

Issues of Modernity, Identity, and Women of Arunachal Pradesh

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This chapter explores modernity as the identity space for women. Modernity as perceived an influence of Western education shaped up thoughts and actions of the people of state and non-state societies of the world. Modernity in principal created a space for women and embracing Western education, women of the non-Western societies reoriented the traditional views and living patterns. The parameters of modernity maintain different configurations, which differ from society to society. Moreover, nothing is considered constant in the issues of modernity except education. However, modernity is cultural, economic and political too. Even in the practices of modernity religious issues are interpreted in a new way. It refers to new habits and activities shaped by ideologies. In arguments, modernity refers to rationality of thoughts. While modernity as a parameter is historically determined by some scholars as the backdrop of traditionalism, primitivism, and post-modernism, others consider it as referring to the identity space determined from the perspective of structuralism.

Context

I reached Arunachal Pradesh at a point when tribal communities of this part of India received statehood, and the UN declaration on the CEDAW, tribal women organizations, as well as the Government¹ ratified it as a document and acknowledged its principles. After reaching here, I had the opportunity to meet women activists of the state and NGO workers at local, regional, and national levels, who had diverse experiences of addressing women's issues at the

organizational level. Problems of gender inequalities were coming up as an agenda for tribal women after statehood. In a research paper, Basar (2006: 208)² mentions how education enlightened and created consciousness. She writes: "This consciousness along with other factors made us aware of discrimination against women in the society, due to which women organized themselves to protest against the inequalities and other traditional maladies prevailing in the society...". She continues that an ideological conflict happened after the exposure of women to different jobs, and businesses of their husbands. The women realized that they were discriminated in society, marginalized in development, and were least secure as they were outside the protective cover of their respective community. Here Basar quotes Jarjun Ete, who is one of the Indian women activists and a pioneer in Arunachal Pradesh, who says, "The women came together to look at their lives in a society in transition and to dream of a strong society with traditional strength and wisdom" (Basar Ibid). Both Ete and Basar referred to "modernity" as a pressure point for women and children within communities, vulnerable to attacks from within and outside their community. Even the use of words "within and without community" by these authors refers to a structural change in society, whether perceived in mind or as a reality. Again in the same article, the use of the words, "...struggle for more egalitarian society" signifies a momentum generated by women specifically after they established a women's organization (1979), which is now popularly known as Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Society (APWWS)³. Speaking at the Rajiv Gandhi University on 05 September 2009, Jarjun Ete stated: "in May 1985, dealing with various womenfolk, rural and urban, educated and illiterate—our collective comprehended that those problems would not have been there if the womenfolk were treated as equals, as humane as their male counterparts, in the society or within the families in the schemes of community life"⁴. Basar (Ibid: 209) mentioned that the APWWS has sixteen branches and affiliated bodies all over Arunachal Pradesh. Apart from fighting for issues concerning problems faced by women and children, the organization also extends moral support, counsels and negotiates cases of moral discord, and organizes seminars and workshops to sensitize women on gender realities.

Analysis of tribal women intellectuals, provided evidence of gender discriminations, a phenomena not observed in dominant

mainstream Indian hierarchical caste societies alone. Experiences of tribal women after statehood, on gender equality, interpreted some customary norms and practices as 'dominant', 'hegemonic', and 'discriminatory' for women. Boserup (1976)⁵ and Simone de Beauvoir (1949)⁶ evolved perspectives to study the matter, locating and searching for gender relations in all activities with a view to document the position and development of women at various levels—within traditional, social and economic institutions and organizations.

