



The Role of Women in the Rongmei Economy: A Historical Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine the role of Rongmei women in economic activities, considering their significant contributions to the growth and development of Rongmei society. Women have been significant contributors to the progression of human societies from time immemorial. However, the fact remains that every society believed men were superior to women in terms of socio-cultural, religious, and economic life. Furthermore, society considered women's work inferior to men's. But in every tribal society, women work alongside men in almost all aspects of life and play a dual role, bearing a greater share of the workload. Likewise, in Rongmei society, women have a broader range of responsibilities, from domestic work to various agricultural activities. They also played a significant role in other economic activities vis-à-vis their male counterparts. Therefore, the present paper is a humble attempt to study the role of women in a wide range of economic activities that sustained Rongmei society in the pre-colonial period and how these changed during the colonial period.

Keywords: Women, Rongmei, Economy, agriculture, domestic work.

Introduction

Women's studies emerged from the feminist movement, and in its wake, there is pressure to develop scientific research on women's roles and positions in society. Before the feminist movement, women's contributions to the development of society were neglected, even though women have been significant contributors to the progress of human societies from time immemorial. The basis of this negligence was "no doubt that 'women' or 'the family' were mostly seen as 'natural' phenomena" (Dahlerup, 2015, p. 1). Women are thought to be 'natural' caregivers, and men are 'benevolent dictators' who adequately supply material needs to their families (Moser, 1993). This means that men undertake public activities, e.g., remunerative work and trade, membership in social organisations, and participation in political institutions, while women's activities, in turn, are often constrained to household and community management. But in every society, women work alongside men in almost all aspects of life and play a dual role, bearing a greater share of the workload. And with the development of Women's Studies, scholars seek to reconstruct the social and economic history of society by keeping women at its centre.

In the early 1970s, feminist scholars adopted the concept of 'Gender' to analyse the differences in behaviour between men and women, which are described as 'masculine' and 'feminine'. Simone de Beauvoir (1953) writes, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." Such feminist writing claims that these differences are not biological but are social constructions of patriarchal society. Again, gender as a concept is largely associated with the "sexual division of labour and the patterns of social difference and inequality that arose" (Hameed & Shukri, 2014, p. 3). This sexual division of labour is categorised based on female biology and male biology. Women stay at home, give birth to children, rear children and undertake all the domestic chores. Men, on the other hand, undertake arduous, strenuous work as part of their biology. Thus, the work done by women was not regarded as 'labour' but as natural to them; on the other hand, the work that men did was 'labour' as it resulted in the production of goods and services (Humphries, 1991). In short, the work done by women is seen as less important than that of men, which, in turn, depends on the cultural, social, economic, and historical context of society. Therefore, in feminist debates and writings, the concept of 'Sexual division of labour' emerged as a central concern, primarily focused on explaining women's roles in domestic life and their significant contributions to the public sphere.

Furthermore, these social constructions of gender assign greater value to the activities associated with men and systematically exclude women from the mainstream, keeping them less capable and denying them equal opportunities. During the 1970s, Women in Development (WID) emerged in response to growing evidence that economic and social development efforts had not benefited women as much as men (Koczberski, 1998). WID highlighted that women are not merely mothers, passively affected by development in general and by welfare and family planning programmes in particular, but are also economic agents in charge of key aspects of production and economic development (Women in Development, 1992). Hence, the WID approach seeks to focus on getting explicit recognition of women in programmes and projects, not only as mothers but, even more importantly, as producers. In short, it focuses on women's efficiency and economic growth and stresses their contribution to development. But men's control over the means of production, exchange, and distribution left women very little space to develop an alternative development path. The economy is an important component of society; it shapes social and cultural structures and sustains society, without which no society can survive. According to Will Kenton (2022, p. 1), "An economy is a complex system of interrelated production, consumption, and exchange activities that ultimately determine the allocation of resources within a group." Talcott Parsons and Neil Smelser (1956, pp. 24, 25) defined economy as producing many of the wants which may be relevant to society. According to Dalton (1961, p. 6), Marx perceives the economy as a process of interaction between men and their environment, through which men, as producers, integrate the use of natural resources and techniques and ensure continuous cooperation in the provision of material goods. Karl Marx, in his theory of 'historical materialism', identifies the way a person acquires all the goods he

