

Power Relation in Rural Assam in the Study of Tiwas

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Abstract

Not all the sections of the society enjoy equal level of power in society. Only a few sections enjoy power in cost of other. Accordingly, in patriarchal set up, men hold top most position in power relation. Therefore, women who are considered to be second to men, enjoy less power. In patriarchal set-up, this power relation is being maintained through different mechanism. Further, power dynamics in rural India carries many unique features. For example, not the entire member of powerful section is equally powerful or not the entire member of less powerful section is equally less powerful. Moreover, degree of power also depends upon time and space. With this background, this paper tries to make a critical review on dynamics of power relation among Tiwas among different sexes.

KEYWORDS: -Secular, Religious, Work division, Seniority

Introduction

Study of power is a complex process as it the study of 'relation between people' (Dahl, 1957, p. 201) wherein one person (the one with power) influences the behaviours/act of another person (the powerless one). Further, people have, as described by Robert A Dahl, different bases of power in different aspects of life. Accordingly, different people react differently in different times and spaces. Therefore, all sections of the society have not equal level of power even if they occupied same position in power relation as they acquired the power from different sourcesⁱ. Thus, a particular concrete individual in the community exercises power while other individuals are prevented from doing what they want or prefer to do (ibid).

While talking about distribution of power at Indian villages, sociologist like MN Srinivas considers that among the caste Hindu society, distribution of power depends upon numerous factors in rural India. These include as numerical predominance, control over economic resource, control over political power, high ritual status and those who take advantages of the western education system first (Srinivas, 1996) what the western theorist like Michel Foucault considered as 'system of differentiations' (Foucault, 2000). According to Foucault, system of differentiations permits one to act upon the actions of others' (ibid: 344)ⁱⁱ.

Based on understanding of these theorists on distribution of power, this study is trying to understand the distribution of power in rural areas basically among Tiwasⁱⁱⁱ of Assam, one of the North Eastern states of India.

The study is empirical in nature and by and large a preliminary enquiry into the research problem formulated for investigation and organized in to three sections. The

first section deals with introduction to the study and methodology adopted in the study. Second section deals with major discussion of the paper i.e. power division among different sexes of Tiwas in rural Assam. And the third or last section this study makes the conclusion on the basis of the analysis of discussion.

The field study was conducted at two villages of Morigaon selected randomly based on three basic criteria such as demography, distance from the district headquarter and different blocks. Morigaon was selected for field study as concentration of Tiwas is highest in Morigaon district in Assam. Based on above mention criteria two villages namely Udahinbori^{iv} and Kapurpurabori^v were selected for field study as majority of villagers were Tiwas, in fact, all the villagers of these villages were Tiwas. Further both villages fall more than 20 Km far from district headquarter and thus retain the characteristics of rural Assam. Udahinbori falls under Mayang development block and Kapurpurabori falls under Bhurbandha development block. Data were collected from primary and secondary source. Along with interview, participant observation was the prime method of data collection to full fill the objective of the study.

DISCUSSION: TIWA WOMEN IN THE STUDY OF POWER RELATION

The field study reveals that, although traditionally women occupy some high position in society among the Tiwas but the traditional position is not equal to men. Among Tiwas, women have not inheritance right, except those women who has tied up with Gobhiyarakha^{vi} marriage. On the other hand it has been observed that Gobhiya rakha marriage guaranteed a few portion of paternal land or immovable property to women but can not guarantee the equal share in compare to her brother.

Among Tiwas, traditionally women occupy some important office bearers' positions. Hadi Kumari is one such position in religious hierarchy. Further, they are given higher position in different rituals such as Akumari r ashirwad^{vii} similar to that of Barat Utsav^{viii}. However, this does not assure their claim over power as the field study shows that they cannot exercise this power that that gained through religious status in secular life. Moreover, at a point of time this degree of power is very limited and remains to those women who assume these positions for a short period of time as their services are not used in all through the year in religious life.

Another interesting fact that came up with the field study was men's control over political agenda. Although with introduction of the Seventy-Third Constitutional amendment, a few women from these villages contested in the Gaon Panchayat election, but in a true sense, still the men control the political scenario of the villages. Men hold different traditional positions and most of the active workers of different political parties are men. The entire informants said that when there was no reservation system, only men contested in election. Even no women contested in the unreserved seats in the election of Tiwa Autonomous Council, during the period when I was conducting my field study. Thus, the men actually controlled the political power by controlling political agendas^{ix}. They are the persons who decide who will contest in the election, who will be their leaders and to whom they will cast their votes and so on.

