



# Gender Dynamics Of Inheritance Among The Bodo Community: Quest For Sustainable Development

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## ABSTRACT

Studies of gender and its relations to resources, cultural and environmental milieu has been an important theme in the social and cultural Geography. Bodos have patriarchal society which guide social norms and cultural conditions that have resulted into a distinct subordination of relationship on the basis of gender among the Bodos. This is reflected in the heritage of property between the male and female members in the family or in the community. Heritage of property by Bodo women is confined within tangible material goods like handloom items, share in agricultural products, dresses, gold-silver ornaments, domestic animals, etc. Bodo women are deprived of attaining the intangible and valuable properties like quality higher education, land ownership, right and freedom to economic activities, right and liberty for political standouts. Such practices of the society is an outcome of patriarchy and acceptance of women as paraya dhan i.e. (else's property) leading to gender disparity and poverty in the community as a whole. Overall sustainable development can only prevail in a community if the women are privileged to equally participate in the dynamics of property inheritance.

**KEYWORDS:** Gender, Property, Rights, Bodo, Community.

## INTRODUCTION

The study of culture, community, society, diversity and pluralism has been an indispensable part of Geographical study under Human Geography as a sub branch of Social and Cultural Geography. Geography deals with the resource management, distribution and also the ownership since the time immemorial. In many part of the world such resource management and distribution based on gender and sectarian identity has been questioned in the modern feminist discourses. Feminist geography is a relatively recent discourse in human geography. Feminist academic interventions in the 1960s and 1970s, it has involved a critique of geography as a discipline with particular bodies of knowledge and set of research field, institutional, and teaching practices and its reconceptualisation (Johnson, 2009). The paper is confined within the Social-Cultural Geography and Gender Geographies. The history of women in India unlike rest of the world is not different with regards to the gender inequality that exists in the society. As gender is socially constructed the idea of gender difference and inequality based on gender is the product of its own society.

India has a patriarchal society in general but in minority, matrilineal society also exists in certain communities. In a patriarchal society men have a dominant role in almost all the aspects in family and in all public affairs whereas, women are considered to be more often emotional or illogical enough to handle any of such responsibilities. Therefore, women are denied to be given any such role in the family or in society but subordinate to men.

India is diverse so as its diverse in the social structure and construction that vary from place to place and region to region. The issue around the woman and land in one region differs from the other region. These differences are mainly due to the resource availability based on which the social, cultural, economic, and political as well as the religious structure is fully depended and constructed.

The North-Eastern region of India is mainly accompanied by the different tribal communities and groups as well as sub-groups. Tribal region and the communities have a different notion of resource availability and utilisation. Despite of having patriarchy amongst the tribes, it is considered that gender discrimination is perhaps comparatively less. Both the gender has the equal share of work and responsibility in their own way based on their respective speciality. Tribal societies are also like other societies in which the geographic location and climatic condition plays a vital role in constructing and moulding the society. But one is also not ignorant of the fact that, despite of the claims of having gender equality in the tribal societies, the question always arises of its existence and functioning in reality.

In terms of woman and land rights and ownership in the Bodo community, patriarchy determines the whole issue in relation to land rights and its related resources. On a closer look the patriarchal system and Hindu law go side by side influencing the Bodos' social set up ultimately determining the position of Bodo women and their land rights too. The entire system of land rights and the property ownership among the Bodo community has not been through proper study in details because all this land systems are directly or indirectly associated with the power relations. Among Bodos the property share,

