
Article: Culture and Indigeneity: Women in Northeast India

Author(s): Vijaylakshmi Brara

Source: Explorations, ISS e-journal, Vol. 1 (1), April 2017, pp. 72-90

Published by: Indian Sociological Society

Culture and Indigeneity: Women in Northeast India

--- Vijaylakshmi Brara

Abstract

Visibility, entrepreneurship, sense of justice, collectivity and indigeneity are some of the markers in the colouring of the picture of women in Northeast India. They are out fending for their families and they were out defending their state from colonial forces. Making their mark in the field of sports, theatre, weaving, education etc., they are at the same time in the cudgels of domesticity with the sense of ethnic identity overarching their individual idea of being a woman.

This paper seeks to bring in some of the frames of the women in Northeast India. The idea of Northeast is too contested, and at the same time constitutes a very large area, to bring into the ambit of this paper. Therefore, what it attempts to do is to take a view from afar and see from a broader lens touching a few of the issues concerning women in the region.

Key words: Culture, Customary laws, Meira Paibi, Naga Mothers' Association, Reservation

Introduction

Culture is the ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. This was remarked by Clifford Geertz (1973) in his book *Interpretation of Culture*. Drawing from Max Weber who said that Man is an animal suspended in the web of significance he himself has spun, Geertz took culture to be those webs. The world of women in the Northeast is woven with their cultural matrix. Therefore, their rootedness in their culture and seeing themselves from the indigenous discourse is the way they would perhaps like to tell their stories. Although we will realise that few do the actual spinning. The rest are simply caught.

On the question of indigeneity, Marcos Sylvia writes, indigenous religions are characteristically based on oral traditions – ‘the transmission of beliefs, rules, customs, and rituals by word of mouth’ – rather than on written law and sacred

texts. In these systems, indigenous women 'preside over rituals, preserve but also re-create traditions'. Indigenous religions are not monotheistic, but tend to view the cosmos as made up of the living and the dead, each essential to the whole. Nature must, therefore, be nurtured. This is in stark contrast to the Western hierarchies of (masculine) intellect and (feminine) intuition or emotion, of objective and subjective, material and imagined reality. Such hierarchies may provide a basis for the view that the natural environment and 'inferior beasts' are there for humankind to explore and exploit (Sylvia, 2010). This belief in nature, and, as we shall see later, in the fertility cult gives the identity to the women as the generative principles of their societies. But, the assimilation of the major religions have somehow diluted their role as well as the belief in the generative processes.

Whenever I want to picture the women from the Northeast region, I picture a jigsaw puzzle. Like every small part of the puzzle, women also constitute the small parts to enable the society to make a composite whole. But every part of the puzzle has to have that curve and that angle to fit and fix in the puzzle, the traditions and customs, otherwise that part is simply not needed. Similarly, the women of this region do have a place in the picture, in their society, unless it is framed, specified and angled to fix.

Then comes the issue of yard sticks. It is a research methodological fallacy to compare the status of women in Northeast taking the parameters like sati, bride burning, female infanticide, purdah etc. and the absences of them being indicator of high status of women in Northeast India. To say that they are different from their counterparts elsewhere is correct, but that does not necessarily mean that they are better and have a very high status. They have now started measuring their situation and their position with their own yardsticks. Today they are questioning the customary laws through which their life is guided. The Naga Mothers' Association is one such organisation which will be discussed later in the paper.

The phrase 'Sisterhood is *Loce*', appeared on the cover of the Philippine newsletter *Womenews* (Mitchel, 1996, pp. 3-7). According to Mitchel, there is a lot of literature, generated particularly since past ten years giving us an overview of the South East Asian Women. They have been recognised as the protagonists in their own households who can take the responsibility of running their family as workers in the various sectors of economy, as leaders, and as performers etc.

Women in Northeast India too, are producing and selling their kitchen garden produce and their intricate weaves. They may not be big entrepreneurs but are economically self-sufficient. Every household in the villages has a loom, a small or big kitchen garden and a pond with plenty of fishes. This being the conflict region for a long time, women here have learnt to sustain their families in the absence of the men, who are taken to insurgency or led to drugs or drunkenness. Today, one sees the growing enterprise among them. The younger women have taken to designing the traditional weaves as well as creating processed food. They are now seeking market outside their region.

