

## LITERACY AND EDUCATION IN MATRIARCHY

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Literacy, Education, Matriarchy.

**ABSTRACT**

This article deals with understanding the aspects related to literacy and education in matriarchy. Literacy and Education are the indicators of development of a society. A society or a nation can use education as a tool for its progress. Providing education as a right is not sufficient. Implication of the act and providing access as well as equal opportunities of education to all irrespective of the dynamics of socio-cultural, economical and regional factors is required for achieving the goal of making an egalitarian and progressive society. Education itself has very broad and diverse meanings, but here the question is of finding out the access and achievement of education in matriarchal societies existing in diverse regions of the world. Whether the females have better educational standards in matriarchal communities or not, it's one of the important question that comes in our mind when we talk about socio-economic status of women in matriarchal societies. The accessibility and attainment of education by males and females are studied in this article. And the influence of education on other aspects of life has also been explored. The present article is a theoretical exploration with the help of discourse analysis on the theme discussed above which includes books, articles and researches available in the concerned field.

**I. INTRODUCTION**

Education has a very broad definition. It is not restricted to the books, educational institutions, academics or just to the formal system of education. But literacy has a rather restricted meaning. It only refers to one's ability to read, write and do basic arithmetic. But according to the present society of neo-liberalism where everything is governed by the market and the meanings of progress, growth and development have also derived only from the market and market forces, thus, it is considered to be a necessary condition for one to be literate and formally educated to a certain level in order to stand in this competitive world. Literacy and the educational levels of individuals are the indicators of one's progress and achievement. It is also thought that one's body and mind are strengthened with the help of this formal

education where the people learn to equip better understanding. A community comprises of literate people is supposed to be more advanced than the community of illiterates.

The seven North-Eastern states of India comprise of great tribal population and the Khasis, Garos, Jaintias are also the tribes found in North-Eastern states of India which are matriarchal in nature. Marak (2010) reveals that the educational development among the tribes of North-Eastern states of India is quite higher than the non-tribal groups of Northeast like Mizoram and Meghalaya as well as rest of India. Earlier there was no formal system of education and no focus upon literacy among these tribes, but now the literacy levels of this tribal population is above the national average. If looked upon the school participation of children, it is good to see that there are very less gender-based disparities in the school enrolment

and attending the school by boys and girls among these tribal communities, whereas, huge gender discrimination can be seen in the remaining parts of India especially among the patriarchal communities. Since the girl is considered to be the burden in the patriarchal families as they have to go to the in-laws house after marriage; so the parents don't see any profits in investing upon the education of girl children. Due to this, the school participation of the female child is usually found to be comparatively low in the patriarchal society.

When the Christian missionaries came to the hilly areas of North-Eastern India, they wanted to spread their religion. In order to persuade the people to adopt their religion and way of life of Christianity, the missionaries realized that education can play an important role in it. Educating the people can help in the propagation of their religion. Thus, they had started educational programs in the Christian Church in the rural areas of North Eastern states of India too. But today the role of government and the formal system of education especially the primary education can be seen in these areas.

The Census data also reveals the increasing literacy levels in the tribal North Eastern states, especially of Meghalaya where not only overall literacy rate has increased in the past 40 years but also the female literacy in the rural areas has shown the rise. Government of India's Census Report of 2001 shows the males' literacy is higher than the literacy rate of females in rural areas of Khasi, Garo and Jaintia hills.

The women of West Garo Hills District have the lowest percentage of literate females whereas the women of East Khasi Hills District have the highest percentage of literate females. If looked upon the data of urban areas of Meghalaya, it can be seen that according to Government of India's Census Report of 2001, the people of Jaintia Hills District have the highest literate people's percentage whereas the people of Ri-Bhoi District show the lowest levels of literate people's percentage. The separate literacy rates of males and females are also the highest in the urban area of Jaintia Hills District and the lowest in the Ri-Bhoi District.