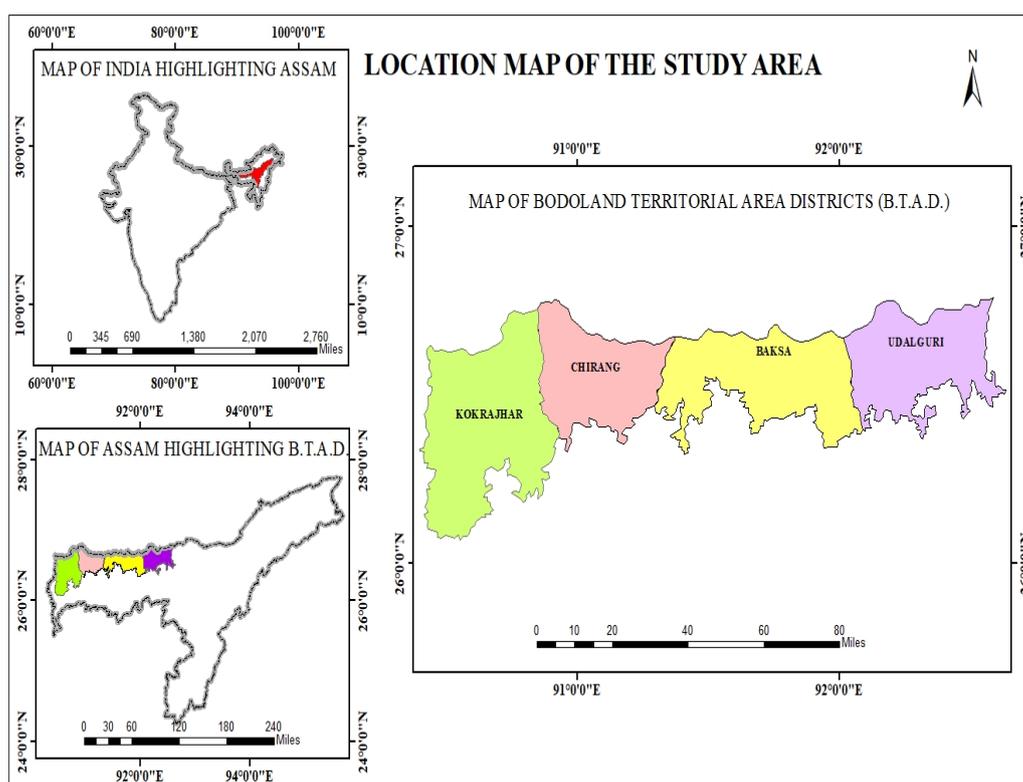
ownership and distribution system has been based on the consent of both the genders as well as the families with proper discussion and suggestions of the elderly persons of the society in a village or locality. Thus, the issue of land right or the cries of the woman almost remain silent and might be sometimes unheard by the society because of the power relations.

Though the present day scenario is not as bad as a few decades back and many emerging voices and legal sanctions are being made for the protection of women's rights, the traditionalism in Indian society has not changed much. Though India is a signatory to many UN declarations such as Universal Declaration of Human Rights, (UDHR) 1948, the Convention of Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) etc. Indian women continue to be marginalised, discriminated and violated within their own society and in the larger national context as well.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS:

### SELECTION OF THE STUDY AREA

The paper covers the four districts of Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (B.T.A.D.) of Assam namely Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, and Udalguri comprising the total area of around 8822 sq.km. The coordinates extend between 26°7'12"N to 26°47'50"N Latitude and 89°47'40"E to 92°18'30"E Longitude, has been selected as the area of study. The total population of the four districts is 31, 38,805 (2011, Census). The above mentioned area has been selected on the basis of having highest concentration of Bodo population.



Map no.1 Location map of the study area.

## Objectives of the study

1. To study about the Bodo community and their socio-cultural practices.
2. To know about the status of women and property inheritance in the community.
3. To highlight the traditional and modern methods of property inheritance among the women in the community.

## Methodology of the study

In the preparation of this paper, both the primary and secondary sources of data have been utilised. Primary data used in the form of observation and interview with the Bodo women from the study area. Images have been collected from the field. Secondary data in the form of literature and study materials such as book, journal, government data and official record has been used for the study.

## BODO AS A TRIBAL COMMUNITY AND THEIR SOCIAL PRACTISES

Bodos are the ethnic, linguistic and the largest sub branch community of the Kachari Group and is a dominant as well as indigenous tribal group of the northern valleys of the mighty river Brahmaputra in Assam. Like many other communities, Bodos also have their oral history in the form of folklores, stories of kings and kingdoms as well as the warrior history. Although the ancestral travel history of Bodos do not have any written record.

Bodos are predominantly the followers of animism unlike the other tribal communities. The Bodos traditionally practise 'Bathou' which is the belief in the five elements of nature and those are air, water, fire, sky and land. The term Bathou has been derived from two Bodo words 'Ba' which means 'Five' and 'Thou' which means 'Deep'. Apart from that, another deity known as 'Bwiswmuti' the 'Goddess of Land' is also worshiped immensely among Bodo people. As the Goddess of Land is a female, thus in the Bodo community women of all ages plays a very significant role in their own way.

