



Modernisation and Women's Status in North Eastern India:

A Comparative Study of Six Tribes



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Chapter I: Changing Women's Status And Tribals in the Northeast

North Eastern India comprising the seven States of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, is the abode of a large number of tribal and other ethnic groups. Most tribals of the region are of Mongoloid origin. Some of them live in the hilly terrain and others in the plains. They have some commonalities but each also has a distinct cultural, linguistic, religious and historical identity. This ethnic and cultural diversity has made the region different from the rest of the country. Besides, the Northeast has witnessed social unrest in the form of nationalist movements and political upheavals as a result of real or perceived threats to their culture and because of economic changes, especially land alienation and commercialisation. Along with the rest of India the Northeast has also experienced social, economic, cultural and political changes in the 1990s. It is now beginning to feel the impact of globalisation.

These processes have resulted in changes in the socio-economic structure of most societies in the region. As such they have implications for its tribal as well as non-tribal communities. Some think that since the tribal identity is closely linked to land, its alienation has special implications for them. It deprives them of their livelihood as well as of their identity. Some others opine that modernisation and religious changes have resulted in the assertion of patriliney even in matrilineal tribes like the Khasi and Garo and strengthening of patriarchy among most tribes. Some tribes have experienced these processes because of the ongoing attack on their culture and identity as well as migration of non-tribals to their region.

Thus the background of the region as well as the recent changes have special implications for women in general and tribal women in particular because tribal as well as non-tribal women in the region enjoy a relatively higher position in society than what their non-tribal counterparts do. There are indications that even within the Northeast tribal women are slightly better off than their counterparts in caste societies and much more when compared with the rest of

India. But their situation seems to be changing particularly with regard to the ownership pattern of common property resources (CPRs). as a result tribals in general and tribal women in particular experience a loss of cultural identity and livelihood.

The study on 'Changing Women's Status in the North East' on which this book is based, is an attempt to understand these changes in the region in general and among tribal women in particular. We begin it by conceptualising their status in the context of women in India in general and in the Northeast in particular before narrowing it down to the tribal women of the region. We then give the methodology of the study, a profile of the tribes studied and the field setting. Within this context we analyse tribal women's demographic, social, and economic status based on primary data got from the field.

In order to understand the implications for tribal women we analyse the changes in their economic status pertaining to their access to and control over the natural and other resources and the extent to which commercialisation has affected their role in the economy. Based on this understanding we look at their status in the context of the power they enjoy in the domestic and social spheres. Closely linked to it is their access to the wealth producing capacities of the community. We use the decision-making process in the family as an indicator to analyse gender-based changes in the power structure. To do it we look at tribal women's traditional role in their cultural and social systems and the result of the recent economic and social processes. Through this analysis, we test our hypothesis on tribal women's status in the Northeast and their standing in a society that is in a flux.

1. Conceptualising Women's Status

The first step in an effort of this type is to understand the thinking behind the analysis. In this study we attempted to understand the change in women's status through a comparative study of six tribes that are at various stages of modernisation. Gender based role differentiation is basic to the understanding of their status

because women's studies today take power as central to role and status differentiation.

The Rationale of the Study

Our focus is not on women's status in general, but on the impact of recent changes on the tribal women of the region, through a comparison between six tribes, namely the Aka of Arunachal Pradesh, the Angami of Nagaland, the Adibasi and Boro of Sonitpur district and the Dimasa of North Cachar Hills of Assam and the Garo of Meghalaya. These tribes have different historical experiences, social organisations, cultural values, religious identities, economic systems and degrees of exposure to modernisation and commercialisation. These forces have defined their identities and influenced women's status. So we tried to make an inter-tribal and at times intra-tribal comparative analysis of women's status with the objective of understanding the variations in the culturally and geographically distinct tribes. Secondly, we tried to understand their status and recent changes through a comparison between the domestic and social spheres since the positive and negative impact of the changes is felt in both of them. Thirdly, we looked at a thirty year period.

Thus it was a longitudinal study in the sense that it was a comparison between their past and present. Through a comparison between these tribes we attempted to examine the situation of tribal women of the region in their traditional society and the emerging trends that can have an impact on their status. In choosing the tribes, we also bore land relations, changing forms of agriculture and the extent of militarisation in mind because these and other changes have an impact on the identity of a community. They result in a search for a new identity in an attempt to cope with them. So we chose six tribes that were at different stages of a search for an identity and of transition from the past to the present..

To begin with land relations, all the areas we studied except Balipara come under the Sixth Schedule. So land cannot be transferred to 'outsiders'. A virtual revolution is nevertheless taking place in land relations. While community control is the primary principle upon which tribal land relations are centred, except among the Aka

of Arunachal Pradesh today more and more land is being brought under private ownership. The growth of individual land holdings has resulted in far-reaching changes in the community. In some areas like the southern Angami hills, the community is trying to maintain, with limited success, a balance between village or clan and individual ownership by adapting traditional land management rules (D'Souza 2001 a: 96-98). In other areas the absence of such methods has created new inequalities.

Women, Status and Social Roles

The context of role and power is essential to understand women's status in general and of tribal women in particular. Gender is a major but not the only differentiating factor conditioning divisions in human societies. Basically biological it is reflected in cultural norms that assigned specific roles to men and women in a society. Both were thus socialised to bear the responsibilities of the role assigned to them. Men were to be bread winners and custodians of property and of women and children who depended on them. Women were to produce heirs, socialise children, be "home makers" and thus be confined to the domestic arena while men dealt with the world outside. A set of norms was associated with these roles to which a status was assigned according to a person's position in the hierarchy (Mair 1972: 59).

This legally enforced position in a society is often legitimised in the name of the supposed capacities, limitations or superiority or inferiority of people. Subjectively internalisation of their subjugation by women themselves determines such legitimisation of their status. Objectively, social norms ensure that men and women adhere to this division. Thus though closely linked to power, gender differentiation is legitimised through a culture based on biological differences. Men and women are socialised to bear the responsibilities of the role assigned to them through a superior or inferior status. Inequalities are thus legitimised by attaching roles and responsibilities to specific social positions that determine an individual's social position (Mahapatra 2002: 47-48).

Thus a gender based concept of status denotes women's legal, social and psychological position and rights and privileges in a given

social set up. It is conditioned by the prevalent ideas and functions in that society, the attitudes, the behaviour of men towards women and their own acceptance or rejection of these roles. So women's status that encompasses their traditional as well as changing position in a society, is a dynamic concept where both their present and emerging status is based on the prevalent ideas, functions, norms, and traditions. The development and corresponding changes in their status is linked directly with social and cultural traditions, stages of economic development, level of education and political participation (Pande 2001: 4-5). Such factors affect the national as well as regional characteristics of women. Hence the need to make a comparative study.

