

Gender and Customs in North East India

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ABSTRACT: Gender generally refers to the social and cultural differences between men and women. Whereas sex refers to the physical and biological differences between men and women. Gender is of four types:- (i) Masculine, (ii) Feminine, (iii) Common, and (iv) Neuter Gender. Masculine refers to male gender whereas feminine refers to female gender. Common gender is a combination of both masculine and feminine gender, whereas neuter gender refers to nonliving things.

Geographically, men and women share the same space, but everywhere in the world, women are accorded a lower status than men. The North Eastern region of India has been considered as a backward region in terms of growth in per capita income. However, there is a perception that the status of women is higher in the North Eastern Region of the country in comparison with the status of women in all India average. It is found from the analysis that the status of women in the region is comparatively better than the rest of the country only in some selected indicators. The indicators reveal that women have a very low degree of freedom of movement and low level of control over themselves in North Eastern Region.

Northeast is better off than the other parts of India as a whole in terms of gender equality. However, inequality between women and men exists in the region inspite of the predominance of various ethnic groups who by and large do not believe in sex discrimination. The study reveals that women are relatively disempowered and enjoy somewhat lower status than that of men in the region. Gender gap exists in terms of access to education, employment and health. A large gender gap exists in political participation both at the levels of state and nation.

Keywords: Gender, Education, North, East, India.

I. INTRODUCTION

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Gender Identity

Gender Identity describes the gender with which a person identifies (i.e. whether one conceives oneself to be a man, a woman, or describes oneself to oneself in some less conventional way) but can be used to refer to the gender that other people attribute to the individual on the basis of what they know from gender role indications. Gender identities can thus be defined as the conceptions that individuals have of themselves as being male or female.

Gender Roles

Gender Roles refer to the set of cultural expectations that define the ways in which the members of each sex should behave. Gender roles are expectations regarding the proper behaviour, attitudes and activities associated with both the sex – male or female. The term gender role has two meanings: first people's gender roles are the totality of the ways by which they express their gender identities; secondly people's gender roles may be defined as the kinds of activities that society determines to be appropriate for individuals belonging to a particular sex – either male or female.

Gender Socialisation

Gender Socialisation refers to the ways in which society ensures that children learn the appropriate behaviours associated with their being males or females. It also sets children into different courses in life because they are male or female. Society thus channelizes human behaviour through gender socialisation.

Gender Stereotyping

Gender Stereotyping refers to categorising certain behaviours as associated with a particular gender and to the widely held beliefs about characteristics that are considered appropriate for males and females. Gender stereotypes occur when certain attributes, opinions or roles are applied to either gender. Gender Stratification

Gender Stratification refers to a society's unequal distribution of wealth, power and privileges between men and women. Gender stratification is found in all types of societies in some form or the other, and is usually biased in favour of one sex, in most societies the male sex in a larger context/extent stratification on the basis of gender resulted to gender inequalities.

Gender Equity

Gender Equity is a set of actions, attitudes and assumptions, that provides opportunities and create expectations about individuals. It offers a framework for the form in which all females and the males are engaged regardless of their sex.

Gender Discrimination

Girls are equal to boys, as both belong to the same species. Through birth, girls inherit all those rights that are due to all human beings. They are born with the same fundamental rights to life, food, shelter, education, health care and employment. However, even before their birth and continuing throughout their lives, girls are discriminated against in terms of basic rights. Girls throughout the world are subjected to violence, exclusion and exploitation based simply on the fact that they are female.

SEX AND GENDER DISTINCTION

Gender refers to the socially constructed roles of and relations between men and women. It implies the social qualities and opportunities involved with being male and female. It also refers to the relationship between women and men and girls and boys, as well as the relations between women and those between men. Gender is a cultural term. It refers to the different roles which the society, assigns to men and women. It distinguishes between 'masculine' and 'feminine' stereotypes. The concept of gender was become popular in the early lives in the field of feminism, sociology and psychology.

Now we must define sex. Sex refers to the biological and physiological differences between men and women. The term sex is a physical differentiation between the biological male and the biological female. The infant is identified as a boy or a girl depending on his or her sex. It refers to biological factors which distinguish man from woman. Judith Butler says "Sex is not just an analytical category. It is a normative category as well. It stipulated what men and women are. It also stipulates what men and women ought to be. It formulates rules to regulate the behaviour of men and women.

Distinguishing between sex and gender is nothing but a debate of nurture our nature. Sex refers to the biological differences between men and women and gender indicates the vast range of cultural meanings attached to that basic difference. The distinction between sex and gender was first emerged in the 1950s and 1960s in the writings of British and American psychiatrists and medical

personnel engaged to cure intersex and trans-sexual patients. To distinguish between the two Simon de Beauvoir rightly says “women are made, they are not born”. It indicates the cultural aspects of sex.

Some of the distinction between Sex and Gender are:

(I) Sex implies the biological and physiological features which define the difference between men and women.

On the other hand, Gender implies the social and cultural aspects of roles, behaviours, activities and attributes of a society which distinguish between men and women.

(II) Sex is natural, whereas Gender is cultural.