needs to live a basic existence, his means of production. To perform the tasks required to sustain a person's basic existence, that person does labour. He focuses on the means of production and on how societies formed around producing goods to survive. He argues that changes in the means of production drive changes in society as men seek easier ways to meet their basic needs. In short, Marx highlighted that the prime mover of society for any development is the economy, and the same has been put forth as the 'base' and the 'superstructure' (Baur, 2017).

The Rongmei

The Rongmei are one of the major tribes of Naga inhabiting the tri-junction of three northeastern states of India: Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. The term Rongmei literally means "the people of the south" or "southerners" (Thaimei, 1995, 390). The Zeme, Liangmei, Rongmei, and Inpui are the cognate tribes of what is commonly called 'Zeliangrong' today. Essentially, an indigenous society, they believed that their ancestors came from a cave called 'Mahou Toabei' (Thaimei, 1995, p.378). According to R. Brown (1910), "The Kowpoi tribe of Nagas would appear to have occupied the position they now held in the hills from great antiquity" (p. 22). Ethnically, they belong to the Mongoloid stock, with their physical features by and large similar to those of other tribes of Northeast India, and linguistically, to the Tibeto-Burman language family, falling under the Naga-Bodo section (Grierson, 1995, pp. 469-481). They are called by outsiders by different names, such as Koupooes, Songbu, Kabui, etc. (as cited in Kamei, 2004: Pemberton, 1835, p. 55). Geographically, Rongmei inhabits Tamenglong and Noney districts and certain parts of Churachandpur district and the Imphal Valley in Manipur, along with certain pockets in Kohima, Dimapur, and Peren in Nagaland, and the North Cachar district of Assam. Like any tribal community, they lived in villages, and the village was the crux and backbone of Rongmei life. Every village was independent of the others and had its own political, social, economic, and cultural unit with a defined territorial boundary (Gonmei, 2018, p.1). Furthermore, like many other tribal societies, the Rongmei society has a patriarchal social structure that is characterised by the notion of male superiority, but women enjoy relatively high social positions and a fair spirit of independence compared to caste society, which is prevalent in India. Also, they played central roles in family and community affairs in the village. This is well reflected in Haimendorf Von Christoph's work (1939), "Many women in the more civilised parts of India may well envy the women of the Naga Hills, their high status and their free and happy life; and if you measure the cultural level of a people by the social position and personal freedom of its women, you will think twice before looking down on the Nagas as 'savages' (p.101). However, this does not mean women in Rongmei society were free from inequality. They did not enjoy property rights and decision-making in the village council.

Rongmei Economy

Rongmei society was agrarian, and the economy was, by and large, agriculture-based. Their economic activities were mostly confined to jhum cultivation (Ramkhun Pamei, p. 26), which is closely connected to their customary and traditional practices (Dun, 1992, p. 30). The main crop was rice, which was also their staple food. In the Jhum land, they also cultivate cotton, maize, beans, chilli, sesame, spices, ginger and many other vegetables (Pamei, 1992, p. 11). Besides cultivation, they also depended on forest resources and practised hunting, fishing, gathering and domestication of animals to supplement their livelihoods. Animals like pigs, cows, dogs, and fowl were domesticated for both consumption and sacrificial purposes. They also engaged in trade with other Naga villages and the Meitei and Kachari kingdoms (Ibid., p. 338). This trade was based on the exchange of commodities such as cotton, various vegetables, ginger, maize, tobacco, and pan leaves for salt, iron implements, and brass ornaments (Brown, 1874, p. 18). R. Brown's description regarding the trade activities may be quoted here.

