

## THE MYTH OF AN EGALITARIAN SOCIETY: TRACING THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE MATRIARCHAL SOCIETY OF MEGHALAYA

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### **Abstract**

A clear understanding of the term “matriarchal state” is essential to examine and understand the status of women in the matriarchal state of Meghalaya. In simple words, matriarchal system can be understood as a system contrary to the patriarchal system where men are considered as the primary actors in undertaking responsibilities for the family, the community as a whole and also bear solely the responsibility in the public sphere. So justifying the contrasting characteristics of a matriarchal system vis- a vis the patriarchal system, it can be understood that matriarchal system is a system whereby it is the women folk who take charge of all the activities both in the private and the public sphere. An attempt would be made in the paper to locate and examine the status of women in Meghalaya based on such understanding of a “matriarchal state.”

This paper would attempt to challenge the “assumed reality” of the matriarchal state Meghalaya by raising certain questions, as to whether matrilineal meant just the “descent and inheritance traced through the female line?” Whether the rights given to the women in Meghalaya are merely customary or commanding? Can a matriarchal society be considered as an egalitarian society?

It has often been said that the Meghalaya state is a ‘matrilineal state with a patriarchal mindset’ because rights and priority given to women in taking decisions on family matters and non-existence of dowry system or non-existence of female infanticide merely does not go further to justify the “egalitarianism” presumed to exist in the state. What needs to be analyzed is that to

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what degree and extent the women folk in Meghalaya enjoy freedom in the decision-making process, as not much women are found either in the mainstream political sphere or in the Village councils known as “dorbar.” While women in the rest of the country have long got the right of 33 per cent representation in the Panchayats (local self governance), women in Meghalaya have only recently woken up to the need to seek representation in such middle-level political institutions as the district councils.

This paper would focus on the harsh reality of a matrilineal state as a “double edged sword” when it comes to the women folk, for women in the state are often not paid much attention as it is assumed that women in the state enjoy too much rights and power and so no special effort is needed to ensure their rights. Infact, the women's organisations have been demanding the setting up of a State Women's Commission to tackle the problems faced by women in the state. This demand has, however, not been taken seriously by state authorities who are overwhelmingly male. The standard reaction to a demand for mechanisms to protect women's rights is that "in matrilineal communities it is men who need protection as women control everything".

The state also has the dubious distinction of having a high rate of domestic violence, according to North East Network, a women's rights organisation based in Shillong even the National Family Health Survey published by the Government of India reveals that Meghalaya has the highest levels of domestic violence among Northeast states. Such vulnerability of the women folk even in a matrilineal state elucidates the gender based insecurities that persists under the canopy of a matrilineal state. Thus, an attempt would be made to question the assumption of Meghalaya being “the only state that is holding a flame, a beacon of hope by putting the weaker sex on a strong pedestal of society.”

**Key words: matriarchal, women, rights.**

Meghalaya is a small state located in the northeastern part of India. The total population of the state according to 2011 Census is 29,64,007, of whom about 86% is tribal, and about 70% of them follow Christian religion. It is a state with the largest proportion of population following matrilineal system.<sup>1</sup>

The attempt towards understanding and analyzing the reality of a matriarchal society vis- a- vis the status of women in the matriarchal society of Meghalaya would in the first place demand for the understanding of the term “matriarchal<sup>2</sup> system”. In simple words, matriarchal system can be understood as a system contrary to the patriarchal system where men are considered as the primary actors in undertaking responsibilities for the family, the community as a whole and also bear solely the responsibility in the public sphere. So justifying the contrasting characteristics of a matriarchal system vis- a vis the patriarchal system, it can be understood that matriarchal system is a system whereby it is the women folk who take full charge of “all activities relating to allocation, exchange and production, as well as socio-cultural and political power...”<sup>3</sup>

It has often been said that the Meghalaya is a ‘matrilineal<sup>4</sup> state with a patriarchal mindset’ because rights and priority given to women in taking decisions on family matters and non-existence of dowry system or non-existence of female infanticide merely does not go further to justify the “egalitarianism” presumed to exist in the state. Infact, one of the gender activist Patricia Mukhim said that, the Meghalaya women mostly were of the view that ‘Meghalaya’ is a well placed society where women enjoy freedom of movement and they are definitely in a better position when they are given the space and the position in the family to decide something within the family. It is here that Patricia Mukhim raises a very important question about the non-existence of the political and social space for women and so she expresses her skepticism about

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<sup>1</sup> Narzary, Pralip Kumar and Shilpi Mishra Sharma (2013), “Daughter Preference and Contraceptive Use- in Matrilineal Tribal Societies in Meghalaya, India”, *Journal of Health Population and Nutrition*, 31(2): 278- 289.

