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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mainstreaming Gender Narratives: A Study on Women Empowerment of Kuki women In Assam's Karbi Anglong District: A Case Study in Diphu Town.

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Abstract

Karbi Anglong district of Assam in India is the home to numerous tribes and communities that constitute it essentially into a plural society. The mapping of borders and boundaries and different nomenclatures reinforced by the British colonial administration had insidiously influenced the lives of the people of the region to a large extent. The delineation of erstwhile Mikir Hills (now Karbi Anglong) as partially excluded territory deprived it from the mainstream development that culminated in multiple "mental borders" between different groups of people. The post colonial ruling elites also did not intend to frame policies to ameliorate the tribes of the district as mandated by the Indian Constitution. Hence, the emergence of the new ruling elites in post colonial Assam as well as in Karbi Anglong could not fulfill the aspirations of the sixth scheduled tribes. During the creation of the Mikir Hills by the colonial administration, along with the Karbis (who were earlier called Mikirs), other tribes such as Rengmas, Dimasas, Kukis, Man Tai, etc. also marked their presence there. Even the migration of Rengmas took place earlier than the Mikirs (Karbhis). In 1952, the Mikir Hills District Council was created to uplift the sixth scheduled tribes of the district. This led to the migration of more Karbis to Karbi Anglong from various parts of Assam. In order to confer more autonomy, a memorandum of understanding was signed between the Assam Government and the Karbi Anglong District Council members in 1995. Hence the Karbi Anglong District Council was upgraded to Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council. The numerical majority of the Karbis and their representation in the council put them into the corridors of power and conferred them hegemony in the process. The ethnic minorities who are also indigenous to the land were subsequently put into marginalization and discrimination. The situations of perpetual underdevelopment and near absence of the government from the life of the people added more fuel to the fire. The emergence of various militant groups to rein control over the scarce resources tarnished the ethnic tranquility and brotherhood. Consequently, innocent civilians had to give away their lives immaturely in a civilized society. In that situation, women and children faced the brunt more severely. Having being women as well as minority, the Kuki women are doubly marginalized group. Given the background, this paper is an attempt to explore the living realities of the Kuki women who are the indigenous sixth schedule tribe of the district and the extent of their empowerment.

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Introduction:-

Women empowerment entails wider significance in the 21st century given the growing awareness to ameliorate the socio-economic position of women and to ensure their political participation. The widely pervasive gender

discrimination is a social reality in India and a strong impediment to women's empowerment. The concept of women empowerment emerged especially in the 1980 as an offshoot of human development discourse. It is a multi-dimensional concept with various interpretations. One way of defining it as a way to infuse people with power (World Development Report 2002). There are different parameters to measure women empowerment like autonomy (Dyson and Moore 1983, Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001), agency and status (Gage 1995; Tazannatos 1999). In fact, women empowerment underscores access to resources, job opportunities, level of education, access to political office, inheritance right, autonomy like decision making power, freedom to movement, right to choose partner in marriage etc. The extent of women empowerment varies from society to society, across culture, class and regions. It is observed that the policies of the government are largely male-centered and women's relative absence from it fails to reflect their plight. It is however pertinent to address women's issues in the policy making as well as their implementation.

Patriarchy shapes and maps women's responses to a large extent. Examples galore to substantiate that even the educated and employed women in numerous cases are not free from the prejudices of patriarchy. This is perhaps due to the socialization process that gradually stipulates subordination to women since childhood. The highly acclimatized son preference in the Indian society offers priority to them in schooling, food, games, dress etc. Consequently, the power structure within the family is centered on male hegemony and subordination of women. Invariably, a very few women could ache out independent choices outside the male dominated values. It is however crucial on the part of women to infuse confidence in them and ensure their capabilities as well as entitlement to make choices (Sen 1999; Rowlands 1995; Nussbam 2000). In fact, women should equip and empower themselves rather than to depend on men for empowering them. Such perception of empowerment would reinforce again on superiority and subordination rather than real empowerment. Simply talking about empowerment without braving challenges and skill development cannot actually empower women. Hence, economic empowerment coupled with skill development is the prelude to political empowerment.

