

# A Study on the Naga Women of the Traditional Lotha Society of Nagaland, North East India

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**KEYWORDS:** Naga women. Lotha society. Patriarchy. Fertility. Bride price. Property

**ABSTRACT:** The Lotha Nagas of Nagaland are one of the 16 conglomerate tribes of the Nagas, inhabiting in the north eastern corner of the India. The Lotha Nagas have distinctly patriarchal customs and traditions which place the women in a subordinate position in the society. This paper seeks to understand some of these patriarchal practices and the consequent gender implications of the same.

## INTRODUCTION

The Nagas, an ethnic conglomeration of various tribes, occupy the State of Nagaland in the north east of India. Nagaland is bounded by Assam in the west, Myanmar on the east, Manipur in the south and Arunachal Pradesh and part of Assam on the north. It lies between 25°6' and 27°42' northern latitudes and between 93°20'2 and 95°15'2 eastern longitudes. The State has an area of 16,579 sq km (which constitutes about 0.5% of the country's geographical area) with a population of 19,88,636 (0.2% of the country's population) as per 2001 Census of India. Nagaland is inhabited by 16 major tribes along with a number of sub-tribes. Ao, Angami, Chang, Konyak, Lotha, Sumi, Chakhesang, Khiamniungam, Phom, Rengma, Sangtam, Yimchungrü, Zeliang and Pochury are the major tribes. The Lotha Naga tribe belong to Wokha district located at a latitude of 26°8' North and longitude of 94°18' East with a geographical area of 1628 square kilometres constituting 9.82 per cent of the State's geographical area. The district has a population of 1, 66,343 with a male population of

84,505 and 81,838 female populations and has a sex ratio of 968 (Wokha District Human Development Report, 2013).

The study is based on the available sources of writings supported by oral traditions to ascertain the place of women in the traditional Naga society. The Naga society is patriarchal wherein men hold power in all the important institutions of the society and women are deprived of access to such power. Women were subjected to male authority; considered only as a means for the propagation of the tribe. The Lotha Naga view of this is reflected in the carved representation of woman's breasts on the front post of a *chiümpfo*, bachelor's dormitory, alongside Mithun heads and Hornbills. The significance was that, just as a woman's breasts never dries – it being the source of nurturing life – so also, it hoped for fertility of the land and prosperity of the population for generations to come (Ngullie, '94).

Women's breasts were thus engraved to signify fertility. The irony is that women were not allowed to go anywhere near the dormitory as it would contaminate the revered place; woman's entry into the dormitory was taken as undermining the education of men. The central argument of Mary

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Wollstonecraft's 'vindication' (Wollstonecraft, '88) is that women remain enslaved because of a corrupt process of socialization which stunts their intellect. Thereby, traditional Lotha women internalized the culture of patriarchy, believing that it was their duty to obey and to serve men and accepting that they were physically and mentally inferior to men. Women themselves contributed to this indirectly, by daring their men in head taking and rejoicing in their achievement, thereby promoting man's superiority and vanity. The Lotha Naga women were unconsciously living in a suppressed position in the society and did not question as to 'why' it was so. The Naga genealogical history is a record of the male line and no mention is made of the wife or mother and daughter. The making of civilization was considered a male prerogative; any recognition in the society was reserved for men. Here a reference can be made of a woman who killed a tiger. Rhonchumi of N-Longidang village, married to a man from neighbouring Niroyo village, in one of her routine visits to her native village came upon a tiger hunting group from her village. Being a brave and adventurous woman and seeing that the men needed assistance, she offered her service. After some hesitation, and in the thick of the hunt, she was given a spear, which according to custom, a woman was not supposed to wield. The hunt continued, and suddenly, the tiger jumped out of the undergrowth and was making its escape from between the spear-armed hunters. At that time, Rhonchumi threw the spear which landed on the tiger and killed it. This very act of hers rendered the male hunters speechless and there was quiet. Now, tradition has it that, a paean is sung for the person who accomplishes feats of courage and the woman wanted that a paean be sung for her as was only right. But it was refused to her on the pretext that a misfortune would befall on the village. There is no authentic reason as to why a woman's commendable deed should cause a misfortune on the village. The only possible reason could be that of male chauvinism; it was an embarrassment for men to be outdone by a woman, so the universal excuse was 'taboo'. This was carried out to the extent of forbidding man to eat game killed by a woman for it was considered unclean. It was believed that a man would be jinxed in whatever manly task he undertakes should he partake of it.

