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Conservative to liberalism: A case study of women in Apatani Tribe

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Abstract

This study explores the historical and contemporary transformation of women's roles among the Apatani tribe of Ziro Valley, Arunachal Pradesh, within the broader framework of Indian cultural values that revere femininity as Shakti, Prakriti, and Matrusatta. Traditionally, Apatani women were confined to domestic and agricultural roles within a patriarchal system that denied them education, property rights, priesthood, and political participation. However, gradual social reform, the expansion of modern education, Panchayati Raj reforms, and exposure to external influences catalyzed significant changes. The research highlights how Apatani women created new spaces for themselves in education, politics, religion, and economic ventures, breaking away from stigmas such as tattooing, child marriage, and social subordination. The emergence of female doctors, engineers, bureaucrats, social workers, entrepreneurs, and priests demonstrates a dynamic shift from exclusion to empowerment. While challenges of male chauvinism and patriarchal constraints persist, the Apatani case study exemplifies resilience, adaptation, and women's agency in navigating tradition and modernity. This research concludes that education and political participation remain the strongest instruments of empowerment, offering a model for women's advancement in tribal and patriarchal societies across India.

Keywords: Apatani women; Ziro valley, Arunachal Pradesh, women empowerment, education, political participation, gender equality, indigenous traditions, religious participation, economic empowerment, patriarchy, social reform

Introduction

The illustrious son of India, Swami Vivekananda has honoured 'Shakti' and has declared that every prosperous country has given proper respect to the 'Matrusatta'. The nation that has not given proper respect to the women community could not become great and will not become great in future.

The entire Universe is alive; pervaded by the Supreme Being: Body of God The Earth is called as 'Mother Earth' and Nature as 'Prakriti' (feminine) in Hindu philosophy Ma Ganga: justifies rivers as manifestations of feminine deities. Grains are manifestations of Devi Annapurna. Trees and Forests are abode of feminine deities: sacred grooves, sacred trees, sacred mountains, sacred streams and sacred plants. Mother Cow is the symbol of motherly love of sacred animal.

Reverential mentions appears due to the Esteemed First lady teacher of India, Mrs. Savitri Devi Phule, who introduced the Girls' education in India facing immense hurdle erected on her path by male dominated society.

The area of research study is confined to Apatanis of Ziro Valley which comes under the jurisdiction of Lower Subansiri district of present Arunachal Pradesh. It is bounded by the Upper Subansiri District in the North-East, East Kameng District in the West, Tibet and China in the North and Assam valley in the South-East. The Apatani plateau is laying approximately between the latitude 27°32'N to 27°37'N and longitudes 93°48' E to 93°52' E and longitudes 93°48' E to 93°52' E.¹⁰ It is situated at an altitude of about 1,524 meter above the sea level fringed by high hills. The valley is confined to approximately an area about 25 Sq.km. As of 2001 India census, Ziro had a population of 12,289. Males constitute 52% of the population and females 48%. In Ziro, 17% of the population is under 6 years of age. Ziro has an average literacy rate of 66%, lower than the national average of 74.04%: male literacy is 72%, and female literacy is 60%.

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The inhabitant of this valley (Apatanis) were named variously as OnkaMiri, AnkaMiris, Aukas, Apatanang, Tanang, etc., by early visitor of the valley. Apatanis have few unique special characteristic features which differ from other tribes in Arunachal Pradesh and India. Few of these special characteristic features are:

- a) Apatanis are permanently settled in one place whereas other tribes are nomadic in nature move from one place to another in search of fertile lands. They travel vast area of forests and settle temporarily for not more than four to five years in one place.
- b) Apatanis cultivate permanent wet land cultivations whereas other tribes practice dry land cultivations by clearing the forests by burning the jungles.
- c) Apatanis used to practice facial tattoos before; now they have dropped this custom few decades back.

Creation of niche for women through education

The development of girl's education in the Ziro valley in the first decade of post-independence era was dormant and challenging. The noble venture of education in the valley started with establishment of two schools in 1948. As the girl's education was considered a taboo for Apatanis, no girl student could be enrolled despite door to door campaign by the school authority. The narrow mindset of Apatanis assumed girls as a component to serve the male dominated society. They were confined to perform domestic household and agricultural activities since expertise in these areas were requisite qualification for fetching a good husband to grantee a prosperous family life.