Tulika Tripathy observed that women from Bihar, Assam, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan have least access to all five indicators of empowerment —higher education, decision making in HH, freedom of movement, say no to have sexual intercourse, attitude for wife beating (Tripathy 2010). Tripathy, however failed to comprehend the significant presence of tribal population in Assam wherein women enjoy a marginally better position in the society than their counterparts in the caste society. Representation in the political bodies and inheritance of properties are the two areas wherein they experience discrimination as stipulated in the customary law. The UN Millennium Development Goals adopted in September 2000 at the United Nations Millennium Declaration devoted one of the eight goals to the promotion of gender equality and women empowerment. The MDG could be designed as a human rights approach to develop issues with emphasise on equality and non- discrimination (Oyebamiji and Amini-Philip C 2012).

The basic objective of the present paper is to explore the living realities of the Kuki women and the extent of their empowerment in Karbi Anglong district of Assam --- a case study of three Kuki inhabited villages in the district headquarter, Diphu—Lhanghoi, Thadou Veng and DPC. The methodology that we have adopted to conduct the study is historical and sociological. The primary data is largely used to conduct the study except a few references from the secondary sources. The data is however collected through a structured schedule. We collected 30 samples to conduct the study. The schedule was framed to extract relevant information about various aspects of the study.

The presence of diverse tribes and communities in Karbi Anglong district essentially constitute it into a plural society. The tribes indigenous to the district are -- Karbis, Rengma Nagas, Dimasas, Man-Tai, Bodos, Tiwas, Hmars., Kukis, Khasi, Mizo Chakmas etc. (Population pattern in Karbi Anglong, Deputy Commissioner's Office, as per 2001 Census). There is also a significant presence of communities in the district-- Bengalis, Assamese, Nepalis, Hindi speaking, ex-teagarden, Manipuri, Bilaspuri, Chakma etc. The Kuki is one of the indigenous sixth schedule tribes of the district. In the colonial period, the British used the compound term 'chin-kuki-Mizo' to group the Kukish language speaking people. The Kukis were bifurcated into several parts and 20 tribal identities were created. In 1956, the Government of India recognized each dialect group as separate tribe (Haokip 2012:64). The Kukis are largely found in North-West Burma (Myanmar), Chittagang Hill Tracts in Bangladesh and North-eastern states of Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram and Tripura. "In Assam, the Kukis are known to have been one of the earliest settlers in Karbi Anglong region. They are dominant in North Cachar Hills and its adjoining areas. They have once dominated Silchar and its adjoining mountainous regions. In Assam, they retain Kuki as the name of their common identity" (ibid). They are also found in Singhason Hills under the Diphu sub division, Dhansiri area, Manja, Borjan

under Bokajan sub division, some parts of Deopani under Borpathar police station, parts of Diphu town and Hamren sub division. They belonged to the Mongloid stock and the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group, a sub family of the Tibeto-Chinese.

Scholars have accounted that the Kukis migrated from Burma to undivided colonial Assam. They were identified as chin with many dialect groups in Burma. Some scholars believe that the settlement of the Kukis in Karbi Anglong district took place along with the Karbi community in the 13th century (Terang 2008:97). According to Nazmeen Anarn, “their migration into Karbi Anglong in the erstwhile Sibsagar district took place after the Kuki rebellion of 1917-19. In Karbi Anglong, one group inhabits some pockets of Hamren sub division and a second one inhabits the Singhason-Khanbomon Hill range of Diphu sub- division” (Damzen 2008: 57). “The Kukis were parts of Labour Coups during the World War II, Dimapur being a military zone and Bokajan also, they settle in these areas after the war” (Narrated in an interface by Hengolal Singson on 12 July 2015). There are others who narrated that the Kukis settled in Karbi Anglong district since the second part of the 19th century. They practice animism as their traditional religion. The arrival of Christian missionaries in the region marked a departure from animism to Christianity, a significant section of them had converted to Hindus (Horatio 1982:179-18). The traditional mode of economy of the Kukis is shifting cultivation.

