




ANALYSING TRADITIONS AND INDIAN WOMEN THROUGH THE LENS OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.250306046>

Abstract

The Indian tradition placed high accord and value on marriage system as it is regarded as sacred and held a high accord amongst the Indian society. Indian women were traditionally expected to get married at a young age and confined only to domestic roles. The parents usually neglected the education of their daughters as they placed higher investments on their sons and higher securities were also placed on their male. In terms of family, the traditional Indian family mostly follows a joint family which is headed by a male authority and the society is highly patriarchal in nature. In modern times, Indian society and laws places higher value to educate girls and women and develop various schemes and programmes for their benefits. This has resulted in the higher enrolment rate of girls and women in educational institutions and also led them to engage in economic activities other than that of domestic roles. However, the case is still different for women with disabilities as they hardly progress beyond the four walls of their homes. Hence, this paper analysed the traditional and modern systems of Indian society in terms of marriage, education and family structures and comparative analysis was done to show how the women with disabilities in Mizoram lag behind modern Indian women in terms of marriage and educational status.

Keywords: *Traditions, Indian women, women with disabilities, public and private sphere, Mizoram*

Introduction

India has often been dubbed as a country rich in traditions. The Indian society is a close-knitted society and is a collectivistic society which is bounded by religious life (Piliavsky 2022, 130). The Indian tradition has a rigid family structure, has a profound value for marriage system, cuisine and social structure and a deep-rooted educational value (Das 2021, 1). Religion shaped the lifestyle of the people and the Indian population largely follows a religious obligation and their culture is shaped by their religious beliefs (Khanna 2023, 1). On the other hand, Indian tradition follows a patriarchal society and the status of women in traditional days was not a desirable picture. Women are an integral part of Indian society yet; their socio-economic conditions have not always been favourable. Female foeticide, dowry and confinement to domestic roles are some of the many struggles faced by Indian women (Pedia 2023, 1).

However, in modern days, the status and influence of modern Indian women have improved and the traditions of Indian society has slowly paved the way for the growth and progress of women in general. Women are more empowered and have engaged in higher employment and educational fields (Roy 2022, 1). The female literacy rate has seen a massive increase in modern times and women not only engage in domestic roles, but venture across different occupations (Srivastava 2023, 1). The conditions of women with disabilities say otherwise as women with disabilities are often neglected in Indian society and are also neglected in the academic study as well. Even though the lived experiences and socio-economic conditions of modern Indian women have seen an improvement, women with disabilities still face countless of hardships and low socio-economic conditions that are otherwise not address extensively by policy-makers and community leaders (Dawn 2014, 1768).

This paper analysed the traditions of marriage system, educational status and family traditions in India for women from both the public and private sphere and how they change in modern times. A comparative analysis is then made based on the conditions of 163 women with disabilities in Mizoram and comparison was made on how the changes and growth experienced by modern Indian women are also experienced or not by the women with disabilities in two districts of Mizoram, which are Aizawl and Lunglei districts.

Tradition of marriage for Indian women

In the public sphere in terms of marriage, traditional Indian society expected Indian women of young age to get married and in many circumstances, failure to do so were even outcasted and shamed by their family members and peers (Dhar 2023, 1). Marriage is believed to be an act which preserved family heritage and honour and Indian society sees it as a way to strengthen social ties. In many occasions, young women are forced to give up on their dreams, visions and aspirations of their desired future and sacrifice their entire future for the sake of marriage and abides by her in-laws' family and serves her husband throughout. In Hindu society, marriage is viewed and considered as a sacramental ties and religious bond between families and the members of society are bound to get married. The Shastras defined that man alone is incomplete and needed the assistance and bond of female companion. The wives are called as *dharmapatni* or half of a man and only when a man and woman bonded through marriage, were they being viewed as complete (Sharma 2023, 3). Women often play the role of a subservient position in the traditional Indian marriage system and men often play the role of a master in traditional society.

In modern days, many Indian women are delaying their marriage so as to pursue their personal goals and educational aspirations. Education largely plays a role in the delayed choice of marriage of modern Indian women as opposed to traditional practices of early and arranged marriage in Indian society. This leaves more room for financial stability and independence among the women and many women do not even wish to engage in marital practices at all in recent years (Vijay 2024, 3).

However, even though the conditions of women in terms of marriage have started to witness changes in recent years as compared to traditional years, it is of utmost importance to analyse the conditions of women with disabilities in terms of marriage and how marital change observed in recent years is applicable in their lives.