In 1950's few more schools were established in some villages of the valley but still with no enrollment of the girl students. However, in early 1960's though ignorant about the value of education, few awaken and inspiring girl students were enrolled evading their parent's oppositions. They too became dropout students due to domestic compulsion, early marriage and show of force from their parent. But still it encouraged many other girls to opt schooling in the subsequent years. Besides, preferences for schooling personals for employments in government establishments also exhibited the value of education. In early 1970's conservative Apatanis slightly broaden their mindset to allow their girl to schools. Accordingly, many over aged girl who were initially deprived of the education got the opportunity to gain education in the schools. However, these students had to perform dual works of schooling and attending domestic and agricultural works for the concession granted. By then the administration and few educated Apatanis initiated for the growth of modern education in the valley. Due to their endeavor, in early 1980's many wealthy Apatanis began to send their girl to private hostels outside the valley for seeking best education. During 1990's numerous private and government schools mushroomed in the valley catering education to the Apatani children. As of now, the tribe does not discriminate and compromise education on the basis of gender. They strongly feel that education is the only source of earning decent livelihood to support their family.

The Apatani have incorporated many ways of the modern world, but the traditional culture and customs still retain their significance. Many of them are high-level government employees, doctors, and engineers and are working far away from their native villages around Ziro. Education carried a tremendous change in the lives of Apatani girls and made a

strong entry in various field of the society rendering their services as Doctors (Dr. Subu Kampu, first lady Allopathic doctor within Apatanis, Dr. Hage Kari first lady Dental doctor within Apatanis, Dr. Radhe Angku, first lady Ayurvedic doctor within Apatanis, Dr. Kuru Dumi, first lady Homoeopathic doctor within Apatanis, Dr. Subu Sumpi, first lady Surgical Specialist doctor from Arunachal, Talyang Yassung, first GNM Nurse within Apatanis, Hage Yassung, first ANM Nurse within Apatanis), Engineers (Racho Yaku first lady engineer within Apatanis), Bureaucrats like Koj Rinya (Indian Forest Service), Tadu Mamu (Indian Foreign Service), Bullo Mamu (IRAS) etc.

Education did not only provide employment in the society but also it did provide empowerment in the delicate community of society. For instance, the Non-Government organisation runs by Smt. Tailyang Santii (Chairperson) who herself is illiterate works for the welfare of the economically neglected and socially despised sections. This organization provides shelter to the orphan, destitute and mentally retarded persons for their rehabilitation. The mother's home branch unit has now been extended to the state capital, Itanagar. In recognition to her works for the society, her NGO was given best society award by Nehru Yuva Kendra, Ziro in 2000 and Anita Sen Memorial Award by New Delhi based NGO in 2011.

When we look back the position of Apatani Women, we feel how much they were deprived of their status recognition, comfort and decision making body in the family, in government sector as well as in the society. Their merits and scholarship were doomed due to male chauvinism. This was the dark phase in the history of Apatani culture where intellectual women were enslaved within the four walls of the house providing the tireless services and giving pleasure to their husband on the bed.

Creation of social space through political participation

The Apatanis had evolved with a sound political system known as Buliang to regulate and maintain peace and tranquility in the society. The institution was envisaged with political, legal and supernatural authority to settle all the disputes amicably and judiciously. The decision of this institution were accepted and obeyed in the society. The memberships of the Buliang were represented by all the clans of Apatani villages. Traditionally the women were neither allowed nor had any say in the deliberation of the institution until or unless a woman is part of the issue. However capable woman can motivate the man in bringing out merits of settlement within the four walls of the house. But to accept or reject the motivation of woman lies at the prerogative will of the man.

There are no restrictions for a woman to become a member of the Buliang institution. But there are no traces of women membership in its history. Perhaps the being society patriarchal, the man avoided women membership taking into consideration the male ego and the nature of duties to be performed by the members. As the post of the Buliang was prestige in the society every mother wants it to be inherited by her eldest male child. Therefore, a widow having a minor male child takes over the charge of late husband till her child is old enough to be a Buliang himself. The dilution of the institution started with the incorporation of 73rd and 74th amendment bill of Indian constitution, popularly called Panchayati Raj Institution. It provided ample scopes for equal and increased participation of

women in grass root political affairs. It also carried a tremendous change in the lives of Apatani women and they made a strong entry in political participation. Accordingly, Smt. Lod Yaming was the first nominated lady Zilla Parishad member of Apatani tribe in 1992. Further, incorporation of 1/3 reservation in the Panchayati Raj Institution in 2003 facilitated maximum participation of women in its election of 2003, 2008 and 2013. Smt. Nani Yamang and Smt. Bullo Badu of Reru and Hong village respectively became the first elected Zila Parishad member in 2003. In 2008, Smt. Nada Dumi and Hage Yassung of Hija and Hari Village respectively and Smt. Millo Yama and Smt. Punyo Paya of Tazang and Hong village were elected to the post of Zila Parishad member in 2013. Besides large numbers of women candidate participated and got elected or selected as Anchal Samiti Member and Gram Panchayat Member (Table Enclosed).