This is an attempt to understand the contemporary modernity of Arunachal Pradesh through contributions of women and their interpretations of their own society. Traditional ideas of gender construction limited the role and contributions of women of this state to food production, weaving technology, and household work that are regarded as less strenuous and thus classified as women's jobs. Work participation of women of the region is generally considered as an indicator of economic self-dependence, categorizing tribal women as bread earners for self and children in everyday life in the rural situation. In India, 'economic self-dependence for women, which is measured through work participation and earning, is perceived as the basis of gender equality'⁷ and invariably women of Arunachal Pradesh enjoy better status than their counterparts in the rest of India. However, socio-economic and demographic findings (mentioned in the Human Development Report, 2005)⁸ do not indicate a better social status of women. Therefore, this study intends to understand the concept of space for women in modern times, in terms of roles and rights they enjoy in their own societies, at the backdrop of women's contributions to subsistence economies. Specifically, references of Boserup (Ibid) remind us of a similar situation in Africa where agriculture heavily relies upon women and developmental activities disassociated women gradually from the production system. Moreover, patriarchy influences all ideas, opinions and dialogues even to understand women's subordination in all communities. Whether this is the situation among tribal women as well, not clear. Therefore, this chapter further explores modernity as an identity issue⁹ for tribal women and specifically aims to understand relations of modern technology, education (44 per cent for women in 2001 census), with a culturally perceived private domain. Subsequently, this variable will be the centre of enquiry.

In agricultural activities, women contribute substantially in production systems. According to the culturally perceived scales

of division of labour, cleaning of cultivable land, digging and sowing seeds, weeding, harvesting, carrying, threshing, and storing seeds in the granary, all are women's jobs. In the Apatani plateau, old women remain busy in repairing the bund during the winter season. In Adi villages, women remain busy in vegetable and horticultural production of ginger and orange, after paddy production is over. These attachments refer to full work participation of women in food production throughout the year. Does their contribution in the family ensure equal rights and space for women in the private as well as the public domain? Does indigenous knowledge carried by women from one generation to another ensure rights to women for participation in the decision-making process for future development? Do state-level development facilities create better opportunities for women?

Modernity and the Private Domain

Private domains as a construct both in cultural traditions as well as in academics perceive 'household' as the unit to understand the domestic production system. That space, traditionally, and in academics is distinguished as space for women. In that domain, the role of women in food production is not only compulsory but also inevitable. Culturally, the knowledge of food production is learnt and practiced by women, generation after generation and is considered as a woman's job in the tribal societies. In modernity, when the individual's choices guide life in urban societies, the tribal women in the urban family have redefined their workspace in the family production system. Ethnifications of tribal identities engage women in the work of redefining 'culture and tradition' as 'heritage'. Modern education created new working space for women. Modernity also created the urban living space. Their rural counterpart embraces modernity differently. Whatever it is, the urge for food security remained the responsibility of women in the real and symbolic senses. Now, white-collar jobs of many women both in urban and rural situations categorized the work of agricultural production as secondary activities. Families with landed property practice wet-rice cultivation with the help of hired labourers. Women practice shifting cultivation, and cultivate kins'/clans' land. The status of women farmers differs, and follows traditional institutional practices.

Urban Women Farmers and Their Identity Space

Mrs. Gumri Ringu, a founder-member of the State Women's Commission said in the summer of 2010 that she would not be available for some days for any work during the seedling transplanted in her cultivable field. She would be at the farmhouse. In another interaction, she was remembering her trip to Nagaland when she visited entrepreneurs engaged in Bamboo production and technology. Recently, the Government of India and the North Eastern Council's initiative to the Bamboo Mission attracted progressive farmers and Gumri was one of them.

Mrs. Dakter Basar, a schoolteacher and wife of the Director, State Health Services, passionately remembered her experiences of participation in cultivation on her in-laws' cultivable land. This interaction took place before she contested the state assembly election for the first time in 2009. In fact, for her and for many other women settled in urban areas of the state due to family commitments or for own careers participation in cultivation as well as in get-togethers in the rural household, follows institutionalized tradition of reciprocity. This is part of celebration and heritage. In these cases the investment cost of agriculture sometimes does not reach levels of high surplus or sometimes even the expenditure related to a common feast and merry-making may be the same as the investment cost. But Mrs. Basar derives immense pleasure in community participation. For her the cultivation is not a primary occupation, not even for any member of her family, who are otherwise highly educated and well placed. Participating in the tasks of cultivation maintains a good tradition, utilizing cultivable land to help members of one's own society that has remained rural. I felt that the acts of Ms. Gumri Ringu, Ms. Dakter Basar and many women like them were conscious and progressive acts that blended tradition with modernity. Here, participating in cultivation is like participating in the traditional activities. These educated tribal women are used to urban living. Therefore, modernism is the order of the day for them. Friedman (1998: 285-300) identified modernity as identity space which is "cultural", and "natural". For him "traditionalism" stands for "culture" and "primitivism" stands for "nature". He said all the categories, like "modernism", "post-modernism", "traditionalism" and "primitivism" may be historical categories to some scholars but for him those are structurally designated identity spaces in the post-colonial contemporary world.