“The subject of trade and manufactures among the hill-men may be dismissed in a few words. Trade, from the scanty nature of the hill productions not required for the sustenance of the people, is confined, so far as Manipur is concerned, almost entirely to the bartering of raw cotton and a few other articles in the bazaars; salt is chiefly taken in return. The hill-men also, for the most part, supply the valley with the firewood required for the inhabitants. The bazaars in the Kachar Valley, lying nearest the hills, are also thus supplied. Iron is procured from Kachar and Manipur and manufactured into daos and spearheads. Some of the northern tribes also make the brass and bell-metal ornaments, so much affected by certain sections of the tribes, but by far the largest number of these are the productions of Manipur and Kachar” (p.19).

Traditionally, fishing and hunting were considered men’s work, and food gathering was carried out primarily by women. But on a community fishing day, the whole village joined in the fishing activity (Pamei, 1992, p. 21). Women gathered edible forest products, such as roots, tubers, fruits, leaves, and mushrooms. Also, there were ranges of economic activities that were exclusively the work of women, such as the production and manufacturing of clothes, rice beer, and other household activities like cooking, fetching water, and gathering firewood. They were the main contributors to the family economy, but society always acknowledged men as the sole breadwinners and ignored the contributions of women. They engaged in various economic activities, from domestic chores to agricultural work, to meet the family's and society's needs. Therefore, women have always been an active part of the workforce and have laboured in the fields and other economic activities, side by side with their male counterparts in society.

Women in Agricultural and Food Gathering Activities

Rongmei women played an important role in agricultural activities alongside their men, and there was barely any agricultural work that women did not partake in. The agricultural manoeuvre can be divided into pre-harvesting, harvesting, and post-harvesting, in which women participated equally with men, except for a few activities such as felling trees, making footpaths, and constructing a farmhouse. During pre-harvesting operations, activities such as seed selection, sowing, and weeding were almost exclusively the work of women, although men sometimes helped with sowing and weeding. Harvesting includes cutting and carrying paddy to the farmhouse and thrashing, to which women continuously devoted their labour. The post-harvest operation includes the transportation of paddy, drying, pounding, winnowing, and storage, in which women were the main workforce. Furthermore, Rongmei women cultivate various vegetables, such as chilli, cotton, yam, ginger, gourd, and more, in their jhum fields and in kitchen gardens. Apart from this agricultural activity, women were also active participants in food-gathering activities. They take part in collecting wild vegetable leaves, fruits, insects, etc. to supplement their diet. This reflects the valuable contributions of women to agricultural and food-gathering activities

Household Activities

In household activities, the role of Rongmei women begins early, and their contribution to household needs is direct and indispensable. The responsibilities of childbearing and child-rearing, as well as domestic tasks, fall on the shoulders of women. Even as a child, a girl helps her mother tend to their younger siblings and with other household chores while her mother works in the fields. Moreover, throughout the year, women have the monotonous task of preparing meals, after which they spend many hours fetching water from a far distance by carrying bamboo tubes in their baskets. Also, the responsibility of collecting firewood falls upon womenfolk. Furthermore, women performed the daily task of pounding rice in a mortar every morning, a strenuous and exhausting chore. After all these activities were completed, they packed the foodstuffs, water and other beverages and set out for fieldwork, which was quite far from their house. William McCulloch's (1869) description of women gives a clear picture of Rongmei women in household activities.

“In the grey of the morning, the females of the family are astir, and the village resounds with the blows of the long pestle in the wooden mortar beating out the rice from the husk. This finished, breakfast is cooked both for the family and the pigs; for the latter, the husk mixed with other refuse serves the purpose. Breakfast over, which usually is about sunrise, the women proceed for water, which they fill into bamboo tubes and bring on their backs in baskets. Then they go for firewood, and this brought, they set about the internal economy of the house; that is, to see to their husbands’ drink being in proper quantity and quality, to their spinning or to their weaving or any of the other household occupations except sweeping the house clean, an act in which they have no pride.” (p. 48).