Thus, the unequal distribution of power at field among men and women further led men to control women's influence over different decisions related to their lives and

the society. These phenomena, shows that women are not only excluded from taking decisions but different practices are also structured in society to keep them outside of the decision-making process. Thus, the power rooted not only in the decision-making process but also in other areas which actually prevent a person from taking decisions (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962)^x.

Division of Power in Religious Life

Now the question is- how does the power relation maintained at these villages among men and women? In simple, this power relation at these villages can be termed as disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977) as power is control by powerful by keeping the powerless under supervision of powerful. In here powerless supervise themselves in a disciplined manner and power is retained by the powerful. Thus, the powerless consider the tradition and social behavior as the rules, which they should abide by and maintain for running the society. Therefore, there is no social control imposed from the above through outright coercion, but by disciplining people in serving power themselves (ibid).

This is the reason why women use to refer their husbands as ‘mallick’. Literary meaning of mallick is the owner. Thus, through cultural norms, men dominate the women by controlling both their body and mind. In here it should be remembered that power is not only the control of body but it also talks about control of mind (Mitchell, 1990)^{xi} of powerless section over which powerful sections exercise their power or control. Thus, ‘gender is not only a cause but also a consequence, instrument and embodiment of power-over relations’ (Koester, 2015, p. 3). In the case of the Tiwa community, taken for this study, this process is maintained through different roles assignment to different sexes and accordingly, they are being socialized. Accordingly, the socialization process was different for different sexes so that the power relation could be maintained in a way that it maintains men’s power on women. Thus, the women at field consider themselves as inferior to men. Even many women informants said

‘Lau JimaiDangorNahouwk Kiyō SadaiPatar Talat (in Assamese) (No matter what the size of the gourd is, it remains under the leaf of the creepers)’.

Among Tiwas, women are found to be divided in to two sections in power relation both in religious and secular relations. No matter what was the status of Tiwa woman in power relation, the field data shows that women have different further subdivisions in power relation. In power relation, basically in the religious life, Tiwa women are divided into two groups, i.e. the powerful group who control the religious positions and ceremonies, and those who are powerless and so do not have any say in religious life as they do not hold any religious position. Generally, it is the elderly women (mostly mother in laws) who constitute the powerful group and mostly the daughters-in-law or women between 20 to 35 years of age who constitute the powerless group in religious life. Many factors are associated with this division in religious life.

Holding of higher status in religious life by elderly women among Tiwas is a continuous process and each generation inherits the same from generation to generation. In this process one generation replace another. The issue of purity and

pollution is one of the major determining factors of this higher position. Only those who are considered to be pure and not polluted are allowed to hold this position. The determining factor of pure and pollution is mensuration. Tiwa society in rural Assam strictly adhered to temporary untouchability of women and they consider mensuration cycle as temporary pollution. During the menstruation period, no women are allowed to touch anything till the seventh day. They are forbidden to cook and clean the dishes of others. They are not allowed to enter to kitchen and any religious place. Further, during this period, if anybody touches them, then the person who touches them need to take bath before touching others. As, woman experiences mensuration till a certain age, so they prefer elderly woman to occupy different position in religious life. So, until a woman attains menopause, she is not allowed to occupy any position in religious life. Accordingly, only elderly women started to occupy different religious positions.

From the viewpoint of society, this phenomenon seems to be traditional and related to the issue of untouchability. However, this is not always true. There are some other underlying factors which forbidden the young women from being holding different positions in religious hierarchy. One of such reason is 'seniority'. The issue of seniority rooted in household further plays an important role in power distribution among the women in Tiwa society. An elderly woman could occupy such positions in society only after she holds the senior most position in family (of course it might not be a high position as compare to that of elderly men in the family, but a higher position among other women of the family). This inevitably assures her high position in religious life.

The second most important possibility of divisions of power in religious life and holding of positions by elderly women is the 'division of labor' after seniority. In fact, it is the most probable possibility for such division of power in religious life. Among Tiwas, work division is strictly maintained. Domestic chores are the sole responsibility of women. Therefore, as a woman became older, new women members such as daughter-in-law replace her position in domestic chores. This phenomenon takes place with the entry of a girl to that family as a daughter-in-law. As soon as a new woman member added to the family, the senior woman of the family started to control the decision over the domestic chores. Through this control, the elder woman begins to control the labor of other woman who replaces her at family in domestic chores. Now, in such condition, if a young woman is allowed to involve in different religious activities, then the elderly woman will have to complete the domestic chores. Accordingly, the family develop a mechanism in where domestic chores becomes sole responsibility of young woman. In here men play an important role. A series of discussion with different informants reveal the same.

