

A woman's world - Meghalaya, India; matrilineal culture

by Thomas Laird

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Concerned citizens gathered recently in a public hall, in Shillong, capital of the Indian state of Meghalaya, to discuss women's rights. The program was organized by the Sam Kam Rin Ku Mai (Societal Restructuring Association). As in other parts of India and Asia, both men and women want to change traditions that have been in existence for thousands of years, but which are now seen as sources of social discrimination.

Yet the battle is not about gaining women's rights, but about diminishing them. The native people of Meghalaya are part of the world's largest surviving matrilineal culture. Some men of Meghalaya feel oppressed by what they now see as a female-dominated society. Outside influences and education have made them realize that they do not have the "natural rights" of their brethren throughout most of the patrilineal world. Eighteen-year-old Anthony Musonbri speaks emotionally about his fate in this "women's world":

"If I marry and go to my wife's house, I have to be under her control and under the control of her mother, all because I am living in her house. I am a servant really -- just a breeding bull."

FOR ANYONE BORN into a patrilineal society, and particularly for a male, it is a revealing experience to witness life in Meghalaya. The fundamental assumptions built into 90 percent of the world's cultures are reversed. In the rest of South Asia, women are ruthlessly exploited. One social worker in Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, put it succinctly: "The law is against us. Men have the full weight of the culture and law behind them, and it leaves the women no rights or ways to find justice. One hundred thousand Nepalese women have been sold off into prostitution in India, where they are nearly slaves. Here, we don't inherit, and we are often sold off to marriages we do not want. We are used as breeding cows by the men."

Since this is the norm in South Asia, it is ironic to hear Meghalayan men complain of their problems. J.D. Lyngdoh, vice president of the Societal Restructuring Association, sounds like a European or American woman activist circa 1960 when he talks of male problems in Meghalaya today.

"We have become like tools for the women. It makes you feel so insecure: everything always belongs to the wife's house. If you don't please her, don't work hard enough, any little thing, then -- after six months, or seven children -- you are through."

Shillong is still somewhat isolated. But videos and satellite TV have brought the relatively affluent tribal people of the region into full intellectual contact with the rest of the world. What has caused more changes, though, is the fact that since 1960, vast numbers of Indians from the plains of Bengal have moved into North Eastern India.

Yet the indigenous Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes have retained much of their ancient culture. These cousin societies have maintained the matrilineal tradition for thousands of years. Although historical evidence is limited, it appears that the Garo and Jaintia tribes migrated from Tibet, and the Khasi tribe from the Khmer areas of Southeast Asia. In these traditional societies the men have always been traders and warriors and the women have stayed home.

KHASI WOMEN explain that "because the men were gone for long periods of time, property passed down through the female line, from mother to daughter." And even though men retained political power -- in the form of tribal monarchies and clan councils -- rights to all power passed from mother to daughter, not from father to son. Although 80 percent of the tribal population is Christian, these old traditions still pervade Meghalayan society.

As everywhere, the language reflects basic cultural assumptions. The Khasi believe the female is the giver of all life, the root of all things. All nouns take a gender form, as with many European languages. An inanimate object is masculine until it is put to use. The word for tree is masculine, but when the wood is transformed into any building material, the noun becomes feminine. Likewise, the word for a rock is masculine only when it is not cut and used. So it is with all nouns: something useful is feminine; something unshaped, crude and natural, is male.

Although the women do not seek leadership in either politics or religion -- the Khasi have never had queens, only kings, and all priests are male -- land power, name, and social rank are passed on from mothers to daughters. Even before the British colonial conquest, kings did not pass power on to their sons. The monarchs were men but the rights to monarchy passed down through the king's youngest sister: so a king could not make his son king: only his sister's son could be king. This forced kings to consult privately with their sisters, just as Khasi men and women control political power today. Men consult their wives before voting in public forums, and the women agree to stay at home when the votes are cast.

Matrilineal is not matriarchal. The women do not dominate the men. Here the men have power -- but it is inherited from the women. This power structure has created a unique balance between the sexes.

Though women choose whom they will marry, they choose among men who must compete for their hands; marriages are still arranged by the elders. Power at home is in the women's hands; in public it is in the men's. But men and women share in decisionmaking.

Judy Schullai, of Shillong University, describes this unique balance between the sexes: "Women do not suffer here; we walk hand in hand with the man. We are not killed for our dowry, as happens too frequently in India. We are not forced to abort a fetus because of its sex, as happens too frequently in India and China. We are not forced into prostitution just because we want a divorce, as does still happen in village India. Here, in our world, women and men help each other in fact." Unlike in most of Asia, Meghalayan men move into the woman's house when they get married. This has quite a disturbing effect on the young men. J.D. Lyngdoh:

"We have been born and brought up in one environment. In our own mother's house they teach us a way of life. And then suddenly twenty-five or thirty years later, we are taken to our wife's house, which has a new environment and atmosphere. I can't tell you how scary and intimidating that process is."