As Bodos belongs to the tribal community, they have a close and intimate relation with their land. Stating from cultural, society, religion as well as economy is also associated with land. Apart from the religious and cultural attachments of the community with land, the politico-historic relationship between land and the Bodos are worth mentioning. Bodos are regarded as the "Son of the Soil" as they were considered to be the first settler in the mighty Brahmaputra Valley.

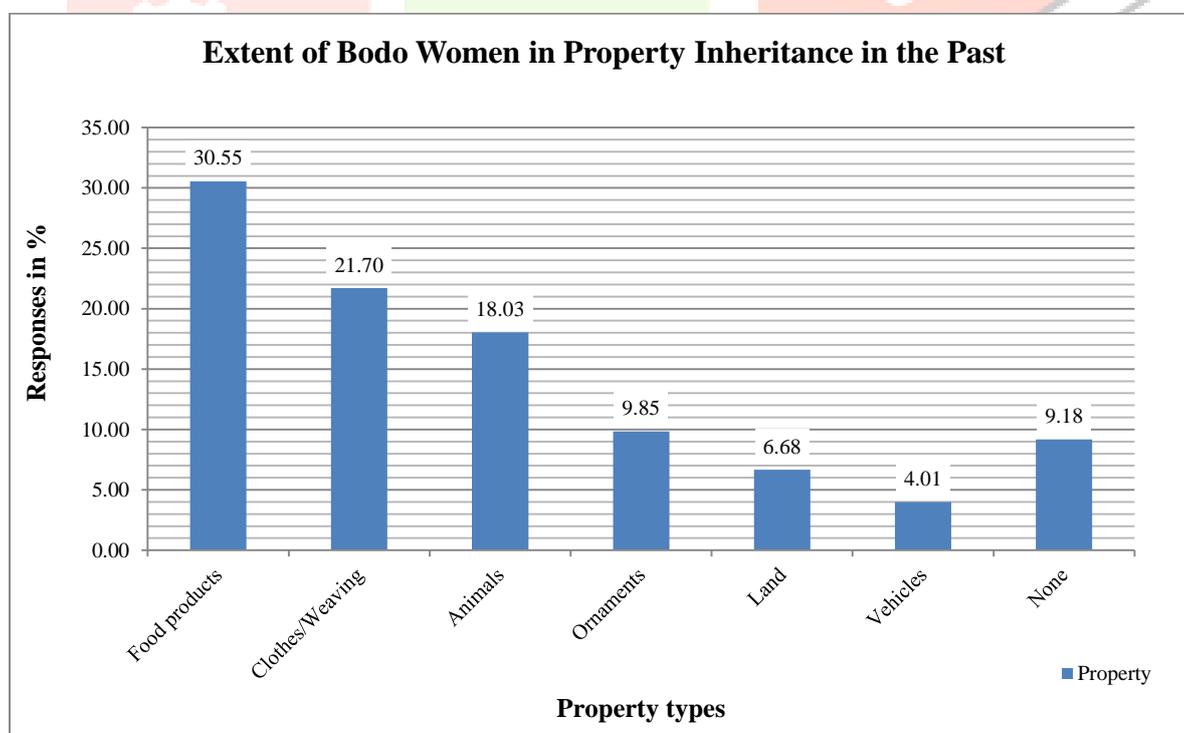
Unlike other communities Bodos also follows the patriarchal society with the tribal believes of inclination towards woman. Woman in Bodo community are treated as resourceful and valuable as man in the society. Despite of having a patriarchal society, Bodo woman plays a vital role in almost all the

activities starting from the religious, cultural, social, agriculture and partially property and land rights. But patriarchy and equality are the two different corners which cannot go hand in hand.

## BODO AND THEIR PROPERTY INHERITANCE SYSTEM

Heritage of property by Bodo women is confined within tangible material goods like handloom items, share in agricultural products, dresses, gold-silver ornaments, domesticated animals, etc. Here tangible means perishable items, which currently might have value in the market, but the valuation of those items reduces with time. Bodo women are deprived of attaining the intangible and valuable properties like quality education, land ownership, right and freedom to economic activities, right and liberty for political standouts. Such practices of the society is an outcome of patriarchy and acceptance of women as paraya dhan i.e. (else's property) leading to gender disparity and poverty of the community as a whole.

