

Women and Property Inheritance in Chiechama Village of Nagaland

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Abstract: Property can be anything that a person owns either by inheritance, self-purchase or even gifted items and has absolute ownership rights over it. The concept of property for the Angamis of Chiechama village primarily revolves around land. The present paper reveals that the people, being a patriarchal society, follow the patriarchal system of inheritance. On one hand, sons inherit both the inherited ancestral land properties as well as the self-acquired land properties of the parents while women on the other, do not have the right to inherit land properties. The study took a micro survey to capture the narratives and opinions of the people of Chiechama village on women and property inheritance. With this argument, the present paper tries to locate the reasons as to why women do not have the right to inherit land properties.

Key Word: Chiechama; women; men; property.

Date of Submission: 17-08-2021

Date of Acceptance: 01-09-2021

I. INTRODUCTION

Property can be anything that a person owns either by inheritance, self-purchase or even gifted items and has absolute ownership rights over it. In other words property can be a thing or things that is owned or possessed by an individual, group or community which can be bought or sold. Properties are of different types which can either be classified into immovable or movable properties. Inheritance is the practice of passing on property, titles, debts, rights and obligations upon the death of an individual. The rules of inheritance differ from society to society and have changed over time. Inheritance is an integral component of family, economic and legal institutions, and a basic mechanism of class stratification. Laws of inheritance relate to a mode of acquiring property and of succeeding to office which is occasioned by events, such as death, which cause a discontinuity of possession (Hodson, 1989: 98). Naga society being a patriarchal society where descents are traced through the male bloodline, property inheritance has been in favour of male children. In most patriarchal societies including the Naga society has been unequal with regard to the property inheritance system. Likewise, the people of Chiechama village who are a part of the Naga society also falls under the patriarchal society where properties, be it inherited land properties or self-acquired property of the parents are passed on to the male children. Women have little to no right when it comes to property inheritance.

The people of Chiechama village and land

The state of Nagaland lie between 25°6" and 27°4" north of the equator and between the longitudinal lines 93°20"E and 93°15"E (Singh, 1994:1). Nagaland is one of the smallest states in India with an area of 16,578 square kilometres which constitute 0.52 percent of the country's total geographical area. There are twelve districts in Nagaland with Kohima as its capital. The state of Nagaland is inhabited by sixteen major Naga communities. The Angami Naga community is one of the major Naga communities of Nagaland.

The people of Chiechama village belong to the Angami Naga community that comes under Kohima district. The Angamis are divided into four regions: Northern Angami Region, Southern Angami Region, Western Angami Region and Chakhro Angami Region (Chakhro literally means below the road). Chiechama village comes under the Northern Angami Region and is the second largest village under the Northern Angami Region. Chasie (2013) in the early stage of the village, the first name of Chiechama was 'Soziebamia' meaning people of *Sozieba*. Since the village was established on the hillock that housed *Soziera* or *Thobvüra* (Hornbill) the people were at first called *Soziebamia*. The hillock is also called as the abode of Hornbills. With the passage of time and growth of population, people of the village began to move out of the old village residential hillock and move to a new hillock for settlement. Out of the new hillock grew a mystical stone called 'Chiecha' meaning 'tall or long stone'. The village was later named 'Chiechama' meaning 'the people of tall stone'.

Land is regarded as the most valuable property for the people of Chiechama village. Being an agriculturalist society where life circles around agriculture depending on the produce of land, property can

broadly be classified into two types: movable and immovable. The movable property consists of traditional attires, jewellery, household articles, vehicles and so on forward. The immovable property inclusively consists of land property. Land ownership can broadly be divided into four types. They are as follows: Community or Village land, Clan land, Lineage land and Private land. Lands, either inherited or self-acquired has been passed down through the male bloodline from the older generation to the younger generation which has been in the family or lineage for several generations and continues to be. Buying and selling of land is done within the village community and people are advised not to sell their lands to outsiders. Das argues that land ownership pattern was unique in the sense that customs did not allow inter-tribe transfer of land. Even people of the same tribe but belonging to different villages were not allowed to own land as per the village customs (Das, 1995:63). Land is held in several ownerships, but no alienation outside the clan is permitted. In cases where attempts have been made to dispose off the land to persons who were neither members of the clan nor members of the village, public opinion has dealt very severely with the offender (Hodson, 1989: 105).