Hence there is a need to expand the geo-matrix of the concept, 'sisterhood is local' to include the women in the Northeast with their sisters in South East Asia.

The Visible Colours of Women in Northeast India

There is this peculiar South East Asian trajectory, which also envelopes the Northeast Indian ethos. It is the way we look at the women collectives. In most of the South East Asian societies, specially the Burmese, the Javanese and the Malaysian as well as in Northeast India, the collective strength of women offers material self sufficiency and ensures a degree of co-operation with men in the social sphere. A woman's self-image in Northeast, just like her counterparts in the Javanese and the Burmese societies generally speaking, is very much influenced by her role as a mother, which provides her a superior status and stable security compared to her wifely role. And not individual mothers, but in collectives. The roles are institutionalised.

One such institution is the *Ima Keithel*, women's market in Manipur. Women of Manipur are particularly very visible. They are also expected to earn. Any woman who is not economically productive is considered lazy. In Ima Keithel no male is allowed to own a shop there. These market vendors also have a very strong organisation. The police are afraid to hassle them. If one goes through the history of Manipur it was the Ima Keithel, which was the launching pad of the two-epoch making *Nupilans* (women's fight) against the British, one in 1904 and the other in 1936. It was here where they organised and pursued their movement and fought against the colonial forces. It is not only an economic base of the *Imas*, but also their political base. This Nupilan (an exclusive women's movement) also marked the first people's organised protest against the British. The traditions set by the two Nupilan(s) live on. Mass women's protests by the *Meira Paibis* (the torch

bearing pressure groups) against the atrocities of the armed groups still goes on and after 53 years it again made history. The naked protest of the women after the killing of Manorama has gone down in the history of Manipur as the third Nupilan.¹

The Ima Keithel is the largest market exclusively run by women in Asia. Nobody complains if your fish is measured in small tin boxes, or your cloth is measured with the arm's length. Women here most often do not use formal weights and measures. Another striking feature of this market is that the stalls are generally passed from mother in law to the daughter in law; not only does it not follow the formal inheritance law among the male agnates but also does not go through the matrilineal inheritance from mother to daughter. The women who sit there are those who have been married, brought up their children and can spill out, as their domestic roles have been taken care of by the younger affine, usually their daughter in law. They are generally between 50-70 years of age. But recent studies have shown that women with a much younger age group, between 35-45, are entering Ima Keithel. They are generally the sole bread earners for their children as their husbands have either died due to drugs and AIDS or due to the conflict between the state and the non-state actors. But nevertheless, those who have earning husbands, about 50-60 percent are able to earn more than them. In other states too women are visible in the market relations in a more informal manner.

Another institutional base for women is their role as pressure groups and peace builders. In Manipur, as mentioned above, they are called the Meira Paibi (fire torch bearing). Although now the fire torches have given way to mobile torches, but this technology has not been able to change their style of mobilising and gathering for protests. For any issue the immediate messenger is the clanking on the electric pole. The effectiveness of this communication can be seen when within a matter of minutes one can witness hundreds coming together. Among the hill tribes of Manipur, the Naga Women's Association and the Kuki Women's Association have undertaken strenuous journeys to meet their respective underground organisations so as to stop the killings and roam in the interiors to make people aware of their rights and duties. In Nagaland, there is Naga Mothers' Association (NMA) which has recently come into the limelight by starting to think out of the cultural exigencies. They have demanded their right to stand for Municipal Council elections by granting 33 percent reservation which is their constitutional right, to which the men are not allowing them. Recently, they won

the case in Supreme Court. But in spite of the apex court verdict, the Naga Hoho (composed of all men) is still denying their right. Is it because patriarchy is subsuming and patronising the native cultural expressions? We did have traditions which barred women in social spaces, while in other places there was a tradition of Sati. So do we continue with the traditions as something sacrosanct? Traditions also change with changing times. Secondly who decides? This selective epistemological understanding is what is problematic and is being attempted to be deconstructed by the NMA.