All the identity spaces in the post-colonial, globalized world symbolize trans-nationalization...and ethnification as expressions of declining global hegemony. Therefore, the urban tribal women going to the forest for the collection of seasonal leafy vegetables, mushrooms, roots, fruits is cultural and traditional heritage. Here I cannot resist sharing the closeness of modern tribal women with forests. In one conversation, Mrs. Tariang¹⁰, Mrs. Hungyo¹¹, and Mrs. Pakma¹² were discussing about mushroom gathering being one of the favourite pastimes. They referred to going to collect mushrooms to the forest whenever they went to the village or had time. Urbanism for tribal women, was not yet completely detached from the cultural use of nature, though none of them were sure that the habit would be transmitted to the next generation.

The circumstances of the rural women in all cases are not the same. There are tribal families living at subsistence levels; there are tribal families at village level who are surplus growers, too. For many rural women, agriculture is the primary occupation. Their work schedule is the best way to understand that. During the whole season of cultivation, these women spend major working hours in domestic production. An attempt by the Womens' Studies Research Centre of Rajiv Gandhi University (RGU) observing activities of women cultivators, is presented in two Tables below. These data were collected through a documentation project entitled, "Women Work and Land Right" by the members of the Centre in the month of March and July 2010. The workshops aimed to understand the issues and concerns of women cultivators. The women participants were from the areas of Sagali and Leporiang of the Lower Subansiri district, and Takpu Bagra, Gori I Gori II, and Soi villages of the West Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh.

Table 4.1 shows the nature of participation of women in family production systems. This is a sample of women participants who attended the workshop.

According to responses, 87.5 per cent of the women started agricultural work in the family production system before the age of puberty. Each of these members contribute at the subsistence level. The shifting cultivation is a mixed production system. They grow paddy, maize, arum, different types of gourds, cucumber, chili, leafy vegetables, brinjal, pulses, and beans. The concept of kitchen garden is practiced with paddy production through shifting cultivation. In the Table 4.1, the separate category of vegetable growers refers to

Table 4.1: Women Cultivators

Age at the beginning of work		Family production	Types of cultivation			Village
Pre-Menstrual	Post-Menstrual	Working in kins' land	Vegetable, fruit cultivation	Shifting hills	Wet rice	
25	4	29	13	28	15	Takpu Bagra
25	13	33	08	24	25	Gori I
11	6	17	05	13	11	Gori II
21	03	24	03	21	19	Soi
30	0	30	19	29	28	Sagalee

Source: Women Studies and Research Centre, Rajiv Gandhi University, 2010.

the commercial ventures undertaken. Women sell products of Jhum cultivation in local markets and most of the income is utilized as expenses for children's education, purchasing food and vegetables that they do not grow in their own fields and to meet family requirements. They spend money on cloths also. The family production system is extending its reach and venturing into vegetable production at the commercial level, as well as fruit production. In the extended horizon, tribal women became experts in both hills and plains cultivation. A few women referred to their experience of commercial horticulture. All this work participation among women needs separate sets of expertise and experience. The division of labour identified most of the tasks of cultivation as the responsibility of women. In the hills these include cutting, clearing forests, and burning wood and leaves as well as tasks like seed sowing, weeding, fencing, harvesting, drying, cleaning, and storing. Earlier cutting/felling of trees and fencing were men's jobs, now women do men's jobs as well. Similarly, operating the mechanized plough (Japanese brand 'kubuta') is the job of both men and women in wet rice fields. The rural women are now doing men's jobs. Is the horizon for women expanding due to technological developments? (Table 4.2)

Among the 34 respondents at Sagalee, at least 20 women claimed that they inherited landed property or purchased landed property with or without Land Possession Certificates in their names. In Bagra circle, among 100 respondents, only one woman claimed that she had the land possession document in her name. These women of Sagalee and Bagra may be very insignificant in percentage but are an important pioneer group among women farmers, who are enjoying rights over