Even an elderly woman said

'If we allow them to attend all the religious ceremonies then they will overtake us. Thus, we must control them. Otherwise, they will not obey us. Moreover, controlling of them is important to appropriate their labor especially for domestic chores'.

Thus, in those families where mother-in-law is alive and have physical mobility, the daughter-in-law is not allowed to attend the religious ceremonies. And this becomes a social norm for all. Those who violates it they become outcaste^{xii}.

It is not always true that only elderly woman plays the decisive role in distribution of power among them in religious life. In here, Tiwa men also play an important role. In fact, it is the man who decides who will be in powerful position in religious life and who will be excluded from this position^{xiii}. Almost all the men informants said that they do not allow the young women of their family to take part in religious life as they need to look after the domestic chores. If are allow to do so, then it will become responsibility of men what they do not want to do.

Moreover, keeping a large section of women excluded from controlling power is a positive aspect for men as it gave less possibilities of development of any resistance to unequal distribution of power among men and women. Through this process, men actually control the collective efforts of women in where a large number of women are being excluded. Finally, this exclusion lead to division of women in two sections in power relation in religious life. Moreover, this division always restrain an invisible tension between these two groups of women which actually prevents women from resisting the existing power relation between men and women. Interestingly, among Tiwa men there is no such division in religious life. All can hold any position in religious life irrespective of age, seniority, nature of work involves with and so on.

Division of Power in Secular Life

Like in the religious life, similarly in secular life also, Tiwa women divided in to two groups in power relation i.e. powerful and women with less power or no power. Powerful sections comprise of women with higher mobility, education and political rights. As they have early exposure to western education (Srinivas, 1996) and possess of some degree of skill and abilities (Tumin, 1967/1987), so they exercise some degree of control on the other sections of women. Thus, those women having jobs, those who are members of Gaon Panchayat^{xiv}, signatories of of different Self-Help Groups (SHGs), those who are entrepreneurs etc., irrespective of age, status in family (whether mother-in-law or daughter-in-law or daughter) constitute the powerful group in secular life and the rest constitute the powerless group. Therefore, unlike the religious life in where age, seniority and work divisions etc., play an important role in divisions of women into powerful and powerless sections, in secular life, other secular factors such as education, jobs, political participation, participation in economic institutions and the system of marriage etc., affect the divisions of women.

CONCLUSION

Thus, this study reveals that power is not subjected to person, rather it is related to the position, which a person holds. Whenever there is change in the position, there is change in power relation. Therefore, there is no person who is powerful, but the status, which the person achieves or is ascribed to, actually decides whether, the person is powerful or not. Therefore, individual exercises power, but individual cannot possess power (Foucault, 1969/2012). In such cases, at these villages, men always had an upper position being the head of the family and the primary breadwinner as set by the

social norms. Further power shifts with shift in position. But this degree of change of power varies from person to person and depends on different social norms.

Although, a few sections of women exercise some degree of control over the less powerful or no power section of women, but this is not enough for these powerful women to control the men. Thus, to sum up we can say that women as a group or individuals are second to men among the Tiwa society. Further, both the religious and the secular positions of women at these villages are independent of each other and holding of a high position in religious life does not enhance one's secular position or vice-versa. Therefore, power division among different sexes among Tiwa society is a dynamic and continuous process of power control mechanism wherein a large section of women is being kept aside from having any power through controlling the political agendas by men and keeping them outside decision making. It is because the 'power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not a supplementary structure over and above "society" whose radical effacement one could perhaps dream of' (Foucault, 2000, p. 343). So, there is a necessity to change the structure to distribute power equally among different sexes as power is not the pre-condition of knowledge; rather knowledge is the pre-condition of power (Foucault, 1969/2012)^{xv}.

Notes

ⁱThere are five sources of power. The first source is the position derives from authority given to people by virtue of their positions. People can gain power from the possession of goods and services. Skill and abilities also provide another source of power. The fourth source of power lies in one's personal qualities such as beauty, charm etc. The fifth source of power is force, which may be of psychological, social or physical. For further details, see Tumin, Melvin. M. 1967/1987. *Social Stratification: The forms and functions of inequality*. New Delhi: Prentice Hall of India.