Women with disabilities' marital status

The study of sociology defines marriage as a union between two or more people which is socially and legally accepted. Marital status refers to the legally defined state of marriage (Crossman 2024, 1). There are various marital status categories, including widowed, divorced, separated, single, married, and, in some circumstances, registered partnerships. Those who have never married are those who have never tied the knot by the law. Those who were married by lawful procedures and before a competent body are considered wedded. Those who are declared widowed have lost their marriage due to the death of one spouse or the respectful declaration of a spouse missing. People who have had their marriage ended are considered divorced. Marital status in this study is divided into six categories which are married, unmarried, widow, separated, divorced and unlikely to get married.

Amongst the respondents, it is revealed that in Lunglei district of Mizoram, there are 2 (1.2 per cent) women who are married and 3 (1.8 per cent) women are unmarried. There are 2 (1.2 per cent) widowed women and there is 1 (0.6 per cent) woman who is separated from her spouse and there are as many as 12 (12.3 per cent) women who are unlikely to get married.

In Aizawl district, there are 23 (14.1 per cent) women who are married while 43 (26.4 per cent) women are unmarried. There are only 5 (3.1 per cent) widows among the respondents and 4 (2.5 per cent) women who are separated. There is 1 (0.6 per cent) divorcee and as many as 67 (41.1 per cent) women are unlikely to get married. In Mizoram, there are currently no legal divorces as practiced in other states in India. The woman who divorced found in this study formally divorced from her husband through Mizo customary laws and the bride price was even returned to the husband's family. However, the 5 (3.1 per cent) women who reported being separated lived separately from their husbands without any thoughts of divorce in their minds. They currently lived separately due to some minor arguments amongst themselves and they all planned to move back in after the anger associated with spousal arguments died down. The action of actual divorce has never even crossed their minds and have only lived separately with their parents with the plan to move back in with their husbands after some time.

It is observed that most of the women with disabilities are in the category of 'unlikely to get married' (48.5 per cent) and that marriage is off the shelf for most of the women respondents. In Lunglei, 60 per cent of women are unlikely to get married while in Aizawl, it is also on the higher side as 46.85 per cent are unlikely to get married. Besides, 28.2 per cent of women from both the districts are unmarried in which Lunglei women form 15 per cent while in Aizawl, it is as high as 30 per cent. So, there is little to no scope of marriage for these women since most of them are unlikely to get married and are unmarried.

'... you're talking about marriage as if proposals come easily to me.... no approach is made towards marriage proposals by the bachelors nor had I made any. Who will want to marry a woman like me? There is no room in my life for love and marriage as I have always felt that people outside of my family would never love me unconditionally the way I am loved and adored by my family. This feeling leaves no room for marriage in my life.' Miss P1, locomotor disability.

There are only 15.3 per cent of women who are married, and the case of divorce is also at a minimum point as there is only 1 woman (0.7 per cent) who has experienced divorce. The divorcee respondent was asked with lots of hesitation about the reason for the divorce.

'...it was one of the lowest points of my life. All my children stayed with my husband and he re-married already. We had a divorce after an accident left me with a chronic neurological condition. We were already poor by then and my husband could not afford to always care for me since he himself had to work and our two children were still so little. We argue often as I lack the much-needed care and support as a circumstantially driven disabled woman. This led to our divorce two years ago and I lived with my parents who cared for me lovingly every passing day. I really missed my children but my husband and

his new wife took better care of them and I'm not really in a position to even care for myself and so, I accept my fate with a heavy heart.' – Miss P2, chronic neurological condition.

Their own consanguine family is the only hope of care and support instead of an affinal family and there is little or no scope of forming affinal kinship on their own.

'As you can see, my daughter is not capable of even moving around the houses. We have to care for her and do almost everything for her including bathing her. She is not in a position to start her own family. Even we find it stressful sometimes to cater to her at all times since we also have many other ventures to tend to. But I am a mother, you know.....and I always see past her disability and that may not be the case if she married into another family.' – Mrs. P3, mother of P4 who has muscular dystrophy.

The Indian tradition of early marriages and compulsory marriages for women are not applicable to women with disabilities as most of them did not even have suitors and bachelors who approached them for marriage. Those who get married are mostly women with blindness and even though they had lost their vision, they have a sound mind and healthy body. The case is different for women with other types of disabilities as most of the respondents have stated that they are unlikely to get married. The traditional practices of marrying Indian women at a young age and to affluent husbands are mostly not applicable to women with disabilities due to fewer number of approaches by the bachelors and the modern practices of marrying late by their decision is also not applicable as the women with disabilities' 'single' status arises not out of their own choices and decisions but rather by the conditions brought about their 'disability.'

