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RESEARCH ARTICLE

IMPACT OF PATRIARCHAL CUSTOMS ON WOMEN'S LAND OWNERSHIP AMONG GALO TRIBE IN WEST SIANG DISTRICT OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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Abstract

This study explored how patriarchal customs influence women's land ownership and inheritance among the Galo tribe in West Siang, Arunachal Pradesh. Land in Galo society is more than just an economic asset; it represents lineage, identity, and belonging. Yet, the prevailing patrilineal inheritance and patrilocal residence systems place land rights squarely in male hands, effectively excluding daughters from inheritance. Using a mixed-method approach, data from around 150 adult respondents and interviews with women, elders, and leaders revealed that none of the women inherited ancestral land. Only a small portion (2%) received land as parental gifts, typically newly acquired land rather than ancestral property, while the overwhelming majority (98%) purchased land themselves. This shows not only how customary norms exclude women but also how determined women are to secure economic independence despite systemic barriers. Decision-making remains dominated by male elders in the customary village council (keba), reinforcing the exclusion of women. Although legal provisions exist to guarantee equal inheritance rights, these rights remain mostly theoretical, overshadowed by the prevailing customary system. The women interviewed expressed a range of emotions—from acceptance to frustration, hope, and agency. While many accept cultural norms, they also assert themselves by purchasing land, which is a source of economic security and empowerment, though often lacking full social legitimacy. Factors such as education, financial independence, and NGO support help women acquire land, but deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes, low awareness of legal rights, and fear of community backlash continue to hinder progress. Thus achieving gender equality in land ownership among the Galo requires a multifaceted approach.

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Legal literacy, economic empowerment, engaging with customary leaders, and promoting women's inclusion in formal land registration processes are essential steps forward. While Galo women demonstrate resilience and adaptability, true equality will only arrive when customs evolve to fully recognize women as rightful heirs. This

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study adds vital empirical evidence and personal voices to the ongoing dialogue on balancing tradition with gender justice in tribal communities.

Introduction:-

Tribal societies across India are sustained by deep-rooted traditions and indigenous systems of governance that regulate community life, property relations, and social norms. In these contexts, land is not merely an economic asset but a profound marker of heritage, identity, and security. Within the Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, primarily settled in the West Siang district, customary laws and cultural codes continue to shape land ownership patterns in ways that reflect and reinforce patriarchal authority. The transmission of property through the male lineage remains the norm, symbolizing continuity of tradition but also limiting women's space within the sphere of ownership and inheritance. This relationship between land and patriarchy is not incidental; it is embedded in a social fabric where decision-making power, lineage rights, and resource control are largely vested in men. Women's ties to land are predominantly mediated through fathers, husbands, or male relatives, making their access contingent rather than autonomous. While transformations in education and exposure to wider socio-political changes are gradually reaching tribal areas, the hold of tradition remains strong, particularly in rural Galo communities where customary codes carry binding moral authority. Within India's broader constitutional landscape, the principle of gender equality is upheld and reinforced through several statutory provisions. Yet, tribal regions such as Arunachal Pradesh function under a unique legal pluralism in which customary laws retain legitimacy alongside state legislation.

This dual structure, protected under constitutional provisions such as special autonomy articles creates a complex arena where modern laws advocating equality intersect with traditional rules rooted in patriarchal lineage systems. The outcome is an intricate balance between preserving cultural identity and reconciling it with evolving norms of justice and equity. Studying land ownership through this lens is essential for unpacking how gender roles are defined, maintained, and contested within the Galo society. It draws attention to deeply held cultural beliefs, the mechanisms of customary governance, and the social hierarchies that influence who may inherit, control, or benefit from land. The subject also opens a window into broader questions of legal recognition, rights negotiation, and the dynamic relationship between tradition and social change in tribal India. Guided by critical perspectives such as Feminist Legal Theory and the Gender and Development (GAD) framework, this inquiry situates itself at the intersection of culture, law, and gender relations, exploring how normative systems mediate resource distribution and power structures. By engaging with these conceptual tools, the study approaches the Galo experience not as an isolated case but as part of a larger discourse on indigenous governance, women's rights, and the ongoing negotiation between heritage and equality.

Review Of The Related Literature:-

Research on tribal societies in Arunachal Pradesh and neighbouring regions shows a consistent pattern: customary norms rooted in patriarchy heavily influence women's access to land and inheritance, often limiting or denying their property rights despite statutory laws which affirm gender equality.