(III) Sex is less social and more scientific. It explains the physical aspect of human being. On the other hand, Gender is social in nature. It stressed on clothing, activities, carrier choices and positions of people in society.

(IV) Sex divides society into male and female.

On the other hand, Gender divides society into masculine and feminine.

(V) Sex is static. There is no variation in the matter of sex in different human societies. On the other hand, Culture varies from society to society according to cultural variance. (VI) Sex is vested biological identity.

On the other hand, Gender is acquired identity based on social and cultural behaviour.

Thus, sex is a biological concept whereas gender is the socio-cultural elaboration of biological sex. Feminists are of the view that there is no necessary co-relations between the biology of men and women and the qualities that are thought to be masculine and feminine. Rather it is child rearing practices which try to establish and perpetuate certain differences between the sexes. For this, from childhood, boys and girls are trained in appropriate, gender specific forms of behaviour, play dress and so on. Men and Women perform different kinds of work both within the family and outside has little to do with biology. Only the actual process is biological, all other work within the home that women must do cooking, cleaning, looking after children and so on. These works are considered ‘domestic work’ or ‘women’s work.’ So sex is fixed while gender can be changed. Gender is based on ascribed role while sex is based on physical role.

Customary Laws And Gender Relations In India

The gender relations of the tribal which constructs inequality can be analysed looking at the customary law of the tribal communities in India.

Customary law is a part of the tribal traditional customs and practices where the tribes considered it ‘intrinsic to their identity and culture’. Customary law can be understood as ‘an established system of immemorial rules which evolved from the way of life and natural wants of the people, the general context of which was a common knowledge, coupled with precedents applying to special cases, which were retained in the memories of the chief and his counsellors, their sons and their son’s son, until forgotten, or until they became part of the immemorial rules’. The operation of customary laws acts as a powerful tool to define the roles of men and women and dictate acceptable standards of behaviour. Women’s social and economic status continues to be influenced by customary rules.

Almost all the customary law of the region which includes ‘people’s beliefs, customs, social mores, percepts, rites and usages practiced since time immemorial, are not always conducive to the interests of women’ and the customary laws relating to ‘property and marriage are highly oppressive to women.’ As have been mentioned above, women in the region shoulder heavy economic responsibilities viz-a-viz men. Yet their customary laws deny them equal rights to property and inheritance which is one of the important factors affecting their empowerment.

The customary law in matters of marriage and divorce also are far from favourable to women. Among many of the tribes in India, women are treated as mere commodities which can be seen in their custom of bride price. Bride price prevails among the various communities in India where the bridegroom has to pay certain amount of money to the girl’s parent. This custom of bride price which is practiced among the tribes is based on the recognition of the importance of women’s role in the economic sphere. It is the ‘reflection of the fact that women are a productive worker in the economy of the tribe’. Though bride price was paid to compensate the girl’s family for their loss of an ‘economically active member’, it has provided man with the ‘justification to treat his wife as a disposable commodity.’ The payment of bride price did not protect women against exploitation within the family rather it creates limitation on women’s right to initiate divorce as it ‘entails the obligation to return the bride price to the husband. So women prefer to suffer in silence ever if she is ill treated rather than take resources to divorce’. In most of the communities of India, the customary laws are constituted and interpreted by male alone. Women have no role in decision making. Due to their customary laws, they are not allowed to share their

ideas in village decision making. Women are excluded from participating in all the important decision making institutions.

Almost all the communities in India are patrilineal society where descent is traced from father to son except for the state of Meghalaya, where the Khasis and the Garos follow the matrilineal system where descent is traced from mother to the daughter. Yet what remains similar is that patriarchy rules in all these societies. Women are never allowed to represent the family or the kin group at the community level. Moreover, they are neither being given any authority at the social level. Thus, even though women have property rights in the matrilineal society, but when it comes to decision making whether it is in matrilineal or patrilineal societies, it is regarded as the domain of men.

II. CONCLUSION

There are about 190 million adolescents in India- a demographic in which over 30% of people are illiterate. Disparities in gender at this age can often be explained by relatively poor access to reproductive health care and the fact that girls often have less access to food, which adversely affects their growth patterns. Additionally, adolescent girls often work long hours in the home with no opportunity for employment.

Various international gender inequality indices rank India differently on each of these factors, as well as on a composite basis, and these indices are controversial. Gender Inequality in India refers to health, education, economic and political inequalities between men and women. Gender inequalities and their social causes, impact India's sex ratio, women's health over their lifetimes, their educational attainment and economic conditions. Gender Inequality in India is a multifaceted issue that concerns men and women. Some argue that various gender equality indices place men at a disadvantage. However, when India's population is examined as a whole, women are at a disadvantage in several important ways. In India, discriminatory attitudes towards either sex have existed for generations and affect the lives of both sexes. Although the constitution of India grants men and women equal rights, gender disparities remain.

Research shows gender discrimination mostly in favour of men in many realms including the workplace. Discrimination affects many aspects in the lives of women from career development and progress to mental health disorders. While Indian

laws on rape, dowry and adultery have women's safety at heart, these highly discriminatory practices are still taking place at an alarming rate, affecting the lives of many today.

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