Women and Power

Status and role are also interlinked with the concept of power and position. The dominant opinion in Women's Studies today is that a role confers social, economic, political or cultural power on the individual. In other words, status is determined to a great extent by the power enjoyed by men and women in the domestic and social spheres. Today status is evaluated also in terms of social and economic indicators such as income, property or opportunities and skills that open up opportunities of employment, better health etc. Access to or denial of these services confers or denies power to an individual or group. Many also understand power to mean one's ability to take independent decisions on personal matters like education, career, marriage, fertility, divorce, remarriage etc. even in the face of opposition or as "women's ability to determine important events in their lives, even when others are opposed to them" (Chatterji 1993: 68). In the present-day context education, economic independence, employment and political participation are the major indices of women's status in a society. These indices are adjudged on the basis of power in the social, economic, political and religious fields (Siddiqui and Ranganathan 2001: 135-136).

Others who hold that functions, status and power are relative, do not link women's status only to their economic roles but speak 'also in terms of their autonomy and of equality between men and women. They have equity and equality as their starting point, not

absolute control to the exclusion of men or anyone else. They hold that women's emancipation and equality with men are impossible as long as they are excluded from socially productive work and restricted to the private sphere i.e. to work at home. They demand autonomy and complementarity, not independence. In their view the sum total of their participation in the production process and control over the productive resources determine the power they exert in the social system. This view of power involves understanding women's subordination and powerlessness and the consequent inequality, and resisting such undeserved injustice. It emphasises the part played by their access to or lack of power to influence their own social position. So improving social status involves women acquiring more decision-making power in relation to men (Banu 2001: 12-14).

Both are agreed that women cannot acquire power and improve their self-esteem and self-image as long as they lack a share in the decision-making process in the family. Both also bring into focus the rights and opportunities provided by the State, society and the socio-cultural institutions to perform these tasks. Apart from more decision-making power in the family, in their society they have to be involved in decisions concerning the economy, political participation and representation, education, constitutional safeguards, rights and privileges enforced as laws. "Legal measures, constitutional rights and privileges supplemented with education and gainful employment help to instil much confidence and self-dignity among women" (Chatterji 1993: 61). Accordingly, most countries have enacted laws to remove the traditional socio-cultural disabilities and discrimination. These legal measures propose to achieve freedom from their traditional economic and social roles by providing them opportunities of gainful employment, education, political participation and other rights (Siddiqui and Ranganathan 2001: 10-12). They have helped many women to emerge from their traditional roles and free themselves from their ascribed hierarchical social position.

Women and Power in Traditional Societies

According to another opinion the concept of power is relevant

only in individual based societies like those of the West, especially the urban middle class or in hierarchical systems like castes. In these systems division of roles essentially involves power based on a domination-dependency syndrome. In the perception of these scholars, this view of women's status is static. They view changes in their status as more of a process than a fixed point. "Women's status would be analysed according to economic improvement, more decision making powers in the family and in society, an attitude of self-confidence, equality of sexes, and women coming together as a group both in the understanding of their situation and in working for equality" (Fernandes 1990: 36-37).

This concept of women attaining status as a dynamic process rather than a static acquisition is further clarified by others while analysing traditional, particularly tribal, societies. They hold that power had less importance in the traditional tribal societies than the division of roles. Power was not absent but their conscious processes were geared more towards the division of roles than of power (Klesing-Rempel 2001). The main reason for it is that in these societies there was a clearer division between the family and social spheres than in either caste or individual based systems. For example, in most tribal communities, the woman was in charge of the family. She controlled its decisions and economy. The man represented the family in society. So the village council was made up of men alone (Fernandes and Menon 1987: 117-119). In that sense both of them had power within their own spheres, but one can assume that the social role was more important than that in the family. It made them patriarchal societies in which the woman was not equal. But her status was higher than that of women in other societies.

Table 1.1: Type of societies and Legitimacy

<i>Society Type</i>	<i>Informal</i>	<i>Formal</i>
Livelihood	CPRS	Individual Patta
Power Source	Community	Individual
Legitimacy	Spoken Word	Written word

This division of roles is visible among others in marriage and in patterns of cultivation. It illustrates also the difference between the informal and formal societies as well as the concept of role and power. The traditional societies belong to the informal sector. In them the source of power and legitimacy is the community and the word of mouth. Truth is unequivocal in them. For their sustenance they depend on the resource under the control of the community. The formal society depends on the individual and the written word. Its livelihood and sustenance are controlled by a written individual ownership document (*patta*) (Sharma 1978: 8-10).

An area in which the division between the formal and informal societies as well as of roles is symbolised is marriage. In most traditional societies, once the boy and the girl chose their life partners they approached their mothers for their consent. After their consent (obviously in consultation with their husbands), the fathers of the boy and the girl approached the village council for its permission for their children to be declared husband and wife. After getting the permission of the Council made up of men alone, the boy and girl were free to live as husband and wife. The permission that the leaders granted in the name of the community provided the legitimacy they required (Menon 1992: 220-221). It may be contrasted with the Hindu and civil marriages. In the former a ceremony in the presence of the community is essential for them to be considered man and wife, but no written document is required for social acceptance. However, in most of these cases the decision is taken by the father, obviously in consultation with the mother. The validity of the civil marriage, on the contrary, requires the presence not of the community but of five individuals, the man, the woman, two witnesses and the registrar. Basic to it is a written document, the marriage certificate (Sharma 1978: 11-12).

The difference between shifting cultivation and settled agriculture is another mode of distinguishing between these societies. It is not a distinction between informal and formal societies. Also settled agriculture in India is in most cases sustenance based and belongs to the informal sector. The difference is in the form of ownership. By and large shifting cultivation depends on the CPRs. Studies in Eastern India show that among most *jhum* practising tribes

the village council took the decision on the area to be cultivated, the size of the plot each family could cultivate according to the number of mouths to feed, which family with excess labour would assist which one with a shortage of workers, and the day before which cultivation could not begin. At this stage the man of the house chose the plot and performed the rites marking the beginning of cultivation. From that moment the woman took charge of the plot and controlled production and labour. As a result, division of work has traditionally been more equitable in shifting cultivation than in settled agriculture (Fernandes and Menon 1987: 77-79). In the latter the plot is owned by an individual, in most cases a man, who takes decisions concerning the type of crops to be grown and division of work. He is also the decision maker in family matters such as children's marriage. Thus unlike in the tribal society he controls both the family and society. Hence in a community based system in which there is a division between the family and social spheres, the woman has greater control over the resource meant for immediate use than in settled agriculture controlled fully by the man (Menon 1995: 80-82).

This somewhat lengthy discussion on roles and status is basic to the longitudinal nature of our study. Today's discussion on women and power belongs primarily to the formal society and to individual ownership of property. One notices among many tribes in the Northeast a transition from an informal to a formal society. In this process, the State and other systems like religion and the political set up focus on the social sphere where the man predominates. In so doing these external inputs may strengthen patriarchy and lead to the deterioration of women's status unless measures are taken to counter it. The political system, for example, is in the social sphere. It often works on the tradition of division of spheres and distorts it by letting men monopolise political power which is assumed to be belonging to the social sphere. That may explain why till recently Meghalaya did not have a single woman legislator and there are only three today, though all three major tribes in this State i.e. the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia are matrilineal. But their societies are patriarchal.