Chai and Choudhary (2025) examined how customary codes and gender expectations influence women's land ownership among the Galo community. Employing a mixed-method design with 300–400 participants, their findings revealed that inheritance systems rooted in patrilineal traditions severely restrict women's rights to immovable property. Despite statutory laws guaranteeing equal property rights, customary practices often supersede these formal provisions. The study highlighted that such customary dominance creates ambiguity in implementation and weakens enforcement mechanisms intended to protect women. The researchers emphasized the urgent need for policy and community-level interventions to bridge the gap between law and practice in gender equity.

Doye (2020) conducted a study among the Galo tribe of the Ramle Banggo region, focusing on inheritance practices and gender roles. The research demonstrated that customary inheritance follows a strictly male lineage, where land passes from father to son, leaving daughters with little or no ownership rights. Despite women's integral role in family and community life, they remain excluded from land decisions. Doye highlighted the role of customary leaders, such as burahs and village chiefs, in reinforcing patriarchal norms. The study concluded that even with improved education and awareness, traditional authority continues to maintain gendered land inequality.

Neba (2019) explored the inheritance system of the Tagin tribe and found that property ownership remains patrilineal, with women excluded from inheritance rights. Tagin women may use or cultivate land, but they lack

formal ownership and legal authority over property. The study emphasized that despite constitutional and statutory provisions supporting gender equality, customary governance systems hold greater influence in tribal regions. These customary structures reinforce male dominance in property succession, making reform difficult. Neba concluded that without active integration of statutory law into local governance, gender equality in land ownership among tribal communities will remain aspirational.

Borang (2014) studied modernization and changing gender roles among Adi communities, emphasizing the relationship between literacy, governance participation, and shifting attitudes toward women's property rights. The study found that while patriarchal inheritance traditions remain dominant, modernization and increased female involvement in local decision-making are fostering gradual questioning of these norms. Educational progress and exposure to external influences have initiated dialogue on gender inclusion. However, Borang noted that legal and customary reforms remain slow due to deep-rooted cultural resistance. The research underscores the tension between tradition and modernity in redefining women's roles in property ownership.

Hina (2013) investigated the inheritance customs of the Nyishi tribe and found that women are largely excluded from owning or inheriting land. Their participation in property-related decisions is minimal, reflecting the persistence of patriarchal structures. Nevertheless, Hina observed gradual change influenced by youth awareness, NGO interventions, and educational initiatives. These factors are challenging traditional gender norms and promoting discourse around women's rights and empowerment. The studies highlight a slow but meaningful transformation in attitudes toward gender and property. However, despite evolving perceptions, structural resistance and adherence to customary law still hinder equal land ownership.

Mitkong (2002) examined inheritance systems among the Adi and related tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. Their findings revealed that ancestral property is almost always inherited by male heirs, reflecting the deeply patriarchal character of customary law. However, both studies identified emerging changes driven by education, urban exposure, and economic mobility. Increased awareness of statutory laws promoting women's rights has initiated discussions about gender equity in property inheritance. While these trends suggest potential reform, both studies concluded that patriarchal norms continue to dominate, and tangible change in property ownership patterns remains limited.

Research Questions:-

- i. How do customary patriarchal traditions influence the ownership and inheritance of land among Galo women?
- ii. What tribal norms and traditional inheritance rules govern the transfer of land within Galo families?
- iii. How do married and unmarried Galo women view and experience their rights related to land and property?
- iv. Which social, educational, and legal factors support or limit Galo women's access to and control over land?

Objectives of The Study:-

- i. To analyze the influence of patriarchal customary systems on Galo women's ability to own and inherit land.
- ii. To record and explain the traditional laws and inheritance practices that determine land succession in Galo households.
- iii. To understand Galo women's attitudes, awareness, and lived experiences regarding their land and property rights.
- iv. To identify the social, educational, and legal conditions that facilitate or hinder Galo women's acquisition of land rights.

This investigation aims to clarify how these local customary beliefs interact with women's rights, highlighting the challenges and barriers that women face in accessing land, as well as the broader social and legal framework that affects their property rights.

Methodology of The Study:-

Research Design: In this study the researcher used a cross-sectional descriptive design utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods. Specifically, the study gathered data through household surveys and complemented this with interviews of key informants as well as focus group discussions. This mixed-methods approach is widely recognized in research on customary law and women's land rights, as it allows for combining statistical data with deeper insights into community perspectives and lived experiences.

