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The Place and Role of Women in Tribal Society of Northeast India

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Abstract: Nothing much has been written or spoken about the status and role of tribal women of the Northeast. Women there, are realizing more about their rights and privileges and are standing up to claim these, as in the International Fortnight Protesting against Violence in 2003, women and girls launched their rally in Shillong with the headline: More Muscle to Women's Movements. The tribal women of the Northeast have much to be proud of, but they have to go many more miles before they realize their dreams and aspirations.

Keywords: Women in North East India, tribals, women as hostesses and goddesses, women as mediators, Matriliney.

Introduction

Northeast India covering about 255,000 square kilometers is home to hundreds of tribes. According to Prof. A. C. Taher Bhagawati, a renowned anthropologist of the region, there are 9 million tribals who can be divided into about 400 communities.¹ This paper will address mainly the hill tribes of the region, like the Naga tribes of Nagaland and Manipur the Chin-Kuki-Mizo (sometimes called Chikim) group of tribes in Mizoram, Manipur, parts of Nagaland and Assam. It will also speak of the matrilineal (taking lineage from the mother) tribes of the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos of Meghalaya, because the bulk of the tribals of the Northeast live in the hill states of Arunachal (66.63 per cent tribals), Mizoram (94.75 per cent) and Meghalaya (85.53 per cent). Other states with a sizeable number of tribals are Manipur (34.41 per cent) and Tripura (30.95 per cent).

Nothing much has been written or spoken about the status and role of tribal women of the Northeast. Hence, writing about it may be a little like opening Pandora's box. However, things are beginning to change.² The world of tribal women in the Northeast is also quite different from that of their counterparts in the rest of India. The narrow geographical link of Northeast India to mainland India typifies the socio-cultural and psychological link too. As narrow as is the geographical link, so are the social, cultural and psychological links. Intellectuals and academicians may speak of India being multi-cultural, racial and ethnical state, but for the common masses of India, the people of Northeast India do not look like Indians. The majority of Northeasterners also do not feel a sense of belonging to mainland India. Every time they cross Kolkatta, they find it hard to prove themselves to be Indians. This is true of tribals in general as well as tribal women. Hence, the role and status of tribal women cannot be judged from the parameters of women in the rest of India. Much of what we say in the paper contains materials obtained from our interviews with persons belonging to these tribes. The tribal society of the Northeast is undergoing a period of transition. In some, the traditional laws and practices are dying out, while in others, they are still very much in vogue. In most tribes the old customary laws go hand in hand with the new ones. What we say will mainly be related to the traditional customary laws and practices regarding women.

1. Definition of Place/Status and Role

Before we discuss the place/status and role of women in the tribal society of the Northeast, it may be useful to speak briefly about these concepts. Social status is commonly thought of as "the position that an individual has in society" (Vashum 2003: 297). It should further be added, however, that this social status of the individual is not "a static condition of a building. It is rather the product of a dynamic process of interaction between what is inherited and what is achieved" (Vashum 2003: 298). Closely related to status is role. In fact, role and status can be said to be "two sides of the same coin... there are no roles without status nor status without roles – the roles represent the dynamic aspect of status" (Zehol 2003: 298). Role can also be defined as "the behavioural aspect of status. Status

is occupied but role is played. A role is the manner in which a given individual fulfills the objectives of a status and enjoys its privileges and prerogatives. A role is what an individual does in the status he occupies” (Zehol 2003: 298). The status of women can be divided into two broad domains: the domestic and the public domains. “The former includes activities performed within the localized family unit, whereas the latter includes political and economic activities” (Zehol 2003: 299). These two domains can further be seen in terms of four factors: social status, economic condition, political empowerment and psychological condition (Zehol 2003: 298). We shall, like a photographer look at the tribal women first in a panoramic way and then focus closer to look deeper into their life and experience. We shall first look at the surface level and then proceed deeper into the life and experience of tribal women. There may be many skeletons in the cupboard, that may reveal to us that ‘all that glitters is not gold.’