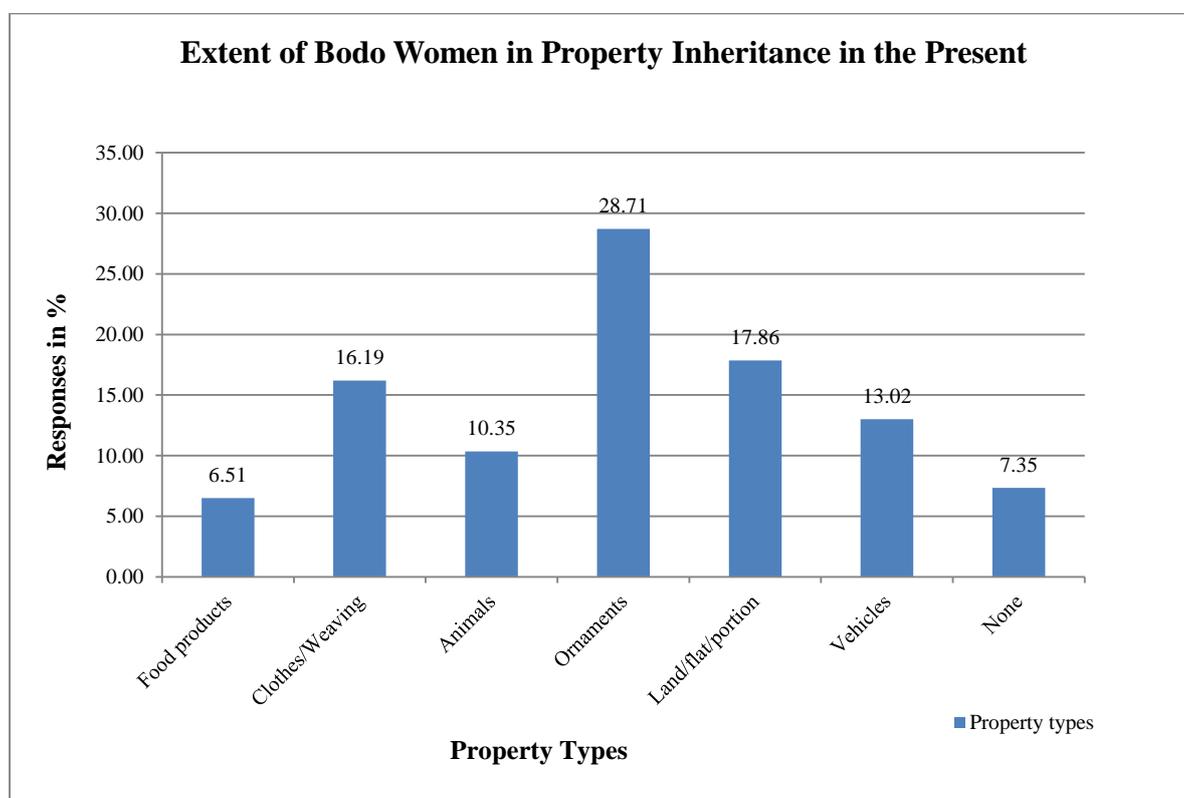
The past history of the Bodo women and their extent of rights were confined only till her own life and periphery. The daughters had no such share in the parental property in the earlier days. The responsible reason could be the large family size and less land to share among the sons. Thus, the daughters are always been left out because they were considered as the other's property dweller.



**Figure No.1. Bar graph showing the extent of Bodo women in traditional property inheritance.**

**Source: Field Survey from the study area.**

The above graph basically shows the responses of the women from the study area in terms of Bodo women's extend to property inheritance in the community in the past. Bodo being a tribal community, its main intension is to be self sufficient to be able to run the family during unsuitable condition. The community used to concentrate more in the context of attaining basic things for livelihood such as food, shelter and clothing, thus, from the above bar diagram, the trend of women being given the food products counts the highest followed by weaving tools, animal items and products such as ornaments, vehicles, land etc. The shares of food items, weaving tools and clothes as well as animals were more because the community wanted the females to be able to run the family during crisis. Moreover, the percentage of these products as considered as property for women reduced gradually with time. Such a decrease is due to the influence from other community and requirements for the fulfilment of current period of time.