Ziro-I panchayat election (2003 and 2008)

Particular	Total seats	Nos. of women candidate	Nos. of male candidate	Year	Percentage of women participant
Gram Panchayat	394	213	181	2003	54%
Anchal Samiti	128	70	58	2003	56%
Zila Parishad	07	03	05	2003	30%
Gram Panchayat	394	217	177	2008	56%
Anchal Samiti	128	45	83	2008	35%
Zila Parishad	07	02	05	2008	30%

Source: Election Office Ziro

Most of the initial batch of Panchayat members was illiterate which hitherto made them difficult to understand the power and functions of the institution. However, expanding horizon of education projected literate Apatani Women into the decision making body in the grass root political affairs.

However, participation of women in political affairs needs to be analyzed if their decisions in the political affairs are independent or remote controlled by the male chauvinism. The purpose of the government legislation can be only achieved if the women are given free hands in dealing their task in political affairs.

Expanding domains in religious affairs

For Apatanis, Beliefs and Faiths plays a vital role in every aspect of their lives regulating their thought, customs, traditions and daily activities. In nutshell, it embodies the basic characteristics of the primitive religion called Animism. The Apatani women play a very significant role as that of male in every ritual and rites. It is the duty of the women to make all arrangements of ceremonial feast during the socio-religious ceremonies. Besides, they collect and donate the sacrificial fowls and domestic animals reared by

them for the ritual. However, women are subjected to subordination in the institution of priesthood. According to Apatani mythology there are certain restrictions on the women to perform the socio-religious ceremonies of Murung and Subu Tanii that are solemnized on the sacred platform called Lapang. Perhaps it was the only reason why there is no trace of women priest in the religious history of Apatanis, despite having no restriction for the women to become priest. But due to decreasing male priest in the society, a few women priest highly equipped the priestly knowledge namely Smt. Nending Diming and Smt. Hage Taka Eli of Hari village were compelled to accept the post of priesthood to redress the suffering of the society in late 1990's. These women perform all kind of ritual with an exception to the socio-religious ceremonies solemnized in the sacred platform. The priestly knowledge to the woman is transmitted by the patient listening to the incantation of the renowned male priest. Their knowledge are more enhanced and refreshed when they contest amongst them in priestly hymns called Biisi.

The age old indigenous faiths and beliefs are constantly endangered with the rapid conversions of the alien religion. It has also drastically changed the lives of the converted Apatani women. The women like Smt. Mudo Dumi and Hibu Rita who associates themselves with Gayatri Parvivar were trained to conducts Havan (Yagna) with Sanskrit Slokas. Besides, dozens of Apatani women have joined an institution called Brahma Kumaris and they are given exposure to visit many Hindu Sacred Places (Table enclosed)

List of the Pilgrimage Undertaken by Apatani Brahma Kumaris

Sl. No.	Year	Name	Place & Location
1.	2001	Mudang Oman	Tinsukia Ashram
		Smti Hageotung	-do-
		Miss Hage Obe	-do-
		Smti. Koj Aku	-do-
		Smti Hage Asse	-do-
		Shri Hage Taming	-do-
		Smti. Habung Punu Ama	-do-
2.	2002	Smti. Hage Otung	Mount Abu
		Smti. KojAku	-do-
		Smti. Subu Ata	-do-
		Smti. Anju Mate (Nyishi)	-do-
3.	2003	Smti. Hage Otung Koj Aku	Shivpuri, Calcutta -do-
4.	2005	Smti. Hage Otung Koj Aku	Patna -do-

Sources: Field survey

A good numbers of Apatani women have also been converted into different denomination of Christianity. The Christian fraternity provided ample scopes for converted women to get theological education in different parts of the country.