<sup>2</sup> a postulated gynocentric form of society, in which power is with the women and especially with the mothers of a community.

<sup>3</sup> <http://nitawriter.wordpress.com/2008/03/19/meghalaya> and kerala status of women

<sup>4</sup> a system in which one belongs to one's mother's lineage, where children are identified in terms of their mother rather than their father, and extended families and tribal alliances form along female blood-lines.

the “empowerment” of women in the state as there is limited women representation in the Village Councils called “dorbar.”<sup>5</sup>

Three basic elements of matriliney which exist in the present-day matrilineal societies are descent through mother (family name through mother), matrilocal residence system (husband lives in wife's residence), and inheritance of parental property by daughter. All of these three characteristics are strongly prevalent among the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia tribes in Meghalaya, qualifying to be matrilineal societies.<sup>6</sup>

Khasi- Jaintia tribe: For many years the inhabitants of Khasi and Jaintia hills of Meghalaya were broadly called Khasis. The term Khasi is believed to have been derived from the term *Ka Shi* meaning the first women of the society.<sup>7</sup>

The Jaintia tribe is also known as Pnar or Synteg. They are the original inhabitants of the Jaintia hill district of Meghalaya .They are the sub tribes of Khasi tribe but since they reside in the Jaintia hills, they have been named as Jaintia tribe.<sup>8</sup>

In 1914 Gurdon described the social customs of the Khasi tribe as ‘matriarchy or matriliney,’ though the term was used to describe the nature of residence after marriage. The Khasi tribe as such has matrilocal pattern of residence after marriage and descent through female line, that is,

<sup>5</sup> Duncan, Mc Duie (2007), “The Constraints on Civil Society beyond the State: Gender-based Insecurity in Meghalaya, India”, p.364

<sup>6</sup> Narzary, Pralip Kumar and Shilpi Mishra Sharma (2013), “Daughter Preference and Contraceptive Use in Matrilineal Tribal Societies in Meghalaya, India”, *Journal of Health Population and Nutrition*, 31(2): 278- 289.

<sup>7</sup> Duncan, McDuie (2007), “The Constraints on Civil Society beyond the State: Gender-based Insecurity in Meghalaya, India”, p.370

<sup>7</sup> Sen, Soumen (2004), *Khasi- Jaintia Folklore: context, discourse and history*, Chennai: National Folklore Support Centre.

<sup>8</sup><http://www.meghalayaonline.in/about/Profile/Society/Tribes.html#sthash.vXBKVG6z.dpuf>

matrilineal descent coupled with inheritance of the family property by the females of the family. In other words, it is the youngest daughter known as Ka Khadduh takes up all the responsibilities of the family and also inherits the family property.<sup>9</sup>

The status of women in such matrilineal tribe can be understood to be that of an elevated one, with women playing an important role in the affairs of the family. In the words of Kyndiah (1990), Khasi women enjoy 'special place of status and dignity.'

It has been observed that the traditional family set up of the Khasi tribe has undergone changes due to several factors like the spread of Christianity, which led to the spread of education which in turn led to the change in the perception of men of the Khasi tribe. The men then developed the desire to set up a separate household unlike the one in the matrilineal residential set up, where men after marriage were to stay in their wife's house.<sup>10</sup>

Besides, this the interaction of the Khasi tribe with the neighbouring cultures, influenced their culture as well. Many belonging to the tribe, having gone out of their homes to seek education and employment, interacted with other cultures, predominantly patriarchal culture. Such interaction as such brought with them different norms and values of other cultures, thereby altering the traditional culture of their tribe. This could also be attached with the interaction of culture with cross culture marriages.

It has also been said that the economic status of each family tends to affect the matrilineal set up of the society since families with weak economic status unlike that of the rich families cannot afford to sustain so many members in one household, this as such leads to males staying away with their wife after marriage. Besides, in the rural areas unlike that of the urban areas, families do not own large households and so even if daughters have been accorded the right to inherit the family property, but the limitation of the household property does not facilitate the division of property among the daughters<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Das, Madhumita, " Changing Family system along a Matrilineal group in India", *National Family Health Survey-2*.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Das, Madhumita, " Changing Family system along a Matrilineal group in India", *National Family Health Survey-2*.

But it cannot be negated that, the Khasi- Jaintia household is a reflection of female prerogatives and so with its matrilineal culture women seem to be more protected and respected. Moreover women are considered as not just mothers but also as the custodians of religion and property.<sup>12</sup>

Garo tribe: The Garo tribe is one of the major matriarchal tribe of Meghalaya after Khasi- Jaintia tribe. They call themselves as Achik or mande which literally means Hill man. The Garos ethnically belong to the Bodo group and they believe to have belonged to Tibet. With such nature of culture, here too like that of the Khasi tribe exists the system of matrilineality, that is, descent through female line.

