

# Monpa Women of Arunachal Pradesh: Between custom and constitution

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## Abstract

Women are the forbearers of the culture of any community or tribe. Right from child rearing, managing household chores to their involvement in economic pursuits women have always worked hand in hand with their male counterparts. The life of the Monpa (one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh inhabiting the districts of Tawang and West Kameng) women is no less different. However, it has been noticed that in spite of her selfless service in this socio-economic construct, the rights enjoyed by women are very few. Although tribal societies are said to be egalitarian in nature, disparities are widely prevalent. One can still find traits of gender discrimination, especially in inheritance of laws of the Monpas. Till now the Monpa women are practicing the same order followed in the traditional structure of the Monpa society. This paper, therefore, attempts to look into the status of the Monpa women in the prevalent socio-economic and political scenario. It shall also look into the rights reserved for the male counterparts in the Monpa society and how women are denied their share of rights and privileges.

**Keywords:** Monpa, Women, Economy, Customary, Tradition

The Monpa women since ages have been assigned specific duties, mostly revolving around their roles as a devoted wife, a nurturing mother and an efficient homemaker. As wives, the Monpa women are expected to support their husbands and assist in managing day-to-day family affairs. While they freely join in religious ceremonies, festivals, and social gatherings, drinking, dancing, singing, and serving together alongside men without any prohibition- their influence remains limited to the domestic spheres. Within the family, although mother's counsel is sought, most often fathers hold the final decision. In the traditional social structure, the village council exercised the supreme power, and it was exclusively dominated by men. Monpa women have no say in village governance, they were entrusted with minor and easier tasks. Because of the exclusion of Monpa women in important societal activities since ages, they never truly felt

the necessity for active participation in public affairs. They were mostly occupied with farming and household activities while the male members were the decision makers relating to the village or community at large. This disparity is mostly a consequence of the patriarchal outlook that has long shaped the social fabric of the Monpa society.

Historically, only a few Monpa women exercised their political rights. However, their participation in the proceedings of the village councils were largely confined to cases related to them. Their representation in state politics remains abysmally low. Although various legislative provisions grant her the freedom to contest elections for various political intuitions, she hardly avails any such opportunities, partly due to lack of self confidence and partly because the political arena continues to be overwhelmingly male- dominated. The constitution of India unequivocally provides fundamental democratic rights and equality to every citizen. A lot of provisions have consequently been enacted for the upliftment of the women by offering them equal rights and opportunities comparable to those enjoyed by their male counterparts. Political opportunity provided to all by the Indian constitution is a new phenomenon for the Monpa women and a radical departure from their traditional political ideas and practices.

For the Monpa women, however, this constitutional promise of political participation is a relatively novel concept- one that marks a radical departure from their traditional political norms and practices. In this context, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act stands as a landmark initiative, proposing that no less than 33% of all the seats at each level of Panchayati are to be reserved for women. These provisions have been subsequently implemented with the enactment of Panchayati Raj system in Arunachal Pradesh in 1997. Despite women being elected at various levels of Panchayati Raj, such representation has often been nominal in practice. In many instances, women are elected only in name, actual power continues to be indirectly exercised by her husband or other male members of the family who actively participates in all the official work and becomes the decision makers. This is partly because of her diffidence and partly the hesitation to assert themselves in the public forums. Encouragingly, however, a gradual shift is seen. Now, Monpa women have begun to gain political exposure and promptly started asserting their political rights. Increasing women's interest and participation in Panchayati Raj institutions signal a discernible progress in their socio-economic status and an awareness of their political entitlements. Today, Monpa women also understand their civic duties as a citizen more clearly and actively exercise their franchise, making it not merely as a ritual but as a meaningful instrument to transform the society.

The Monpa women today are conscious of their social standing. As educational opportunities expand, their perspectives are broadening, enabling them to engage more actively with the social structures that reshape their lives. At the same time many new welfare schemes are being implemented for the welfare of women, both by the government and by various non-governmental organizations dedicated to women welfare. At present, there are many women registered associations that raise voice against injustice that the women have to undergo. These associations have also made notable contributions towards social upliftment of the weaker sections of the Monpas in general and of the Monpa women in particular. They very often settle cases involving petty disputes arising between the husband and wife.