The survey that we have undertaken in the Langhoi, Thadou Veng and DPC villages are substantiated below:

Case 1:-

Lhanghoi Village:-

Lhanghoi village is overwhelmingly a Kuki inhabited village situated in Diphu. There are 53 households in the village. We interviewed the village headman N. Lengthang who narrated that the Kuki women enjoy a relatively better position in the society than their counterparts in the caste society. The birth of a girl child is equally solicited as the boy. The decisions in the family are jointly crafted out by the husband and the wife. He articulated that the earning of the husband in many cases goes to the wife. Even the wife can provide loan to anyone in the village without prior permission of the husband. The elder son in the family has an edge over succession of property and decision making capacity. Regarding the settlement of marriage, discussion with the village headman is mandatory. The bride price is paid by the bridegroom's family. In the 1940s and 1950s, Mithun was provided as a bride price which is replaced by cow in recent times due to the rising prices of the former (Mithun is a species belongs to the family of buffalo. In the 1940s and 50s, the cost of one mithun was Rs.40 which has been increased to Rs.50, 000 at present). Sometimes the bride's family demands cow with a calf. In case of divorce, as per the customary law, the husband has to provide a buffalo or cow to the wife and the case is settled by the headman. In many villages there are two headmen—one is appointed by the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council who is known as *Sarkari Gaonbura* and the other is by the villagers. He narrated that the village lacks the basic facilities like safe drinking water, medical facilities, old age pension and job card etc. The villagers dig wells for drinking purpose as well as to meet their household necessities. In this village, a few people are employed in SSB and Assam police etc., a large chunk are daily wage earners and cultivators etc. It is pertinent to mention that a very few women could have access to graduation and post-graduation courses due to financial crunch. Women are hardly employed except a few. There is no employment generation scheme like the Self help group etc. Women suffer from health related problems. A very few villagers have land *pattas*. The Karbi-Kuki ethnic conflict of 2003 claimed lives of many, displaced thousands, orphaned a plenty children and left many as destitute. The conflict has drastically changed the mindset of the people and a feeling of fear and insecurity pervades their psyche. He narrated that in the All India Kuki Inpi (the apex body of the tribe) meetings that were held twice in Manipur after the conflict expressed concern over the safety of the Kuki women wherein they were directed to wear pant and shirt for early exit in case of any untoward situation. He highlighted that the conflict has severely changed the dress code of the women that has direct bearing on their culture (Narrated in an interface by N. Lengthang on 14 February 2015).

We also interviewed Soni Lhinghoteng of the same village whose husband is employed in the District Special Branch of Police in Diphu town. She articulated that the decision making in the family are jointly made by the husband and the wife. The earning of the husband, according to her, in many cases rests with the wife since the male members are generally extravagant. Though the village is located in the Diphu town, the sign of urban life is conspicuous in its absence in it. Wretched road condition, lack of safe drinking water, inadequate health care facilities, lack of employment etc. speak a volume about the drudgery of the villagers and the state's absence from the development process. She narrated that among the three Kuki inhabited villages, service of the Asha workers is

available only in one village. Even the presence of Asha workers and the medical facility by the Diphu Civil Hospital is inadequate to care their health related problems. In many cases, they have to purchase medicines and other accessories like injection, needles, saline etc. The government schemes do not percolate down to the beneficiaries. Though the villagers were provided job cards under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Generation scheme, they were not provided jobs so far. Since Soni's husband's salary is not enough to meet the family expenses, she along with nine other women of the village set up an interest based Self -help group to supplement the family income. The name of the self help group is *Zoujam*. It consists of 10 members from 5 households. Each member deposits Rs.150 per month. The rate of interest in case of members is 5% and that for a non-member is 10%. There is a primary school and a community centre in the village but these are not equipped with necessary amenities (My conversation with Soni Lhinghoteng on 25 February 2015).