Women and Property Inheritance System

The people of Chiechama village follow a patrilineal system of inheritance where the father is considered to be the owner of both the inherited ancestral land property as well as his self acquired land property. Decision regarding the transfer of property to children depends on the father of the family. Property inheritance takes place through the male blood line where men can inherit both moveable and immovable properties. The youngest son is the most privileged of all the sons because he not only gets the parental house but along with it he also inherits the household articles in the house. The property of families with only daughter and no sons both inherited ancestral as well as self-acquired is passed on to the nearest male bloodline. Barthakur (2010), states that a man with no son and only female children cannot pass on his properties to his daughters and after his demise his property is inherited by his brother's sons.

Women on the other hand, does not have any rights to inherit the immovable properties be it inherited ancestral land property or even the self acquired land property of their parents. "A woman cannot inherit immovable property such as land or house of her father (Barthakur, 2010: 3)". The only properties which women received from their parents were the movable properties which were given to them as gifts and not as rights. Barthakur further pointed out that the only properties which women can receive are the moveable properties that they received at the time of their marriage in the form of 'gifts' and not as 'rights'.

According to Tayeng (1997), "As a daughter her share is limited to the items of socially accepted valuables such as bead necklaces, brass bangles or such other ornaments, cloths etc. She gets her share of such articles when she leaves her parental home after her marriage". The daughters get the minimum share of property in the family as immovable properties are not given to women. In the past, women were gifted grains, agricultural implements, domesticated animals, traditional attires, jewellery, weaved bamboo baskets, earthen pots and other movable things by their parent at the time of her marriage. The traditional necklace and baskets were considered to be the most valuable properties for women.

However, the practice of gifting cultivable land to daughters was not totally absent as there were certain cases where well-off parents with multiple land properties would gift or allow their daughters to till the land in their lifetime where the land would be retrieved by her bothers after her demise. Therefore, in order to retain the gifted property of the parents, women would pay a small nominal amount to their family with the knowledge of the parents and brothers so that problems would not arise in the future.

The unequal property rights in Chiechama village for men and women in the past was not a problem for the people because no women complained or asked for their share of property from their parents. This was because of the believe and practice that even if women do not receive any land property from their parents, whatever property their husband inherits from their parents will also be the property of the women as long as they are married. Moreover, no Nagas are without land. And if at all, a man does not have his own land he and his wife could still cultivate the land of his wife's brothers or even cultivate the land of anyone who is willing to let them cultivate for their sustenance. Adding to that, every village has its barren communal land which can be cultivated by its citizens for free.

Till today there has been no law or right that grants women the right to inherit their parent's property. The properties which women receive from their parents are given to them as gifts and not rights even in the present day. The people of Chiechama village still follow the traditional customary law of property inheritance inspite of the advancement with time.

II. CONCLUSION

The Angami society in general and the study area that is, Chiechama village in particular the domain of property includes the land, its produce, residential house, livestock, granary, ornaments, traditional attires, weapons, furnitures, agricultural implements and so on. The people of Chiechama village follow the patrilineal system of inheritance where the father is considered to be the rightful owner of the inherited ancestral as well as

self-acquired land property both movable and immovable which is passed on to his male children. Women on the other hand, do not have any right with regard to property inheritance. The women receive only the movable properties at the time of their marriage. The strongest argument for not giving inheritance right to women was justified on the basis of customary law. The people believed that this law is integral to their identity and should not be changed. Another reason that has been found in the study was to keep property within the village because not all women get married within their village. So when women get married outside the village such customary laws ensures that the land property does not go outside the village.

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Khriekesanuo Metha *. "Women and Property Inheritance in Chiechama Village of Nagaland." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 26(08), 2021, pp. 40-42.