Education is a very crucial and necessary for one's own personality development as well as for setting up the functional social setup of the

community. There were no written scriptures or the well-established writing system among the Khasis and Garos. They had their oral tradition of transmitting the culture, knowledge, history and heritage. When the various foreign missionaries came to these remote and inaccessible areas of Khasis, Garos and Jaintias, they established the system of writing there with the purpose of propagating their ideas, beliefs and religion. Their motive of initiating the education system among these tribes was also of spreading their ideology, culture and religion. The Welsh Presbyterian Missionaries, the American Baptist Missionaries and the Catholic Missionaries came to these tribal areas of Khasis, Garos and Jaintias at different periods of time and established the Roman script for writing so that they don't have to rely upon only the oral tradition of transmitting their history through the modes of stories, fables, mythologies, folk music etc. And they can also adopt the Christian or Western way of living through their Western texts, Western Knowledge and Western Education. These Missionaries had also set up the schools in these regions like - The Welsh Presbyterian Missionaries set up primary schools in 1841 in Khasi Hills, the Baptist Missionaries started the primary schools in Garo Hills in 1873 and the present Christian Girls High School in Tura was one of the earliest institutions established in 1882 in Garo Hills area by those foreign Missionaries (Marak, 2010). Despite so many difficulties, scarce resources and lack of facilities, these missionaries were successful in creating the educational ethos and setting up educational institutions in these Khasi, Garo and Jaintia hills. Since the Baptist Missionaries and the Welsh Presbyterian Missionaries had come earlier, faced hardships and established the educational system in these regions, so the Christian Missionaries did not have to struggle much and their work was relatively easier to spread the higher education in these areas. Shillong Government Boys High School set up in 1880 was the first high school and St. Edmund's College established in 1924 was the first college in these hills.

Later on, when Meghalaya had emerged as a state, the government had taken up its responsibilities of taking care and running the educational system in these areas efficiently. The government schools are running there where all

the other state and central level policies of education are implemented. The government has also given the utmost importance to sector of education in the state of Meghalaya. The Right to Education Act, 2009; the universalisation of primary education and National Policy on Education have been trying to fulfil the constitutional commitments to provide free and compulsory education to the children of 6-14 years of age. However, there is only one university for higher education in Meghalaya which is managed by the Central Government - the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU). The state is not having any medical or engineering colleges but only one Polytechnic at Shillong however (Marak, 2010).

Let us have a look at the statistical figures of the number of educational institutions available in the state and the enrolment data of the students in these educational institutions. There were 2,617 institutions at the level of Primary and Junior Basic in 1971-72. Their number was raised up to 4,054 in 1981-82. A decade later, such institutions increased to 4,235 in 1991 -92 and the latest available information have shown as 9,457 in 2006-2007. (The data has been quoted by Marak, 2010). The enrolment rate also rose with the growth of Primary and Junior Basic Schools. The following data trends have been mentioned by Marak (2010) - It is observed that during the first decade of Meghalaya, when there were 1,48,002 students in 1971-72 and the number increased to 1,90,026 in 1981-82. The growth of enrolment of students from 1981-82 to 1991-92 was up to 47.26% in a ten year period. With the increase of institutions at the school level, the number of colleges which was only 14 in 1971 -72 but accounted to 56 in 2006-2007.

An implication of education into the sector of employment can also be reflected upon. Since the literacy rates and educational levels of the state have been rising year after year; more number of youth is achieving good educational qualifications and achievements. But the severe problem arises when these youth do not get the jobs according to their educational profile. Due to this lack of professional opportunities according to the educational achievements of the youth, they stay unemployed. The state and central government are not able to satisfy the work or employment requirements of the people. The

unemployment rates are rapidly growing every year and the education seems to be failing to fulfil the purpose of making lives of the people better. How can one have a better life when one is not getting a suitable job despite studying so much and attaining higher educational qualifications? This sort of education seems to be useless for those people because even after investing their valuable years of life and the monetary investments, they are not receiving any satisfactory results after it. To reduce or remove the unemployment levels in the state, various measures can be taken - like, by improvement of agriculture; checking up on the population growth; need of decisive policies to be made by the government to encourage investment in industries; and to encourage the youth to set up small scale industries or their start-ups in the unorganised sector. And the important implication for the educational sector should be to be capable of employing the people. Educational system should be made job-oriented so that students released by the institutions would not depend entirely on Government Services (Marak, 2010).