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words, we ask whether the present type of modernisation and external interventions strengthen patriarchy and result in the deterioration of women's status. The Sixth Schedule applies to four out of the six tribes we studied. The law recognises community ownership of land among them. However, there is a trend among them towards individual ownership. Another trend is towards commercial crops. Both the trends can go against women if care is not taken to prepare the family and the community for the changes. The question that needs to be asked is "if it is true that the present type of modernisation goes against tribal women what measures need to be taken to ensure their equality?" They were not equal in their traditional societies but had more rights than their counterparts in other societies had. How can one build on this tradition and go towards equality, not subjugation?

2. Women in Indian History

A study on the status of women in the predominantly tribal North Eastern societies can be better understood when their situation is compared with that of the rest of India and located within the larger discussion on women's status in the academic discourse in the social sciences in the country as a whole and among tribal women in particular. Within that background we shall study the issue in a historical perspective.

Conceptualising Women's Status in India

In the West studies on women began in the post-war period, particularly in the 1960s with a conviction in a section of them that they as a group have been relegated to the background, in spite of the roles they play as homemakers. This disillusionment grew stronger when their status was re-examined at the time of the International Year of Women, 1975. They felt that two decades of mobilisation and struggles had failed to achieve the target of their equality. However, there is an opinion that these statements refer to the idealised state of women. We shall not go deeper into this issue. We mention the situation in the West only to state that not merely in India but also elsewhere, women are denied equality with men.

Discrimination based on biological and cultural differences has worked against them and has led to a discrepancy between the roles they play in society and their access to power and status (Siddiqui and Ramanathan 2001: 14-27).

As in the rest of the world so also in India, there is a wide gap between the idealised state and the social reality of women. But its expressions are considerably different in this country. Because of it some think that their idealised state is conceptualised in the historical and social situation of the West. While Indian women share many of their disabilities with their western counterparts, the experience of constraints and subordination they experience is more extensive because of higher illiteracy and poverty among them and lack of awareness of their situation among the majority. As a result they have fewer opportunities to free themselves from their subjugation and differentiation. So western thinking cannot be transferred directly to India (De Souza 1977: ix).

Table 1.2: Sources of Power in Indian Society

<i>Area</i>	<i>Dominants</i>	<i>Subalterns</i>
Social	High caste	Low caste
Economic	Rich	Poor
Habitat	Urban	Rural
Gender	Male	Female

A reason why one needs to modify western concepts in India is that, many feminists in the rich countries take the gender issue in isolation and treat women as a homogeneous group. In a country like India, while there are commonalities between all women and the male-female divide is basic to the injustice they suffer, the extent of their discrimination, disadvantages as well as privileges differ according to their habitat (urban-rural), social status (high and low caste), class (rich-poor) and gender (male-female). Thus one can speak of a fourfold source of inequalities and understand power in terms of this ladder. This combination of sources of power results in cumulative inequalities. On top of the ladder is the urban high caste upper class male, followed by the female of the same group. Then comes the rural high caste, rich male followed by the female

of his caste-class. Finally comes the rural low caste, poor male followed by the female of his caste or class (De Souza 1986: 26). (Table 1.2). Most cultural, economic, political, religious and social power is accumulated in the hands of the urban high caste rich male. It trickles down according the position of the rest. Because high caste/class persons have access to the best education, health care and nutrition, they also monopolise high status jobs and other facilities (Qadeer 1985: 204-206).¹ Thus they not merely monopolise power in this generation but also ensure upward mobility for themselves in the next. On the other side, rural poor Dalits and tribals, particularly women, are denied not merely power in this generation but also the possibility of upward mobility in the next. For example, around 86% of the child labourers are Dalits and tribals, 60% of them girls (Fernandes, Burra and Anand 1986: 96-98). Discrimination against Dalit and tribal children is seen also in high infant mortality, poor literacy and health.

Thus there are variations of behaviour across regions and between castes and classes. Common to all is gender-based discrimination that runs through the whole spectrum of caste, class and habitat. Because of it the woman's status is lower than that of men at every level. It is relevant to our theme because the tribal communities in which women experience discrimination less than in caste societies are being integrated into the formal system without providing to them adequate opportunities to cope with the changes. As a result indications are that their status deteriorates (Fernandes 1993). Hence the need to introduce gender elements in the caste-tribe-class analysis and the caste/tribe component in the gender analysis of these and other societies.

Women in the Indian Ancient and Middle Ages

Historical records in the form of religious texts and literature of the Vedic, Puranic, Medieval and post-independence period throw light on the perceptions and attitudes towards women and their role fulfilment in Indian history and variations in their socially and culturally ascribed position. Some argue that their social position in the early Vedic age was high and almost idealistic (Siddiqui and Ranganathan 2001: 31-34). There are indications that in that period

women played an active role in the economy and that girls were allowed to undergo rituals and attend ceremonies that are barred to them today. What appears in the later Scriptures like the *Aitareya* and *Sankhayana Aranyakas* and *Atharva Veda* is considerably different. By the time these Scriptures were written, men had strengthened their position. The male law-giver curbed women's freedom in deed and speech. The literature of this period like the *Grhyasutras*, *Smritis* and other treatises depict them in a poor light (Bhattacharya 1987: 33-34).

To understand these apparent contradictions, one should probably situate the Scriptures within the historical context in which they were produced. One probable reason behind the changes is the transition from a pastoral to a settled agriculture based community, and the surplus in production that accompanies it. In this form of a society, women tend to lose their social mobility and the measure of freedom that they enjoyed earlier. Thus the change in women's status probably also symbolises a transition from an earlier tribal (or possibly Dravidian) society expressed in the early Vedic high status to the later Sanskrit age when women's status got lowered. This situation has probably been codified in *Manu Samhita* IX.3 which says "Since a woman is weak, she is unfit to enjoy freedom." The earlier relatively high status is probably represented by Jainism and Buddhism, considered somewhat progressive with regard to their position. Buddhism gave a degree of freedom and equality to all the subalterns including women. The order of nuns provided an alternative vocation to women who wanted to disassociate themselves from the normal functions of common women. Widows were respected and divorce was allowed under certain circumstances (Sivaramakrishna 2001).

As in the ancient age so also in the medieval, two trends existed side by side. In some cases one sees a reaction against organised and hierarchical religious doctrines in the form of *Sufism* and the *Bhakti* movement. However, one cannot view it merely as a reaction to religious orthodoxy. It was also, perhaps principally, a reaction to the caste hierarchy. *Sufism* too, while being an eclectic religion, sought to question the rigidity imposed in the name of Islam. Some believe that these two movements influenced each other both in

their origin and growth and that both were probably influenced by Buddhism. Common to the two is the fact that they articulated the aspirations of the subalterns. *Bhakti* resisted principally caste and rejected a hierarchy based on it and the nature of work. It preached that all work is equal as long it is done out of devotion to God. Similar was the approach of *Sufism*. Though both opposed social hierarchy in general and the caste system in particular. By questioning its religious basis they became the voice of the subalterns. By implication though not overtly they also opposed women's subjugation. It was too early in the day to speak of women's equality openly. But the spirit of these movements of equality can be extended also to women (Sharma 1966).