**Figure**

**No.2. Bar graph showing the extent of Bodo women in traditional property inheritance.**

**Source: Field Survey from the study area.**

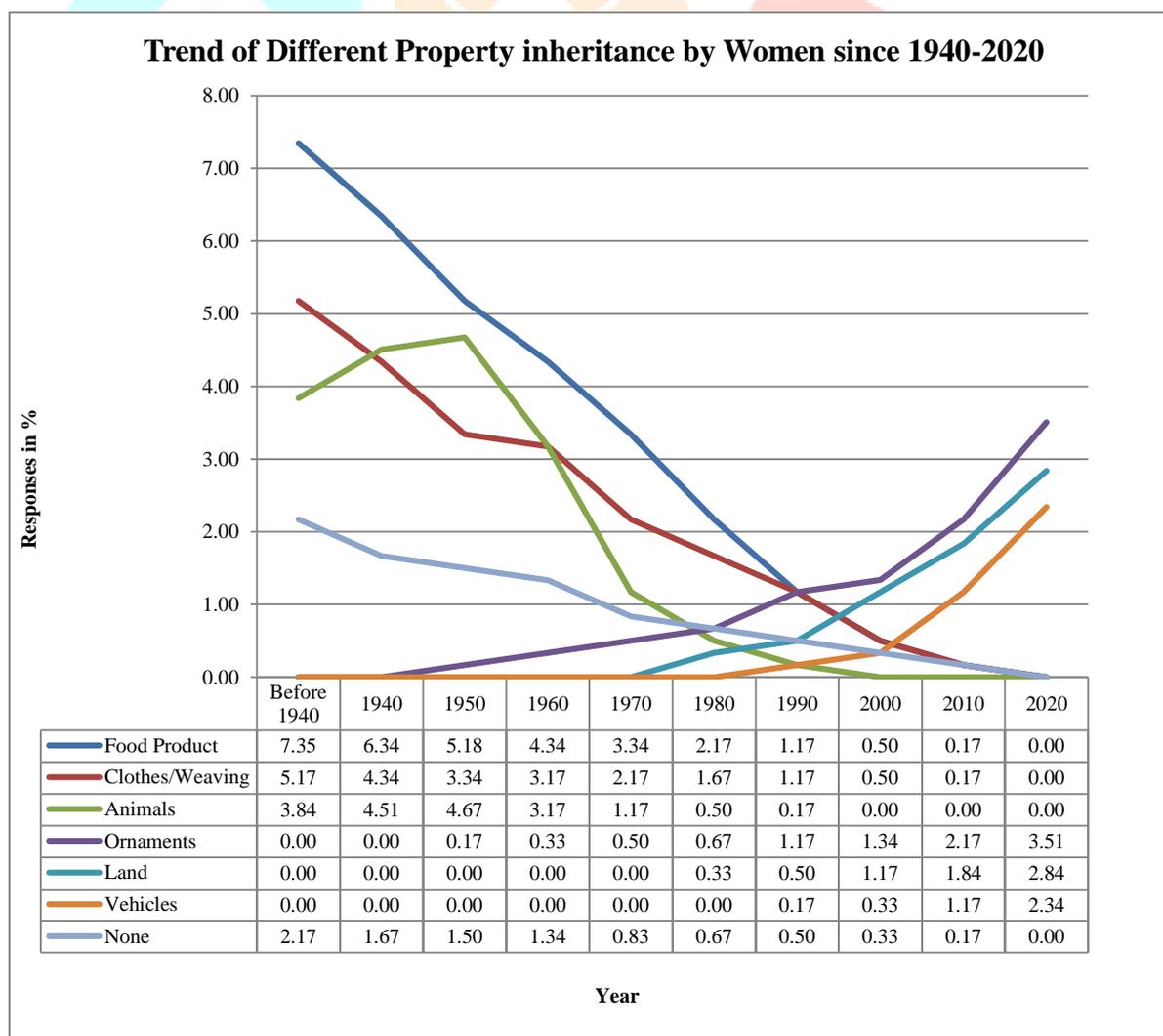
The above graph shows the extent and change in the property inheritance of women in the present day. There is a significant change and decrease in the percentage of food items, weaving tools and clothes, animals. Whereas, on the other hand, there is a gradual increase in the percentage share of vehicles, land/flat/portion of land or flat and lastly ornaments. This shift from non-materialistic to materialistic good is due to the requirement and nature of investment of those goods for future and influence from other community as well. Whereas, the sufficient number of responses has still agrees that women are given the weaving tools and clothes as property. The possible reason could be the skills the Bodo women have through their descending as legacies which they still practise.

