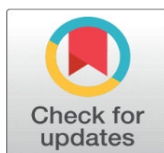
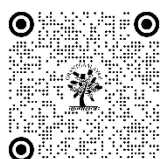


GENDER EQUITY IN INDIGENOUS SOCIETIES: EMPOWERING WOMEN IN NORTHEAST INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous women in Northeast India, particularly from communities such as the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia, play a pivotal role in preserving cultural heritage, sustaining economic activities, and fostering community resilience, yet they face significant gender-specific challenges, including economic marginalization, health disparities, political exclusion, and gender-based violence. This article explores the historical and contemporary roles of indigenous women, emphasizing their contributions to cultural preservation, economic stability, and community governance within matrilineal frameworks. It examines the impact of colonial legacies, globalization, and modernization on gender dynamics, highlighting systemic barriers that perpetuate inequality. To address these challenges, the article advocates for culturally sensitive gender equity initiatives, including enhanced access to education, economic resources, healthcare, political participation, and robust legal protections against violence. By fostering empowerment through targeted interventions such as vocational training, micro-financing, reproductive health programs, and leadership development, these initiatives aim to strengthen the agency of indigenous women, ensuring their voices shape policy and decision-making. The study underscores that empowering indigenous women not only promotes gender equity but also drives sustainable development, reinforcing the socio-cultural and economic fabric of their communities in Northeast India. This study is based on secondary source of data and follows an analytical method.

Keywords: Empower, Equity, Gender, Indigenous, Northeast, Women

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1. INTRODUCTION

The gender equity among indigenous communities has emerged as a pivotal theme in contemporary issue in the sphere of human rights and social justice. Gender equity refers the principle of ensuring equitable and unbiased treatment for individuals across all gender identities, safeguarding them against discrimination rooted in their gender. In the context of indigenous societies, gender roles are profoundly associated with longstanding cultural, religious, and social frameworks that have evolved over centuries. Indigenous communities in Northeast India are characterized by distinct gender dynamics shaped by their unique historical and cultural trajectories. These indigenous groups, nestled in India's north-eastern states, embody a rich mosaic of traditions, values, and social norms that distinguish them from mainstream Indian society. However, these gender roles have not remained static; they have been significantly influenced by a confluence of internal transformations and external forces, including colonial interventions, migration patterns, globalization, and the implementation of national policies. This interplay of factors has created a dynamic landscape, presenting both opportunities for advancing gender equity and challenges, particularly for women, who often

navigate the tension between traditional expectations and modern aspirations for equality and empowerment within their communities.

1.1. OBJECTIVE

The main objectives of the study are to-

- 1) Examine the historical and contemporary roles of indigenous women in Northeast India.
- 2) Identify and analyse the gender-specific challenges faced by indigenous women.
- 3) Analyse equity-based initiatives to address the challenges faced by indigenous women and promote sustainable community development.
- 4) To analyse women empowerment among indigenous women in Northeast India through measurable indicators, such as the increased participation of indigenous women in local governance and decision-making processes.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an analytical approach based on secondary sources of data to explore gender equity among indigenous women in Northeast Indian societies. The research relies on review of existing literature, including academic books, articles, government reports. The methodology involves a qualitative analysis of historical and contemporary gender dynamics, to examine the roles, challenges, and empowerment strategies for indigenous women.

3. POSITION OF WOMEN

Women have historically held significant social roles in various global cultures, including those in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. In ancient India, women's roles were complex and dynamic, shaped by religious texts, societal frameworks, and political transformations. During the early Vedic period, women enjoyed considerable autonomy, participating in religious rituals and contributing to intellectual and philosophical discourses. Notable female figures, such as Gargi and Maitreyee, were celebrated as rishis (sages), leaving an indelible mark on spiritual and philosophical thought. However, book like Manusmriti, contributed for very limited role for women as daughters, wives, or mothers. Despite these restrictions, women continued to play vital roles in economic spheres, participating in trade and agriculture, and accessing education. They held significant spiritual authority, particularly in the worship of deities like Durga and Lakshmi. In the indigenous communities of Northeast India, particularly the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia tribes, women have historically occupied esteemed social positions, particularly within the matrilineal frameworks of these societies. Women in these communities wield considerable influence in decision-making processes, participating in social rituals and contributing to conflict resolution. Their roles extend to the guardianship of family resources, including the administration of property, highlighting their integral position in maintaining cultural and social continuity.