The Colonial Age and the Freedom Struggle

Like the middle ages, also the colonial period is ambiguous on issues concerning women. Their subordination was intrinsic to India's dominant cultures. Though many subaltern groups were more supportive of them, the colonialist needed the collaboration of the dominant classes in order to run the administration and transfer the commercial values of the Industrial Revolution to the masses (Misra 1961: 59-61). As a result he made constant compromises with the dominant classes both in the metropolitan country and the colony. In order to support the British Industrial Revolution, the colonial regime strengthened the feudal forces in India while building capitalism in Europe. Besides, what the colonialist called civilisation was male dominated. Thus both the colonial culture and the Indian dominant system considered patriliney more civilised than matriliney. So the colonialist's commercial imperative and culture combined to uphold the patriarchal culture of the dominant classes (Banerjee 1989). As a result many popular cultures that provided women with opportunities of freedom came to be considered inferior and downgraded in the name of civilisation. Some matrilineal societies like the Nairs of Kerala that wanted to get the benefits of the colonial system changed over to patriliney in response to its demands (Mehta and Saradmoni 1983). One is thus left with the impression that while upholding equality in theory, colonial culture was ambiguous towards women's equality.

On the other side, the principle of equality was followed by a few in imparting English education. Many women, mostly from the dominant castes, but also a few subalterns gained access to it. That created a basis for later struggles. Thus though the Indian dominant classes opposed women's equality, the colonialist had to yield to pressures from reform minded Indians as well as some missionaries in their favour. So while the colonialist strengthened the feudal system, some of these inputs resulted in a few subalterns becoming aware of their rights. As a result, India's colonial history is also one of resistance by these groups more than by the dominants (Amin 1988: 101-108). Besides, measures such as female literacy and widow remarriage that reformers like Raja Ram Mohun Roy propagated in the 19th century could have gone a long way in assuring a better place for them. In practice these reformers paved the way for the British government to pass several laws to eradicate the social evils which discriminated against women. However, the social situation and the dominant attitude in India went against their implementation.

The opposite was the effect of the legal changes meant to make it easy for British entrepreneurs to acquire land at a low price for mines and plantations. Unlike the social reform laws, these were implemented by the colonialist since his enterprise was primarily economic. These laws had an impact on the subalterns in general and women in particular. Intrinsic to the land was individual ownership that is basic to the formal system. It affected women the most. It confers on the owner the right to use the property according to his/her will, with no obligation to anyone else unless it goes against the rights of another individual. Community ownership existing in the Sixth Schedule areas is an exception to this norm. Changes in the land laws made individual ownership absolute because they were based on the principle of eminent domain, called *terra nullius* (nobody's land) in Australia. The White colonisation of the Americas, Australia, New Zealand and southern Africa was based on the principle that anyone can occupy land belonging to none. The Australian judiciary has declared it null and void (Brennan 1995: 15-18) but it continues to be the basis of land laws in India under its American version of eminent domain. Its first facet is that the natu-

ral resources such forests and land with no individual title belong to the State. Its second facet is that the State alone may define a public purpose and deprive even individuals of their assets for it (Ramanathan 1999: 19-20). One result is development-induced displacement and deprivation of livelihood.

To begin with the subalterns in general, these legal changes disrupted the lives of the Dalits by weakening the *jajmani* relationship with the land owning groups. The *jajmani* system did not break up immediately but got weakened. While keeping the Dalits and other subalterns tied to land with a low social status, this system had ensured their material security. The changes in the land laws deprived them of material security without improving their social status (Fernandes 1996: 143-144). It also de-legitimised the tribal community based system. As private ownership became the sole norm, the tribal woman who exercised some control over her livelihood because of the role assigned to her in the family economy began to lose it. The laws affected also women from the land owning dominant classes because individual ownership involved transferring all power to men.

More changes occurred in the age of the freedom struggle. Following in the footsteps of the 19th century reformers who raised their voice against the age-old customs and prejudices against women, its leaders like Mahatma Gandhi espoused their cause through new value systems. Nevertheless the freedom movement including Gandhi's stand on their role continued to be ambiguous. Their participation fitted well into his scheme of combining social with religious reforms. He considered women crucial for reforms like abolishing child marriage. He did not assert their equality explicitly in the form one understands it today. But he was convinced that the freedom movement would not succeed "unless women came out of the *purdah* and worked shoulder to shoulder with men" (Bakshi 1987: 3). Following this principle he involved a large number of them in the struggle.

Though it may sound like using women as instruments for an objective his approach was progress over the middle class male dominated years of the movement. He at least saw the need to involve women actively in the struggle. However, support to their cause

came more from the subaltern, particularly Dalit, movements than from the dominant classes. That too can be situated in the 19th century context, when the middle class sought to adjust its culture to grasp the opportunities provided by colonial intervention. In adapting itself to their system this class had also to defend its tradition to which women's subordination was basic. Since such adaptation demanded a change in gender relations too the high caste leaders especially in western India were split among those who wanted to safeguard their tradition and those who were open to change. Brahmins like Bal Gangadhar Tilak did not favour their equality. In contrast, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule the Dalit leader was convinced that the failure to educate women was the prime cause of India's backwardness and that no change was possible without them being an integral part of the process. So he spent much of his energy on their education (Chakravarti 1996: 163-168).

Thus despite the ambiguity in the colonialist's mind, western education was instrumental in inculcating the ideology of equality in women. This value created in them an awareness of the need to rediscover and reaffirm their social position as equals. However, the nuances in the approach of leaders cannot be ignored. One is left with the impression that Mahatma Phule viewed education as absolute, knowledge as an end in itself. Dalits in general and women in particular had to acquire it through education in order to feel equal to the castes that suppressed them. Though Dr B. R. Ambedkar too upheld Dalit equality one is left with the impression that, for him education was primarily an instrument for the Dalits to move upwards on the social ladder. Without his realising it, his approach of instrumentality ran the risk of favouring Dalit men more than women since they can interact better with the outside world and get jobs in the system.

More differences arose in the political formations about their political role, especially their right to vote. Many women who were politically active in the freedom struggle refused to accept their disenfranchisement and turned this demand into a rallying point. However, given the social processes mentioned above, it was easier to convince subaltern leaders than those from the "high castes" and the British Parliament, of the need to treat them as equal political

partners. So women involved in the freedom struggle organised regular delegations to meet Montague and other British representatives. Their demand was not conceded in 1919 but they had made much progress by 1931. Many middle class women could qualify to be voters because of their education. But the property clause went against them. The Joint Select Committee of the House of Lords did not support their franchise. It stated that once men were granted franchise to the provincial councils, they could take a decision concerning women. So women had to overcome two hurdles, at the provincial council and the British Parliament. We do not need to go into its details. Suffice it to state that despite obstacles the objective was achieved (Pearson 1989: 200-205).

3. Women in Post-Independence India

The spirit of the freedom struggle is reflected in Article 39 of the constitution that confers equality on women. Post-independence India has introduced new laws and schemes in their favour. However, it would be unrealistic to state that they have attained equality. Some classes have made progress. So it is important to make a caste/class/habitat based analysis of women's status in modern India.