Table 4.2: Women Land Owners

No. of Respondents & Circles	Inherited landed Property		Purchased landed Property	
	With document	Without document	With LPC	Without LPC
34 (In Sagalee and Leporiang circle)	3	3	8	6
100 (in Bagra circles)	1	0	0	0

Source: Women Studies & Research Centre, Rajiv Gandhi University, 2010.

their land or influence of modernity, where parents/husbands wanted to ensure security for women family members. However, this data really exposed us to a complex phenomenon when the marital status of the sample of Sagalee was compared with the right to inheritance. Among 34 respondents of Sagalee 13 women live in polygamous marital relations.

Tribal Women in Public Domain

Both concepts of “Traditionalism” and “modernity” share similar views on “private” and “public” domains as “women’s space” and “men’s space”. In traditional tribal wisdom, physical space of women is never confined within the household for activities in different shifting cultivable plots, forest for gathering food, or collecting firewood. In the public domain, women do not have access to the political organizational meetings if they are not a party—either accused, victims or aggrieved; as such political spaces are open only for men.

Therefore, the establishment of APWWS is significant in many ways. In the Constitution, Article I claims, the women’s organization is formed for all the women of Arunachal Pradesh, in order to bring integration and foster understanding among the younger generation to exploit the exuberance of youth for the greater interest of women in Arunachal Pradesh and to preserve, promote and protect culture and tradition. It further claims to fight for the human rights for women of Arunachal Pradesh and to eradicate all forms of social evil and bad practices from society and thereby, to bring a new dawn for the women of Arunachal Pradesh (Basar, Ibid). In reality, from the beginning, this organization had to concentrate on eradicating all forms of social evil related to child marriage, polygamy, forced

Tradition and Modernity in Arunachal Pradesh

<i>Year</i>	<i>Issues and Demands</i>	<i>Programme</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
1994 October	Demanded Equal Right and necessary modification in the customary practices to ensure gender equality	First all tribal women state conference on 10th October 1994	For the protection of customary rights, laws, social and cultural practices the bill was accepted in the assembly without debate.
1995 June	Demanded review, debate, etc. at the level of civil society, rural leaders, lawyers, social workers, politicians, human right activist before codification	Hold a meeting and sent the document to Guwahati Law Research Institute, Gauhati High Court	
1995	Demanded Women's Studies and Research Centre in RGU		The center is established on 5th September 2010
1996 October	Demanded State Human Rights Commission	Submitted Memorandum to Prime Minister Deve Gouda	
1996 October	Demanded implementation of 73rd amendment act for women	Submitted Memorandum to Prime Minister Deve Gouda	
1996 October	Repeal of the Armed Force Special Powers Act	Submitted Memorandum to Prime Minister Deve Gouda	

“As women of the particular tribe—some lenient and most others not being so—from their infancy to their graves, the women of Arunachal Pradesh, like most of their counterparts in the world, have to negotiate their lives within the parameter of the society. Yes, some of us had to break grounds and be known as rebels by the conventionalists—both men and women. However, someone had to do it. We did it. In addition, we take pride in that. The establishment of the State Commission for Women, the coming of more than 38 per cent of women PRI leaders in the three-tier panchayat of the state, and the legislation known as the A.P. Bill for Protection of Customary Law and Social Practices 1994, pending review, are the landmark achievements of the pioneering tribal women's network, APWWS.”

Regarding her experiences with the State Commission for Women of Arunachal Pradesh (APSCW), which she headed as founder-chairperson, she added:

“We dealt with cases of child marriages besides the ones of polygamy, maintenance, child custody, divorces, etc. We lobbied hard for a private members’ resolution for a ban on such practices in the last assembly session of 1993. It had to be withdrawn. Then, on 8 March 1994, another private members’ resolution was tabled for establishment of the State Commission for Women. It also had to be withdrawn. Women were used to scuttle this move in the state legislature. That was one of the most unfortunate Women’s Day for us in Arunachal. And for having highlighted the manipulation and intrigues used by the state, yours faithfully was got thrown out by the publishing house of a regional daily, for which she used to report.”

