



# Matriliney in a patriarchal mould

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## Summary

The Indian state of Meghalaya has the rare distinction of being a matrilineal society. Shillong, its capital, recently played host to a conference for women journalists from east and north-eastern India organised by Voices, a network for Indian women journalists. This paper is based on findings from the workshop that raised some important issues relating to the status of women in north-eastern India, Meghalaya in particular.

Unlike for most Indian women, women here carry the family lineage. It is the youngest daughter (*khatduh*) that inherits the ancestral and parental property. In fact, very few clans among the Khasis are wealthy enough to distribute their property among all daughters while giving the largest share to the youngest. Not all *khatduh* own property. Some families are too poor to keep body and soul together. The few affluent families that own substantial property do not discriminate between sons and daughters. In fact, the practice has always been to give sons a share of the clan/family property as well. The Khyriem, Kharkongor, Mawrie, and Nongkhlaw clans that own large tracts of land in and around Shillong have always divided the money earned from the sale of land equally among clan members be they men or women, sons or daughters.

Studies on Khasi matriliney have invariably focused on the *khatduh* at the expense of the other daughters in the family. Parents with adequate assets generally give a share of the property to all their daughters, but the biggest share remains with the *khatduh*. This gives her financial liquidity as the custodian of her immediate and extended family (consisting of her brothers' and sisters' children, aunts, uncles, and sundry relatives).

Aside from that, the author points out, the property handed down to the youngest daughter comes with conditions. The *khatduh* has to look after her parents and unmarried brothers, orphaned nieces or nephews, and brothers that have divorced their wives or vice versa. Thus, she is in effect merely the stewardess or custodian of the property, with the maternal uncle the chief executor. Attempts to sell off ancestral property have led to court cases. Every family member has a say, and often it is not based on the most equitable formula. The issue of inheritance is the weakest link in the matrilineal chain, with a propensity to create conflict between individuals in society.

For example, in cases where parents have only one home, the other daughters have to set up their own units after marriage. They live in rented houses until they manage to buy land and build their homes. In Shillong and other district headquarters, where at least one member in every family is a government employee, the government's house-building advance scheme has enabled families to buy land and construct houses. The problem persists, however, for those that live on the fringes of development. Not even 0.01% of those living below the poverty line benefit from government schemes aimed at giving homes to the homeless. Thus, in Meghalaya, the affluent are acquiring more and more land from what had previously belonged to the village and clan. This new class of landowners does not often include women. Matriliney has hardly been the answer to the problem of rising poverty among a large section of the rural population, including women that remain dispossessed and subject to the drudgery of back-breaking labour.

The author argues that the concept of empowerment is often confused with the freedom of mobility. In terms of social mobility, except for the *khatduh*, the women of Meghalaya are largely unhindered. The *khatduh's* responsibility towards her parents forces her to forego opportunities for better educational and employment prospects outside the state or country. Her sisters, however, enjoy full freedom to pursue careers of their choice. But empowerment is not synonymous with mobility and encompasses a wider range of issues that include access to information, the awareness of birth control methods, and the freedom to choose the size of the family. In short, it means enjoying reproductive rights which, presently, are left largely to chance.

The right of lineage also comes with its share of curses. Because of it, when a couple divorce, the children invariably live with their mother. Since cohabitation is not a social taboo, a man can easily abandon his wife without compensating her or paying for the children's maintenance. Even when marriages are legally binding, very few women actually file for maintenance. They are either ignorant of their rights or afraid of the prohibitive legal costs. Ironically, lineage is the very issue that unsettles a man in Khasi society. He feels insecure because of the world's perception of him as a 'breeding bull' and his fear of being dispossessed of the family inheritance. These are two crucial issues for Khasi matriliney today.



Any talk of gender equity in Meghalaya tends to become acrimonious. Women believe they have been deprived of the right to decision-making in the *Dorbar*, the grassroots' Khasi democratic institution. Men contend that women are already empowered because of their right to lineage and ownership of property. Some traditionalists maintain that a woman's place is in the home and that she should stay out of politics and matters outside the home.