Among the Tangkhuls there is a traditional institution of women as peace negotiator called by the term *Pukhrelas*. Even though some of the tribes may claim that women have no place in the village councils, there are incidents of women chieftains and women warriors among them. According to Baruah, there is a historical legacy of women occupying a seat of power among the Nagas (Baruah, 2007, p. 45). She writes that in times of war a woman named *Maram Harkhosita* was the supreme commander; village *Kangpot* and *Thowai* had a woman chief; and *Tolloi* village council members were also women. Women were given the responsibility of the village granary. There seems to be penetration of hegemonic patriarchal notions of major religion seeping in over a period of time among these communities. In the present scenario, barring the ritual importance given to women over the protection and decision over the granary, they have not been recognised as chiefs or commanders of their villages.

Hence there are women's associations in every tribe and every community. Some are the result of colonial rule and some are the product of post modern era. Many of them especially among the tribes are church based and many are ethnic oriented, which nevertheless give them a strong institutional grounding. The indigenous women of Arunachal are mobilising to bring reforms in their customary laws, especially in the field of polygamy, child marriage and even forced marriages. Visibility therefore is an essential colour in the prism of seeing women in Northeast India.

We have to understand that no societies in the world are gender neutral. The Northeast Indian women are visible in socio-economic spheres. They are also visible in informal political domains as pressure groups. And, unlike their other Indian counter parts, don't have to face the veil systems and other systems of exclusions. But they are also bound by the customary laws, which are held to be

sacrosanct as well as linked to the identity issues. To come out of these laws is perhaps more difficult than the norms laid down by the rest of the Indian society.

There are major issues when it comes to property ownership rights, land rights, political participation, and a very strong and rigid glass ceiling. To explain and justify these elements in the whole gamut towards marginalisation of women, the existence of customary laws and the promulgation of it as well other patriarchal notions are a major point of dissention. These and various other factors, therefore are creating hinderance towards women to enter into the policy initiatives, governance and the use of natural resources.

There is another very interesting aspect, and that is while certain, predominant traditions are serving as great hinderance to the involvment of women, there are certain cultural and traditional practices which have also enabled them to be 'out there', so to say. They were present in the social space in the form of traditional priestesses. There are stories of royal women in Assam, Manipur and Tripura who were warriors, promoted education and also peace negotiators. Women have been traditional story tellers, performers in proscenium theaters, etc. And the conflict in the post modern era have compelled the women to come out to earn their livelihood. According to Devaki Jain, 'feminisation of work' connotes low-quality, lowly-paid work. Jain argues that 'feminisation' devalues the increased presence of women². Therefore Northeast women did not have the rigidities of domesticity; they were visible. Although later this was more out of compulsion than due to their individual choice, yet this has made them distinct from their counterparts in the rest of India.

Women in Cultural Landscape

In many cultural and religious traditions, particularly in Northeast India, women have had primary responsibility for transmitting cultural and spiritual knowledge and practices, as well as group identity, to succeeding generations. Because culture exists through, and is generated by, the lived experiences of people, the role of women in transmitting culture also situates them as bearers of culture. For this reason, people across a diverse range of communities view women's adherence to and promulgation of cultural norms as integral to cultural survival.

This bandwagon of culture is also used as a basis for justifying violations of women's human rights. For example, in many cultures, religions, and states, the

rights of individual women are subordinated to upholding women's role as the carriers of group identity, as we have seen above while discussing the Naga Mothers' Association. This is made necessary to ensure cultural preservation with the result that women are often denied the right to make autonomous decisions regarding their own sexuality, childbearing, and marriage; and their children's nationality, religion, and citizenship. These violations of basic rights are rationalised identities, which women are thought to embody.

But lately in the indigenous discourses, especially of South East Asia, the feminist expressions are a new wave which is finally questioning the social norms of their societies giving rise to a sisterhood which has a local fervor. Observers point out that the reason for this upsurge in expressing themselves was given impetus during the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. At the Conference, indigenous women argued for the goal of self-determinism rather than gender equity, stating that the empowerment of native women could not occur outside the context of decolonisation (Grey, 2004, p. 35).