Therefore, because of the accepted belief that it 'is a man's world,' the contribution of the woman was ignored and forgotten and all such tales of women's heroic deeds were banned from being told. To this day, every Lotha clan meets to read their history and in such a conclave, no women are allowed to even lend an ear. Women were marginalized with the tag, 'women have no stories to tell' and it is for this reason that there is scarcity of women's stories in this tribe.

Patriarchal attitude and gender differentiation in the Lotha society can be observed right at birth; a social practice different from other Naga tribes. The custom of the Lotha Nagas can be reflected in what Simone de Beauvoir says in her book, "*The Second Sex*," that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (de Simone, '76). Not only was a Lotha born a man or a woman but certain rites were observed at birth which shaped the identity of a man and a woman. It started with the disposal of placenta according to the sex of the child – the male placenta is wrapped in rags with wild lemon leaves and placed inside a carrying basket, which was used by males; the female placenta is wrapped in a similar way with a variety of wild leaves and placed inside a carrying basket used by females. Then it was hung on a tree to prevent it from being eaten up by animals for should it be so, it would bring ill luck to the child. The birth of a child, in some cases, is announced by the men as *oyam ka*, meaning 'other' or 'stranger' for a daughter whereas, a son as *ete ka*, meaning, 'us' or 'one of us'." Reference is also made of the girl as *oyam echi ka*, meaning *belonging to others*, a clear indication that she would one day come under the custody of other clans. The announcement was followed by the killing of a cock for a boy and a hen for a girl child for celebration. This is followed by observation of *genna* by members of the family for five days for a female child and six days for a male child during which the naming ceremony of the child is observed. The appropriation of time for the naming was based on the belief that while a woman possessed only five strengths a man possessed six strengths. On the fifth or sixth day as the case may be, the naming ceremony is conducted – for a boy child, on the sixth day a little boy, who would become his carrier, was called and the act of placing the child upon his back was done six times with a prayer that they go together to the

forest, for hunting, fishing and other manly pursuits. Then he was given a proper name in lieu of the nickname given at birth. If it was a girl, a little girl was called and in like manner it was performed – placing five times on the back of the carrier, praying that they go together to collect firewood, to fetch water, to catch river fish and to the forest. Then her ears are pierced and she is given a proper name. It was followed by a feast and the boy carrier is served with six pieces of meat, and the girl carrier five pieces of meat (Ngullie, '94). The allocation of five and six days for the naming of the child was carried over in the death of a person; the period of mourning being five days for female and six days for male. The chanting suggests that gender work segregation was done right at birth and enforced on the child. Men, it was claimed, are endowed by nature with superior physical and mental attributes which are lacking in a woman. Basing on this, it was believed that a woman cannot perform tasks that a man does; she was not allowed even to try her hand at it. Differentiation in gender can also be observed in the breastfeeding of a child. By the right that males were superior to females, boys were suckled for three years as a rule and girls for two years. It is believed that the male child needed extra feeding, he, possessing an extra strength. Another very patri-dominant practice in the Lotha society, is the title *okharo* (endearing address to the youngest) given to the youngest boy in the family, the heir apparent, though he may have younger girl siblings after him. Because of their importance in carrying on the family name and since the chief economic activities revolved around them, special attention was given to the youngest boys in the family. This was a total denial of the existence of the girls as children of the parents. Thus, it can be suggested that patriarchal attitude and gender distinction in the Lotha tribe is rooted deeply. The perception of the child is formed in the growing up years; girls are raised to assume patriarchal conditions, and boys are raised with full consciousness of their distinctiveness as 'sons of warriors.' While the boys at around 9 to 12 years go to stay in the *chümpo* to learn the traits of a warrior, the girls stayed home to help the mother. According to the Lotha customary law, since females have no need of any learning, they had no right to enter a *chümpo*, and a fine was imposed on the

defaulters. The childhood of a Lotha girl ended at around 13 to 14 years for marriages in the Lotha society are conducted early in life. Rigid patriarchal control on Lotha women can thus be observed in that girls are married young and almost invariably without being consulted in the matter (Mills, '80).

