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Tribal culture & religion and its impact on women empowerment**A study on the Khasis of Meghalaya**

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The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) proposed by the UN in September 2015, are directed towards a broad range of development issues including achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. Women are often considered to fall under the vulnerable group, but instead, they should be considered as change agents whose participation is key to the advancement of our countries and societies. Hence making women's empowerment an essential component for economic growth, promotion of social development and the enhancement of business performance. Further investing in women's empowerment produces the double dividend of benefiting women and children and is pivotal to the health and social development of the family.

Since the 1980s, the Government of India has shown increasing concern for women's issues through a variety of legislation promoting the education and political participation of women. With approximately 270 million of the population in India living under poverty, the highest proportion of them is women and children. Approximately 43.4% of women suffer from crimes committed by their husbands or family members. As of 2015, the government's lack of action has positioned India as 125th out of 188 countries on the Human Development Report's Gender Inequality Index.

While several recent studies focus on the fact that culture and religion do impact women empowerment, this study focuses on how cultural beliefs and traditions of a matrilineal society have an impact on empowerment levels of women. Cultural beliefs and traditions in society play a major role in moulding various decisions of an individual belonging to a particular societal framework. Recognition of these beliefs and traditions is what anchors an individual to his/her society. In central to this, the need for social acceptance is what pushes women to adhere to these norms. This, in turn, results in an impact of empowerment levels on women.

The present research focuses on women issues in the Khasi matrilineal society of Meghalaya. In a state where traditional institutions function based on local customs and conventions that are not codified and yet religiously followed, it is questionable to whether the women are essentially empowered. The study has been designed to understand the core issues behind low empowerment levels of women of the Khasi society. It intends to check the influence of culture and religion on empowerment.

The objective of this research is to check if culture and religion do play a role in the empowerment levels of women of Meghalaya. Followed by evidence of how culture and religion have impacted the respective empowerment levels in accordance to the National Family Health Survey- 4. Along with this, the research will also look into the various initiatives taken by the various NGO's, government and village leaders. While many authors have concluded that the underlying issue behind the empowerment levels is the exclusion of women from the political decision making at the village level, this study has also gone on to check the societal perception towards this recommendation.

The first two chapters of the study go on to give an introduction and an overview of the research issue and objectives. Chapter 3 goes on to focus on the first objective, which is checking if culture and religion have an impact on empowerment. Chapter 4 and 5 will focus on the second objective, that is to stress on the evidence of cultural and religion impact on empowerment. Chapter 6 will focus on the third objective which is to look into the various initiatives taken up by the various NGO's, the government and the village leaders. Chapter 7 will focus on the societal acceptance of the highly recommended suggestion to accept women into the village council. Chapter 8 will conclude this dissertation.

To get a better understanding of whether culture and religion have an impact on empowerment, chapter 3 compares the cultural perceptions of two societies- a patrilineal and matrilineal society. Along with which T-test analysis was used to compare certain empowerment factors of the two societies. It further not only focuses on the productional behaviour of the societies but attempts to understand the impact of tribal cultural traditions on empowerment levels of women as a whole. It also hypothesizes that cultural traditions of the Khasi matrilineal society have led to the prevalence of domestic violence and a high total fertility rate. From this chapter, it can be concluded that culture and religion do play a role in the empowerment levels of women in Khasi society.

With Meghalaya being a matrilineal society, women owning land is considered to be a cultural tradition. Chapter 4, checks the impact of land ownership on the women empowerment levels of the Khasi society and if it gives her decision-making power in the household. Probit regression was then used to analyze the data. The results stated that women who inherited land were more likely to have a savings account and be a part of a socio-economic group. From this, it can be concluded, that women who o Fig.5c shows the value of the radial stiffness, axial stiffness and maximum stress growing with the increasing of thickness about the permanent width circle spring when the width and circle numbers are the same. According to the above analysis, the permanent parameters were the width at 40mm and circle number at 2 which was used to analyze the affection of thickness. In view of the moving mass needing support and the limit of fatigue reaching summary, the use of a thickness at 2.5mm is of an optimum choice, however 3mm is also acceptable.

wned land through lineage were empowered, however, the fact that they still consider their husbands to be the head of the family, makes us consider that there may be a psychological component to it.

83.3% of the population in Meghalaya follow Christianity as their religion (2018). With 100% of the respondents following protestant Christianity, the question arises to whether religion has an impact on contraception usage behaviour. The current use rate of contraception to prevent pregnancy in Meghalaya is 4.7 (2.8 for sterilization and 1.9 for temporary methods), which is the lowest in India. Hence, Chapter 5, investigates the possibility of religion impact on the low contraceptive use and participation in family planning programmes. The effects of knowledge about contraception, the extent of urbanization, empowerment and demographic characteristics on contraceptive use and participation in family planning programmes were estimated in a logit regression analysis. Principal component analysis was used to construct a composite measure of women's empowerment. The results found a rural-urban

difference in women's knowledge of contraceptive use. Women and men's educational attainments positively related to contraceptive use. Women's empowerment is positively related to knowledge about contraception. However, employed husbands were less likely to attend family planning programmes, suggesting the importance of providing programmes that do not conflict with work responsibilities.

According to NFHS-4 statistics, the major gender issues that Meghalaya is facing are in the fields of family planning, domestic violence and early marriage. Chapter 6, focuses on providing an overview of the role of the government, the NGO and the village leader in educating women on the repercussions of early marriage, advantages of family planning and combating domestic violence. In this study, four NGOs, the different government departments in the offices of Social Welfare, National Health Mission and the Women's Special Cell, and 20 village heads, 12 presidents of the female unit and 13 SHGs from each village, have been analysed. From this case study, it was found that while there may be a difference in interpretation of reality between the village head leaders and the government as well as the NGOs when it came to the eradication of social issues, the three agencies were closely connected.

With women in the Khasi society being excluded from political decision-making at local governance institutions, their inclusion has been recommended by several authors. Chapter 7, attempts to understand the view of women on the importance of women representation as decision-makers in society and to examine the determinants of the knowledge and attitude of Khasi women towards women representation. It is hypothesized that facilitating female representation in local governmental structures represents one of many routes towards empowerment. Probit and Logistic regression (reporting odds ratios) were then used to analyse the data. From the results, it could be deduced that women inclusion in the local governance system is of utmost importance. It is also important that the women realise that their rights are not solely limited to placing a vote but having a say in the decision-making process as well.

With Meghalaya being considered a matrilineal state, it is taken for granted that the women of the state are empowered. While a lot is being done towards the empowerment of women, the exclusion of women from political decision-making at local governance institutions is the underlying issue behind their empowerment status. From the positive willingness of Khasi women to be a part of the village council and the acceptance of female individuals into one village council, it can be deduced that the decision of women inclusion is on the village leaders. It is hence recommended that the Sixth Schedule, which gives these village leaders the authority to enact various legislative and judiciary laws, is revised. Along with this, it is also recommended that the government collaborate with the church towards the implementation of family planning programmes.