ⁱⁱThe system of differentiations is the differentiation that occurs due to a number of factors that include juridical, traditional differences of status or privileges, economic differences in appropriating wealth and goods, cultural differences, and differences in know-how and competence. For further details, see, Foucault, Michel. 1982. 'The Subject and Power', in Hubert L. Dreyfus, and Paul Rabinow(eds.): *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Brighton: Harvester, pp. 208-26.

ⁱⁱⁱTiwa is one of the major tribes of Assam mainly concentrated at the central part of Assam also known as Lalung. Tiwa belongs to the great Bodo race and bears the physical characteristic feature of the Mongoloids. There are many popular legends associated with the origin of Tiwa. It said that one of the Hindu God Lord Shiva or Lord Mahadeo created them. According to their language, 'Ti' means water and 'Wa' means superior. For more details see, Bordoloi, B. N., Sharma Thakur, G. C., & Saikia, M. C. (1987). *Tribes of Assam: Part-I*. Guwahati: Tribal Reserach Institute.

^{iv}Udahinbori is a small village situated approximately 20 km north- west to the district headquarters of Morigaon district of Assam having 126 households inhabited by Tiwa

Community; in fact, all the villagers are Tiwas. The village survey conducted for the purpose of this study, shows that total population of this village is 660, out of which 338 are men and 322 are women. Hence, the sex ratio of this village is 953, which is lower to the sex ratio among the Scheduled Tribe (ST) live in the district i.e. 1000. The sex ratio of this village is also lower to the overall sex ratio of the district i.e. 967. However, the most alarming situation is in relation to the demographic composition of this village is that the sex ratio among below 06-year population is very low, accounts only 851 girls per thousand boys. Status of literacy at the village, according to the survey is not satisfactory. The village has only 60.91 per cent literate populations, which includes 68.05 per cent men and 53.42 per cent women. All these figures show that the status of women at this village is not up-to the mark. Popular tales provide details of the history of naming this village. According to the villagers, the present Udahinbori was originally the farmland of the Koch community and there was no inhabitant at this place like now. The size of the farm was not as large as the size of today's village. Because of the size of plot, this village inherited its present name. They said that the word 'Udahin' was derived from the word 'asoporamatti' and the plot was like an 'asoporamatti' meaning small piece of land. On the other hand, 'bori' in Oxomiya (Assamese) language means land. Therefore, later on when settlement started here, this place begun to known as Udahinbori. As, the farmland was far from the village of the Koch community, the owner of the land kept a Tiwa family to look after the plot. Accordingly, the Tiwa family became the custodian of this plot. Meantime, during 1950s', cholera broke out among the Koch landowners. Thus, they left their original homeland and Udahinbori became the property of the Tiwa custodian family, and then gradually it became a village. This story gave us a broad outlook on how the village became the land of Tiwas but not how it derived its name. Even after rigorous effort, I could not derive the logic behind the naming of the village. From the story, one can assume how this plot became village, but it is very difficult to relate this story with the naming of this village. It may be quite possible that the word Udahin is associated with Oxomiya word Udash that means desperate. It may be so that the outbreak of cholera made the Koch community so depressed with the loss of many of their family members and forced them to vacate the land. Finally, the people located the place as land of desperate, which later on began to known as Udahinbori.

^vKapurpurabori falls under Bhurbandha development block. It is also a Tiwa village with 47 households. The man woman ratio was 54:46 in Kapurpurabori; thus, it has 117 men and 100 women populations. Hence, the sex ratio at Kapurpurabori was 855 respectively. Interestingly, the sex ratio of the villages was not only lower than the sex ratio of the respective blocks and the districts but also lower than the sex ratio among the ST living in the district. The logic of the naming of Kapurpurabori is very simple. It consists of three Oxomiya words such as 'kapur', which means cloth, 'pura', which means burnt and 'bori', which means land. Therefore, it is the place, which experiences the burning of cloths. Earlier, when there was no human settlement at this place, it had a small beel (natural water reservoir) surrounded by forest to the west of

this present village. Tiwa people, primarily the women, living near the village used to catch fish in this beel. Once, when they were catching fish after changing their clothes, somebody burnt the forest. The forest fire caught the cloths that they kept near the beel. In this way, this place got the new name as Kapurpura and when it became the human settlement, it became the Kapurpurabori village.

