19.04
02	Disagree	07	16.66
03	Appeal for Review	27	64.30
	Total	**42**	**100%**

Source: Field survey

Among the total respondents, it is notable that only 16.66% refuse to blindly accept the decisions made by the Mahari. They actively protest against decisions that fail to address their needs and interests. Conversely, 19.04% of respondents adhere to the Mahari's decisions, recognizing them as collective decisions made by senior male members. Meanwhile, a significant majority of 64.30% request the Mahari to review its decisions if they are contrary to their own interests.

The Mahari meetings, traditionally regarded as exclusive to males in Garo society, have now become inclusive and open to both males and females. A growing number of women actively attend and participate in discussions during these Mahari meetings. The extent and manner of women's participation in these meetings can be better understood by referring to Table-4.

Table : 4 Women participation in Mahari's meeting

SL No	Type of Participation	Respondent	% of Respondent
01	By Meeting Call	04	09.52
02	As observer	13	30.95
03	Participate in debate	18	42.87
04	Meeting Management	07	16.66
	Total	**42**	**100%**

Source: Field survey

The data presented in the above table sheds light on the dynamics of Mahari meetings within the Garo community. It is observed that 09.52% of respondents initiate these meetings when important matters cannot be resolved at the family level. Furthermore, 30.95% of participants merely attend Mahari meetings without actively engaging in the discussions. On the other hand, an encouraging 42.87% of women actively participate in decision-making and debates alongside their male counterparts in the Mahari. It is noteworthy that these meetings are focused on addressing the concerns of all members, hence the regular attendance. However, it is observed that 16.66% of Mahari members are primarily responsible for providing hospitality during these meetings. Serving tea, betel nut, pan, water, rice, and other refreshments form an integral part of this supportive role.

Taking into account the aforementioned analysis, it can be concluded that Garo women have shed their submissive roles. The active involvement of women in the social

system is now clearly evident. Over time, an increasing number of women are stepping forward to participate in Mahari meetings. This changing attitude towards their roles and positions within the Mahari is bound to enable them to attain the recognition and share they rightfully deserve within the social system.

Inheritance of Property: In the study village, the traditional Garo system of property inheritance is matrilineal, meaning that property is passed down exclusively through the female line. In this system, a daughter inherits her property from her mother, and subsequently, her own daughter will inherit the property from her. This intergenerational transfer ensures that property remains within the family lineage.

Under this matrilineal framework, it is important to note that no man is entitled to possess property, unless he has acquired it through his individual efforts and

endeavors. In other words, men are not able to inherit property under any circumstances. While a man can utilize his parental property, he cannot inherit it, nor can his son. Only daughters are given the privilege of inheritance in this system, allowing for a seamless continuation of property ownership from one generation to the next.

The traditional right to inheritance is no longer earnestly followed. Over the ancestral property the women have no longer exclusive right. The ancestral property is now equally shared and inherited by the daughters and the sons. In this respect, the Garo society, like their neighbours, has been influenced by the democratic ideas and legal orders.

Position of Women in Garo Village :
In the traditional Garo society, women were assigned the lowest position when it came to matters pertaining to social feasts and ceremonial functions.[11] It was strictly believed that a woman could never assume the role of a village headman (Nokma), as certain ceremonial functions and

rites performed in the locality were deemed exclusive to men. Consequently, the position held by women in village affairs was often regarded as equivalent to that of children.[12]

However, in contemporary times, Garo women actively participate in various ceremonial functions within their communities. Such participation encompasses religious meetings, social feasts, Christmas celebrations, marriage ceremonies, New Year's Day celebrations, and more. It is worth noting that most of these functions have a religious foundation or are intrinsically linked to religious practices. Importantly, women now have the freedom to take part in these ceremonial functions without facing any restrictions from any quarter. The manner in which women engage in these functions can be better understood by referring to Table 5, which provides insights into their participation.

Table : 5 Women participation in Village feast

SL No	Type of Participation	Respondent	% of Respondent
01	As committee Member	09	21.42
02	As participant	26	61.92
03	As Active Member	07	16.66
	Total	**42**	**100%**

Source: Field survey

The data presented in the above table reveals that a mere 21.42% of women hold the prestigious position of committee head in ceremonial functions. The majority, comprising 61.92% of women, participate as ordinary members, while 16.66% actively engage as members in these events. This data strongly suggests that women who possess a keen interest in ceremonial functions can readily take part in various capacities, as societal barriers no longer hinder their participation.

Position of Women in Village Administration: Despite the matrilineal system in, the women of Pritilata village have historically been barred from participating in political and administrative affairs. Traditionally, politics and administration were considered solely within the domain of men, resulting in a clear division of roles between genders. Men were seen as fathers, uncles, breadwinners, warriors, defenders, and rulers, while women were expected to fulfil familial roles as mothers and sisters.

In the traditional Garo society, women were excluded from engaging in village administration. Positions such as Nokma, Laskar, and Sardar, responsible for administering justice and acting as magistrates in rural areas, were exclusively held by men. Women were not allowed to become the headman of the village. It was commonly believed that the forefathers, with their foresight, did not intend to burden women with the tasks of politics and administration. Despite their exclusion from formal positions, women played a significant role by acting as moral forces behind men, providing their views and suggestions on different matters.

However, as time passed and women achieved educational advancements, the traditional custom of barring women from politics and administration has gradually become more flexible. In the present Garo society, women have the opportunity to become Nokma, and there are now women occupying this position in the surveyed village. The current scenario reflects a significant shift, where Garo women no longer face social obstacles in their political participation.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, notable transformations have taken place within Garo society, signifying a shift from its traditional norms and beliefs. Previously, women within the Garo community were subjected to ridicule, characterized by the saying that women lacked intelligence, comparing them to toothless goats (Zehol 2003). However, with the introduction of education and employment opportunities for women, a remarkable change has occurred. More women are now receiving education and actively participating in various governmental and non-governmental endeavors. This liberation from the confines of conventional household responsibilities has granted them newfound freedom and autonomy.

Moreover, the practice of shifting cultivation has gradually given way to permanent cultivation, causing

agricultural activities to become predominantly male-oriented. Nevertheless, due to their education, women now possess the agency to choose life partners not only from within their community but also from outside. Consequently, there has been an evident increase in inter-community marriages, particularly among the Garos residing in the plains.

Another significant aspect that has contributed to this metamorphosis is the adoption of Christianity by some Garos in the study areas. This transition has resulted in a broader outlook for the community. The Garos are now being educated in Christian missionary schools, preferably in English medium. Education in the English language, as well as the exposure to Christianity and contact with people from diverse backgrounds, notably the plains people, have played crucial roles in expanding the perspectives of the Garo community and have brought about substantial changes in the social status of Garo women.

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