



THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN BIATE PROVERBS

Lalfani Durpui

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Cultural and Creative Studies, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong – 793022, Meghalaya, India

ABSTRACT

Proverbs are an encapsulation of the age-old wisdom that has played a significant role in every aspect of culture whether religious, economic, social, or political. This wisdom of the past has survived many generations and its usage and value is still as significant as it was in the past. Unlike other forms of folklore, proverbs seem to have held on to their originality in this fast-changing society. This paper is an attempt to have a better understanding of the life and position of women in the Biate community, by examining their proverbs which have been passed on from generation to generation.

INTRODUCTION

Any meaningful examination of the Biate society going as far back as memory will allow including what is now only consigned to the delicate strands of their oral tradition, will reveal the fact that Biate women, much like their counterparts in more parts of the world than one would like to imagine, have languished in their subservient role that they have been conditioned to play as far back as can be recalled. Perhaps they have played their assigned gender role too well – so well that no one ever looked and thought of reconstructing her role until the First Feminist wave comes into action lest it awaken the women from their long hidden miserable life. A.R. Desai (1959) noted, “Women remained subordinated except that the new education had afforded them a little respectability but not the position of equality with men”. Today, the world may have become a slightly better place for women, but again gender equality still has a long way to reach different corners of the Earth. This paper is an attempt to highlight the role and position of Biate women in their society as evidenced by their representation through their age-old proverbial sayings. This will include a brief look into her day-to-day workload which will give us an overall view of the Biate woman.

The reason that the proverbial sayings have been chosen for this purpose can best be understood

by examining exactly what proverbs are and why they remain relevant, perhaps more than any other aspect of such age-old oral traditions, to this day. Firstly, it is imperative to define what constitutes a proverb. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2001, on-line) a proverb is “a short pithy saying in common and recognised use; a concise sentence, often metaphorical or alliterative in form, which is held to express some truth ascertained by experience or observation and familiar to all”. Durkheim (1933: 170–171) defines a proverb as ‘a condensed statement of a collective idea or sentiment relative to a determined category of objects’. Cocchiera (1981:176) highlights the role that proverbs play in setting in stone the values, beliefs, laws and “collective spirit of nation”. Yuksel (1993:65) argues that the very specific characteristics of proverbs such as their brevity, simple form, and use of rhyme and rhythm allows them to hold people’s attention and lends themselves to easy memorization. As we can see from the above, proverbs are the ideal objects of analysis for the purpose of this paper for the following reasons:

1. They represent the collective wisdom, ethos and worldview of a people and community.
2. Their form allows them to be easily shared, virtually unchanged, across generations and this resilience ensures their perseverance

even as other forms of oral tradition have gradually faded from daily relevance.

There has been much luminous work done on the representation of women in proverbs by scholars in various fields and geographical settings. Hiroko (1992), in their analysis of the attitude towards women in 817 Japanese proverbs, found that 331 are negative in nature and only 29 positive. Yusuf (1993), examining English proverbs and Yoruba proverbs, finds that they frequently compare women to animals, food, plants, property, and trouble. Meryem's (2003) analysis of Moroccan proverbs finds men pictured as "predators, profiteers and tyrants" while women are seen as "weak, vulnerable, stupid and mainly victims of an ideology that is maintained by men." Ardakani *et al.*(2015), in their exploration of Persian proverbs, indicate that women are portrayed as deceitful, irrational, superficial, mysterious and powerful in their influence, especially over men. Similarly, Mubarak (2017) states that in the proverbs of the Sundanese people of western Java women are portrayed "as object of sex, representation of virtue and constructions of submissiveness." Most recently, Gebeyehu (2019), studying the proverbs of the Awi people of North-western Ethiopia found that they represent women as incapable in household activities, poor in home management and that they are actively discouraged from holding power and authority.

BACKGROUND OF THE BIATE SOCIETY

The Biates are one of the many tribes of North East India, whose population is distributed in different parts of the region and their major concentration is in the states of Assam and Meghalaya. Racially they belong to the Indo-Mongoloid stock and their language belongs to the Tibeto-Burmese language group. They are akin to Darlongs, Khelmas, Bawms, Chorais, Ranglongs, Rangkhols, Halams and other Mizo-Kuki-Chin tribes. They have a distinct language and culture. The Biate people in Meghalaya inhabit the geographically contiguous region encompassing the south-eastern part of the East Jaintia Hills District and Kharthong area of Dima Hasao District in Assam. The Biate of Assam and Meghalaya are separated by the river Kopili, which is locally known as *Kangkalang Dung*. This river also serves as the inter-state boundary. The land inhabited by the Biate is called by them as *Biateram* which means 'Land of the Biate'. According to the 2011 Census, the total population of the Biate in Meghalaya is recorded at 7092 persons. The Biate are predominantly agriculturist and practice shifting cultivation as their traditional system of cultivation. Shifting cultivation is the main source of their livelihood.