We also interviewed Baby Daropi of the same village who is working as the instructor of the Integrated Child Development Scheme of the said village. She was Kuki by birth and married to a Karbi. She highlighted that the problems faced by the women in the village is primarily due to the non-implementation of the government schemes. Consequently, people lack employment, health schemes, opportunities in education and safe drinking water etc. The condition of the road is very poor. In most cases, women had to trudge water from the wells. Majority of the women are semi literate and the number of graduates in the village is very less. A few people are engaged in the government department like agriculture, District Special Branch, Assam Police etc. A large number of people are daily wage earners while some others are cultivators who cultivate in the distant hills leaving behind their village and family. There are 54 students in the ICDS Scheme, majority of them are girls. The salary of the instructor is irregular. She highlighted that ration is provided twice in a year and the allotted amount is inadequate in view to large number of students. Women in the village are largely housewives except a few. Women were found less interested in politics. She narrated that during the Karbi-Kuki ethnic conflict of 2003, those Kukis who were married to the Karbis faced serious threats. She endorsed that without opportunities in education and micro finance schemes and other employment avenues for Kuki women; empowerment would remain only in 'paper' (My conservation with Baby Daropi on 15 February 2015).

Village: DPC:-

The Village DPC is located in ward No.4 of the Diphu town. We interviewed Lemphu Vaiphai, the headman of the Village who was appointed by the villagers. He narrated that there are 24 households in the village wherein 69 are male and 78 female. The village is situated on a hilly terrain and there is virtually no road in the village. The dilapidated way leading to the village exposed the villagers very badly in rainy season. Moving out at night in such a terrain is extremely difficult for women. There is no initiative on the part of the government to provide any facility to the villagers. Job cards under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme were not provided to them. There is no pension for the widows or elderly women. The electrification of the village became complete only a year back. Among the women, two are graduates and one is pursuing her master degree in the Assam Agricultural College, Jorhat. There are three working women in the village. One is engaged in a government primary school and two others are working in a private school set up by the church named Calvin Primary School. Two women in the said private school receive a salary of Rs.6000 per month (My interview with Lemphu Vaiphai on 23 March 2015).

We also interviewed Bobby Vaiphai of the same village who is a teacher in the Calvin Primary School. She narrated that her husband does not have any income and her monthly earning is too meager to sustain. She was provided a straw house by the school authority. In view to the virtual absence of the government, her gratitude lies to the church members given their humble initiatives in educating the children of the village and the support provided to her. Safe drinking water is the primary concern since the village lacks the water supply facility. She has to pull water from the well through rough terrains of the village. The health care facilities are almost non-existent in this village. People suffer from various diseases like malaria, jaundice, typhoid etc. Women who are mostly anemic and victims of malnutrition are most vulnerable in such a situation. The health care facilities provided by the Government through Asha workers are concentrated in a nearby Rongkimi village that is inhabited by the Karbis. There are four female headed households in the village, the plight of which is more severe. They rear pigs, hens' etc. to support their families and the young female members tutor a few children of the village to supplement their income. She articulated that though the village was not smacked by the Karbi-Kuki ethnic conflict of 2003, the villagers had to run away to safer places apprehending threats to their lives. The potential fear of ethnic conflict is still encompassing with a pervasive feeling of insecurity (Narrated in an interview by Bobby Vaiphai on 18 March 2015). We also

interviewed some other respondents of the village who shared more or less similar views of perpetual under development, the absence of Government in their lives and the fear of impending conflicts.