Again, this is a disturbing echo of young women's concerns throughout the rest of Asia, today, and much of America and Europe, very recently. But Professor Schullai vehemently denies any similarities between women in Meghalaya and women in the West.

"The whole Western idea of women's liberation is odd to me, because somehow, women want to be on top of men in that concept. I don't want to dominate men, I want to walk side by side with them. Men and women are different. We are not the same. Therefore we have to work together."

THE WAY this culture deals with rape graphically illustrates the unique power of sharing and trust. Rape is very rare, but recently in Shillong a woman was raped and the whole locality took the law into their own hands. Justice was simple: the man was found and beaten to death. No jury, no trial, no thought that the woman was lying or at fault; her word was enough.

R.T. Rynbai, an ex-minister and a historian of Khasi culture, explains: "Rape is a thing that the Khasi consider as sinful as murder. In the olden days, they would bring straps and tie the guilty man down and then proceed to crush him with huge logs." Quite different from justice for victims of rape in the "liberated" West, where it takes countless hours of testimony and questioning to actually believe a woman is a victim of rape. While Professor Schullai does not approve of mob justice, she was equally shocked to hear that multiple rapists in the West still walk the streets looking for their next victim.

R.T. Rynbai expressed his idea of rapists clearly enough. "Traditionally we feel that rapists, like murderers, are no longer human. They are like rabid dogs: how do you treat rabid dogs in your country?"

Sexual taboos are inherent in most patrilineal cultures, especially those found on the Subcontinent. In Hindu and Muslim cultures there is little open discussion of sex and strong streaks of puritanism, and prurience runs deep within both cultures. Judy Schullai: "It is well known that most Indians find the idea of oral sex or anything but the missionary position to be taboo. I mean the Brahmins expect their women to kiss their feet, so you can imagine what they expect in bed. Just subservience!"

The men also find the difference between Meghalayan and Indian culture quite strange. Mr. Rynbai remembers vividly the first time he ventured down to the plains of India. When he visited West Bengal, a state only a few hundred miles away, he was shocked at the physical scarcity of women.

"Everywhere I went, I looked for the women. They were nowhere to be seen. It was depressing to discover that the women were hidden away: that they were not heard and not seen. So different from our world."

Divorce procedures are vastly different from those practiced by patrilineal cultures. Before the arrival of Christianity, divorce was easy for a woman. If she was having problems with her husband, her clan would intervene; or she could publicly declare that she was divorced, and she was. Mr. Rynbai explains: "Divorce was so simple. And you know it was the Christian religion that complicated it. What I'm trying to say is that certain modern things are not conducive to our system and would have been better left as they were."

BEFORE MODERN TRANSPORT arrived, this region was one of the more isolated corners of the world. But today it is under pressure, from without and within. Indians from the plains are increasingly interested in the coal, timber, and other resources of the North East in general. Because of the contorted regional geography, Meghalaya is the conduit through which the resources of North East India must move to the plains and the market.

The last twenty years have seen a vast influx, legal and illegal, of plainsmen from Bangladesh and India. Contact with the outside has changed many Meghalayan males' self-perceptions.

Some Khasi men, and even some women, now believe that their traditional matrilineal society is "backward" or even "uncivilized." Like indigenous people nearly everywhere, the people of Meghalaya are perhaps overly concerned to be seen as "modern." People are very open about these feelings. It is "modern to have a patrilineal society. There is no way to develop properly in a matrilineal society. The Bible and God do not talk of a matrilineal society, but of a patrilineal society."

Such complaints reveal an overriding shame that the local men feel for living in what plains Indians and others might simplistically see as a world dominated by women.

J.D. Lyngdoh ironically expressed this feeling when trying to articulate why the Meghalayan system must end: "Our old system could have gone on forever if we were alone here. But during the past fifty years a lot of plainsmen have moved here. When you mix all the communities up, when you get an education, you find that you have this humiliation. That you are not really a man."

Ivan Rindoh Johnson's story will sound all too familiar to many women. His Irish father married a Khasi woman. When he died in World War II, instead of Ivan receiving his inheritance, it went to his sister. When his sister married, the problems began.

"My life is ruined by the man my sister married. We didn't get along and he now controls my sister's property. I don't have any resources now. And he originally had nothing. What he has now, in a patrilineal system, would have been mine. My life has been ruined by this culture."

