

# **GENDER AND MATRILINY IN NORTH EAST INDIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

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**Abstract:** Gender is a systematic way of understanding men and women socially and culturally. Society and culture play a very important role in defining human behaviour, day to day activities and practices or their relationships with other individuals/groups. People's attitude, behaviour patterns, beliefs and values are significantly influenced by the compliant standards of the society and culture, rather than by the personal choice. Similarly, gender roles assigned to a particular sex is socio-culturally constructed than choice based. There is always cultural context which defines the status of women in a particular culture and society. Despite this variation, the link between culture and secondary status of women is one that identifies women in majority of cultures in the world. Infact, this is also the major point of debate and clash between promotion of women rights and protection of cultural rights at the same time. The feminist and international debates on gender disparity have brought to the fore the marginalised status of women and their subjugation in the dominant patriarchal cultural order. All these debates indicate that women in most parts of the world have been the victims of ideological suppression of patriarchy. Their conformation to gender based power dynamics continues to reinforce the norms that fuel cultural subjection of women. The world is fighting with the issue of gender inequality and grim socio-cultural status of women. However, Meghalaya poses a unique case of matrilineal society where culturally women are at the centre. Matriliney, is a social system where ancestral descent is traced through maternal line and daughter inherits ancestral property in contradiction to dominant patriarchal culture. The present paper tries to analyse gender and its various aspect in matrilineal society of Meghalaya.

**Keywords:** Gender, Women, Matriliney , Patriarchy.

**Introduction:** Term 'gender' is often used interchangeably with the term 'sex' though there is a perceivable distinction between the two. While 'sex' refers to the physical and biological difference between man and women, gender on the other hand, refers to a social and political construct to explain the social and cultural difference in the behaviour and roles of women in society. The concept of gender was first developed by Jill Matthews in 1984 in her study of the construction of femininity. According to Mathews, the concept of gender gives recognition to the fact that every known society distinguishes between women and men. Therefore, the term / concept of gender is a systematic way of understanding men and women socially and the pattern of relationships between them. The concept of gender also helps to study the differences in behaviour between men and women and to analyse the basis of these differences as biological or socially constructed. The World Health Organization defines gender as the result of socially constructed ideas about the behaviour, actions, and roles a particular sex performs. The beliefs, values and attitudes taken up and exhibited by them are as per the agreeable norms of the society and the personal opinions of an individual are not taken into the primary consideration of assignment of gender and imposition of gender roles as per the assigned gender. The cultural explanation of differences between the sexes further establishes roles specific to the respective sexes leading to the formation of distinct genders [WHO:2014]. Ann Oakley, in the introduction to her book "Sex, Gender and Society", emphasised the role of culture in formation of gender identities she writes - *—the enduring questions are these: does the source of the many differences between the sexes lie in biology or culture? She further interrogates if —biology determines male and female roles, how does it determine them? How much influence does culture have?* [Oakley: 1972,p15]. However, gender itself is not a uniform socio-cultural identity, gender identity construction approach also need to identify the influence of other forms of identity such as caste, class, race, ethnicity, nationalism, language, religion etc. As identity constriction is both relational and contextual.

Gender identity is often identified with patriarchal society which breeds inequality and oppression for women, while justifying dominations and public role by men. The debates on gender inequality and discrimination have brought to notice the marginalised status of women and their cultural and ideological suppression in the dominant patriarchal cultural order. Gender based division of power in patriarchal societies continues to reinforce the norms that fuel cultural subjection of women. Various Anthropological and Sociological studies also bear testimony to the fact that all the divisions of gender related roles, labour, and power stem from this very socially constructed classification. Women are largely confined to the four walls of their homes and their domestic roles are often glorified as the essential attribute of a female. Femininity is regarded synonymous to meek submission and docile behaviour [Johannsdottir:2009]. In such a cultural condition the lineage is eventually traced along the line of the males and all the transactions in the socio-economic realm are dealt with by the male members of the society hence constituting what is called a patriarchal system of functioning. Patriarchy has contributed largely to the widespread gender disparity. Even in advanced and developed countries of the world, women still experience the unfairness of the —glass ceiling, wherein they do not get promoted beyond a certain level. Although with education and awareness, the scenario is said to be changing which is evident with women entering the public domain and proving their mettle, but their percentage is very low. For majority of the women, gender equality is still a farfetched dream.