In the Garo community, as such it is the youngest daughter known as Nokna who inherits the family property and in case the Nokna is not married then the father tries to get her married off to a man from his own lineage, commonly the son of his own sister. The husband of the youngest daughter is known as Nokrom.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, it has often been debated whether 'matriarchal' and 'matrilineal' meant the same because questions has often been raised that whether matriarchal can be understood as merely the "descent and inheritance traced through the female line?"<sup>14</sup>

Further, it cannot be negated that for women the matriarchal society is no less than a "double edged sword" for women in the state are often not paid much attention as it is assumed that women in the state enjoy too much rights and power and so no special effort is needed to ensure their rights. This as such makes, to some extent the condition of women in the state more precarious than that of their counterparts in patriarchal societies as the women in the Meghalaya face on one hand: the universal discrimination experienced by all women, to which is added the burden of living under the assumption that women control everything.

<sup>12</sup> Sen, Soumen (2004), *Khasi- Jaintia Folklore: context, discourse and history*, Chennai: National Folklore Support Centre.

<sup>13</sup> Sikdar, Mithun (2009), "Continuity and Change in Matrilineal Marriage system: A case study among the Garos of Poschim Bosti, Assam", *Study Tribes Tribals*, 7 (2): 125-130.

Infact, the women's organisations had been demanding for the setting up of a State Women's Commission to tackle the problems faced by women in the state. This demand was not taken seriously by state authorities who are overwhelmingly male until 2004 when the Commission was set up to improve the status of women. The standard reaction then to the demand for mechanisms to protect women's rights was that "in matrilineal communities it is men who need protection as women control everything".<sup>15</sup>

Such a scenario of the state with regard to condition of women has definitely paved way for further 'victimization' of women like for instance in the case of Lakyntiew, a 23-year-old woman in Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, she was sexually assaulted by a gang of six men and left for dead. Somehow she survived and managed to file a First Information Report (FIR) against her assaulters in the local police station. But the brutality of the crime notwithstanding, she and her husband, a daily wage labourer, were "persuaded" by the local tribal village council and the perpetrators of the crime (all moneyed men) to withdraw the FIR in exchange for payment of her medical bills. This is just one of the such cases of violence against women in Meghalaya.

Infact, the state also had, a high rate of domestic violence, according to North East Network, a women's rights organisation based in Shillong.<sup>16</sup> Even the National Family Health Survey published by the Government of India reveals that Meghalaya has one of the highest levels of domestic violence among the Northeastern states. Such vulnerability of the women folk even in a matrilineal society elucidates the gender based insecurities that persists under the canopy of a matrilineal society. Furthermore, a study by the Hyderabad-based National Institute of Nutrition found that Meghalayan mothers were among the most anaemic in the country. This was attributed to an incapacitating lack of awareness and education about the women's health and needs.<sup>17</sup>

As such women in the state, besides being vulnerable to violence, they have been subjected to gross 'disempowerment' with regard to their political rights as women in the rest of the country

<sup>15</sup> <http://indiatogether.org/women/articles/matriliny.htm>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

have since long got the right of 33 percent representation in the Panchayats unlike the women in the Meghalaya who have been striving hard to seek representation in the middle- level political institutions like the District Councils.<sup>18</sup>

The irony of the matriarchal state is such that, the demand for the one- third reservation of women in the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC) was not welcomed irrespective of the matriarchal nature of the state, as the male dominated body GHADC claimed that the women in the matrilineal societies do not require ‘quotas’ since enough rights have been ensured to women within the matrilineal setup.<sup>19</sup>

One of the Shillong based lawyer, O D Vallentine Ladia also was of the view that women in matrilineal societies are entrusted with enormous rights over property and important duties in performing family rites, but the reality was that they did not possess the actual ownership. Justifying it he said, that like for instance, in contrast to men, women do not have the right to dispose off property on their own and women even were not entitled to any kind of maintenance if deserted by their husbands under the matrilineal customary practices.<sup>20</sup>

The mirage of an egalitarian society is well illuminated in the words of Patricia Mukhim, as Meghalaya women being poor and in a worsen condition than the women of the other parts of India, as the marriage system under the canopy of the matriarchal set up is such that the husbands are not bound by any kind of obligation once deserted from their female counterparts. Such a marital set up under the matriarchal society accelerates the pace of drop outs among the childrens with divorced parents since the mother alone is not able to adequately fund the education of her childrens. The other side of the story according to Mukhim, is such that the flexible nature of marriage in Meghalaya has led to the rise in the number of single mothers in the state.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> <http://indiatogether.org/women/articles/matriliny.htm>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Pisharoty, Sangeeta, Barooah (2013), “Faced with Changing Times”, *The Hindu*, New Delhi, 19 February 2013.