Kerala is a southern state of India where the 'Nair' community resides. The Nairs followed matrilineal societal structure. The highest sex-ratio is found in Kerala as compared to other states of India and overall India. The Nairs celebrate the birth of a daughter more than the birth of a son; unlike the other states of India where patriarchal culture is followed. The overall literacy rate as well as female literacy rate is the highest in Kerala. When the roots of Colonialism are traced in India historically, one gets to know that initially the foreigners had come to India for the purpose of trade. They had come via sea route, so first of all they had come to the coastal regions of India. Kerala is also a coastal region, a state on India's tropical Malabar Coast. It is located on the Western Ghats and has approximately 600 kilometres of Arabian Sea shoreline. Kerala is world famous for its spices and was also known as 'the city of spices'. When the traders realized that they can be potential rulers too over Indian subcontinent instead of just gaining through trade, they started spreading their religion, culture, style of living etc. For these purposes, they also started their colonial education system, calling it as Modern system of education which

was necessary to civilise the people whom they were ruling or colonizing because they believed that the natives were uncivilized. Since they had first come to the coastal regions and it was much before they reached the central and northern parts of India; so the effect of colonization and colonial education was also greater in coastal parts of India. Even today, we are continuing with the education system whose roots deeply lie in the colonial education system.

In order to adopt the modern and civilized lifestyle as well as to improve economically by taking up jobs or employment in public sector or sectors other than agriculture, the people of Kerala and especially from Nair society also accepted and enrolled themselves into formal education system started by the Christian missionaries and British. That's why the overall literacy rate, female literacy rate and levels of education are higher in Kerala. The Nairs allow their daughters to study higher and thus the levels of women education are very high among the Nair women. They are making out the best out of the opportunities and access provided to them in their matrilineal society. The women in matrilineal societies of India - that is, the Nairs in Kerala and the Khasis, Garos and Jaintias in North-Eastern state of Meghalaya located on the foothills of Himalayas are enjoying a higher social and political stature as compared to the women in the remaining parts of India following patriarchal societal structures.

On the contrary, an article from India Today (2016) states that the best sex ratio of Kerala has credited to the fading culture of matrilineal society of Kerala along with crediting to their high literacy rate. It presents a fact that the state has officially banned the matrilineal/matrilocal family structure through the Joint Family System (Abolition) Act, 1975, which was passed by the Kerala State Legislature. Another factor responsible for fading of matrilineal culture of Kerala is the influence of adjoining states having strong patriarchal culture surrounding Kerala. Still few families follow the matrilineal traditions and customs of carrying the name of mother's clan throughout their lives in order to preserve their matrilineal system.

Bodo, a community residing in Assam, a North-Eastern state of India, follows the bilateral

societal structure, that is, it is partly patriarchal and partly matriarchal. The Bodo women enjoy enough liberty and equality to the Bodo men in almost all the spheres of their everyday lives. Bodo women are well trained into the skills and knowledge of weaving. Weaving can be considered a vocational stream of education if looked upon from the lens of modern system of education. Merina Islam (2012) stated that Bodo women enjoy same status to that of men in the social and educational fields. The Bodo women and men have similar education and both participate in the philosophical debates. The Bodo women are well educated and have good leadership skills which make them eligible and potential leaders in the political arenas. They are allowed to participate in the political affairs as per their wish. The Bodo women's political participation and active role can be evidently seen in the Bodo Liberation Movement in the late decade of 1980s; in the formation of various social and political organisations like - All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF), Bodo Women Justice Forum (BWJF), etc. Through such organisations and movements, the Bodo women struggled for the welfare, emancipation and justice of Bodo as well as other tribal women. They also carried certain programs and drives under these organisations to create awareness about the role of women in running a family as well as society at large where the women rear the children; take care of the health, hygiene and sanitation of family members; family planning and the demerits of alcoholism; the negative consequences of polygamy and they also play a major role in the education of children. There are many Bodo women who have worked for the social welfare of the women and have emancipated the women from the drudgery of miserable lives. Anjali Daimary and Pramila Rani Brahma are the eminent leaders and social activists who work for upliftment of status of Bodo women and other tribal women found in the adjoining North Eastern regions of India. Thus, we can see that education make the women self-confident and visionary who channelize their energy and potential into the good works for society.