A very prominent social practice of the Lotha tribe is the payment of bride price in the marriage system which, apart from the number of heads he could boast of, demanded that the groom earn his bride. It often involved the youth in servitude from about a year to seven years, apart from payment of the bride price proper, because of the father's unwillingness to give his daughter in marriage for nothing. Bride price does not determine the position of a woman, and unlike the Sema Naga girl whose marriage price was reduced at least 50 percent by the fact of her having an intrigue (Smith, '25) before marriage; the bride price of the Lothas has no bearing on the attributes a woman may possess. In theory, the demand of bride service and bride price among the Lothas was not economically motivated but this cannot be completely ruled out for, to start with, to meet the demands of bride price, when a young man come of age and intended to marry, he cleared a virgin forest and tilled his own field, independent of his parents. He had to fill up his granary to prove that he was in a position to support a bride. He also reared a pig to serve as the bride price. (Kikon, 2015) Among the Assam tribals, the woman being an economic asset to the household, she was taken away from her parental house with respect and social sanction. So also, for the Lotha the presence of a daughter in the house was considered as an economic asset, therefore, the loss of a daughter was to be compensated befittingly.

The missionary Mary Mead Clark, in her long residence in the Naga Hills observed that there was no degradation of women among the Nagas (Clark, '78). True to some extent for there was no social restrictions, such as *sati* or *purdah*, imposed on Naga women. However, as the Census of India 1891 states, the position of Naga women was inferior as compared to men due to the fact that they could not inherit landed property. Being a patriarchal society, lineage was traced in the male line, and sons were the sole heirs to family property. In the first place,

it must be noted that the Nagas followed collective ownership of property by the village and by clans. So the Lotha women according to customs were excluded from access to land in their own right. If a widow was alive, she having not remarried, she had the right of use to the land and thereof, for her survival. The unmarried daughter shared the rights with her mother. Hence all women became lifelong dependants. The only right to inheritance that a woman had was possession of articles of dress or artifacts made and used by women, such as earthenware vessels and weaving tools which generally passed into the hands of daughters or other female kin.

The Lotha women did not get equal rights with men and were prevented from participating in social functions and ceremonies whilst women of some tribes like Ao had all the rights socially. While they take no public part in the village councils or in political affairs and in inheritances have no very substantial share, they were on an equal footing with men in social life (Vickland, '28). Lotha women were also barred from taking part in dances; neither alone nor with men. Dances, in the Naga context, were a display of male machismo and therefore purely a male thing. Dances were enactments of man's prowess in battle which they performed with great pride, with spear and hatchet in hand in their full war dress accompanied by terrific howls and war whoops. Again all ceremonies concerned with the welfare of the whole community were undertaken by the priest of the village. Women were excluded from the ritualistic observances that occupy the foremost place in Naga culture. The Lothas, like all patriarchies enforced taboos against women touching ritual objects or food. It was believed that the presence of women near about would pollute the ritual. The universal belief that women were unclean could be related to the female menstrual cycle and childbirth. Ceremonies for the general welfare of the household were performed by the master of the house. An instance may occur, but very rarely, when the priest died and till the village could find a designate priest to replace him, the wife of the deceased took charge of the priestly duties. Women were forbidden to go anywhere near when a *chümpho* was under construction or when a stone dragging ceremony was carried out. The only time where women featured in the Lotha society was during

the 'Feast of Merit' ceremony, when the woman makes a nominal appearance beside the husband, and during the stone dragging ceremony of the husband, when the wife appears with three other women for the stone erection. The appearance of the women does not seem to have any valid reason except to fulfil the tradition but it could be to guarantee more stone erections for the man, just as women give birth to multiple children. Some sources suggest that, though it was taboo for women to go to war, women at times played an important role during war and conflict as peace makers or carriers; even the heads of the deceased were returned to the respective village through women ambassadors. Historically, women did not involve in the affairs of wars, for care was taken not to involve women and children as far as dealing with enemies was concerned; not to mention that women were not even allowed to venture beyond the village unprotected. Women, however, did involve indirectly by saving the lives of many by hiding them in baskets.