The indigenous women, as the Northeast women with nationalistic cultural bandwagon, see themselves as a microcosm of the bigger social system encompassing them. This makes us understand the fact that why people living in this region have never had any feminist movement the way we have witnessed in Europe, America and even Indian heartland. Why, what is the reason behind it? This is in spite of the fact that we have proud histories of women's movements against tyrannical rulers, colonialism as well as present injustices of the state apparatuses. The discourse has been surrounding along the notions of nationalism and nation building by women and everybody else; a desire to see their Nations based on freedom and justice. The age old injustices meted out to their people during colonial regimes and later in the tyrannical times of self-governing states have embroiled our women in the overall turmoil in their society. They have not been able to think about the gender disparities within. Secondly, when the issue predominantly encircles identities, it en-cultures around the pride of belonging to one's group. Critiquing one's culture then skirts around the charge of being anti-national.

Melissa Lukashenko (Lukashenko, 1994, p. 21), an Australian writer of mixed European and Murri (Aboriginal), claims that '... while feminism is a global movement with potential global applicability, political, regional and ethno-cultural factors can mean that feminist ideology is not appropriate for indigenous

women.’ With the common colonised history, their focus has been on decolonisation as the central political project; hence assertions on identity and concentration on nation building. Women are also said to take the part of ‘motherists’, militant mothers fighting for the survival of their children. This happens when conflict and chaos makes the traditional role in native society difficult to perform (Udel as cited in Grey, 2004, p. 10). Jaimes Guerrero employs the term ‘Native Womanism’ to describe a struggle aimed at ‘restoring the female principle to challenge the prevailing colonist and patriarchal denigration of women and nature’ (as cited in Grey, 2004, p. 10).

Following this line of argument one also sees a contrast whereby the western feminists are bent upon throwing away their patriarchies and the social system which perpetuates female subordination, while the indigenous women in turn seek a negotiated renewal of native cultural values and systems.

Ironically this rootedness in the cultural histories is making women further marginalised. Within their traditional systems they have no say in the village councils. This is so even in matrilineal communities like Meghalaya, where women are excluded from the village councils. When natural disasters and environmental changes happen, women and men are affected differently because of increased stress of traditions, the planning of resource distribution, and gender specific roles and responsibilities. In the situation of total denudation of resources, women still carry the inevitable burden of running the household and looking after the food security. This gendered responsibility forces women to look for any means whatsoever to feed her children and become susceptible to violence and human trafficking. She ignores her own health and also gets prone to various illnesses.

Interestingly, in spite of such gendered marginalisation women still want to adhere to their indigenous discourse in this part of the region. Northeast India has seen major religious conversions like no other part in the rest of India. Being predominantly a tribal society, most societies were traditional nature worshippers. The cosmos was built around the father sky, the mother earth and all the paraphernalia structured around them, like the mountains, the rivers, the forests, the clouds, the thunder and other natural phenomena. Therefore, the regeneration cycle, or the ‘fertility principle’ was the dominant belief system. And it was only natural that the messengers of our gods on the earth, the priestesses, enact and symbolise this fertility cult time and again. One can see the sexual exigencies in

the dance form of the *maibis* (the Manipuri priestesses of traditional faith) during the *laiharaoba* festival and the gestures during the Bihu dance of Assam. In this sense, sexuality was seen as a totem, a symbol, on which depended our prosperity. But no sooner did we turn into mainstream religion such as Vaishnavism in Manipur, for instance, first thing it tried to do was to marginalise the existing indigenous belief system and bring forth the male Brahmins. Sexuality, which was a totem, then became a taboo after the advent of Hinduism, although, how much this ancient order was really fractured and broken is for everybody to see. Incidents such as Sati and concepts such as *Pativrata* (devoted to husband) though initiated could not continue for long. But a shift had taken place without doubt, whereby the women's hegemony on religion was replaced by men.