Population: In this study population comprised of all adults aged 18 years and above from Galo households located in selected villages in West Siang District, Arunachal Pradesh. Additionally, information was gathered from key individuals such as village elders, women leaders, staff from local NGOs, and government officials from revenue and forest departments who are involved in issues related to customary land practices. Ethnographic records confirm that the Galo community is predominantly found in West Siang.

Sample Size: The study involved approximately 150 adult participants (both women and men) from 6 to 8 representative villages through a household survey. For the qualitative component, 10 to 12 key-informant interviews and 3 to 4 focus group discussions with 6 to 10 women in each group were conducted. These sample sizes were chosen to balance the practical challenges of fieldwork in remote areas with the need to capture a diverse range of customary practices. Similar sample sizes are commonly used in research on tribal communities to adequately explore prevalent social norms and behaviors.

Sampling Techniques: The sampling for the study was conducted in two stages:

First, 6 to 8 villages in West Siang known to be primarily inhabited by the Galo community were purposively selected to capture local variations in customary practices. In the second stage, within each selected village, households were chosen through systematic random sampling to ensure proportional representation. For the qualitative part, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to identify knowledgeable participants such as village elders, members of the village council (keba), and women with diverse marital statuses and land experiences. These sampling methods are standard practice in social-legal and ethnographic research conducted in tribal areas.

Tools and Techniques: The study employed several tools and techniques for data collection and analysis. A self-structured questionnaire was used in the quantitative survey, covering topics such as household composition, land ownership (including registered owners and traditional use), inheritance history, education, and attitudes towards women's land rights. For qualitative data, semi-structured interview guides were prepared for village elders (keba members) and women, focusing on customary regulations, inheritance disputes, changes over time, and awareness of formal law. Focus group discussions with women to gathered collective views on obstacles and strategies related to land rights. The study also reviewed relevant documents, including local land records, minutes from keba meetings, legal notices, and NGO reports. Quantitative data analysis involved descriptive statistics like frequency counts and cross-tabulations by gender, age, and education, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically to identify prevailing customary rules, personal narratives, and factors that enable women's land access.

Ethical Considerations and Permissions:-

Obtain village consent through keba, informed consent from individual respondents, guarantee anonymity in reporting, and be sensitive to culturally appropriate interview practices (female enumerators for women respondents where appropriate).

Results:-

The present study titled "Impact of Patriarchal Customs on Women's Land Ownership among the Galo Tribe in West Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh" sought to explore how traditional patriarchal practices influence women's access to and ownership of land. The analysis was guided by four key objectives, and the findings are presented below according to each objectives:

Analysing the influence of patriarchal customary systems on Galo women's ability to own and inherit land

The study revealed that patriarchal customary systems continue to dominate the pattern of land ownership and inheritance among the Galo tribe. Field data collected from approximately 150 women respondents clearly indicated that none (0%) of them had inherited ancestral land from their forefathers. Only 2% of the respondents reported receiving land as a gift from their parents, which was land the parents had purchased rather than ancestral property. The overwhelming majority, 98% of Galo women, reported that the land they owned was acquired through their own efforts, primarily through personal purchase. This finding vividly demonstrates how the customary inheritance system excludes daughters from inheriting land, while sons continue to enjoy exclusive rights over ancestral property. In Galo society, daughters are regarded as temporary members of their natal family since they move to their husband's household after marriage. As a result, they are not seen as rightful heirs to their father's land.

Women's Land Ownership Status in Galo Tribe (n ≈150)	Percentage (%)
Inherited ancestral land	0%
Received land as parental gift	2%
Purchased land on their own	98%

These results align closely with findings from previous research (Quest Journals, 2023; Journal of Pharmaceutical Analysis, 2011), which highlight that women in Galo society have “no rights to share immovable property of the family” and that inheritance follows the male lineage. In essence, patriarchal customs not only restrict women's ownership of ancestral property but also force them to rely on their own financial capacity to secure land. Consequently, women's economic empowerment becomes the sole pathway to ownership, whereas kinship-based inheritance remains inaccessible.