Women and the Legal System

The value system propagated by the reformers is felt in constitutional provisions and laws such as the *Special Marriage Act 1954*. Other measures like the Social Welfare Board, *Mahila Mandals* and development programmes were meant to promote their welfare. A National Committee was established in 1971 to survey the socio-economic status of women and suggest plans for their welfare. Programmes like DW CRA were introduced with the hope of improving the lot of rural women. More middle class women than in the past took to salaried jobs and gained some economic freedom. But some think that it did not really lead to their liberation. Initially a salaried job was a double burden. They became full time workers but their role as housewives did not change. Slowly, however, it brought subtle changes in their own attitudes and those of others about their work in general and their status in particular.

As a result of the changes in the work pattern, middle and upper class working women have become more conscious of their rights. Many of them consider economic independence a means of improving their position in the social hierarchy (Karlekar 1986). Thus though the status of urban middle class women has improved, one cannot state with confidence that it has come up to the desired level of equality.

The situation is worse when it concerns the rural majority. The main reason for it is that laws have been passed without building a social infrastructure of awareness and education to complement these changes. It is symbolised by the *purdah* which is not to be confused with the veil (*burqa*). One is referring to the social ban on a woman interacting with men not related to her. According to one interpretation, such taboos are symbolic of the Indian woman's dependence on men all her life viz. on her father in her childhood, husband after marriage and son in widowhood (Sharma 1980).

An example of a law without a social base is the one declaring dowry a cognisable offence. One does not have to labour the point that the menace is growing despite the law. The worsening sex ratio shows that it has deteriorated with consumerism that is intrinsic to globalisation. The overall sex ratio in India has increased marginally from 927 in 1991 to 933 in 2001. But that of the 0-6 age group has declined from 945 in 1991 to 927 in 2001 because of a decline in States like Haryana, Punjab and others that have witnessed a high economic growth in recent decades. Despite its economic prosperity, at 865 Haryana had the lowest sex ratio in the country in 1991, mainly because of the exclusive attention paid to economic growth ignoring social inputs. For example, the sectors of agricultural production where men are involved are mechanised, not those in which women work. As a result, women are expected to tend more cattle than in the past. So far from declining, women's workload has increased in prosperous States like Haryana. With growing commercialisation, the sale of milk and the income accruing from it is controlled by men. Because of the pressure to earn more income, not enough milk is kept back for children. The malnutrition that results from it is seen in high infant mortality. In 1991 it was 68 per 1,000 in Haryana

or about 200% more than in Kerala which has invested much in the social sector but relatively little in economic growth (UNDP 1997: 3-4).

Haryana's sex ratio has declined further to 861 in 2001 because of a sharp fall in the ratio of the 0-6 age group from 879 to 820. In Punjab the overall sex ratio has declined from 882 to 874 and that of the 0-6 group from 875 to 793 (Registrar General and Census Commissioner 2001: 92). An analysis of the census data shows that similar is the case in other prosperous States like Gujarat and Maharashtra and that the decline is the sharpest in their most prosperous districts as well as in others like Salem in Tamilnadu (Bose 2001: 46). Thus far from ensuring a better deal for the girl child a higher standard of living may intensify the bias against her and her situation may deteriorate. With prosperity access to modern technology grows. The rich in these States have used it against the girl child. The families that can afford pre-natal sex determination use the technology though the *Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act of 1994* bans it (Srivastava 2001: 184-185). Other analysts go beyond prosperity to globalisation and the consumerist society that is intrinsic to it. The main reason of these "sex selective abortions" seems to be greater demand for dowry. By its very nature dowry turns the girl child into an economic liability. The demand has increased with the need for more money to cope with a consumerist society. Dowry is one of its major sources. So while globalisation is beneficial to the middle class as a whole, often it goes against girl child of these classes too (Bose 2001: 45-46).

Women and Cumulative Inequalities

While feticide is at the basis of sex selective abortions in the middle class, poverty and cumulative inequalities add to the burden of the poor girl child and woman. While the urban high caste upper class male accumulates economic, political, social, cultural and religious power in himself, the rural poor Dalit or tribal woman continues to be economically poor, socially without a status, politically powerless and culturally marginalised. Denied access to education, her health status is low and she gets only low paid jobs.

The remaining groups in this ladder have access to economic, political and social inputs according to their position in it (Table 1.3).

Table 1.3: All-India Male and Female Literacy Rates in the Rural and Urban Areas

Year	Total Population			Scheduled Castes			Scheduled Tribes		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
1961									
Urban	57.49	34.51	49.97	32.19	10.05	21.18	30.47	13.42	22.41
Rural	29.09	08.55	19.01	15.06	02.51	08.89	13.36	02.91	08.16
Total	34.43	18.70	24.02	16.95	03.29	10.27	13.82	03.17	08.53
1971									
Urban	61.27	42.14	52.44	38.92	16.99	28.64	37.10	19.61	28.83
Rural	33.76	13.17	23.73	20.04	05.06	12.77	16.91	04.36	10.68
Total	39.45	23.60	29.45	22.36	06.44	14.67	17.63	04.85	11.30
1981									
Urban	65.83	47.82	57.40	36.60	47.54	24.34	47.60	27.32	37.93
Rural	40.79	17.96	29.65	27.91	08.45	18.48	22.94	06.81	14.92
Total	46.89	24.82	36.23	31.12	10.93	21.38	24.52	08.04	16.35
1991									
Urban	83.30	65.70	75.00	63.89	43.03	54.09	66.56	45.66	56.60
Rural	57.00	30.60	44.20	37.02	16.18	26.06	38.45	16.02	27.38
Total	64.13	39.29	52.21	40.69	25.65	38.05	40.65	18.19	29.60

Source: Census Commissioner 1961a, 1961b; Registrar General and Census Commissioner. 1971a & 1971b; 1981a & 1981b; 1994: lxxiii; 1995: liii; NIAE 1992: 5.

An example is literacy by caste/tribe and habitat. Table 1.1 shows it in the country as a whole, 1951-1991.² The differences would look more glaring if one were to analyse it by State. For example, at the national level Dalit and tribal female literacy was 25.65% and 18.19% respectively in 1991, against 39.29% for all women. In Rajasthan it was 4% for tribal women and in AP 9%. The national average looks high because of the North Eastern States like Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. Dalit literacy was 19.49% in Bihar and 26.85% in UP. But Dalit female literacy was 7.07% and 10.68% respectively in these States. Among rural Dalit women it was 5.54% and 8.47% respectively. The national average for Dalits looks somewhat high because of States like Kerala (79.91%), Gujarat (61.06%) and Tripura (56.66%). In the Hindi belt literacy has re-

mained static.