There are various studies presently going on which are trying to understand the role of the elderly women as heads of their clan among the Native Americans. These clan mothers of the Iroquois Nations were revered and held sacred by the communities. One of their prominent roles was to preserve seeds, decision on growing and cutting parts of vegetation and also the choice of crops. The preservation of wildlife, marine animals and river and water sources was also based on their thorough planning³. But with the rise of industries, private property and patriarchy, and the growing marginalisation of indigenous people, the institutions of clan mothers have also disappeared. There is a trend by the state towards centralising patriarchy in all its various documents of planning and implementation. Today even though the buzz word in the government corridors is inclusive growth and inclusive planning, somehow somewhere this inclusiveness does not include the carrier of traditional knowledge systems, the women. Even today this region is filled with stories of medicine women from Northeast India having oral knowledge of herbs confident in curing incurable illnesses. But unlike the pressure groups and the women's markets, these knowledge sources do not have an institutional base.

Some Contemporary Reflections

A lot has been said about the Meira Paibi of Manipur. They have been in the forefront since their fight with the colonial forces and their use of their body to protest the rape and killing of Manorama. But it has been a concern for social scientists to see that in the table for negotiations and policy intervention their absence goes unnoticed. The informality given to the bodies of women is good for

their instinctive actions but it also pushes them in the area of non-seriousness barring them from serious negotiations.

In Sikkim, according to B.B. Ray of Voluntary Health Organisation of India (VHAI), the lens to analyse gender has to be different. But to our understanding he was only resonating the perspective of Northeast per se as well. Here as elsewhere in Northeast India, women are seen boldly moving on the streets with no threat perception. Nevertheless, like the dichotomy everywhere else, in the Northeast, a woman is expected to take care of her family, not speak in front of elders, follow the rigid sexual division of labour and at the same time be enterprising with visionary ideas. I call these women the two faced Janus of our society. Sikkim also boasts of 50 percent reservation for the women in the grass root governance called the Panchayats. But the all-encompassing patriarchal notions and specific gender roles prevents the women elected representatives to take active part in the meetings and air their views. Alienation from land due to climate change as well as due to development induced displacement is bringing in vices like drunkenness resulting in wife beating and other violence against women.

In Nagaland and the other hill women traditionally even today bear the major responsibilities of working in the paddy and jhum fields, preparation of fields, sowing, weeding, harvesting, storing the grain and produce and above all managing the genetic utilisation and balance of the crops. Today many of the womenfolk as an extension of their traditional roles are engaged in secondary income for the household through commercial weaving and the sale of forest and agricultural products.

Most of the states in the Northeast have been in the troubled waters of insurgencies since more than 60 years. The issue of independence from the Indian state has overshadowed all the issues of societal development. It is these identity issues which are also impeding the equity growth of its women folk. They are still asked to adhere to their tribe's customs and not challenge for equal rights. Therefore, in this whole gamut of discourses on the deconstruction of the state and re-construction of nationhood, the collaboration of tradition, religion, and culture re-enforces the notions of identity, patriarchy and the ideologies behind the sons of the soil theory. Here the justification is the customary laws.

Meghalaya is a very peculiar situation when it comes to the discourse on gender dynamics. It is a matrilineal society, where the descent is seen from the female line. Here the immediate cognitive group is mother's brother, sister's children and the sister⁴. According to TiplutNongbri, the ideal Khasi woman is '...the repository of family honour. Daughters in particular should be chaste, obedient, polite and virtuous because family honour...depends on them...' (Uberoi, 1994, p.179). This expected role of women from a matrilineal society is exactly the same as the expected role of women in patrilineal society. The village level institutions called the *durbars* also exclude women in their official capacity. Women intelligentsias here too are voicing concerns over their customary laws.