Ivan wants "modern, Western, Christian" thought to save him. He says that the real reason a patrilineal system is needed is because "The Bible is in favor of the patrilineal system. And once you have received Jesus Christ, you should forget all these old things."

Depression, anger, and resentment are pervasive among young men in the small villages where tradition is strongest.

One says, "It should be equal. Men always feel dominated here. They look after the girls more here. I see it in school. It is almost like saying, 'Well, this boy will not live in this house, so why should I spend my money on him?'" Once again, with a change of gender the same words could be put into the mouths of oppressed women throughout Asia.

After puberty, this discrimination breeds a sense of hopelessness. Many young men turn to drink; unlike their Hindu and Muslim counterparts in the rest of India, their religion does not forbid drinking. Coming from "dry" West Bengal, roadside bar signs in Meghalaya would shock almost anyone. "Drive In, Stagger Out," says one. Alcoholism is rampant in the Indian North East.

MEGHALAYAN MEN'S disenfranchisement in their own state is also seen in the problem of land ownership. The plainsmen are moving in quickly and have already become the majority of the population. Legally the plainsmen cannot own land. It appears that some outsiders have married tribal women and then registered land in the names of their wives. The perception (whether true or not) that this was being done by large numbers of plains Indians has caused rioting and demands for legal changes. Theoretically, a plains Indian could gain ownership of land from his tribal wife, then divorce her and keep the land. Some young Khasi men use this question of immigration and land ownership as the reason to end the matrilineal system. You hear comments that "the ignorant tribal women are used and then abandoned."

The Khasi Students Union (KSU) has been particularly eager to exploit the immigration issue as a way to change the culture. Recently, they tried to push through the legislature a law that would banish a woman from Khasi life if she married a non-tribal man. Paul Lyngdoh, president of the KSU, seems to think that under a patrilineal system there would be no immigration problems. He feels that the Khasi women are "being used and need to be protected for the preservation of their own culture." As he talks about immigration, though, other issues surface.

"This all goes back to the matrilineal system. When all the family wealth goes only to the women, it makes you practically dependent on them. And this is why at this stage we feel exploited from all sides, from all spheres of life: education, family, and politics."

Mrs. Roshan Waji, a member of the state legislature, does not feel that local problems stem from the matrilineal system but from the men and their own problems. She feels the men are bringing up this issue of matrilineal society because they need a scapegoat for their frustration.

The rise in frustration is due to unemployment. We need a firm policy from the government. Changing our culture will not make a difference in this area."

Judy Schullai agrees that the Khasi culture needs to protect itself from the plainsmen, but suggests that the issues of land ownership and immigration are being used by the KSU and the Societal Restructuring Association as means to gain power.

"There might be one or two bad cases where a man came up from the plains and cheated the system, but in most cases where these men have married Khasi women, they have settled and brought up their children here and looked after their wives well. And, you know, in our system the children are Khasi. It is the matrilineal system that has kept our society strong. You cannot always stop people from coming in, but when their children become Khasi, that shows the strength of our society, doesn't it?"

"If we were patrilineal, then every outsider coming in here to marry would have 'polluted' our bloodline. In the current system, we simply absorb outsiders."

ON MY LAST NIGHT in Meghalaya, I went to a traditional dance outside of Shillong, in a village whose people are still strongly matrilineal. Many still subscribe to the pre-Christian faith. As the dance began, the endless rhythm of Khasi culture emerged. The unmarried women danced slowly in long lines, at the center of the circle; the young men and boys pranced around the edges, in a warrior protection dance. The men and women never touched. They clearly danced to different beats within the same melody: the two halves of life moving differently to the same rhythm.

Such dances are used for the women to display their wealth and attract potential husbands. Yet they are dances of Khasi life: the women sustaining and cultivating the center of life, of their universe, while the men fiercely guard the fount of life.

A priest described the basic tenets of the dance and Khasi culture.

"Our tradition has been like this since time immemorial. The mother is the source of life. God has bestowed upon her this power. We should respect that and follow her lineage. The mother is the source of everything and so we must follow this system."

Leaving the dance I pondered this and wondered about something that Roshan Lyngdoh, a young student, had told me: We can't change tradition.

"How can we change tradition that has been around thousands of years? Most probably we'd lose our culture."

His question goes to the heart of the matter. In this women's world, men face the same struggle for equality as women elsewhere in the world. What parallel can one draw when a traditional matrilineal society defends its advantages with the same arguments as those used

by male-dominant societies to defend theirs? Perhaps the questions raised by Khasi culture are ones of human conditioning, rather than of gender.

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