Worldwide, a large number of communities follow a patrilineal system including India in which the lineage is traced through the father. The Patrilineal system often manifested into a society and patriarchal culture and values where adult males or fathers hold the authority and control, power of decision making and dominance over females. As debated, patriarchal culture contributes largely to gender discrimination. In India gender discrimination takes the form of a wide range of abuses, from wives being ill-treated by their spouses, eve teasing to deadly ones such as being sold for sex trade, rape, child abuse, sex-selective abortion, infanticide, neglect, dowry deaths, honour killings and the list is inexhaustible. Till date majority of the men folks still regard women as passive, weak and many a times merely as sexual objects. This detrimental mindset is very much alive in almost every part of India. However, Meghalaya in North East India presents a peculiar case very different from the rest of the country. A country where women, usually cry out for equality, respect, rights and protection, there is a state, where a group of men now demanding more rights. Majority of the population in Meghalaya practice or used to practice matrilineal system in contrast to popular patrilineal system.

It is amazing that ethnic, linguistic and religious groups co-exist, along with their own varied cultural systems in India. Matriliney, one of the peculiar social systems has almost disappeared in Kerala but is still cherished in the state of Meghalaya. Although true matrilineal society does not exist anywhere in the world today, it is commonly agreed that three basic elements of matriliney exist in the present-day matrilineal societies, viz. descent through mother (family name through mother), matrilineal residence system (husband lives in wife's residence), and inheritance of parental property by daughter. Any society where these characteristics exist is considered to be matrilineal. All of these three characteristics are strongly prevalent among the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia tribes in Meghalaya, qualifying to be matrilineal societies. 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.

There is a sharp contrast in status and position of women in a patriarchal system and in the traditional matrilineal system. Catherine G Hartley in her book "The Position of Women in Primitive Society, Study of the Matriarchy" [Hartley:1914] bring out the contrast of women position in present day patriarchal societies with that in the matriarchal societies of the past. In her work, she has also done an extensive study on status of women in the matriarchal family system among American Indians, African Tribes and Khasi tribe in North East India. Unlike the rest of India, women of Meghalaya have an ascendant role in the society. While in the whole world where the eldest son of the family gets the charge and is given the ancestral property, in Meghalaya the youngest daughter becomes the heiress and given all the acreage and in return it is the duty of the youngest daughter to take care of their parents in old age and look after family welfare and property. After marriage, the bridegroom is supposed to move to the bride's

house and live with her parents and family. Moving into girls family is unavoidable, if a man marries the youngest daughter of the family or else couples can choose to establish their own independent family setup. The surname or title of the wife is passed on to their children. The birth of a daughter is celebrated with joy, unlike patrilineal society where the strong son preference is a well-established fact. Studies show this son obsession reached a stage, when it leads to cases of female foeticide and infanticide. The rapidly declining child sex ratio in the country is also the testimony to this. On the other hand the birth of a female child in matrilineal society in Meghalaya is hailed with a great joy. It may not be an exaggeration to say that parents often feel happier to have a female child for the simple reason of being sure of the continuity of the family and the clan. However, there seems to be no discrimination in the upbringing of the male and female children. Girls and boys get equal attention of the parents regarding education and health. In matrilineal societies of Meghalaya, especially female children are considered as assets, girls are the progenitors of the family and of the clan because children follow the mother's lineage but not that of the father. Hence a strong daughter preference is visible among matrilineal tribes of Meghalaya.

However, the fact that needs to take into account is that the society in Meghalaya is matrilineal and not matriarchal. The distinction is that matrilineal system refers to a relationship between mother and the children, which can be understood only as matrilineal descent, while the term matriarchal means a society which is controlled by women rather than men. Matriarchy is not just about descent and inheritance being traced through the female line. The matriarchal system means a system where women have power in —all activities relating to allocation, exchange and production, as well as socio-cultural and political power. It is the very opposite of a patriarchal system where men —take primary responsibility for the welfare of the community as a whole, and also act as representatives via public office. It is believed that no society in the world has ever had a matriarchal system. The Indian states of Kerala and Meghalaya (where matrilineality exist) are no exception. When descent and inheritance are traced through women it's called a matrilineal system, but the matrilineality is only a sub-system of matriarchy...and does not mean that the women hold any power except in domestic matters (including control over children). In this case (where the couple and children either stay with the wife's parents or near their house and the female wields the power in running the house and control over the children) the society is termed as a Matrilocal or even a Matrifocal society, but not matriarchal.