Thadou Veng Village:-

We interviewed the village headman who narrated that there are 53 households in the village and the total population is 325. A few of them are engaged in petty jobs like primary school teachers, District Reconstruction and Development Agency, clerks in the Public Work department etc. In one household, there is one engineer and a doctor. Due to financial crunch, the villagers in most cases are unable to afford higher education to their children. Some respondents expressed that they cultivate ginger in hilly areas to support their lives. Some others are daily wage earners. There is one primary school in the village with a female headmistress. The Government does not provide water supply to the people. Some people arranged the community water supply scheme and pay Rs. 400 per month. Others who cannot afford to pay the said amount are depended on ring well. The number of graduate is less. There is no micro finance group or other avenues of employment in the village. One girl qualified Teachers Aptitude Test and was appointed as a primary teacher in Longnit area of the district. One girl is pursuing master degree from IGNOU. There is one primary school the name of which is Thadou Veng Primary School.

We also interview Hoinu Hansing, the secretary of the Kuki Mothers Association who is located in the same village. She narrated that the village has not witnessed any development since its inception. After the Karbi- Kuki ethnic conflict of 2003, some families were brought from the Singhason Hills of the district to protect them from the Karbi militant groups. Though the village was situated in the Diphu Town area, word no 4, the amenities of urban life are in astray. She reiterated that memorandums were proffered to the concerned authority several times to construct road and to provide basic facilities but it fell on the deaf ear (My conversation with Hoinu Hansing on 15 March 2015). We also interviewed a couple of respondents from the same village who aired their difficulties in pulling on their lives. Most of the respondents shared the similar views that the sixth schedule failed miserably to foster meaningful ties between different ethnic groups. This is in conformity with the observation made by one of the stalwart communist leader of the district, Jayanta Rongpi (cited in Tom Magnattuthazhe 2008).

Findings and Conclusion:-

From the survey conducted in the above mentioned villages, it is found that women in the Kuki society enjoy a relatively better social status than the caste society. They have decision making power in the family and a control over finance. In the marriage of the Kuki women, there is the traditional system of bride price to be paid by the groom's family. Even in divorce, the groom has to provide cow or buffalo to the bride. In jhum cultivation, women played a significant role. Seeds were preserved carefully by the women folk. At present, they are playing an important role in ginger, paddy, maize, vegetables, cash crops and non cash crop cultivations. The family structure is patriarchal since the line of descent is traced through man. The eldest among brothers in a clan is a hierarchical head called *Hoosa* (chief). He is the chief of not only his village but also of the entire family and clan. His word is final and binding on the members of the clan (Haokip 2012:65). The Kukis administers their civil life as per the tribal customary laws in general and land in particular. In recent time, some changes have been taking place in the customary laws due to sanskritization and modernization. It is pertinent to mention that though women enjoy some rights in the Kuki society, they experience certain discriminations too. Hence, such a society cannot be identified as an egalitarian society. For example, the customary law excludes women from making political choices and exercise judicial power. The village Council is made up of men alone and disputes are settled by the headman. Furthermore, women do not possess inheritance rights except a few in recent times. According to the customary law, the brothers have to take the consent of the elder sister in any vital decision. But in the present scenario, this custom is not being strictly followed as narrated by some of the respondents. Inter marriage took place between the Kuki-Karbi, Kuki-Bodo, Kuki-Dimasa, Kuki-Nepali etc. But such cases are not many.