Theological education of Apatanis women

Sl. No.	Name of evangelist who pursued theology course (Comprising of both Diploma and Degree)	Name of the college where studied	Year	Denomination
1.	HageOniya	Akuvuto Bible College, Dimapur	1996	-do-
2.	MudangOje	-do-	1996	-do-
3.	KojYabo	Arunachal Bible Training institute	-	-do-
4.	MichiYalu	-	2005	-do-

5.	TakheYalu	North east India, India Baptist and seminary College, Silchar	2004	-do-
6.	Dusu Modi	-do-	-	-do-
7.	RachoMeenu	Naga Land	-	-Revival-

Source: Michi Bath, Secretary, Apatani Baptist Association, Ziro, 2006

The rapid progress of Christianity had also brought changes in the life cycle of Christian converts in the form of birth, marriages, funeral ceremonies etc. The holy marriage or the Church marriage became the common phenomena of the converts.

Marriages in church

Sl. No.	Name of bride and groom	Nature of marriage	Denomination	Year	Marriage Conducted by
1.	Tage Donyi and Duyu Nenkha	Holy marriage	Baptist	1997	Field Director K. Lalrinthanga Ziro.
2.	Takhe pussang and Ngliyang Rimung	Holy Marriage	Baptist	-	-do-
3.	Nako Ajo and Hage Yase	Holy Marriage	Baptist	-	-do-
4.	Tallo Apa and Dusu Modi	Holy Marriage	Baptist	-	-do-
5.	Hano Rajan and Bamin Namya	Holy Marriage	Baptist	2004	TageAto, Ziro
6.	Takhe Tadi and Munka	Holy Marriage	Baptist	2004	-do-
7.	Hage Oniya	Holy Marriage	-do-	-	-
8.	Bamin Olang	Holy Marriage	-do-	-	-
9.	Mom Hassang and Hamo Ampa	holy Marriage	-do-	-	TageAto, Ziro
10.	Kago Yubey and Dule Rinu	-do-	-do-	-	-do-
11.	Kago Tangu and Tithing Yamy	-do-	-do-	-	-do-
12.	Millo Tabin and Gyati Mala	Holy Marriage	Revi Bible	-	Delhi
13.	Habung Tanyu and Duyu Aniyo	Holy Marriage	Revi Bible	-	Itanagar
14.	Tamo Dayang and Hage Yaku	Holy Marriage	-do-	-	Ziro.
15.	Duyu Tadu and Hage Uyang	Holy Marriage	-do-	-	Ziro

Source: Field survey

Expanding role in economic ventures and empowerment

Apatani women carry out the household chores of gathering both wild and kitchen garden vegetables, cooking, fetching water, pounding rice, cleaning houses, washing clothes and utensils, nursing, looking after infants and children, ginning (clothes) and spinning of cotton, and other jobs associated with the household. In the field, the Apatani woman carries out the tasks that include gardening, seeding, transplanting of paddy and millet, weeding of fields, and other activities. At home, the internal family income is controlled by a woman. But the man also has his part of duty in looking after cultivation activities, and acts as the head of family in society. The patang which comprised of boys and girls comprising of five to ten members engaged in the agricultural activities on mutual help on rotational basis amongst them are slowly vanishing from the valley. It is due to the fact that most of the youths from the village are shifting to the urban settlements for the want of better education and employment that can give them a better life. As of now, the agriculture activities are pursued by few aged women in the village.

In addition to performing house-hold duties, and tending

kitchen gardens, Apatani woman weave clothes for their own use, neighbours and relatives. Besides, Apatani girls have their own earnings; rearing pigs, working in the fields and indulging themselves in a bit of trade. During the early days the agricultural produce were bartered with the neighbouring tribes in exchange for the essential commodities to enhance economic position of the family.

The profession of inter-mediating a deal for sale and purchase of property, Castration of domestic animals and making of potteries which was solely owned by the women was considered undignified occupations. These professional were either landless or living below the poverty line. Some of these professionals were subjected to social and religious negligence during the socio-religious ceremonies. But in the modern days, inter-mediating the deal of property has become a profitable job where they can earn a good amount of dividend. Hence, has become the most lubricate job for the women.

The markets of the valley which was once in the monopoly of outsiders are captured by the Apatani women to sell their domestic local products. Some of these commodities are also exported to the other places of the state. The development of entrepreneurship amongst the Apatani women has made them more self-dependent, self-reliance and economical sound.

Breaking away the social stigmas and barriers

In Apatani women are more or less subordinated by the male as their society is patriarchal in all respects. The birth of both male and female child is always welcomed and considered auspicious. However, in general the parent prefers at least one so to carry forward their family lineage. Monogamy is the general practice but polygamy was permitted if the woman remains barren or has no male child, death of wife, and divorce from the first wife or wealthy enough to look after the second wife etc. however, the practice of polygamy is very rare in comparison to the other tribe of the state.