Her writing continues, and she maintains, “Many years later in 2000, the state under a new leadership, a friendlier one, constituted an all-woman committee to draft the State Commission for Women Bill for Arunachal Pradesh, in which the former president (of the State Women’s Commission) and president of the APWWS were appointed as members, the latter being Member-Secretary. Finally, the bill was passed in the early 2000s but the first commission began its work only in first week of January 2005.” (Ibid)

The establishment of State Commission for Women is a big victory for women of that state. The whole concept of patriarchy that relates all values and systems to gender inequality was a very new concept in tribal societies. “The first team focused on raising awareness about the body *per se*, the need for women’s empowerment, the various laws and policies for the protection of women’s rights and privileges in democratic India, even in traditional, tribal, patriarchal Arunachal. The fact that the state had established the body to look into the needs and aspirations of Arunachalee women made the village council elders stare back at us in amazement and disbelief. But, finally, in three years, we see a palpable change, in their attitude. One, even acknowledged that no political leader nor any administrative officer, not even the magistrates had ever told them about the rights of women!!” (Ibid.)

Tradition and Modernity in Arunachal Pradesh

The Arunachal Pradesh State Commission for Women rekindled the aspirations of women's organization. Jarjum Ete wrote, "From...January 2005 to March 2008, we tried and involved the representatives of the women's organizations like APWWS, NAWO, the SHGs and various local women's groups, and other NGOs like the Human Rights Laws Network, Arunachal Citizen Rights, and even interested individuals around various subjects—economic empowerment, social mobilization, legal awareness, gender sensitization, etc. We tried interfacing with policymakers and civil society representatives. We roped in media-persons also to highlight the issues." (Ete 2009)¹³

Summing Up

For women of Arunachal Pradesh, modernity is the instrument of engendering and reformation of social processes. Structurally, the approach is embracing both traditionalism and modernity and perceives cultural identity as political identity. The cultural identity within the concept of modernity celebrates the closeness with cultural ecology and at the same time, locates gender discrimination that persists within tradition. The tribal women of Arunachal Pradesh, despite the separate community affiliations within the state are united in fighting the evils created by the inequality in gender relations.

The educated urban women practice cultivation as part of their cultural heritage. For them, the season of cultivation is a season of getting together. For rural women, a section lives at subsistence level while another is producing surplus. Women learnt and practiced new technology to plough land and techniques of fruit production. The women of the village are performing all jobs, beyond the traditional concept of 'division of labour'.

There may be a gap in modernity as perceived and as practiced, but the gap would be from the standpoint of gender inequality. Women are sharing more of the burden in the rural areas for livelihood, and urban women are reinterpreting agricultural activities as their heritage.

Notes

1. Basar, Jumyir. 2008. "Women Movement in Arunachal Pradesh: A Case Study of APWWS", in A.K. Danda, S.B. Chacrabarti, A. Basu Ed.

- Social Unrest, Jhargram, Pub. by Indian National Confederation and Academy of Anthropologists, pp. 197-206.
2. *Ibid.*
 3. *Ibid.*
 4. In her key note address during inauguration of Women's Studies and Research Centre, Rajiv Gandhi University, Itanagar, dated 5th September, 2009
 5. Boserup Esther, 1976.
 6. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Penguin 1972
 7. UNDP State Development Report, 2005, published by Government of Arunachal Pradesh, India
 8. *Ibid.*
 9. See Jonathan Friedman, "Transnationalization, Socio-political Disorder, and Ethnification as Expressions of Declining Global Hegemony", in Joan Vincent Ed. *The Anthropology of Politics*, 2002, Blackwell, 285-299.
 10. Mrs Tariang was one of my colleagues from Anthropological Survey of India from 1992-1999, at Shillong. She was a Khasi from Meghalaya
 11. Mrs. Hungyo, was one of my Tangkhul Naga Colleagues from Manipur, in Anthropological Survey of India, Shillong
 12. Mrs. Pakma, was one of my colleagues from Meghalaya, in Anthropological Survey of India, Shillong
 13. Jarjum Ete 'Narrative Experience of the Founding Chairperson of State Woman Commission of Arunachal Pradesh', Keynote address delivered at the inauguration programme of Woman Study Center, Rajiv Gandhi University, 5th September, 2009, Rajiv Gandhi University Conference Hall, Itanagar.

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