The Biates have always been a predominantly patriarchal society. The father is the head of the household and he is called *dôngpu*. The father is referred to as *thu neitak* (one possessing the highest authority) in relation to members of the household. The father holds the highest authority in the household and his decision is final. He is concerned with the

overall welfare and maintenance of the household. He presides over the household council or *dônggrisôn* and represents the household in all matters. The mother raises the children, looks after house-keeping and engages in agricultural activities. When the father dies the eldest son living in the household takes charge as the head until he sets up his independent household and moves out. Then the next eldest son succeeds him as the head and so on. However, after the death of the father the title of *dôngpu* is inherited by the youngest son (*ithlum*) and he does not move out of the household. If the children are still young, the mother takes charge as the head of the household till such time when the children attain adulthood and take the responsibility of maintaining the household. Boys and girls are also socialised differently, following traditional gender-role expectations. Girls are advised to engage in activities like the mother's social and domestic activities, and to help in the household chores, while boys are oriented towards more intense physical activities. Girls are taught explicitly to adopt certain behaviour, to be graceful, sensitive and non-confrontational, while boys are suggested to have a tougher temperament that they should not complain and whine. When a girl shows indolence and lack of interest in the household chores the parents will scold her and tell her that such behaviour would bring shame for her and for them when she gets married and settles in her husband's household. They remind her of the roles and behaviours expected of a girl in the society.

LIFE OF A WOMAN IN THE FAMILY

To look into the life of a Biate woman we have to start from childhood, from the day she can take care of herself which is at the age of 9/10 years and above. The real childhood days of a Biate girl are very short. Even as a girl she has a role to play in the family with some of the domestic work bestowed upon her. She looks after her younger siblings during the day while her parents are away in their *jhum* field. She also does work like carrying water, washing utensils and she helps her mother in any other way she can. That is why, it is always said *Nupang mangnge khate a mangna a om pai* meaning 'A girl is never useless despite her age'. She may not be of great help to the family but she is taught to help in every small way. When we see a Biate girl child playing, we cannot help noticing the toys she is playing with-a kitchen set, a doll and the like. This shows that the family and society have already planned for her how she should be growing up and what things she should be interested in playing with and be familiar with. From the day she starts playing, she is given the toys of domestic work which can also be seen as a subtle form of training for her. A child at that age may not know what she is interested in but it is the family and society who shape her interests and effectively decide for her with what she should like and play with. Once a local pastor in his Sunday evening sermon said, *Biате nupang chu asuak ata thini denin nai apuak* which means 'Biате woman carry babies from the day she is born till she dies'. This is indeed a fact as in most

families, the girl child, especially the eldest daughter, has no time for childhood. From the time she attained the age of 5/6 years she carries and looks after her brothers and sisters then, once she has attained a marriageable age, she soon starts looking after her own children then come her grand-children.

Living in remote areas with no electricity and being an agrarian society, the daily life of the *Biäte* starts at dawn. In order to spend more time in their agricultural work, women in the family have to complete all the household work at the earliest hour. The usual morning tasks of a woman are pounding rice, carrying water from the public well, preparing food for the family and domesticated animals, serving food, packing lunch for the mid-day meal, washing utensils and cleaning, going to *Jhum* field, collecting firewood and weaving whenever she gets the chance. While the woman is busy with her chores, the husband on the other hand has nothing much to do as their daily work is outside work which mostly is in the agricultural field. Men always consider housework as *Nupang sin* meaning 'women's work'. A Biäte woman can never expect their husband to help them in any of the domestic works. According to Laurie Rudman and Peter Glick (2005), "Women themselves may not realise sexism but instead may view male dominance as part of the natural order". Also in Hoipi Haokip (2014), "most women of these societies (Kuki-chinzo) fail to recognise the bias attitude embedded in its traditional customary norms and cultures and hence they refuse to recognise themselves as the prejudice lot". Women understand the hardship they go through everyday but they take this as what they are born to do and do not see any real escape. This wide gap of division of labour between men and women is one of the main drawbacks for women which give them less or no time for them to contribute in any important matters of the society. She gives all her morning in domestic chores, spends her day in the *jhum* field and night doing her weaving which gives her no time to concentrate in any social matters.