3.1. THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Indigenous women in Northeast India play a crucial role in the cultural, economic, and social frameworks of their societies. They are the primary custodians and transmitters of cultural knowledge, including traditional languages, folklore, rituals, and sacred practices. They are responsible for imparting these traditions to younger generations, ensuring the perpetuation of their cultural heritage. They also play a central role in teaching children the native tongue, preserving linguistic diversity and reinforcing cultural continuity. In addition to their cultural contributions, indigenous women also contribute to the economic sustenance of their societies through their leadership in subsistence agriculture, fishing, and food production. Their efforts ensure food security and promote sustainable practices that harmonize with the natural environment. They are also accomplished artisans, producing intricate textiles, pottery, art and crafts that also contributing to the local economy. In the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia tribes, women occupy central roles within governance structures, fostering relatively egalitarian gender dynamics and highlighting a model of governance where women's authority is integral to social organization and community cohesion. They serve as the cornerstone of family life, undertaking essential responsibilities such as child-rearing, nurturing social relationships, and overseeing domestic affairs. Their role extends beyond the household, shaping the social organization of their communities. By imparting

traditional knowledge and cultural practices to younger generations, they ensure the continuity of indigenous ways of life, reinforcing communal bonds, and sustaining the socio-cultural framework of their societies.

3.2. GENDER-SPECIFIC CHALLENGES

Indigenous women in Northeast India face numerous gender-specific obstacles that hinder their progress and development. These challenges stem from historical, social, economic, and political factors, deeply rooted in colonial legacies and exacerbated by contemporary disparities. The convergence of these influences creates systemic barriers that disproportionately affect indigenous women, limiting their opportunities and perpetuating inequalities within their societies. Economic marginalization is a significant issue, as indigenous women often face obstacles in accessing essential resources like land, credit, and market opportunities. Health and reproductive challenges, particularly in remote regions, are also significant, with barriers in accessing essential healthcare services. Political and social exclusion is another significant challenge, with indigenous women often excluded from critical policy discussions and being side-lined in land rights, education, and healthcare discussions. They are disproportionately vulnerable to gender-based violence, including domestic abuse, sexual assault, and human trafficking, which are intensified by socio-economic marginalization, social isolation, and inadequate legal protections. The impact of globalization and modernization poses significant threats to the cultural integrity of indigenous communities in Northeast India, particularly impacting women who serve as primary guardians of cultural heritage.

3.3. GENDER EQUALITY

Matrilineal societies, prevalent among communities like the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia in Northeast India, are characterized by tracing lineage, inheritance, and familial ties through the maternal line, contrasting with patriarchal systems. While these societies often grant women greater autonomy and authority compared to patriarchal frameworks, they do not inherently ensure complete gender equality. Complex interactions of cultural, social, political, and economic factors can perpetuate significant disparities. In many matrilineal setups, women bear primary responsibilities for domestic tasks, child-rearing, despite holding economic influence or participating in governance. Although women may inherit property, decision-making authority over these assets often rests with male relatives, such as uncles or brothers, particularly in patriarchal arrangements. While women in these societies may hold prominent titles, such as clan mothers or household heads, their roles can sometimes be symbolic, with men retaining control over critical economic or political decisions.

3.4. INITIATIVES FOR EMPOWERING WOMEN

Empowering indigenous women in Northeast India is a complex task that requires addressing their unique challenges, needs, and cultural contexts. Access to quality education, vocational training, entrepreneurship programs, and higher education pathways is crucial for enhancing economic prospects and strengthening leadership capabilities. Educational initiatives should be sensitive to indigenous cultures, transforming schools and community centres into vibrant hubs while preserving native languages and traditions. Access to resources like legal land ownership, financial resources, micro-financing schemes, and cooperative banking systems is essential for boosting their entrepreneurial potential and contributing to sustainable development. Access to comprehensive healthcare, particularly maternal and reproductive health services, is also crucial for empowering indigenous women. Enhancing political engagement and advocacy is vital for advancing rights and fostering gender equity. Training indigenous women in leadership, governance, and advocacy skills allows them to actively participate in community decision-making processes and advocate for legislation that safeguards their access to property and resources. Preventing and addressing gender-based violence is essential for fostering safer and more supportive communities, and strengthening legal frameworks and establishing accessible counselling centres, shelters, and support networks for survivors is also essential for their recovery and empowerment.

4. CONCLUSION

Empowering Indigenous women is vital for their all-round development, which is a critical step towards gender equity and fostering inclusive, representative governance. Programs aimed at empowering indigenous women must

include culturally appropriate and gender-sensitive interventions, such as education, economic empowerment, and social inclusion. The effectiveness of these interventions is measured through objective indicators, such as the number of indigenous women elected as local elected officials in their constituencies. These interventions should include a range of practical measures, including training programs, community-based workshops, and legal protections to address the specific challenges faced by Indigenous women, ensuring that solutions are culturally appropriate and gender-sensitive. This approach aims to empower indigenous women to fully participate in decision-making processes that impact their communities, promoting sustainable development and gender equity. In conclusion, gender equity initiatives, including education, economic empowerment, healthcare access, political participation, and legal protections, are crucial for addressing the unique challenges faced by indigenous women, ensuring their voices are heard, and fostering sustainable development of their communities.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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