A gender war is not what Meghalaya needs, however. What is required is a climate for dialogue between the sexes, a non-threatening space where views can be openly shared without fear of criticism or loss of face. It is time men actively participated in seminars and workshops on gender sensitisation and women's empowerment. As the woman's partner, a man should not only listen but also try and understand the intricacies of reproductive health and share his own views on the matter.

Meghalaya compares favourably only when compared to other states in India. But the situation is rife with contradictions. The state's three major tribes, namely, the Khasis, the Jaintias, and the Garos, practise matriliney but are highly patriarchal in their world-view. At more than one conference where political rights of women were to be discussed, women from Meghalaya ended up saying that the time has not come for them to challenge the well-entrenched tradition of women being kept out of decision-making at the grass roots.

On the one hand, women in Meghalaya fare better than their counterparts in other states. There is no custom of dowry or the practice of child marriage or Sati; and lineage is vested in the mother. On the other hand, although the youngest daughter is the sole inheritor of her parents' property, she is essentially, merely, the custodian of ancestral property, since it cannot be sold without the concurrence of her maternal uncles. Besides, she has to look after her aged parents, her orphaned nieces and nephews, and her divorced or bachelor brothers. She must carry out the last funerary rites of her parents which, before the advent of Christianity, entailed considerable expenditure.

The absence of child marriage in itself is also no consolation because teenage pregnancies are rampant, particularly in rural Meghalaya. Reproductive rights are a taboo subject for Roman Catholics. The size of the family becomes a hindrance to the woman. Her mobility is largely restricted and poverty multiplied many times over. The children are unable to go to school as they are made to look after their younger siblings.

Another malaise is the high rate of divorce leading to broken homes. The mother is usually the single parent. A rough estimate would put the number of households with single mothers at about 10% of all households in East and West Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills. More often than not, the man has no

financial responsibility or emotional attachment to the child. This phenomenon has given birth to severely disjointed families and a dysfunctional society.

Women in matrilineal societies also suffer domestic and sexual violence as do their counterparts in the rest of the country. Cases of women being assaulted by their husbands are on the rise. What is heartening is that women have begun to speak about these problems with their peers. There still is a silent group that does not complain because they are ashamed and feel that it is a private affair. Consequently, in the cases of domestic violence, rapes against girl-children are on the rise. Surprisingly, society has been rather blasé in its reaction to rape in recent times and has left it to the law to take its course. This is curious as in the past rape was considered a heinous crime that deserved the severest punishment; that might have been a more effective deterrent. Today, traditional institutions simply let the law take its course. This is one reason why rapists get away with a light punishment or go scot-free. Something lasting and effective needs to be done to contain this evil.

## Conclusion

The author reiterates that the fight for women's rights in Meghalaya must not be construed as a gender war. Women demand better health and reproductive rights. They should have as much say as the husband to decide the size of the family. Statistics in India today estimate that one mother dies of childbirth every five minutes, and India accounts for one in five of all maternal deaths around the globe. As many as 52% of women in India do not make decisions regarding their own health care. The statistics include Meghalaya where women regard their children's and husband's health as a priority and their own health the least important. With health care a distant dream in rural Meghalaya and family planning an alien concept, it will take some time for women to assert their reproductive rights.

Interestingly, while there have been strident demands for more power (and direct central funding) for traditional institutions such as the *Dorbar* and *Syiemship* (chieftainship), and several representations have been made to the Constitution Review Committee (CRC), the question of women's participation in these institutions has often been ignored. The *Dorbar* is not a sacrosanct citadel that cannot change with time, however. The acceptance of the demands of traditional bodies by the Central Government must come with the rider that women be equally represented in those *Dorbars*. Failing that, the Centre will also be endorsing and reinforcing the age-old bias against women in a matriliney.