During the construction of the house, men usually do the bulk of the work, such as carrying the pillar from the jungle, thatching, and tying poles, while women remained on the ground and carry out menial jobs, such as cleaning and passing necessary items to the men. Moreover, women look after refreshments for those engaged in the work. Also, every household in the village possessed livestock, mainly pigs, dogs, fowls, cows and goats. Mostly, women were the ones who looked after the livestock of the family by tending and feeding. Often, young girls and elderly women also actively participated in feeding animals, such as fowl.

Production of Rice Beer

In all the tribal societies of Northeast India, the production of rice beer was exclusively the work of womenfolk. C.A. Soppitt (1885) writes, “It is manufactured by the women in the village, and on festivals and feasts consumed in large quantities” (p. 4). According to Rongmei tradition, a woman was supposed to prepare rice beer to meet the family’s needs. The process of making rice beer is complicated, and it requires extensive physical labour. The Rongmei Naga has two types of rice beer: the first is called Jou Ngao, prepared using germinated paddy pounded with rice, and the second is called Pareng, prepared using cooked rice mixed with the yeast called Khoi. These rice beers vary in strength according to the amount of water added and the length of fermentation. After four to five days, depending on the weather, it can be consumed. Both types of rice beer have quite low alcohol content and a pleasant, somewhat bittersweet taste, depending on how long they are kept for fermentation, but they tend to turn sour and bitter if kept for longer. Also, the colour varies depending on the type of rice used. Since the primary responsibility for preparing rice beer appears to rest with the women, a household with more women was in an advantageous position to brew and maintain larger supplies of rice beer. But on certain occasions, such as weddings or festivals, men help in pounding the rice.

Weaving

Weaving plays a significant role in the lives of Rongmei women. It was part of their culture that every young girl should learn to spin and weave through observation and practice, either at home or in the girls’ dormitory called Kailiu. Furthermore, this industry engaged the female population in all aspects, from cotton plucking to processing, spinning, ginning, dyeing, and weaving, but in the Rongmei society, it was considered work that filled leisure time and was normally carried out during the off-season for agricultural activities. The process of producing thread from the cotton called Langruaimei was tedious, and womenfolk, after returning from the field, spun their yarn until they retired to bed. Women were expected to weave for their fathers, husband, brother and other family members. R. Brown (1874), in his book, writes, “women cultivate cotton in their Jhum field and spin their cotton and manufacture the clothing required for themselves and families” (p. 19). Again, the yarns were dyed by women into various colours using leaves, roots, etc., collected from the forest. Women weave by using a simple technology called a loin loom. Ramkhun Pamei (1996) in his work mentioned that “Zeliangrong Nagas are rich in dresses” (p. 26) and they manufactured numerous types of different designs of male wear and women’s skirts for different age groups such as Mareipan,

Inkheim phei, Pheingao phei, Sinkuang Phei, Nthinai, Inkheim nai, Pheingao Pheisuai, langmiu Pheisuai, Ahiaknga, Hianglan, etc (Pamei, 1992, p. 13). Also, the art of weaving was considered an important criterion for selecting a bride in traditional Rongmei society. By presenting a shawl for men and a kilt for women at the time of her marriage to her husband and in-laws, a woman demonstrates her expertise in the craft through the gift. The loin loom material was one of the gifts or the property that a Rongmei woman carried along with her to her husband's home at the time of her marriage. This was given by the parents at the time of her marriage, along with other materials.