Economically, Monpa women have made significant strides. Many have embraced economic independence and continue to contribute household financial support. Economic independence is a crucial step toward elevating their social position. Yet, despite their major economic contribution, they remain largely bound by the age-old customary laws particularly in the field of property ownership and inheritance rights, where the status of women still remains venerable. It has been observed over the years that daughters are denied any share of their parental property. And in the absence of a male heir, the property is inherited by father's brothers or father's nearest male relatives. The situation of a widow without a son is worse as she and her daughters have to leave her husband's home and relocate to the community land. As now her husband's

share of ancestral property belongs to her brother-in-laws or in their absence the immediate male relatives. This is not a tradition but an injustice crafted in a patriarchal society. Daughters may inherit the properties that belong to their mother or what their parents purchased themselves with their earnings; they cannot have a say on the ancestral properties inherited by their father. Even when a mother owns land or other assets in her own possession, she may distribute the property equally among all the children irrespective of the gender. However, in practice, the land is invariably given to sons, while daughters are given mother's personal ornaments. The Monpa family being nuclear in nature, once the sons are married, they are given freedom to set up their own independent households and ancestral properties are equally distributed among them. At the time of division of property, parents have the liberty to reserve a piece of land called *Gangzing* for their livelihood but this too eventually reverts to the sons after their death. Unmarried daughters may enjoy parental property during their youth but that privilege ends once they are married. Discrimination doesn't end here but it also pervades in the laws relating to marital infidelity. A man found guilty of adultery may get rid of it by simply paying a fine, but women committing adultery is considered a serious offense. If a woman is divorced for infidelity then she has to leave her husband's home with nothing, forfeiting even her bridal gifts, she brought from her parental house. During their separation, if she has a male child, the boy is to be handed over to the father, and if the child is an infant, then they may enter into an agreement under which the mother is allowed to nurse the baby boy for some years, after which, the child must go to his father. However, if the offspring is a girl child, the rules are completely reversed.

To this day, the Monpa women largely adhere to the same traditional social order. Their involvement in authoritative and decision-making bodies mostly remain negligible with power exclusively controlled by male population. However, with women now having greater access to education, participation in socio-cultural and economic livelihoods, some changes are visible. And now they are gradually enhancing their living standards. However, all Monpa women did not get the opportunity to embrace education and lack of education remains a major barrier. Without access to modern education, it is difficult for them to understand and exercise their rights and privileges. Economic independence can only be built on education and for a significant portion of the population, it remains a distant goal. Even when opportunities exist, women often hesitate to seize them, partly out of empathy and partly due to entrenched male domination. Although women are vital economic contributors, they never advocate for their rights. However, without a fundamental shift in their status- legally, socially and economically- long lasting progress of the Monpa society as a whole will remain elusive.

A distinctive aspect of the religious life of Monpa women is embracing nun and living in nunneries known as Ani Gonpa. Folklores narrates that the sister of Mera Lama, the founder of the Tawang Monastery started the tradition of admitting women into nunneries. Since women were not permitted to reside with the monks in the Monastery, a nunnery was established on a hillock roughly four miles north of the Tawang Monastery. This came to be known as Gyanggong Ani Gonpa and the nunnery is visible from Tawang Monastery. Today, it houses a considerable number of nuns. And interestingly most of their provisions like rations are supplied by the Tawang monastery itself. In return nuns are expected to perform minor chores as the behest of the monastic authorities. However, Tawang monastery does not extend allowances to any other nunneries in the region. Unlike the customary practice of sending every second son of a family with three sons or more to the Tawang Monastery to become a monk, there is no such compulsion. The women often at a very young age willingly go to the nunneries to become nuns. Nevertheless, the status accorded to nuns remains notably inferior as compared to that of monks. In the past, nuns heavily relied on alms but today they supplement their needs by performing *pujas* often at the homes of villagers upon request. However, this modest earning does not elevate their social and religious

position, their subordinate standing remains largely unchanged.

Women are economic contributors of a region, not just a beneficiary of development. The Monpa women too are seen engaging in various economic activities such as weaving, carpet making, working in the fields, engaging themselves in various Self Help groups etc. The Monpa women are able to maintain a balance between the dual burden of professional obligations and socially prescribed roles of nurturing mother, loyal wife and sacrificing sister. The Government of India has also implemented various schemes for the empowerment of women and to a very large extent they are availing benefits from the government schemes but still they are not economically empowered. The Government needs to bring more schemes by setting up textile ministry, handloom industries etc. to develop the region from small scale cottage industries and self-sufficient economy to commercialized economy.

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