Similarly, malnutrition and infant and child mortality are the highest among the scheduled classes so are bondage and child labour. Through these measures those with a vested interest in their poverty ensure that their present generation remains poor and that the next one cannot free itself from poverty, by denying them access to education and leisure that are essential for their human growth and to improve their socio-economic status. Census data show that the lower the literacy, the higher the proportion of child labourers. For example, by official count in 1981 literacy in Kerala was 70.42% and child labourers were 0.3% of the workforce. On the other extreme, in Andhra Pradesh literacy was 29.94% and the share of children in the workforce was 9.24%. In Bihar it was 26.2% and 4.42% and in Orissa it was 38.46% and 6.5% respectively (Registrar General and Census Commissioner 1971a and 1981a; Govt. of India 1985: 460-461).

These figures are of special relevance to Dalits and tribals among whom both illiteracy and child labour are high. Studies indicate that in 1981 India had 44 million child labourers (Khatu et al 1983) around 86% of them Dalits and tribals, 60% of them girls (Fernandes, Burra and Anand 1986: 96-98). However, compulsory universal education till the age of 14 remained a directive principle till recently, as such non-judiciable and was not implemented (Burra 1995). A constitutional amendment was passed on 28th November 2001, making education compulsory but not free. It puts the onus of educating children on the parents whose duty it declares fundamental. But the State does not accept the responsibility of free education. So it will not have any impact on the education of the poor, particularly of girls in a situation of a poor family's daily struggle for survival (Fernandes 2001a).

Neglect of the Social Sector

The main reason for the continuation of cumulative inequalities is the neglect of the social sector. Human development requires a substantial investment in education, health and nutrition. South and North Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia under Sukarno and the two Chinas invested 8 to 15% of their GDP on them (Colonel-Ferer 1998). Dreze and Sen (1989) state that India should allot at least 10% of its GDP

to this sector. But it has rarely gone beyond 6% in the five year plans (Table 1.4). The share of education has declined with every plan and a smaller proportion of it has been allotted to elementary education. In 1981-82, 3% of the GNP was spent on education, 1.7% (56.67% of it) on elementary. In 1986-87 the total went up to 3.7% but that of elementary remained at 1.7% (45.95% of the total). 4% of the GNP was spent on education in 1991-92 but only 1.8% (45%) on elementary. In 1995-96 the total came down to 3.2% and that of elementary to 1.5% (46.88%) (The Probe Team 1999: 132).

Similarly, public expenditure on health has grown over the years only marginally in absolute terms and has declined as a percentage of the plans. As a result, only 20% of Indians have access to modern medicine. 40% of children suffer from malnutrition. Of the 23 million children born every year, 2.5 million die within the first year. Of the rest one out of nine dies before the age of five and four out of ten suffer from malnutrition. Life expectancy is approximately 57 years. About 9,00,000 people get infected by tuberculosis and 5,50,000 people die of it every year (Nigam 1995: 61-67). Despite the magnitude of the problem, health continued to account for less than 2% of government expenditure.

Table 1.4: Budgetary Allocation for Education in Five Year Plans

No	5-Year Plan	Years	% of Total Plan Expenditure		
			Education	Health	Total
01	First	1951-56	07.86	03.32	11.18
02.	Second	1956-61	05.83	03.01	08.84
03	Third	1961-66	06.87	02.63	09.40
04	Plan Holiday	1966-69	04.60	02.11	06.71
05	Fourth	1969-74	04.90	02.12	07.02
06	Fifth	1974-79	03.27	01.92	05.19
07	Sixth	1980-85	02.70	01.86	04.56
08	Seventh	1985-90	03.70	01.88	05.58
09	Eighth	1992-97	04.50	01.70	06.20

Source: PIRG 1992: 16; Govt. of India 1998

With profit and productivity as the sole norms in judging the effectiveness of investment, the situation has deteriorated with liberalisation. With the trend to privatise these services, focus is on

private institutions, some of them registered in the share market as profit making enterprises of business houses. Since the decision-makers have access to them, they do not need to improve the efficiency of the public services meant for the poor. The eighth plan reflects its priorities (Table 1.4). At first sight one gets the impression that investment in the social sector has risen from 5.58% to 6.2% in the 1990s. In reality the addition is accounted for almost exclusively by World Bank funded schemes like DOTS for tuberculosis and condom based ones for AIDS. In practice these programmes are inaccessible to those who need them. With expenditure on items like salaries growing, the share of the social sector can be expected to decline further.

Tribal Women and Their Status

Some contrast the situation of Indian women in general with that of tribal women and state that they are equal to men. This extreme position does not reflect the reality. Most tribal societies are patriarchal and patrilineal. The woman is not equal in them but enjoys a higher economic and social status than what her counterparts do in caste societies. A sign of it is the sex ratio which has declined in the total population but favours women in many traditional tribal societies. For example, according to the 1991 census there were 1,002 women for 1,000 men among the tribals in Orissa. According to a study in the mid-1980s there were 1,003 women for 1,000 men among the tribals in its Phulbani district. Forests abounded there at that time. Since women had access to edible fruits, flowers, medicinal herbs and other non-timber forest produce, their nutritional and health status was good (Fernandes, Menon and Viegas 1988: 41-43).

Her higher status is seen, among others, in the decision-making process in the family and the division of work in shifting cultivation. An important symbol of it is "bride price". The nomenclature gives an impression that the man paid a price for the bride. In reality tribal tradition was to view it as compensation for the loss of a worker, a recognition of her active participation in the tribe's economy that made her an economic asset, not a liability as in dowry giving societies. There is also reason to believe that as a result of

this higher status evils like female infanticide and child marriage and concepts of pollution and purification were absent among them (Fernandes and Menon 1987: 72-80).

Because her status is linked to her being an economic asset and to the nature of the resources and cultivation, it can deteriorate if she is deprived of this sustenance. That is what has happened in the name of national development. In its name her livelihood is being transferred to the corporate sector and the middle class as seen, among others, in the extent of deforestation and displacement by development projects. Traditionally forests have met more than 50% of the food, fodder, medicinal and other needs of the forest dwellers like the tribals. National development has turned their livelihood into a raw material. Forests that were 40% of India's landmass in the mid-19th century had come down to 22% at independence and are around 13% today. They are destroyed initially by the industrialist to whom they are a raw material and a source of profit. Once deprived of their sustenance and impoverished, many forest dwellers fall in the hands of the moneylenders who accompany the industrial agent, lose the little land they own and become bonded labourers. For sheer survival they continue the destructive process begun by the industrialist, cut the little forest left for sale as fuel wood and intensify the impoverishment process (Gadgil 1989).

Similar is the case of land acquisition because of which during the last 50 years at least 300 lakh persons, possibly around 500 lakhs, have been displaced or otherwise deprived of their livelihood without their consent for development schemes. Around 40% of them are tribals who formed 8.08% of India's population in 1991. Another 20% are Dalits and a big but unspecified number, probably 20% of the rest, are from other rural poor classes. Thus most of those losing their livelihood in the name of development belong to the rural poor classes. But its benefits reach the middle and upper classes. Compensation is low and limited to *patta* land. India does not have a national rehabilitation policy till today. So fewer than a third of those displaced have been resettled. The rest are left to fend for themselves with no economic, social and cultural support. They are rendered further powerless and often become bonded labourers (Fernandes 1998: 251 & 265). Thus development-induced displace-

ment and deprivation result in their further impoverishment.