'Moso' is a matrilineal society residing in China. This community is traditionally known as 'The Kingdom of Women'; but now due to the

impacts of various factors from mainstream Han culture found there, this society is changing and shifting towards becoming patrilineal society. Whereas the women are trying to survive their traditions and culture against this patriarchal Han culture. They don't want to leave their age old matrilineal culture for the so-called modern culture prevailing in the society. Initially the Moso had a natural economy where they were using the Barter system instead of hard or tangible currency. They were not favouring modernization and the currency or monetary economy or market economy even after the economic reform of 1978. Their purpose for production was to produce mainly for their own subsistence in order to satisfy their personal needs and not to earn profits from its commercialisation. They exchanged goods for goods in the barter system. At the same time, the people of China were supposed to spend a certain amount on medical appointment, hospital checking-in, elementary school incidentals and the annual taxes. On calculation, one can see that this expenditure was much greater than the average per capita disposable income of the Mosos. Since they were still continuing with their natural kind of economy based on the barter system, it was very problematic for the Moso to pay these cash payments.

In late 1980s and early 1990s, the Moso started conducting local tourism in collaboration with the governmental national level scheme of indigenous autonomy. There were dual motives of this tourism - to encourage economic development of the Moso community and to preserve their culture. Because of the famine, the local natives of Moso society helped to make this tourism initiative to achieve success. Enticed by the promise of jobs that will allow them into a monetary economy; they often give up work on land and a subsistence lifestyle to become dependent upon a monetary economic lifestyle (McLaren, 1998; Luo, 2008). In reality, the things went opposite to the expected results. The lifestyle of the Moso did improve with this tourism development because they were adopting the monetary economy; but this could not preserve their matriarchal culture; rather this exposed them to the values of patriarchy.

Although the women should have been considered to be powerful in matriarchal Mosos, but some other notions achieved lime light which

were about the sexuality of women in their society. These outsiders believed that the Moso women are free available for sex because there are no commitments and promises for future among the lovers of present. The two reasons that attracted the tourists to visit their areas were the availability of a different system to run the society, that is, matriarchy among Mosos and the desire of the tourists to seek young attractive women to satisfy their sexual urges. "The 'culture' that tourists hope to consume is imagined through an ideational slippage in which notions of matriarchy and of women as ever available objects of desire intermingle instead of clash" (Walsh, 2005; Luo, 2008). As a result, the traditional gender status has changed as their culture is reconstructed, reinvented and digested, particularly in and around tourist sites" (Luo, 2008). The tourism, the new policy for their economic development and modernization impacted the matriarchal culture of the Moso and changed it into a new form through the processes of reconstruction and reinvention of the culture.

Among the various factors like health, medical facilities, taxation rules, etc; education is also one important factor which has challenged the gender structure and matrilineal culture among the Mosos either directly or indirectly in the developmental process. The opportunity to study or the access of education had not been equal for all. Initially the Mosos did not have the opportunity of education since it was a privilege which was accessible only by the people belonging to elite class during the feudal period. Later on, with the struggle and movement of the People's Communes, the opportunity of education was made available for all, but the tuition fee had to be paid. It is not possible for all to afford this tuition fee, thus the Chinese government made education compulsory for nine years in 1986. But it was also problematic for the Moso because they were still supposed to pay an amount of money for school expenses till 2007. The average annual per capita disposable income of the Moso was not sufficient to pay for the expenses of the school. This burden of paying for school incidentals by the Moso was taken off by the Chinese government in 2007 when it waived off all the school expenses and made the nine years of education as free and compulsory for all the children. The step of making

the elementary education compulsory certainly led to the high enrolment ratio of the children to schools but the dropout rates also increased. The dropout rate was directly proportional to the level of schooling as they dropout rates increased with the increase in grades or level of schooling. Thus, very less percentage of children was found to be completing the elementary school. When the state made elementary education free and compulsory for all the children to make it accessible, the enrolment ratio rose higher and the dropout rates fell down to zero. Chia-Ling Luo(2008) presents the data that in 2007, 98% of Moso youth attended compulsory education, and none dropped out.

The scenario was different in case of Higher Education - at high school as well as at the university level because there was no free access to education. Very high fees had to be paid to study at high school and university. It can be said that the Chinese government may have felt that elementary education was enough for the agrarian population of Moso community and that's why the doors to achieve higher education further were being closed. It also had a positive impact on the minds of the Moso people that they were encouraged to be employed into the fields other than agriculture in order to earn more in monetary terms so that they can make their children to study higher. This desire to send the children to high school and university and for working into alternative areas of employment brought some negative connotations in the Moso society. The Moso people who wished to send their children to attain higher education and they took employments in other fields to afford high fees of the children's high school and university; these people were pushed out and excommunicated from the Moso society since they thought that these people were trying to seek and accumulate money or wealth among the patriarchal population which was considered to be external population. "Cultural dilution and - unless beneficiaries of this external education return to work in their townships - a brain drain may then occur" (Luo, 2008).