Studying the traditional laws and inheritance practices that determine land succession in Galo households

The study documented the traditional laws and inheritance patterns prevailing in Galo households and examined how these customs shape women's rights over land. It was found that Galo society continues to follow a patrilineal and patrilocal system. Lineage and property succession pass from father to son, while daughters; upon marriage, become part of their husband's family. The household head, usually an elderly male, and the village council (keba) play a central role in determining property matters and settling disputes.

Key Features of Galo Customary Inheritance Practices:-

Line of descent -	Patrilineal – from father to sons
Post-marriage residence -	Patrilocal – daughters move to husband's household
Decision-making over land -	Controlled by male head and village council
Inheritance for daughters -	Excluded under customary law
Gift of land to daughters -	Rare (less than 5%)
Ownership route for women -	Land purchased independently by women

This structure demonstrates that customary norms remain deeply entrenched, with daughters formally excluded from ancestral inheritance. Even though India's Amendment Act, 2005 legally grants equal inheritance rights to daughters, such provisions have limited impact in tribal areas where customary law prevails.

Interviews with village elders and local leaders confirmed that the keba upholds these traditional practices, and women have little or no say in such decisions. Some educated or economically independent women, however, are beginning to challenge these traditions by purchasing land themselves, indicating a slow, generational shift in mindset.

Understanding Galo women's attitudes, awareness, and lived experiences regarding their land and property rights:-

Women's voices and lived experiences formed a critical part of this investigation. The findings show that most Galo women are aware of their exclusion, yet accept it as part of their social reality due to the strength of customary traditions. Many women expressed feelings of injustice and helplessness, recalling how they worked on family land for years without any ownership claim. One respondent remarked that “the land belongs to my father and brothers; after marriage, I can only visit, not claim.” Despite this exclusion, women are not entirely passive. A significant portion of respondents demonstrated agency and resilience by purchasing land on their own, often using savings from employment, small businesses, or support from spouses. For these women, owning land represented independence and dignity rather than just material wealth.

Summary of Women's Attitudes and Experiences:-

Perception of inheritance rights -	Feel excluded and marginalised
Awareness of legal rights -	Limited or partial understanding
Decision-making over land -	Dominated by men; women rarely consulted
Common barriers -	Customary norms, low education, lack of financial support
Agency strategies -	Buying land themselves, seeking parental gift, saving independently

Married women, especially those who moved to their husband's villages, reported weaker security regarding land ownership, as they depended on their husband's family for access to land. Unmarried women or widows were somewhat more independent but still constrained by social expectations.

These patterns reflect a broader struggle: even when Galo women succeed in owning land, their social recognition as rightful landowners remains limited. Their ownership through purchase does not erase the cultural stigma attached to women holding property in a patriarchal community.

Identifying the social, educational, and legal conditions that facilitate or hinder Galo women's acquisition of land rights

The final objective focused on identifying the broader social, educational, and legal factors shaping women's access to land. The study found that education, awareness, and economic capacity were the most significant enablers for women to acquire land. Educated women, or those engaged in income-generating activities, were more likely to purchase land and register it under their own names. Conversely, customary barriers and socio-cultural beliefs were found to be the primary obstacles. Many women reported low literacy levels, lack of access to legal advice, and fear of community criticism if they questioned patriarchal customs. Moreover, because village councils often rely on customary law rather than formal legislation, even women who are aware of their legal rights face difficulties asserting them.

Facilitating and Hindering Factors for Women's Land Ownership:-

Facilitating Factors

- i. Higher education and income
- ii. Supportive parents or spouses
- iii. NGO or legal support programs
- iv. Access to credit or savings
- v. Changing attitudes in younger generation

Hindering Factors

- Patriarchal inheritance norms
- Low female literacy and limited awareness
- Dominance of customary law and male village councils
- Lack of formal land records in women's names
- Fear of social backlash when claiming rights

The study highlights that only a few women benefit from these enabling conditions, while the majority continue to be constrained by patriarchal norms and systemic barriers. Formal legal rights remain largely symbolic in tribal contexts, as customary institutions exercise greater authority in property matters.

The findings paint a clear picture of how patriarchal customs shape the socio-economic reality of Galo women:

- **Land inheritance follows the male line**, leaving women dependent on their own efforts to acquire property.
- **Customary laws and village councils** reinforce gender inequality, with women rarely participating in decisions concerning land or inheritance.
- **Women's attitudes reflect both awareness and resignation**; while they acknowledge exclusion, they often lack avenues to challenge it.
- **Education and economic independence** emerge as the strongest tools enabling women to secure ownership, albeit outside the traditional kinship structure.
- **Legal reforms have yet to penetrate deeply**, as customary authority continues to hold sway in tribal governance systems.