Even Phrang Roy<sup>22</sup>, who belongs to the matrilineal Khasi tribe quoting an IFAD study of matrilineal societies across China, Indonesia, the Philippines and India (Meghalaya), said that the Meghalayan matrilineal societies were deteriorating the fastest. He further said that “though men here say that matrilineal society is negatively affecting the man's position, women are losing out faster”. He argued that there was a need for the state to focus on the avenues for initiating measures for the development of women.<sup>23</sup>

The irony of the matrilineal society is evident from the number of rape cases in Meghalaya. In the past decade, [Meghalaya](#) has seen over 800 [rape](#) cases, 500 of which are still pending in various courts. There was a six-fold rise in cases of [rape](#) registered annually in the state between 2001 (26 cases) and 2010 (149 cases). In a state that boasts of women's empowerment — where women inherit property and are seen at the forefront of domestic and public life — 830 [rape](#) cases between 2002 and 2012 definitely goes ahead in breaking the mirage of an egalitarian society in a matriarchal state.<sup>24</sup>

Even Patricia Mukhim, editor of The Shillong Times also was of the view that the matriarchal society is a myth with the accelerating pace and continuity of crimes against women in Meghalaya.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, women in the state are presumed to have free access to education, ownership of property, authority in their family and society yet the reality existed that in Meghalaya the number of families headed by men were more in comparison to the families headed by women. Infact, the families headed by women mostly were such that the women were either widow or separated from their husbands. So a very interesting question has been raised as to whether the status of women in the state is “ascribed or prescribed” by the society.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Phrang Roy is currently the Chairman of North- East Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity Society, Shillong, Meghalaya and Chairman at Meghalaya Water Foundation and former Press

<sup>23</sup> <http://indiatogether.org/women/articles/matriliny.htm>

<sup>24</sup> Choudhury, Ratnadip (2013), “Why is matrilineal Meghalaya indifferent towards rape victims?”, *Tehelka*, New Delhi, 30 March, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> De, Utpal Kumar and Ghosh, Bhola Nath (2007), “Status of Women in the Rural Khasi Society of Meghalaya”, *MPRA*, 2007.

Sen(2004) argues that women enjoy privileged position as mothers but solely as women they are accorded no such privileges. It has also been argued that though men in the matrilineal societies are accorded less privileged position unlike that of women in the household affairs yet they enjoy strong decision making position in their mother's and sisters houses.<sup>27</sup>

So, even though theoretically Meghalaya is known as the matrilineal society, many of the families are headed by the males. The tendency is increasing with the increasing involvement of male in the socio-economic activities, expansion of education, emergence of nuclear families etc. Relatively more females are illiterate than male. Also incidence of poverty is more in case of female headed household. Yet the female better manage the family and give more emphasis on the human development indicators like education, health etc.

But the harsh reality remains that, women in Meghalaya are poorly represented in legislative and administrative bodies in Meghalaya despite the fact that the state has a matrilineal social system. There are hardly any women candidates on the poll list released by political parties in the state. The Congress, which has declared candidates for all 60 constituencies, for the election to be held at the end of this month, has only four women on its rolls. The Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) has two women candidates in its first roll of 40. The BJP's first roll of 29 too has only two women. The present state assembly has just three women MLAs.<sup>28</sup> The 2013 election results led to three women being included in the political sphere : Roshan Wajiri (the first female Home Minister of the state), Deborah C Marak (first women Deputy Chief Minister) and Mazel Ampareen Lyngdoh (urban affairs and municipal administration minister).<sup>29</sup>

As such the high position assumed to have been accorded to women under the matrilineal system has been challenged repeatedly, in the words of Sen (2004) "But do they really enjoy as women any higher or equal status with men?" He validates such questions since women have no decision making authority neither in the household nor in the socio-political power structure. He goes

<sup>27</sup> Sen, Soumen (2004), *Khasi- Jaintia Folklore: context, discourse and history*, Chennai: National Folklore Support Centre.

<sup>20</sup><http://www.infochangeindia.org/women/news/in-matrilineal-meghalaya-women-have-no-say-in-politics.html>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/wajiri-becomes-first-female-home-minister-of-meghalaya/article1-1025654.aspx>

further to questions as to whether the lack of access to power weaken the responsibilities undertaken by women, which then goes further to compromising with women's status and role?

Such a scenario undoubtedly raises several skepticism and challenge to the assumption that Meghalaya is "the only state that is holding a flame, a beacon of hope by putting the weaker sex on a strong pedestal of society." It has also been argued that the matrilineal society is "female oriented but not female dominated". Mere primary position accorded to women under the matrilineal society does not indicate that women dominate in every aspect of family lives.<sup>30</sup>

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