Biäte women have accepted the division of labour, the gender role which culture and tradition has given her without realising the bias in it. The world of a Biäte woman is limited to doing all the domestic work, keeping her family warm and comfortable and helping her husband in all the agricultural works in order to have a good harvest, never to complain about her work or her husband, that is the only way to achieve the status of a "good woman". To a Biäte girl, to qualify as a good wife she should be kind-hearted, never complain, be good in domestic chores, be a good weaver, and be a strong and healthy girl. Even in the present day, and even among Biäte families living in towns and cities, these qualities are still looked for in a girl for their sons to marry. To understand a better view of a girl, there is a song composed by a group of young boys, which talk about girls, it says, *Nungák nisuaak mu no imni lo rang? Invo rangin anrup bang* meaning 'what is the use of a girl who never sees the sunrise? She's good only for house decoration'. This

line tells us what the society expects of her. A girl has no right or freedom to live the way she wants, not even while she is in her parent's house. Her life is being closely watched and observed by the society. She will be condemned by all if she does not live her life the way society dictates. This general attitude is rather aptly – if inadvertently – captured in the term for young girls, *Nungak*, which literally means "mother in waiting".

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN BIÄTE PROVERBS

If a woman gives her opinion in any matter of discussion, she is addressed as *Nupangte* or *Nupang ang loia* (*Nupang*- woman, *Te*- small, *angloia*- term for verbal subjugation) which means she is supposed to be quiet while discussions on matters of importance are going on, because she is a woman, and thus inferior. The word *Te* is used in connection to something that is small or of having a lower value. So addressing woman as *Nupangte* shows her status, she is judged neither by her age nor maturity but by her being a woman. In the Biäte society, women are given the same status as that of children.

Let us have a look at these Biäte expressions to illustrate this further.

1. *Nupang țong țong ni nimak, i ai sa sa nimak.*

Translation:

A woman's word is not a word as a crab meat is not a meat.

In this proverb, the word or the knowledge of a woman is compared to a crab meat. Crab meat is not considered as real meat since the meat quantity is too less and it cannot suffice one's desired to eat meat. Just as the crab meat has no value in comparison to other animals' meat, so is the word or the opinion of a woman in comparison to that of the man. This proverb further implies the social position that a woman is holding in relation to any important matter, where her opinion is not considered of much value, and even when she has one, her idea or knowledge is not considerable enough as to make her opinion worth taking.

2. *Nupang naipang țong.*

Translation:

Woman's words, a child's words.

The above line is not actually a proverb but a phrase. This phrase has a close connection with the previous proverb. Here a woman's word or her wisdom is compared to that of a child's knowledge. This phrase is used in matters of important discussion when a woman tries to give her opinion. Just as children are not allowed to talk in between when elders are talking, so also a woman is not allowed to intervene in any serious discussion. Should she do so, she would be implicitly ignored and her wisdom would simply be treated as immature and foolish as that of a child.

3. *Nupang itam bubel inlian.*

Translation:

Many women only enlarge the rice pot.

This proverb means that when there are too many young women in the family, it increases the number of eaters or in other words enlarges the rice pot. In the Biate culture, when a young man pays a visit to a young woman's house, it is impolite to not offer food when visitors come during or close to dinner time. So, when there are more young women in the family, there will be more men visiting them, it is the young people's way of socializing, and one has to offer food to the visitors. This proverb also means that it is a waste of food to have many daughters. As daughters are not supposed to stay in her father's house for long and that they have to move out of the house after marriage. Besides, women are always considered weaker and inferior than men, so it means too many mouths to feed.

4. *Nupang ðhanon a khatin a rel rui a pot isat ngai.*

Translation:

A bad woman breaks the rope/strap of her own *Rel*.

Rel is a traditional basket with a lid. It is not like any other kind of basket used for carrying purposes. The main purpose of a *rel* is to store valuable items like money, traditional garments and ornaments. *Rel* is the most important item a woman takes to her husband's house after marriage. It is a marriage gift from her parents and has a close connection with marriage. So breaking off her own strap of *rel* means breaking off her own marriage or behaving in manners that will be harmful to her relationship with her husband. A married woman has expected rules and behaviour she needs to follow and if she cannot follow those rules and does not behave in a manner as expected of her, she is considered as a bad woman and thus cutting or breaking off her own strap of *rel*.

5. *Nupang ruichimbuk ði no roh.*

Translation:

Never be afraid of woman's *ruichimbuk*.