Women in the Northeast in general did not have to break the shackles of home. They have been visible in the public sphere as farmers, vegetable vendors, weavers, traditional healers and presently as government employees, doctors, teachers and the like. There have never been issues of preserving modesty of the women through veils and other social sanctions. In the states where there have been inter-ethnic conflict and the 'liberation struggles', women in the Northeast have come in forefront as protestors as well as peace makers. But there seem to be a glass ceiling concept, whereby they are told their limits. In spite of their commitment to the socio-economic causes they have never been included in policy initiatives, in the decision making bodies. The glass ceiling comes in the form of customary laws, revolving around ownership issues, inheritance laws, land ownership and the exclusion from all kinds of decision making bodies in the village level, barring the states which has Panchayat system⁵ which ensures 33 percent and in case of Sikkim and Tripura 50 percent reservation for women.

Women and Politics

Naga society is deeply entrenched in patriarchal values and while these do not necessarily mimic the Indian model, they are all pervasive and do not give women their rightful space in society and politics. Since its inception, Nagaland has not had a single woman legislator. The only woman Member of Parliament, Rano Shaiza, was nominated and came from an affluent political background. If Nagaland has not, in four decades, produced a single woman legislator, then a gender analysis of politics and political participation is urgently called for. Naga women are still fighting for their right to be represented in urban bodies but they are facing stiff resistance from men who have dominated the social, political, economic and religious space for ages.

Traditionally, a Naga village was an independent entity having its own governance systems and laws, with varying traditions across villages and tribes. Given that such functional traditional systems existed in each Naga village, the government built upon it and enacted the Nagaland Village and Area Councils Act 1978 to give it legitimacy and recognition as a local self-governance institute. Every recognised village in Nagaland is required to have a Village Council (VC). The Village Councils are empowered for carrying out administration, and administration of justice as per local customs and traditions. VC Members are chosen by villagers in accordance with the prevailing customary practices and usages and as approved by the State Government. Hereditary village chiefs, *Anghs* and *Gaonburas* (GB) as per usage and customary practices of the community are to be ex-officio members with voting rights of the VCs. The VC is required to meet at least once every three months or as and when the situation requires. It is also required to form the Village Development Board (VDB) for the overall development of the village. The VDBs are involved in all phases of developmental activities as a part of their responsibilities. These include receipt of allocation of funds, selection of beneficiaries or schemes, monitoring of progress of works and expenditure and completion of schemes. This is the only body which has a woman representative.

According to a woman civil society member in Shillong, the argument that women in Meghalaya are free to participate in politics is neither here nor there. Women everywhere in India are free to take part in electoral politics. But there are some well-defined gender roles that society has cut out for them which make it difficult for women to become active participants in electoral politics. The well-defined gender roles, more than their reproductive ones, make it difficult for women in Meghalaya, as it does for women in Bihar or Uttar Pradesh, to contest elections. Politics in India is very much a male domain. The resistance that the Women's Reservation Bill has encountered from those very states that have the worst sex ratios is not surprising. But the irony is that when Meghalaya was asked to give its opinion on the Women's Bill, the state government shot down the idea of reservation of seats for women on the plea that this was a matrilineal society and women here were already empowered. A rather large section of people in Meghalaya are led to believe that this state is a beautiful island, safely cocooned from the sea of devastating patriarchal societies around them. But just because a myth is repeated it cannot become a reality. Curiously, it is the men in a matriliney who always proudly showcase women as liberated and empowered but who

ostensibly 'choose' not to get involved in the murky world of politics. Men continue to believe women are happy with their domestic roles.

The recent general elections in Meghalaya to the state legislatures turned the tables, may be not upside down but tilted it a bit when four women got elected, one of them acquiring the so called masculine portfolio of home ministry. Appreciating the emerging trend of more women coming forward to actively participate in the politics in Meghalaya, legislator Ampareen Lyndoh said, 'Brave women who stand by their own principles and believe in themselves can perform much better than male representatives in serving the public, as they have more passion to work.'⁶ 'We have to think a hundred times before taking up the responsibility as public representatives,' the first-time MLA and minister said. 'Women are mothers and they are the ones who run and look after the welfare of the house,' she pointed out.