That a woman's place was in the home and revolved round the family economy and she was not to venture beyond this realm meant that she had no say in matters relating to the village or tribe. They were not even allowed to be anywhere near in the sitting platforms where men gathered every evening to socialize and discuss various topics (Murry, 2003). Here one may observe a similarity with Locke's presumption that a primary qualification for citizenship – the right to participate in public affairs – to be rationality. Only when male children had reached a level of adult rationality could they become citizens. Women were presupposed lacking in rationality, and were excluded from the role of citizens. And so it was that men considered women as unable to hold their tongue which may prompt them to expose the secret decisions to others; regarded as inferior to men and treated as a substandard thing. Women's views were considered as irrational and they were commonly called stupid-dumb or categorized as pigs and dogs. Even in the home, being in a subordinate position, a woman could not take part in any discussion in the presence of male visitors. In this way, women were denied the right to express their views, a tool which could have sharpened their thinking. However, J. P. Mills ('80) observed that "the Lotha man may say, '*What does a woman know about*

*such things?* Nevertheless he would very likely not only ask his wife's advice when he got home but take it into the bargain." This statement holds true, for the pride of men often led him to hold women in contempt in the presence of his cronies when, in reality, in the privacy of his house it was the woman he confided in. The Lotha folk tale, *The Salt Lady*, points out how the Lotha men dared each other to physically abuse their wives with the condition that anyone who failed to comply would be considered a coward and excluded from the group. What the men failed to recognize was women's capacity of intuitive perception, which J. S. Mill terms as 'a rapid and correct insight into present fact' and 'greater quickness of apprehension' and prompt action taken to that effect. This intuitive trait of a woman was regarded as 'suspicious in nature' by men folk. In this regard, the story of a Lotha woman, Kishüngla, having such traits, dispels all assumption that all women are 'stupid'. Here we see that by her intuition and cunning she managed to drive away the thieves thus saving the image of her husband. Among the Nagas, possession of a mithun signifies that the possessor was a man of great standing in the society and to lose it from right under him would be a disgrace to his status. By her intuition she sensed the presence of intruders and to save the image of her husband, she kept herself busy working on the cotton all through the night till daybreak, to give the impression that the household was active. Ultimately, the intruders had to abandon their mission. Such act of women gives one the impression that women could make use of their intuitive perception to advantage.

Historically, although the Lotha woman played a number of important roles in the family- as the wife, mother and the power behind the economic production of the family- the amount of labour women put into economic pursuits did not alter her position in the society. Women faced social, religious and political suppression and biological exploitation. Politically, she had no voice; socially, she had no place as an individual; in the home, though she wielded some influence over the husband, she was a mere tool for the propagation of the tribe. She had no economic status, for she possessed no land. The distinction between the private and the public world was clearly demarcated; the woman was relegated to the domestic

realm of production and reproduction, the men to politics of war. Though she was protected by the customary law in certain areas, it did not make her man's equal. It is the general view that the economic status of the human race in any nation, at any time, is governed mainly by the activities of the male: the female obtains her share in the racial advance only through him. This view can be contested taking into account that while men were obsessed with headhunting, with every man craving for their glory, women were multi-tasking – labouring for the sustenance of her family – a major contribution for any civilization to flourish. The sexual division of labour kept the Lotha Naga woman in an almost oppressed position for her work took second place to man's achievement. What the woman did for the family was absolved in the general milieu of the society as if it was of no significance. She was, in fact, the major contributor to the primitive economy of the Lothas considering that headhunting brought not economic value to the society, but only fame to the individual. No doubt, one motive of headhunting was to secure good crops but the constant warfare affected the economy of the people- constant raids led to loss of cattle and destruction of crops. Much time was spent by men getting ready for raids and repairing the damages caused by such raids that men undid what women built.

#### CONCLUSION

Lotha society clearly flourished upon the labour of the women, yet, men's actions were, supposedly, creating history. One can conclude that women's culture was denied and women were defined, in the Lotha society, in opposition to men, as weak, passive, emotional and intuitive. However, since, women were engaged in moulding men to create culture; therefore, culture, it can be argued, is the product of woman.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors gratefully acknowledge the response of participants especially, Thunchio Kikon (65 years) and Rensumo Nguille (80 years) of Tsungiki village, Wokha, Nagaland whose tales of yore helped to build up the story of the Lotha society. The extended helps of the Nagaland State archival offices for providing the official records which proved of immense help in constructing the factual arguments of this study are also acknowledged.

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