The society recognizes three kind of marriages i.e. marriage by negotiation, marriage by elopement and marriage by force. The consent of the girls was least considered in the marriage system with an exception to elopement or love marriage. The marriage within consanguineous and affinal kinsmen and kinswomen were prohibited till the passage of seventh generation. These restrictions are of course diluted by the younger generation since most of them are ignorant about their genealogy. The exogamous marital relation was not approved and the offender was excommunicated from the society. Now, the liberal educated Apatanis still do not encourage this form of relation but are slowly accepting to the changing trends. The development of education, conversion to alien religion and exposures outside the community has broadened the outlook Apatani women towards marriage. Today, we can find many inter-castes, inter-tribe marriages within the society. Divorce in the society is very rare. The reason for rare divorce is due to the social sanctions for show of force towards the offending husband by the father-in-laws family. Every divorce in the society is associated with the payment of adequate

compensation to the women. If the divorce is initiated by a wife on account of being barren for long time or extra marital relationship of the husband then the husband will have to adequately compensate the wife. However, if the divorce is initiated due to illicit relationship of the wife, then she will have no claim over the property of the husband. Widow Remarriage is socially approved in the society. A widow without an issue is free to go back to her parent's house with compensation from her father-in law side and if she wishes she can remarry. An unmarried widow has every right over the property of her deceased husband till her death but she cant dispose of the property without the consent of he husband's close cousins. In case, she has a male child, she acts as the custodian of the property for her son. If the child is a girl, the widow has every right over the property of her deceased husband to look after the girl child and after her death the inherited property will pass on to the closest cousin who will bear entire social and economic responsibilities toward the marriage of the girl child. The right to use the property will remain with the girl if she remains unmarried.

The practice of tattooing among Apatanis is as old as their existence. Tattooing (Tiipe) and the stuffing of large nose plugs (Yaping hullo) were once popular among the women, although this practice has gradually fallen into decline in recent years. They tattooed their chin with five vertical lines and at the top near lower lip a horizontal bar joins all the five lines of vertical tattoo of the chin and tattooed from forehead to tip of the nose. They also perforate their ear lobes and big pieces of hollowed bamboo called YaruHukho (Ear Plug) are worn to attach ear rings. The facial decoration of the woman would not be complete without two big nose plugs on either side of the nose known as Yaping Hullo. These Yaping Hullo are made of pieces of whole Cane, which are available in the jungle. For these Yaping Hullo a piece of dry Cane is cut. Both the ends of the Cane are smoothened by burning the ends and rubbing it against hard and smooth surface so that they are smooth and even. These processes also ensure the sterility of the material so that it does not cause any injury to the nose and became septic later. Facial decorations of Apatani females is complete with perforation of her ears and later on putting hollow bamboo pieces called YaruHukho, which is used for putting on ear rings. Above the ear holes, two to three perforations are made on each ear a smaller size of YaruHukho are used. These smaller perforations are known as Rutting and used for wearing Rutting Yarang. Rutting Yarang is made of flat Brass rings. The diameter of Rutting Yarang is about three to four inches. In short, the Apatani used tattoos, ear and nose plugs and Rutting Yarang to buttress their psychological needs to face the inhospitable environments surrounding them in early days. And indeed, it has done well in overcoming adverse environment and survives till date. Younger members of this community have stopped this traditional practice. The Apatanis used to practice facial tattooing and modification until the 1970's. The Apatani Youth Association (AYA)

Campaigned door to door to reform the society and eradicate social evils and practices. Thier endeavor in the task bore fruit, resulting to the abolishment to tattooing, child marriage and superstitious practices in the society. The Apatani woman has no authority over inherited ancestral family property other than beads and ornament from her parent. But sometimes wealthy parent gives away

their newly acquired property to their daughter. Transmission of status and privileges through female line is not totally ruled out.

Recapitulating the expanding horizons

It is noted that the position of women in Arunachal society are not completely left to their fate. The exchange of gifts by the contracting parties in marriages is a unique feature of land of rising Sun. This reflects a better position of women Community in real situations whatever their legal position in society.

When we see the past status of Apatani women we get despite hurdles, hardworking, less amount of transportation facilities, schools and mass communication, they have shown their talents in various activities and field of the society. We cannot deny their sufferings but they made themselves as a role model and inspiration to the women of other parts of India. Education gave them not only knowledge but made them empowered. Arunachalee women must come forward with a dream of kartwit, Saktwit and Netriwit. Gender discrimination still persists in India and lot more needs to be done in improving the condition of women in our country.

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