## TRANSFORMATION FROM PAST TILL PRESENT

In the past no land was given to the women. Presently, occurred land is given but inherent legacy based property (land) is not given which is passing down from generations. In certain cases, when the women claim for the traditional land, it is given. Although the decision is solely taken by the male member of the family such as father, brother, uncle, husband and sometimes son as well.

In the cases of widowed women with wards or not, the land portion of the husband after his death is suppose to be given or not to the women is also solely depending upon the behaviour of the women. It is still in practise since the past. Just in the present day context, the transformation is that suggestion and options are given to the women if she wants to claim it or not. Here again the irony is that the suggestion and option is pre-determined by the patriarchal norms hidden behind the curtains of conditions.

In the towns and cities, as the price of land is costly even if it is an owned land instead of inherent, only through oral promises rooms or portion of building/house is given to the daughter based on her behaviour, but no documentation is generally prepared. The price of the land is increasing every bit but the value of the land is reducing very rapidly.



**Figure No. 3. Line graph showing the trend of change in different property inheritance by Bodo women since 1940 till 2020:**

**Source: Field survey from the study area.**

The above line graph shows the trend of property extend of Bodo women. The line graph has been prepared from the women responses from the field survey. Here the female responses have been given more emphasis. Since 1940 to 1970 the food products, clothes or weaving tools and animals were the only property given to women. It was because of lack of resource availability, lack of requirement and interest of women they were limited to these items. On the other hand, looking into the context of property rights the women were considered as incapable of handling the land related issues. Thus, they were not given the land rights.

Since 1980 to 2020 the trend is drastically changing and is still changing in terms of property ownership among women. The percentage of is increasing in the properties such as ornaments, vehicles, land or portion of flat and on the other hand, there is a decrease in the percentage of food products, animal, weaving items. This change is due to the ideas of investment in property learned from other surrounding communities. This influence of investing in non-perishable and valuable items has given a new dimension to the property inheritance system among the women. Now the women are also becoming more confident in dealing with the situations instead of depending on male members of the family. These changes in the trend are predominant in the urban areas more than the villages.

The major portion of the period during 1940 till 1970 the women were confined to certain limitations. Here the responsible reason could be the education. Due to the lack of education among the people of community the transformation took a little more time than expected. The education is affected badly is due to the political unrest condition in the area during that period. The freedom fights of the community against the arm forces to attain a free state for Bodo population, has impacted largely in the quality of education both for men and women in the entire community.

After 1980's the trend of property inheritance has changed. Here the improved level of education has played a vital role. It has helped in settling the political unrest situation in the community to a certain extend. Education has increased the chances of changes in the traditional practices and providing the scope to avail land right among the Bodo women based on her qualities instead of her behaviours.

**FACTORS FOR NOT CLAIMING THE PATERNAL PROPERTY**

- 1) Lack of awareness of human right and to claim their equal rights by women based upon the law implemented by the Supreme Court.
- 2) Lack of adequate higher education facilities for women, by which they are stagnant within the traditional norms.
- 3) Consideration of women as 'Paraya Dhan' (in Hindi), 'Malai' (in Bodo) i.e. 'else's property' by the society and acceptance of the same by the women.

## CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN WHILE CLAIMING PROPERTY

Women consider themselves as mother and relate herself with selfless nature. This leads to taking women as a religious, cultural and social material and the question of being eligible for liberty in economic activities, political freedom and decision making. Apart from that, women herself becomes a threat for the other women in the society. If they don't follow the societal norms and rules set by men and claims land and other material, they are considered as selfish.

## ATTAINING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE COMMUNITY

The quest for attaining sustainable development in the community is evident through the transformation made in the property inheritance. The rate of transformation is found to be lesser than expected. It is only through giving equal share of understanding, respect, freedom of economic activities, political activities and decision making attainment of sustainable development is possible. If the required facilities are not addressed and tackled on time, then the future of the community will be at risk. The hidden strategies of imposition of pre-determined decisions of male upon female must be taken care of. The situation of similar claims from men will be no far to witness if the balance is not maintained for the overall development of the community.

## CONCLUSION

The paper intends to highlight the prevailing traditional practices within the patriarchal systems in which women finds their position in the margin and often deprived of the basic rights. Constituting into poverty, deprivation and preventing them to explore all the potential for overall attainment of sustainable development.

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