Traditional/modern women's educational status

The act of learning something new or transferring knowledge is known as education. Education involves getting children ready for adulthood. The process of education begins right when a child is born. At first, it started as an informal process as the child watches and imitates others around them. Then, the process becomes more formal as the child gets older in which the education becomes more formal through pre-school and play dates. This education process then becomes academic lessons and is much more than learning simple facts. Education is a means to socialize humans into society and is an important socialization method. All cultural expectations and norms are taught through education by teachers through textbooks and classmates.

In the private sphere, educational status of Indian women differs greatly when traditional and modern eras are compared. For the full development of a country, educating a girl child and women are of utmost importance as that can contribute to the upliftment of both society and economy. However, the reality paints a different picture as the tradition of Indian society largely neglects women education (Khair 2020, 2). Indian society being a patriarchal society often limits education to the boys and men and this system is more prevalent in rural areas and since rural areas make up around 70 per cent of the Indian population, the overall scenario shows that Indian tradition largely neglects girls and women's education. Besides, the feeling of lack of security and preferences of domestic roles for the women from their families influence the parents to neglect their daughters' education and invest more on their sons' education. The girls are expected to marry off soon and so, their parents often felt it as a burden to educate their daughters (Khair 2019, 3).

Even though Indian tradition has largely neglected girls and women's education, the country witnessed incredible progress and prosperity on women's education post-independence period with the setting up of various government-backed schemes like National Policy on Education (NEP), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and various schemes introduced to back up girls and women's education which resulted in the rise of female enrolment rate in educational institutions and female literacy rate as well (Iqbal 2024, 556). Initiatives of the government like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) have played an instrumental role in uplifting the educational status and enrolment of girl child in schools and educational institutions. Besides, modern Indian women are better educated as compared with traditional days and are skilled with knowledge and skills (Iqbal 2024, 564). As per the reports of Ministry of Education, there is a significant increase in the girls' enrolment rate in schools as the reports show that their enrolment rate is 96.3 per cent (Ministry of Education 2021). So, even though there are still countless of steps and initiatives to take for the betterment of girls and women's education, the current scenario shows a delightful status as the conditions have improved tremendously in modern times as compared to traditional days.

Educational status of women with disabilities

The respondents in this study are asked about their educational status and the education level of the respondents is divided into primary, upper primary, high school, pre-degree, graduate, post-graduate, Ph.D., technical, and no education. The educational level of the respondents is depicted in the above table. It is evident that in Lunglei, most of the women, i.e., 15 (9.2 per cent) have reached only the primary level of education, while there are 3 (1.8 per cent) women who have reached the high school level of education. There is only 1 (0.6 per cent) woman who has reached the pre-degree level of education and there is 1 (0.6 per cent) woman who did not receive any education at all.

The situation is somewhat similar in Aizawl as there are 55 (33.7 per cent) women who have reached only the primary level of education and there are 17 (10.4 per cent) women who have reached the upper primary level of education. 19 (11.7 per cent) women have achieved a high school level of education and 10 (6.1 per cent) women have reached pre-degree level of education. In terms of graduate women, there are 13 (8 per cent) women who have graduated at their bachelor's level, and 6 (3.7 per cent) women are post-graduate. There is 1 (0.6 per cent) woman who is currently pursuing her Ph. D from Assam and as many as 22

(13.5 per cent) women did not receive any formal education at all. These women did not go to any conventional schools and educational institutions but they had received informal education in the form of reading and writing from their caregivers.

Among the women, 70 respondents have attained only a primary level of education which accounts for as many as 42.9 per cent of the entire respondents. In Lunglei, as many as 75 per cent of these women have achieved only a primary level of education while in Aizawl, the number is a bit lower at 38.47 per cent but the category still forms the highest number in the district as compared to other categories of education. 17 (10.4 per cent) of the women have an upper primary level of education and 22 (13.5 per cent) of the respondents have reached high school level. 11 (6.7 per cent) of the women have a pre-degree which is equivalent to a higher secondary level of education in modern days. In terms of graduates, there are 13 (8.0 per cent) women who are graduates in this study and 6 (3.7 per cent) women who have post-graduate degrees. There are no graduate and post-graduate women from Lunglei district. Among the women, there is only one woman who is currently pursuing a Ph. D which accounts for 0.6 per cent of the entire women respondents. As many as 23 women or 14.1 per cent of the respondents did not receive any type of education in their lifetime because their disability prohibits them from receiving formal school education. It is noted that these women are not illiterate despite receiving no education but have received basic alphabet and number of lessons taught to them by their caregivers.