Although matrilineality is practised in Meghalaya, women do not hold more power than the men and man is a central decision making authority. Man still holding superior positions in decision making in family and in political institutions and women are not free from their gender roles despite economically and culturally empowered. Evidence suggests, the division of labour is very prominent in matrilineal society of Meghalaya. Household Chores, child rearing, taking care of the material need of the family consider women responsibility and administration and politics is males forte. However, in family institutions, despite taking majority of responsibility by women, the authority and control are in the hands of maternal uncles and the father. Youngest daughter or heiress of ancestral property but she cannot take any decision regarding property matters without consulting the maternal uncle. However, the role maternal uncle is slowly declining with growing nuclear families and outside immigration trend for job or other purposes. Similarly, traditionally in matrilineal society of Meghalaya women are never included in any forum (durbar) related to governance. In present time also we see, women representation in state legislature is very minimal. At the level of the local self-government, village head is always a headman.

Tiplut Nongbe in her paper "Khasi Women and Matrilineality: Transformations in Gender Relations" [Nongbe: 2000] examine the link between matrilineality and gender. She argues although women in Matrilineality enjoy comparative security and independence they are not entirely free from gender subordination. The matrilineal principles are subverted by hierarchical political structures where man holds the power. Influenced by the popular patriarchal system, men are using state machinery to come up with the measures to distort the matrilineal tradition. Women traditional exclusion from Politics also effectively aided man in this regard.

In spite of the version of better status in several parts of the region, there is the harsh reality of strong discrimination against women in various spheres, particularly in the light of tradition and customary practices and questions of empowerment. The general assumption that matrilineal descent gives women a dominant position collapses under the weight of the reality of their actual condition—the multiple burden they bear and their actual existence under male-centered authority. Although, women have rights over their children, this does not always translate into authority, which in most cases is shared between the mother's brother/brother on the one side and by the father/husband on the other side, an arrangement obviously made to reconcile male authority. Notwithstanding the dual responsibility imposed by tradition on men in their role as brother and husband, in reality it is the mother who works and stints and saves, and garners all her resources to ensure the sustenance of her children. But when it comes to the administration of the family and the management of its resources, control lies in the hands of men. While matrilineality serves to promote women's economic initiative, the ideology of gender, which views women primarily as agents of reproduction, does not augur well for their development. The matrilineal society witnesses the women's primary role as producing the heirs necessary to maintain the continuity of the family, the lineage and the clan. So while lineage and inheritance is reckoned through the female line in keeping with matrilineal principles, the society actually resembles a patrilineal one, as major decision-making is vested in males.

**Conclusion:** Meghalaya can take pride in the fact that, there exist a society where women are comparatively free than their counterparts in the rest of India. In Meghalaya there is no purdah system imposed on women, there is no restriction on women's physical movement, nor their attire. There is no bride burning, female infanticide or foeticide and no dowry (there are instead cases of a bride's price) and there is no social stigma attached to a widow re-marrying. They are independent; they enjoy freedom of choice, movement, freedom to choose a profession and in workplace and most importantly right to property. They have equal opportunities and access to resources. It is a unique society where the birth of a girl is celebrated in contrast to a society where preference for boy leads to incidence of female foeticide and infanticide. There is no social stigma attributed to a woman remarrying, divorced women or giving birth out of wedlock unlike its counterpart patrilineality. So, women in Meghalaya are in a better situation than those in other states in India. In matrilineal succession of family titles in the female line frees the daughters from the step- motherly treatment to which she is generally subjected, as compared to the boys in patrilineal societies, without imposing same treatment to boys, because boys are equally valued on ground of muscular strength. In the matrilineal society of Meghalaya, daughters have rights but male have the authority. In matrilineality daughters enjoy more right within the family than in patrilineality, where they had only temporary living rights. Man and women in matrilineality did not lose their individual identity once entered the marriage. In most cases, the women did not change her residence or her name or lose her right in her natal home which makes her more secure and independent than their counterparts. On the other hand, the absence of property rights in patrilineal culture despite many legal reforms, right over means of living and over the children makes women insecure and vulnerable to oppression of different kinds. Hence, we can conclude women in Meghalaya are comparatively in a better situation than those in other states in India in many aspects.

Women in Meghalaya have certain important rights, however it doesn't necessarily mean they are in a dominant position. Traditional burdens of gender roles such as household chores, child rearing are still exclusively on women shoulder. The social evils like domestic violence is very much prevalent, sexual exploitation and instances of rape are also increasing despite being a matrilineality. Although women in Meghalaya are socio-economically empowered than their other Indian counterparts yet gender disparity is a concern, which needs to encourage and promoted. Man holding superior positions in decision making and in politics. While the responsibility of matrilineal descent enhanced women's agency in the family and the economy, their marginal position in politics restricted them from converting this opportunity to their advantage. On the other hand, man used the gender based division of labour as a natural aspect to keep women out of the legal political process. Similarly, recently developed male dominated ethnic politics help intensified patriarchal control over women.

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