A small number of Galo women are carving paths to ownership through personal initiative and self-purchase, the structural and cultural weight of patriarchy remains formidable. Until customary laws are revisited to include women as rightful heirs, gender equality in land ownership among the Galo tribe will remain an aspiration rather than a lived reality.

Discussion:-

This study sought to explore how deeply embedded patriarchal customs shape Galo women's ability to own and inherit land, weaving together quantitative data and the voices of the women themselves to illuminate a story of exclusion, resilience, and ongoing challenge. The data strikingly revealed that none of the women surveyed inherited ancestral land, while only a tiny fraction (2%) received land gifts from parents. Overwhelmingly, women have had to rely on purchasing land independently (98%). These findings confirm that the patrilineal system is not a mere abstract rule but a lived reality that renders daughters "temporary members" of their birth families, excluded from the inheritance line. Land "the cornerstone of wealth and identity" remains firmly in male hands, forcing women to

depend on their financial means rather than birthright. This echoes prior research by scholars such as Doye (2020) and Mitkong (2002) and aligns with studies from Quest Journals and pharmaceutical analysis. The women we spoke to conveyed how this structural exclusion plays out daily: tending to family fields without legal claim to the land, symbolically and economically outside the patrimony.

Traditional systems centered on patriliney and patrilocality continue to dominate land succession. The household heads and village councils “the keba” actively enforce male-only inheritance and decision-making, sidelining women’s voices. Though some women’s ability to acquire land by purchase hints at adaptation, formal customary norms remain intact. These findings align with ethnographic accounts by Doye (2020) and Neba (2019), and Borang (2014) who noted early shifts propelled by education and economics, while Chai & Choudhary (2025) emphasize the persistent power of customary law in limiting statutory reform’s reach. The keba’s central role highlights that sustainable change must engage these gatekeepers rather than bypass them. Women experience a pervasive sense of exclusion and often resignation born of structural barriers. Many women know of their precarious position and the injustice but find themselves constrained by community norms and lack of resources. Purchasing land is a significant and empowered act, yet it entails economic sacrifice and does not erase the cultural stigma of being excluded from ancestral inheritance. Married women face additional vulnerabilities due to relocation to husbands’ villages and diminished autonomy over property. These patterns resonate with existing literature highlighting gradual attitudinal shifts often led by younger or educated women, and the gap between legal awareness and practical enforcement. For these women, ownership is both a source of dignity and a reminder of what customary law withholds.

Our findings suggest that education, economic resources, parental support (though rare), and NGO/legal aid empower women to access land. On the contrary, patriarchal norms embedded in customary law, low literacy and income, absence of women in formal land titling, and fear of social backlash constitute formidable barriers. This mirrors Borang (2014), Mitkong (2002), and Neba (2019)’s findings, who recognize education and modernization as catalysts for change but stress the overwhelming influence of social norms maintaining male dominance. The path to ownership is not just legal but deeply social and economic. This research captures more than a static snapshot of inheritance practices; it reveals how cultural traditions and social structures intertwine to condition women’s material security and sense of belonging. The women’s stories of determination reveal hopeful avenues for progress, yet also the persistent costs of exclusion from ancestral patrimony. Real change demands legal, social, and economic strategies woven with respect for community identity, empowering women to claim rights fully and safely. Future research and policy should build on these insights to promote gender-just land governance among the Galo and similar tribal societies.

Conclusion:-

This study highlights the profound impact of patriarchal customary norms on land ownership and inheritance for Galo women in West Siang, Arunachal Pradesh. Customary institutions like the keba still shape key decisions, reinforcing the notion that daughters are temporary members of their natal families. Although statutory laws provide equal inheritance rights, these legal promises are rarely upheld in tribal practice, leaving cultural tradition as the dominant force. Achieving gender equality in land rights among the Galo requires more than legal reform; it needs economic empowerment, sustained legal literacy, engagement with customary leaders, and widespread support for joint or independent titling in women’s names. Galo women’s adaptability offers hope, but true equality will only be realized when customs evolve to welcome women as rightful heirs. The study provides meaningful evidence and human stories, encouraging dialogue among communities, policymakers, and researchers to move toward genuine gender justice in tribal societies.

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