Other Economic Activities

In Rongmei society, food processing formed an integral part of economic activities. Womenfolk were more involved in food processing than their male counterparts. Food items such as meat, fish, bamboo shoots (Thun kang), mustard leaves (Ganeng kang), roselle leaves (Gankhiang kang), and other food items are dried and stored. Also, they ferment food items like bamboo shoot (Thunkhiang, Thunbin), fermented pork fats (Gan nampui), mustard leaf juice (Ganeng kangdui), roselle seed, soy bean and sesame (Nkhui-Gankhiang nkhui & tashio nkhui), etc. All these food items were stored for future consumption by womenfolk in each and every household.

In Rongmei society, every household produced what was necessary for their consumption except for salt, iron and beads. Therefore, they depended on the outside world through the barter system. Men used to travel to places like Imphal and North Cachar for exchange activities. C. Gimson (1939), in his tour diary, writes that they take oranges, pan leaves or cotton to barter in the plains for salt, dry fish and iron implements. But women also played an important role in trade by preparing the items that men carried to distant places in Imphal and Cachar. Also, the articles of exchange were the crops that the women folk cultivated in their jhum fields. In some instances, women too joined the menfolk, carrying the load for exchange and travelling with their men. Therefore, women were the invisible and unrecognised backbone of the trade activities in Rongmei society.

Changing Role of Women

The Rongmei womenfolk have been receptive to the changes brought about by their contact with other cultures and people. Through this contact, their outlook has broadened, and the role and participation of women in economic activities have changed. With the increase in terrace cultivation, women's participation in ploughing and tilling the field decreased to some extent. Henceforth, women were confined to growing vegetables and other crops. Also, though the activities of hunting and fishing were assigned to men traditionally, with the change of time, women started to do fishing and trapping small game and fish in nearby river sources such as Arou (jungle mouse), Taniang (snail), Ga (Crab), Gou (frog) and small fish and prawns from nearby river sources.

The arrival of the British and the introduction of the new administration created an immense impact on all aspects of the life of the Rongmei Naga. The objective of the colonial policy was to make a profit, and so they introduced monetisation in various ways: "introduction of currency as a medium of exchange, collection of house tax in cash, payment of salary in cash and transaction of trade through currency" (Kamei, 2004, p. 342). So during the colonial period, they had to produce a surplus to sell to the markets in the plains. Therefore, women's participation in trade activities increased to pay a house tax, which was collected at Rs. 3/- per house per annum in the hill areas (Dena, 1984, p. 14). The marketable articles were taken to bazaars either in Imphal or Lakhimpur in North Cachar frequently by womenfolk while their men worked in road construction and repair through the pothang system, a kind of forced labour which was imposed on them by the Colonial administrators. In this way, women took on an active role in trade, a trend also facilitated by improvements in transportation and communication during the colonial period. Again, one cannot deny the changes in the role of women brought about by Western education. A good number of them have studied at least up to the primary school level and taken up government jobs as well. Initially, the post of a primary school teacher was the most coveted government job among Rongmei women, and later, they entered other professions as well. Though receptive to Western ideas and modernisation, the Rongmei women have not forgotten or broken away altogether from their traditional role in society.

and continue to occupy a central position in society as a labour force.

Conclusion

The foregoing has clearly shown that Rongmei women play an important role and contribute significantly to the economy through the activities mentioned. Also, Rongmei women play a dual role as wives and mothers and as participants in economic activities. This pivotal role of women was evident in their involvement in several economic activities, some of which were shared with men and others were specific to women. It was also clear that women, alongside their male counterparts, provided the necessities of food, clothing, and shelter, and initiated trade, exchanging the products of their labour. Moreover, the economic activities of a young girl are expanded at a very early age, and once she reaches puberty, she accompanies her mother in collecting firewood and forest products and also helps her mother tend their siblings and fowls, feed, clean utensils, and fetch water. In this way, they learn the activities from such a tender age. In other words, women always play a significant role in the economic activities of society. Therefore, women held a complementary, rather than a subordinate, position to men in Rongmei society. However, most of the work that women do was not considered economic activity but was instead seen as traditional chores they were duty-bound to perform.

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