The gender involvement in politics in Meghalaya is going through a phase when we can probably say that matrilineality has probably given a spring board to the women. Education and awareness has gone a long way in helping them to enter the political arena. Yet it's a wait and watch situation, as this participation level has to reach the areas beyond Shillong. During one of my study, a member of ECOSS NGO in Sikkim told me about the *CheliMorcha*, which is women's wing of political parties. They are very strong bodies, but not feminist groups the way we understand in the rest of India. Their present agenda is to fight for 'Sikkim subject', for those women who marry outside. Right now whoever marries men from outside lose their citizenship rights as Sikkimese. They are insisting that the names of such women also be included in the 'Sikkimese register'. The ECOSS representative asserted that Sikkim is a male dominated society where there is polygamy, violence against women because of alcoholism.

More or less all the states in Northeast India have a very strong patriarchal edifice. But, what makes it different from the rest of India is that the women in these societies have spaces where they can get organised, prioritise their agenda, voice their opinion and enact within their prescribed normative condition. The difficulty arises when these spaces get a defined rigidity. Political space has largely been an exclusive domain of men. Hence decision making and policy intervention takes a back seat for these women.

Within the Family

Very rigid sexual division of labour within the households is the hallmark of the societies in Northeast. It is not manly to fetch water and it is not womanly to cut a tree. In one of my research, I prepared a daily routine cycle in the Meghalaya village in RiBhoi district. While women get up at 3.30-4.00 am, make fire, make tea, lunch, collect leaves for *eri*, which they need to do four times a day. They come back, have lunch, then go to the field, come back, weave, take care of the children, make dinner, and before sleeping clean the area of the silk pupa; men on the other hand have tea, go to the field, come back and rest. The gendered drudgery of the women is so much taken for granted and considered part of the Khasi culture, that nobody questions it; not even women. This is the cycle which is prevalent in most of the villages in Northeast India.

Mono cropping instead of *jhum* multi-cropping has threatened the food security of the villages in Nagaland, according to Secretary, Indigenous Women's Forum. If the crop fails, then for the whole year there is nothing to eat. And in any deprivation women make themselves the last priority while feeding the hungry mouths. Unbridled mining across Nagaland is bringing in labours from outside, who are also making the women vulnerable to diseases like HIV-AIDS. At the same time mining is affecting the respiratory health of the women and children and it is also affecting their reproductive health.

The inside world has emboldened gendered role expectation, what in Manipuri is called *nupakithabak* (man's work) and *nupikithabak* (women's work). In the outside there is all women's polo team, Olympic medalists Mary Kom and Sarita Devi, theatre artists like Sabitri Heisnam, poets, literary personalities, doctors, pilots along with the women entrepreneurs. They are the hallmark and pride of Northeast India. But at the same time the insides of the women's world are stark with gender discriminations. Although there is no female infanticide, the birth of a daughter is always accompanied by the wishes of the people with a blessing to 'have a son next time'. There is no dowry, but a section of the house is kept vacant to adjust the things brought by the bride. There is no bride burning but there is a sublime legitimacy given to a man to bring in a second third wife. And there is no wailing of widowhood, but a widow without a son gets disinherited from her husband's property. Tripura is showing alarming rate of domestic violence. The sex ratio in Nagaland and Manipur is steadily decreasing and the

‘single mothers’ are a category which the sociologists will need to undertake studies.

Conclusion

The South East Asian trajectories of martial women, horse riders, and women of great beauty, the chieftains, and also powerful mothers as well as market vendors have been sublimed in the broader notions of patriarchy over a period of time but have not been eroded. Two forces are at work here, the feminisation of masculinity as well as the masculinisation of femininity, if we take the western notions of what it is to be a male as well as a female. But if we take our indigenous notions of the two concepts then there is no binary and instead we understand that every male and every female has both femininity and masculinity within them and this is how we understand ourselves, our bodies, our cosmos and our society⁷. Such an open notion of gendered self is conducive to building a society with greater understanding, sympathy, creativity, exploratory spirit and opening up of imagination and making it more peaceful and less violent. Therefore, people in Northeast are good in performing arts, are creative weavers, committed and talented sports-people and even have their own novel ways of protests in expressing their collective grievances. But the masculine patriarchal ideology tends to always hegemonise their perceptions. To counter this tendency there is a need to redefine the perceptions of femininity and masculinity by locating them within the broader context of the east as well as our own specific notions of feminine and masculine.