Dr. Ira Das (2013) describes 'Status of Women' as the position of women in society in relation to men. She discusses that even though men and women share the same geographical,

social, economic and cultural sphere; but still the both don't enjoy the same status in society. In the mainstream patriarchal society, the position of women is most often lower and subservient to the men or their male counterparts. There is inequality in their access of resources; differences in the responsibilities and expectations of men and women. Usually the men have greater access to healthcare facilities, educational opportunities, physical and financial resources as well as the other opportunities and prospects in the social, economic, cultural and political spheres of life. "According to Mohiuddin (1995), women's lower status is manifested in women's low wage rates than men in all occupational fields and industries, in their limited upward mobility, and in their greater family responsibilities due to divorce, abandonment, etc. in the developed countries. In the developing countries, women's lower status is reflected not only in their work being underpaid, unrecognised, but also in their limited access to productive resources and support services such as health and Education" (Das, 2013).

Schooling, educational and employment opportunities as well as conditions are also very crucial factors in determining the women's status in society among the numerous other factors. Education plays a very important role in emancipation of women and uplifting their status in society as well as in one's own eyes. It is believed that the women enjoy a better status in the matriarchal societies as compared to the status of women in patriarchal societies. We need to look upon the accessibility and availability of education; and the educational levels attained by women in the matriarchal societies to see whether education has contributed to the better status of women in matriarchal societies.

From the data collected by Das (2013) from the secondary sources regarding the status of women in North Eastern regions of India where matriarchal or matrilineal societies are profoundly found and the status of women in rest of India, one can see the indicators leading to the better status of women in North Eastern regions of India. It has been found out that the female literacy is higher among these states and Kerala where matriarchy's roots are present and the gender gap in literacy rates is also low as compared to the states following patriarchal culture. These states,

especially the tribal areas where there is the matriarchal culture in society, have higher female work participation rate and low gender disparities in terms of work participation as compared to other parts of India. Educational attainment by women can be one of the possible reasons leading to greater work participation levels of women in these matriarchal communities. It is also observed by Das (2013) from the data achieved from Government of India's surveys that the gross enrolment ratio is relatively higher in the North-Eastern regions of India than rest of India, specifically the enrolment rates of children in elementary schools.

From the studies conducted on Khasis, Garos and Jaintias, it has been found out that the age of marriage and age of conceiving first child increases with higher educational levels. The education leads to awareness among women regarding their health. Thus, it has been found out that higher educational level among women leads to better reproductive health of women and low fertility rates.

But it is disheartening to acknowledge the fact highlighted by Rustagi (2004) on the basis of data received from Government of India (2001) that the dropout rates of children from school are also higher in North-Eastern regions of India as compared to the remaining parts of India. "Rustagi (2004) opined the use of girls in sibling care, as additional hands for helping mothers in the household, farm and off-farm work and so on operate to reduce the availability of formal education for them (Das, 2013). Since many girls drop out in the elementary classes only, so very few get the chance to reach and continue their further education at secondary, senior secondary and higher levels of education at university level. The lower levels of literacy and lower levels of educational attainment by the females have many repercussions in their personal and public lives, like, their lack of awareness regarding their own health requirements and they will not be having knowledge about their possible access to healthcare facilities and other welfare services related to their good health. This kind of contradiction regarding the educational and social status of women from North Eastern states of India force us to think that whether the north-eastern women really have more access to

educational opportunities or not and whether they really enjoy more liberty and higher social status or not?

### Summing up

In case of education in matriarchal societies, the question is not of the content and curriculum. The formal system of schooling and education; the syllabus and curriculum; the texts and the content - all are same in the matriarchal societies and patriarchal societies. There is no information about the different kind of schooling or educational system among the matriarchal societies. No other alternative system is found to exist there too. The main question arises to study the aspects related to education in matriarchal societies is of the accessibility of men and women to the opportunities and system of education. And also about how much they are attaining the educational levels and how the education help them in their betterment in the social, economic, cultural, political and personal spheres of their lives. Education certainly helps the women in other aspects of their lives too, like their better overall health as well as better reproductive health, delayed age of marriage and first pregnancy, and lower fertility rates. Thereby, education leads to emancipation and empowerment of women; improved life styles; healthy living; and hence higher social status in society.

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