The Kuki women of Karbi Anglong District are the victims of discrimination, apathy and marginalization. What figured prominently in the interviews and conversations with the respondents is the deprivation and alienation by the government. The perpetual under development, competing claims over scarce resources, overlapping demands for homelands and apathy of the ruling elites etc. complicates the ethnic situation and eventually created situations of endemic ethnic conflicts and related problems. Since the creation of the Karbi Anglong District Council in 1952 and alleviation to Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council subsequently, nothing was practically done for the Kuki community. There is no dearth of fund since it is a sixth schedule district. In addition, it is located in Assam which so far enjoyed the status of a special category state. Lack of political will and commitment, self interest of the policy

makers, bureaucrats, officials, rampant corruption and hegemony of the dominant tribe etc. led the Kukis to be the 'outcastes' in their land of birth. The situation is further complicated with the demand for greater Nagalim by the Nagas (Choudhury2008:243). The government schemes do not percolate down to the beneficiaries. Health care is the primary problem as shared by all the respondents. Lack of safe drinking water is one of the reasons for various diseases in the villages. Malnutrition and anemia affect the health of women to a large extent. Furthermore, they suffer from malaria, sinusitis, jaundice etc. Since Karbi Anglong is a malaria prone area, many people die due to malaria every year. In recent time, increasing cases of typhoid are also being reported from the length and breadth of the district. Education opportunities are limited and except a primary school nothing is provided to the Kuki villages so far. Even if job cards were provided to some of the villagers, no job was provided to them. In fact, social security measures like widow pension, by -cycles for girls, self help groups for women, cooking gas etc. were not implemented in these villages. The plight of the female headed household is more severe. The villagers almost live in a primitive condition. Some of the respondents narrated that since the Kuki tribe is not represented in the Autonomous Council, their voices remain unheard and their plight unattended. Political participation of the Kuki women is almost non-existent. So far the women of the aforesaid villages have not been elected as the member of Legislative Assembly of Assam, member of the Parliament, member of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, nor largely do have formal membership in any political party. The Kuki tribe needs economic and political autonomy to grow. Unless and until women are empowered through various opportunities, upliftment of the Kuki as a whole is a distant reality. The general level of deprivation compounds due to ethnic conflicts. Since women are less mobile and often are in charge of children, old and infirm, they are at more risk and vulnerable in such a situation. Mistrust and insecurity of life and property emanated from the ethnic conflicts and the lackadaisical attitude of the policy makers to improve the quality of life of the people in the district. "The short sighted policy of the government makes matter more complicated"(Choudhury2007:176).

The Kuki National Assembly is the apex body of the Kukis that has been raising the issue of human rights violations and plight of the Kuki people. There are other organizations also -Kuki Students Association, Kuki Human Rights Organization, Kuki Mothers Association to fight for social justice but these are not very active perhaps due to financial crunch, enigmatic ethnic situation in the district and their vulnerability and lack of support etc. Needless to say, perpetual underdevelopment, lack of employment, lack of morality in governance and the mindless acts of posing "ballot with bullet" in elections by the ruling elites huddled together in providing leverage to the militant groups to perpetrate violence on the innocent civilian population of the district.

In conclusion, it is said that the Kuki women are in charge of numerous responsibilities in bringing up the family and society. In view to this, women empowerment for the Kuki tribe is the prelude to the enlightened and prosperous generations. It is urgently necessary to teeth the customary law in providing representation of Kuki women in the village council, judicial settlement and endow them with inheritance rights. There is no dearth of funds that are allocated for all the stake holders with a view to attain a level of development to the sixth schedule tribes. In the present context, right to development is invariably a first category of right and everyone has a claim over it. The politics of inclusion and exclusion in a plural society wherein the dominant tribe and the minorities migrated in the more or less the same historical period and (some migrated even much earlier) contributed each other's development does not auger well and create fluid situations of ethnic rivalry and conflicts. In fact, nothing is more ignominious than mutual suspicion between various groups in a plural society as in Karbi Anglong. Hence, hegemony by the dominant tribe in such a situation has detrimental impact on others. Gender budgeting, creation of employment through micro finance and other avenues, educational opportunities and health care facilities etc. are the pioneering steps to redress the plight of the Kuki women. It is the high time for the leaders and policy makers to step in and frame policies profoundly to incinerate potential and actual conflicts between different groups. They must accomplish the constitutional mandate to uplift the sixth schedule tribes in general and the Kuki women in particular.

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