‘...what is the use of education for a disabled girl like me? All my life I have lived off the emotional, financial, and physical care of my family and I don’t have many opportunities in life anyway. Besides, my analytical thinking and memories did not permit much education as I could not learn many things academically. One of my family members had to accompany me to school every day which is time-consuming for them as they all must work as well. So, I had to drop out from school after reaching primary level as I felt that I only disturbed my families.’ – Miss P5, a girl with autism.

The findings revealed that access to formal education tends to be quite formidable for women with disabilities due to multiple reasons as most of the respondents have attained only a primary level of education followed by women who had not received any kind of formal education at all. Disability has formed a major obstacle to the promotion of the educational career of the respondents. The majority of them have either dropped out after primary level or have not gained entry into formal education. So, it is crucial to provide special education with a syllabus that is customized based on their respective ability. Government initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) do not have much profound impact on their educational status and even though modern Indian women’s educational status and educational institutions enrolment rate have increased and improved, the educational status of women with disabilities are still low and are almost at par with the ancient traditional educational status of the women.

Tradition of family in India

A family is a socially recognised group of individuals who together form an economic unit of society. They are joined together by blood, marriage, and adoption and they all share close personal relations. There are many types of family: grandparent family, joint family, nuclear family, single-parent family, childless family, and compound family, amongst several others. The family is also important as they are an integrated group and they constitute the functional aspect of society (Sharma 2013, 306). In the private sphere, family plays a crucial role as family members are interdependent to one another and there is a system of collectivism system present in Indian tradition. Traditional Indian family usually follows a joint family system wherein three to four generations of family lives together under one roof and share the same dining room and the majority of the family follows a patriarchal system, headed by male authority (Chadda and Deb 2013, 299).

This study focuses on the types of families that are observed among the respondents. Family and household play an important role in analysing the demography of a population and the three features that arise out of this study are the size of the family, the gender basis of the head of the family, and the total number of family members of all the women with disabilities included in this study.

Most of the family members of women with disabilities in Lunglei are nuclear families. They dwell in a family consisting of 3 – 4 members and there are few women who belong to a family of 5 – 6 members in Lunglei. The size of the family is rather small, and they all belong to a nuclear family.

In Aizawl, most of the families of women with disabilities are nuclear family and the size of the families is rather small.

‘Is joint family still feasible in our culture? Do you not know this? Once we get married, it is in our culture to move out and form a separate family... parents drive you out and we live independently in our own house and start our own family. That way, we are more responsible and more mature. Even though we are a nuclear family with disability in our family, the responsibilities have strengthened us and made us more mature, and also, our children are more responsible in taking care of me.’ Mrs. P6, locomotor disability.

Overall, the size of family members of these women is not large at all and can be said to be moderate. Most of the women respondents belong to a family which have members consisting of below 6 members, headed by a male figure. In Lunglei, all the women belong to families that have members below 6, and in Aizawl, of women hailed from a family with below 6 members. Only few women respondents have family members more than 6 and they reside in Aizawl. No joint family is observed among the respondents, and they all belong to nuclear families except two single-parent families, especially from Lunglei. These two

women are also the main income earners in their families while being single parent disabled women. Both of them had become pregnant and had babies without marrying the father which left them in a state of single parenthood. These women did not receive any child support from their fathers and were entirely cared for by their mothers. Hence, the practice of joint family as observed in traditional Indian society is absent among the women with disabilities in this study.

Conclusion

Modern Indian women have benefitted from the empowerment measures and schemes launched by the government, policy makers and community leaders and the traditions of narrow mindset in viewing Indian women only as domestic workers and household help have changed drastically in recent years. The traditions have improved for the better and even though countless of steps are still yet to be taken and countless steps needed to be addressed, the status of modern Indian women have improved in terms of education, marriage and family status as compared to traditional ancient society in India. Women with disabilities, on the other hand, still needed to be empowered and changes in terms of policies are still needed extensively as they still have lower educational and employment status as compared to women without disabilities. Therefore, proper laws and inclusive approach along with their effective implementation will go a long way to improve the socio-economic conditions and lived experiences of women with disabilities and enjoy the delightful empowerment schemes and progress in both public and private sphere, enjoyed by other women without disabilities in the country.

Acknowledgment: No

Author's Contribution: Dr. Lawmsangpuia Ralte: Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

Funding: No

Declaration: Not Applicable

Competing Interest: No

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