Ruichimbuk is a tree covered by a tangled creeper. *Ruichimbuk* or tangled creeper here is compared to a bad-temper woman. This proverb implies that one should not be afraid of woman's anger or that a husband should never be afraid of his wife's anger. This is another way of indicating how man degrades woman in the Biate culture. When a wife gets angry, no matter what the reason is, the husband never pays any attention but ignores her and labels her as *nupang ðongtam* meaning 'a talkative woman'.

6. *Nupang nei intam neh fatun inei voika in inlum but.*

Translation:

Having many girl child and barley keeps the home warm only for a short period.

Rice is the main and staple food for the Biate and barley is cultivated for additional food but is never considered as the main food. So when any family harvested barley in large amount, it is still not counted as good harvest as it is not going to suffice the family's food consumption for long. The same way, having many daughters will only warm the house for a short period as they will be moving out of the house when they are married. Their absence will only bring feelings of loneliness and boredom to the parents. The warmth they once brought to their parents' house was not shifted to somebody's house, leaving their natal house cold and dim.

7. *Nupang inmûr in inchin.*

Translation:

A moody woman crumbled her home.

As discussed earlier, in Biate cultural practice, a married woman has certain norms or rules of behaviour she has to abide by. Being moody is one attitude she is supposed to avoid at all cost. Being moody means someone who does not talk very often, and a woman who does not talk often is regarded as an impolite person. Being the wife and the mother of the family, a woman is expected to be polite and welcoming at all times. The Biates believe that when a family does not have many visitors, it means the mother or the wife is not good and is not welcoming. In such cases the woman is said to have crumbled her own home by distancing her family from the village folk with her rude and impolite behaviour.

8. *Nupang roi riat, vok kong dong.*

Translation:

A woman's knowledge of law, a pig's short path.

A pig's path is short with abrupt ending and its sty is usually made near a house and pig does not wander far from its sty. Its path is not considered a real path for anyone to trail. In the Biate society, a woman's place is confined only to her home, family and domestic works. Women never sit and participate in the *devan*, the village durbar, interfering with the law. Men, on the other hand, are the custodian of the law. So the proverb means, when a woman has any suggestion to offer to the law makers of the village or tries to interfere with the law, she is asked to remain quiet as her knowledge with the law is as limited and as short as the pig's path.

9. *Nupang tongim kita.*

Translation:

It is just the word of a woman.

This is not a proverb in the strict sense but a phrase which is usually used in matters of decision making or in discussion of some important matters. Women are never permitted to participate in discussions related to important matters and when someone recalls or repeats an idea or suggestion given by a woman, the council will disagree simply based on the fact that the suggestion was from a woman. Like some of the other previous proverbs and phrases, this phrase also shows how woman's knowledge is devalued just because she is a woman.

10. *Nupang neh bara a ngul ining tak.*

Translation:

A woman and *bara* that has shaken its root.

Bara is a type of yam or tuber cultivated by the Biates. This *bara* grows better and bigger if a post is erected on the soil for its plant to creep upon but once the post has been shaken and no longer firm and strong enough, the plant stops growing. In the same way, if a girl is not given proper care regarding her wellbeing, she will not grow up in the way she is supposed to be. In this proverb we can see that a woman has certain restrictions and norms imposed by the society for her to obey and follow.

CONCLUSION

The proverbial sayings of the Biates indicate that there has been the same age-old bias against the woman, reinforced by the very oral tradition that they are tasked with passing on from generation to generation. These sayings come sanctioned with the seal of tradition, and purport to represent a sacred collective wisdom of the community that has withstood the test of time. Thus it makes it hard to challenge the views and values that they carry, even when faced with their blatant misogyny and power imbalance that they reinforce among the community. In fact, over the course of time, it could be seen that in a shocking number of cases, it was the women who were more adamant about maintaining the status quo, such has been the depth that these repressive gender-roles have taken root. The very resilience of proverbs, which make them such an effective vessel for communicating the ethos and values of a people, now stands as an obstacle that no amount of education can surmount. The stereotype of women as the doer of domestic chores, looking after families, children, and these notions of gender-role still has a profound effect in the mind of the Biate women. The performance of additional domestic chores may have lowered women's status because women who stay home are not in the public view and lack the opportunities to form social ties necessary for high-status positions. They lack opportunities to demonstrate to others that they have the qualities necessary for leadership roles and political status". Coming out of this stereotype is

still a challenge in the present day situation. Finally, it would be fair to say that it is difficult to see how women will ever have the same opportunities in any other important sphere if equality at home is not achieved and as long as these out-dated values still persist, much like a rusty anchor too weighty for its ship, they will continue to prevent the Biate people and their society from ever moving forward.

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