Notes:

¹Then 32 years of age, the brutalized and bullet riddled body of Th. Manorama was found in the wee hours of July 11, 2004 at LaipharokMaring village in Imphal East District. She was picked up by the soldiers of Assam Rifles (One of the Para- military force, stationed in Manipur since this state was left by the British), from her BamonKampu residence the previous night. It was the first time that the arrest memo was issued at the time she was picked up. The way her body lay on the side of the road agonised and horrified the sensibilities of the populace. Her genital area was blasted by the bullets. Around 12 Meira Paibies went to the gate of the *Kangla*(the traditional capital of Manipur, where the Assam Rifles was stationed at that time), stripped themselves in front of the gate and gave a heart piercing cry- ‘Indian Army come rape us! We are all Manorama’s mothers’ - these were their wailing and cries in their naked bodies.

²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devaki_Jain cited on 10th April 2017

³https://en.wikipedia.org/.../Gender_roles_among_the_indigenous_peoples_of_North_America cited on 10th April 2017

⁴ Besides the obvious difference that patrilineal follows the male lineage as well as affinal residence by the females and the matrilineal follows the female lineage and the avuncular residence, in the terms of the power structure within the family, the men (father in the case of the first and mother's brother in the case of the latter) are the decision makers. Therefore just as patrilineal structures, matrilineal structures also exist under the realm of Patriarchy. Matriarchy, therefore, is a utopia.

⁵ Sikkim, valley region of Manipur, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and the Assam barring North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong, have Panchayat system. Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, NC Hills and Karbi Anglong and Bodo Territorial Area of Assam, Hills of Manipur, and tribal areas of Tripura are governed under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India, and the ADC Act which allows them to have village bodies under the customary laws of their respective tribes.

⁶ During one of my interviews in the year 2014-15.

⁷ Brara (1998) .

REFERENCES:

Bookman, A., & Morgen, S. (Eds.) (1984). *Women and the politics of empowerment*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Brara, V. (1998). *Politics, society and cosmology in India's North East*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press

Brara, V. (2002). Breaking the myth: The social status of Meitei women. In W. Fernandes and S. Barбора (Eds.), *Changing women's status in India: Focus on the North East*. Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre.

Brara, V. (2005). *Situational analysis of women and girls in Manipur*. New Delhi: National Commission for Women.

Brara, V. (2005). The seen and the unseen: Sociological dimensions to violence against women in Manipur. In H. Sudhir and J. Hajarimayum (Eds.), *Violence against women in North East India*. New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House.

Brara, V. (2008). Women in peace: But are they in dialogue. In S. D. Hazarika (Ed.), *Peace in dialogue: Universals and Specifics- Reflections on North East India*. New Delhi: Akansha Publishing.

Brara, V. (2008). Feminist discourses in North East India. *Eastern Quarterly*, 4(3-4).

Baruah, J. (2007) *Studies carried out on customary laws and practices of the major tribes of North East Region*. Guwahati: Gauhati High Court.

Grey, S. (2004). Decolonising Feminism: Aboriginal women and the global 'Sisterhood'. *Enweyin: The Way We Speak*, 8. Retrieved from <http://works.bepress.com/samgrey/13/>

Jain, D. (1980). *Women's Quest for Power*. UP: Vikas Publishing House.

Lips, H. (1991). *Women, men and power*. California: Mayfield Publishing Company.

Lucashenko, M. (1994). No other truth? Aboriginal women and Australian Feminism. *Social Alternatives*, 12(4), 21.

Mitchell, C. L. (1996). Sisterhood is local: The rise of Feminist journals in Southeast Asia. *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 28(3-4). Retrieved from www.bcasnet.org

Silva, N. (2004). *The gendered nation*. New Delhi: Sage publication.

Sylvia, M. (2010). *Women and indigenous religion*. CA: Praeger.

Uberoi, P. (Ed.) (1994). *Family, Kinship and Marriage in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Vijaylakshmi Brara is Associate Professor in Centre for Manipur Studies, Manipur University.