This statement is substantiated by our recent studies in Orissa (Fernandes and Asif 1997), Jharkhand (Ekka and Asif 2000), Andhra Pradesh (Fernandes et al. 2001) and Kerala (Muricken et al. 2001). They show that the proportion of the tribals displaced is higher than their number in the total population, they receive very little compensation, very few of them are resettled and that most of them are impoverished. The CPRs are not replaced. As a result it is impossible for them to begin a new life after deprivation. But the woman's traditional role in the family remains unchanged. She has to continue to perform her task of ensuring regular food supply to the family without this sustenance. Given their low literacy and lack of exposure to the urban reality, tribal women can get at most unskilled jobs in the informal sector. Their status change is not limited to displacement without resettlement. Even when resettled, they lose their past economic autonomy. If resettlement is land-based, except in women-headed families it is allotted in the name of individuals, invariably men, considered their heads. Women had decision-making power in the family as long as the resources belonged to the community. They controlled production that was integral to its economy. With individual *patta* becoming the norm for land ownership after resettlement, this power is transferred to the man and from him to his son. The woman ceases to be the main decision-maker in the family economy and becomes dependent on men (Thekkekara 1993: 92).

4. Women in the North East

A postulate in our attempt to assess the North Eastern scenario is regional inequalities in the rate of economic development. The Northeast is characterised by underdevelopment. On the political front is the high level of militarisation. From a social perspective it is the habitat of diverse ethnic groups. The tribals who constitute a large chunk of its inhabitants are a heterogeneous group, all of them with a rich heritage and ethnic traits. So in discussing women's status in the region one has to go beyond its economy to understand its strong tribal culture that has profoundly influenced even non-tribal

societies like the Asomiya and Meitei who, like most tribals, consider themselves the indigenous people of the region. Thus distinct to the Northeast is the assimilation of many ethnic groups in the formation of linguistic or moral communities. The region also has a strong Bengali presence. Another section of tribals and non-tribals belongs to immigrant communities. Immigration to the region was crucial to the colonial economy that established the plantation complex. It has continued after independence as the census figures testify. The presence of these groups adds to the complexity of the region and makes it impossible to formulate all-pervasive theories about its peoples.

Within these limitations we shall attempt to analyse women's status in the Northeast. In the last three decades social and economic changes like urbanisation, globalisation and education have permeated the societies of the region. Identity assertion among its non-tribal groups has taken a radical turn in this period. Such assertion is almost always defined in opposition to the dominant construction of caste identities in India. Hence, the identity assertion by the Meitei of Manipur and the Asomiya of Assam points to the tensions inherent in the construction of identities in the region.

Women are often active agents of such processes. As stated above, our objective through this comparative study of the social role and status of the tribal women in the region is both to understand their traditional status and changes in it owing to the emerging trends in the background of the recent social, economic and cultural changes. Hence the need to situate women in the Northeast within the historical context.

Women in Non-Tribal Societies

Whether tribal or non-tribal, most communities in the Northeast are patriarchal. Thus gender division and patriarchal base are among the components of the stratified social system in the region. While tracing the traditional and emerging facets of women's status it appears that the socio-religious and cultural practices of its patriarchal society have conditioned women's status. The traditional role and work pattern confined women to the domestic arena of nurturing and socialising children. Such socialisation has far reaching

their own, as members of the *Khulong* (rice cultivation team), *Marup* (credit association), *Nuli-pala* (religious association) and other activities regardless of their marital status (Sircar 1984: 222).

One possible conclusion from it is that patriliney does not invariably accord an inferior status to women. There are exceptions in the Meitei and some other societies of the Northeast and among the tribals. However, others (e. g. Brara 2001) point out that among the Meitei this higher status is limited to the social sphere and that in the domestic sphere women remain subordinate and have internalised this status. Within this context, their role as socialisers of daughters may reproduce the same situation of being self-reliant in the social sphere but dependent on men at home. If true, it would be difficult to state that Manipuri women do not feel the so called crisis of ageing and the need to question their worth.

Thus much ambiguity exists on the issue of women's status in the Northeast but there is consensus that it is higher than that of their counterparts in "Mainland" India. Some think that it is because of tribal influence, that most non-tribal societies of the Northeast, particularly the Asomiya and the Meitei, the two biggest non-tribal societies, have evolved at least in part from a tribal background and have retained some of their value system of equity. As most tribes do, these communities too accord a higher status to women without accepting them as equal to men. From that point of view one can ask whether the extent of deterioration of their status coincides with the degree of Sanskritisation.

Tribal Women in the Northeast

Women's position in the tribal societies is characterised by socio-economic and political heterogeneity. Disparity in women's status among them arises from their different historical experiences. As a result, the present political as well as ethnic conflicts among the tribes give an interesting dimension to the problem. Most tribal groups of the region are patriarchal. Matriliney prevails among the Khasi, Garo and Jaintia of Meghalaya and some sub-groups of the Rabha like the Rangdani. Although the social system conditions women's status, one cannot assert without hesitation that matriliney bestows a higher status on women while their status deteriorates in the patrilineal system. Empirical studies reveal that among the

patrilineal Tangkhuls, important social functions were vested in a number of female clans and that the position of women among the Sema Naga is socially higher than that among caste societies (Hutton. 1921:183). Among the Dimasa, women enjoy an equal *de-jure* status with men. The presence of matrilineal clans in their patriarchal society theoretically provides considerable importance to women in comparison to other tribal women (Bordoloi. 1987: 36-39). However, one is not certain that the theoretical possibilities offered by it actually translate into a higher position in their society when compared to other tribal and non-tribal groups.

Common to most tribes of the region is patriarchy and patriliney. Inheritance and succession rules follow the male line. Women whether married or unmarried do not have the right to inherit clan property. Among many tribes like the Angami of Nagaland, women may inherit what the family acquires but not what comes down from the clan (D'Souza 2001b: 26-28). All the patriarchal societies are patrilocal. Even in uxori-local tribes like the Garo, some men have started going against the 'traditional established norm' and "bringing the bride home". The Reang of Tripura may be considered a 'model' of the changes that women have had to accept within tribal societies in the Northeast. Their role in the economic activities particularly in the post-*jhumming* stage has changed and their occupational pattern has shifted over a period from cultivators to agricultural labourers. Its main reason is a decline in the traditional economic activities without a compulsory expansion in their role in the modern sector. With massive influx of non-tribals, they have lost much of their land. Hence their economic as well as social participation has undergone changes. A consequence of massive land alienation is large scale exodus of tribal men to the urban areas in search of a living. That has imposed a double burden on women of looking after the family and working in the fields. With the erosion of their economic status Reang women have lost their traditional status in their society (Choudhury 1980: 36).