^{vi}Gobhiya rakha marriage that reflects the oldest matriarchal system. Unlike other marriage system, in this tie-up boy needs to move to the house of girl and needs to write the surname of his wife. Thus, in this marriage system, girl does not loss paternal identity rather boy loss it.

^{vii}In this ritual, those girls are being worshiped who have not attain puberty. It is organised by individual household and Tiwa believe that worshiping of such girls may bring happiness and prosperity to their homes.

^{viii} The simple meaning of barat is fasting. This festival organized with ending of fasting by adolescence girls in order to appease their deity.

^{ix}This conclusion is based on my field observation. During the election of Tiwa Autonomous Council, it was observed that all the decisions such as whom to cast the vote, when to arrange the campaigning meeting etc., are made by men. Moreover, it is also said by the informants that in all the elections it is the men and not women who generally contest in election. Women contest in election in the reserved seats only. Further, it was also found that many informants still prefer to approach the local political leaders with their problems rather than approaching to the elected representatives of the Gaon Panchayat as they are women. They considered that the local political leaders are more powerful and influential as they are men.

^xFor further reference see, Bachrach, Peter, and Morton S Baratz. 1962. 'Two Faces of Power', *The American Political Science Review*, 56 (4):947-52. According to them, power not only leads to triumph over other participants in decision making, but also creates or reinforces social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope for other participants to take part in the decision-making process. Thus, according to them, those having power can mobilize the situation in their favour at the expense of others through a set of predominant values, beliefs, rituals and institutional procedures which they described as strategy of 'mobilization of bias'. According to them, power comprises of both decisions making and non-decision making processes. They described non-decision as a 'decision that results in suppression or thwarting of a latent or manifest challenge to the values or interests of the decision maker'.

^{xi}Power must be conceived as something two-fold. This includes both physical and mental mode of operation. For further details, see Mitchell, Timothy. 1990. 'Everyday Metaphors of Power', *Theory and Society*, 19 (5): 545-77.

^{xii}It was observed at the annual Naam-Kirtan of KaliramPatar. After chanting of two Naam-Kirtan, all the participants took a break for tea. After that, they again started chanting Naam-Kirtan again. Meantime the house owner KaliramPatar requested them to allow his youngest daughter-in-law to chant a kirtan. With this, the whole situation changed. All the office bearers among the women reacted differently. They did not want to allow his youngest daughter-in-law to chant a Naam-Kirtan and

rejected the request of KaliramPatar. Even one woman said directly “Gyanibuwarianishobuli bar bahadurimaricho- jaamaatsauki naam gai tai” (He was proud of his daughter-in-law. Let us call her; we also like to see her quality). However at least his daughter-in-law was allowed to chant the kirtan. When they asked her to chant the kirtan, a young married woman of 22-15 years old came out from inside of the house. She gave due respect to all participants by bowing down her head. Her head was covered with the urani. Then she initiated chanting of one kirtan. I found her chanting of kirtan was better than that of the office bearers as she had a soft voice and maintained the tone of the kirtan. Not only me, but a section of participants who were sitting at back also recognized that she sung better than that of office bearers as after completion of the kirtan they requested her to chant another kirtan. On the other hand, the office bearers did not recognize her quality rather it was observed that they did not cooperate with her while she was singing the kirtan. When she was singing they were taking among themselves.

^{xiii}It was found that men regulated many decisions of women. For example, a man informant said that he did not allow his wife to attend many religious ceremonies because allowing his wife to attend such religious ceremonies means allowing his wife to occupy religious positions. He did not want that his wife should have a high religious position. It is because he was holding a religious position and had to spend lots of time for the society. He has no other family member to carry out the domestic chores except his wife. In such a situation if his wife would also occupy religious position then there would be nobody to carry out the domestic chores. Although, he considered that his wife was active and other villagers wanted her to hold religious position and got involved with village matters.

^{xiv} It is the lowest level of three tier Panchayati Raj Institutions. In many parts of India, it is also known as Gram Panchayat.

^{xv}According to him, everyone through everyday actions and perceptions produces knowledge. The knowledge is one of the important components of society as it forms the social reality. The code of conduct of individual conduct is influenced by such social reality. For details see, Foucault, Michel. 1969/2012. *Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.

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