The Karbi living in the autonomous districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills are a patriarchal tribe. However, Karbi women play important roles in the family especially in its religious activities. After marriage, the woman retains her surname, as such a

part of her individual identity, unlike in caste societies where the change of name makes the married woman's identity synonymous with that of her husband. The important economic role played by Karbi women further strengthens their social position. Whether in cultivation, cutting, weeding, clearing jungles for *jhum* or collecting fruits, tubers, medicinal plants, herbs or firewood, Karbi women work side by side with men. But social and religious taboos exist. For example, they are not allowed to attend a village court or partake of food along with men in religious and community feasts. Thus their "active participation in their festivals and religious ceremonies shows the importance Karbi women receive in the social arena. The special role played by the *Uchepi* in *Chomankan* festival provides a kind of prestige to the Karbi women" (Sharma Thakur 1989: 23). However, the taboos show that they are bit equal.

What is said of Karbi women is equally true of most others. Local customs, norms, rituals and value systems have accorded tribal women a unique position in the Northeast not much different from that of the tribes of Middle India that we have discussed above. They enjoy more freedom and social privileges, greater mobility and higher participation in decision-making in the family even in comparison with non-tribal women in the Northeast and much more so if compared to the caste societies in the rest of India. Because of it some anthropologists opine that they enjoy equality. This opinion has often been accepted uncritically and has at times become an important element of governance. But the above studies and field experience show that while enjoying a higher status than in caste societies they are not equal to men.

Another point in common with the tribals in the rest of India as well as non-tribal women in the region is that tribal women in the Northeast are experiencing social, political and economic changes. They are influenced by the processes of marginalisation, land alienation, globalisation, urbanisation and other changes in their livelihood pattern. They are also affected by social and ethnic conflicts. We have opined above that these processes tend to strengthen patriarchy. Women run the risk of losing control over the resources that have enhanced their status. If that happens, far from attaining equality with men, they may lose their traditional

relatively high social status. Hence the need to analyse it further.

There is a major difference between most tribes of the Northeast and those of Middle India. By and large the latter have a totem-based religion. They have built myths around some economically important trees, plants and animals, attributing to them the origin of the tribe or clan. Side by side with it is commercialisation that treats their livelihood only as a raw material and a source of profit (Fernandes, Menon and Viegas 1988: 164-167). Most tribes of the Northeast, being immigrants of about a thousand years or more, have not carried with them the totem myths from the land of their origin. Protection of their natural resources depends mostly on their belief in the spirits of the trees and forests. The fear of the spirits emanating from such beliefs continues whether they retain their original Animist religion or change it. For example, among the Angami, most of whom are Christians, the Animist priest chooses the day of *Genna* on which the whole village is sacred and no outsider may enter it. All the Angami, Animist or Christian, obey it (Iralu 2000: 85-88).

As a consequence in the short term the North Eastern tribals may be able to resist the destruction of their livelihood by commercialisation more than their Middle India brethren have done. Because of the hold of their tradition as well as armed resistance their community as a whole may oppose the external forces for some more time. But the same may not be true of women's status. Individualism that is taking hold of them can go against women. Hence the trend among a section of tribal women in the region to redefine the concept of 'status' different from their traditional role. Education, political exigencies, economic development and cultural transformation have now resulted in the significance of achieved status as an important part of a woman's identity. By and large it tends to become individual related. As such it may turn out to be class specific. Only a few may be able to deal with the changes and the majority may be marginalised. Hence the need to take measures that can assist tribal women in the process of modernisation without marginalisation.

The above discussion raises some important questions about women's status in the Northeast. While on one side there are signs of the deterioration of their status, on the other there are indications

of their awakening in some tribes like the Angami and Mizo. This study seeks to support such a process. In order to do it, we shall look at the impact of external inputs like education, commercialisation and religious change. Besides, an analysis of possible traditional taboos and discriminatory practices against women among them will help us to better understand the implications of recent changes among the six tribes studied and see what inputs have helped them to improve women's status.

Our Hypotheses

What is said about the tribes of the Northeast in general is equally true of the ones we have chosen for this study. They are the Adibasi,³ Boro and Dimasa of Assam, the Aka of Arunachal Pradesh, the Angami of Nagaland and the Garo of Meghalaya. All of them are patriarchal and only the Garo are matrilineal. We need to study the theory that matriliney in itself confers a higher status on women. Our assumption is that though the social system conditions the woman's status, one cannot state unconditionally that her status deteriorates with patriliney or improves unconditionally with matriliney. The nuances of these systems have to be studied. That is the reason why we have chosen tribes with a variety of social systems and differentiated exposure to modernisation. That makes a comparison possible. In the next chapter we shall discuss their background and the reasons for choosing them.

Based on the above understanding of the historical background and the present status of women in India and the Northeast, we question the assumption that modernisation *per se* results in women's liberation. The discussion of dominant and subaltern societies, the pattern of development and the neglect of the social sector has given indications that left to itself the present form of modernisation results in the gap between the rich and the poor growing. Its benefits reach the middle and upper classes. The status of the already weak deteriorates further. What is said about the marginalised in general is true particularly about women from among them. They have traditionally enjoyed a higher status in their society than in caste-based ones. But individual land ownership;

deforestation and displacement can result in the deterioration of their status. Militarisation seems to lead to the deterioration of men's as well as women's status. Hence the need to understand these processes and take protective measures.

1. Based on this discussion our first hypothesis is that modernisation expressed in the form of changing land relations, new cropping patterns and commercialisation results in the deterioration of tribal women's status since they strengthen patriarchy. As a result women lose the little control they have traditionally exercised over their livelihood.

2. Our second hypothesis is that some negative effects of these changes can be overcome with proper inputs. Women's organisation for economic control and social assertion as well as education are among the inputs that can help women to cope with the changes in a positive manner. These hypotheses are based on an understanding of women's status whose main features are:

a. Women are not merely targets of developmental inputs and of their benefits but are participants in the decision-making process that affects their lives.

b. So in their work the voluntary, religious, State or other agencies are not to treat women as individuals. Their approach has to be geared to increasing solidarity among them. In other words, their priority is not solving individual problems (though it is not excluded) but to lead to collective awareness of the gender bias from which women as a class suffer.

c. Thus the external agents not merely bring material benefits to women as a group but also help them to gain self-confidence as individuals and as a group. Their effort has to be a step towards collective empowerment.

d. As such, they are also to mobilise women around their rights and status and to fight for them. This effort gets a visible form in women's organisations that emerge out of this process.

e. In this task, while recognising the gender bias against women as a group they are also to be sensitive to class, caste and ethnic divisions among women.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have studied the main issues around the discussion on women's status. The historical background shows that there is much ambiguity on this issue at every stage of history. In this discussion it is also important to bear in mind that women's status differs even today according to their caste, class/tribe and habitat. So one cannot speak of women as a homogeneous group. Our hypothesis of the study were based on this understanding of women's status.

We shall examine these hypotheses by making a comparison between the six tribes studied as well as between the past and the present. After a discussion on our methodology, the questionnaire and the choice of the tribes and villages we shall examine the demographic status on the basis of the sex ratio, age group distribution, female mortality etc. We shall also test the assertion that amid the changes taking place in the region, women's status remains unchanged or even deteriorates even when that of men improves. We shall see whether there is a transition from community to individual ownership and its implications for women. If women's status has remained unchanged or has deteriorated, we shall seek to identify the measures needed, including legislation, to improve it.