2. A Panoramic View: Women of the NE Better off than Many

Before we look into the different issues related to women, a panoramic view may help. If one were to come to the region for the first time and try to observe things regarding women, this would be more or less the picture she/he gets. Women in Northeastern Tribal Societies seem, in many ways, to be better off than their counterparts in the rest of India. The women “enjoy a high status because their societies are egalitarian, they have no *purdah* system, there is no restriction on women’s movements, food habits and attire and widow remarriage, and when a woman is in trouble or when she is ill-treated by her husband, she is supported by her parents, brothers and clan members, etc (Zehol 2003: 300). Because of this, way back in the nineteen thirties, Furer-Haimendorf, speaking about the Naga women observed: “Many women in more civilized parts of India may well envy the women of the Naga Hills, their high status and their free and happy life, and if you measure the cultural level of the people by the social position and personal freedom of its women, you will think twice before looking down on the Nagas as savages” (Haimendorf 1933: 96). Tribal women, on the whole, seem to be free birds, free to go about where they like, free to mix with people whom they like, and free to have a life of their own. They also have

very powerful organizations like the Naga Mothers' Association (NMA) for the Angamis. This association exerts great influence on every aspect of Naga life and politics. Many other tribal women too have similar powerful organizations like Arunachal Pradesh Women Welfare Society (APWWS), the Mother's Union and *Lympung ki synjuk Ki Seng Kynthei* (Federation of Women's Organizations) in Meghalaya, Naga Women's Union, *Tangkhul Shanao Long* of Manipur), *Mizo Hmeichee Insuikhawm Pawl* (Mizoram), etc. Though these bodies may not have direct access to political life, they have very significant political impacts.

3. Domestic Domain: NE Women: Hostesses and Goddesses

As one enters a family, it is the woman who greets the visitors, welcomes one to the family and serves the guest. It is the woman who does all the household work; cooking, serving, cleaning etc. In short, she maintains the whole household. She looks into the education of the children and their upbringing. Equal opportunities are given to boys and girls but sometimes because of the financial constraints, preference may be given to boys in education. Infanticide is not usually heard of in the society. It is the woman who controls the economy of the family. In fact, she is the mistress of the family, especially in the matrilineal society. "In the Khasi culture, the woman was given names like *Ka Blei Ing* (goddess in the house) and *Ka Lukhimai* (guardian spirit of the house)" (War 1996: 16). It is "very common among the Khasi to say that we all come from the womb of our mother (*na kpoh ka kmie*), and that mother's love is the most compassionate because she has carried her child in her womb for nine months" (Siemlieh 2000: 47). Moreover, the "secondary family above the nuclear or immediate family, which is a kind of a loose joint family, is called *ka kpoh* (the womb). It is clear that identity is linked to a woman. By following the lineage along the mother's line, the Khasi society acknowledges that the identity of an individual in society is embedded in a woman. This is expressed in a saying, *Na ka kmie mih ka jaid, na u kpa wan ka rynieng* (From the mother springs the kind of [species or clan], from the father comes stature" (Siemlieh 2000: 47-48). The youngest daughter (*khaddu*) in the Khasi society is the custodian of the ancestral property. In the Garo soci-

ety, one of the daughters (*nokna*) is nominated by the parents to inherit the ancestral property (War 1996:10). “Naga women make decisions pertaining to home. Home is the woman’s domain; she is the hostess who entertains guests. In pre-Christian days the woman was also the family priestess who performed all household rites” (Chase-Roy 2000: 27). In the traditional Naga society “women also enjoyed certain reverence and respect in religion as ‘mediums,’ ‘diviners,’ ‘spirit bridges,’ ‘healers’ etc” (Chase-Roy 2000: 27). The Chekhesang and Angami Nagas speak of the Supreme Being as *Ukümünupü* and *Ukepenupfü*. God is referred to as feminine. The Maos also address God in the feminine gender. The Supreme Being is addressed by the term *Iyi Amono Pfüpei*, meaning our mother who gave us birth, and our caretaker (Lotsüro 2000: 20). This may be considered the greatest tribute paid to women. The Chakhesang Nagas have women village priestesses who are called *Mawop*. The mother of the family has a great role in deciding the marriage of the children. But there is no forced marriage; a girl/woman chooses her life partner. There is no dowry system; therefore, dowry deaths are not heard of in tribal society (Sharma 2001: 2).

However, a deeper look at the domestic life reveals a different picture. Women may look like bosses in the homes, but they are the ones who toil endlessly while the men folk can enjoy comparatively easy lives. Women are expected to be the first risers in the morning and the last to go to bed at night. This is especially true of village life. They must get up, start the fire, cook the food, fetch water and pound paddy. Men can afford to get up only when the food is ready. Even if they are exhausted with the day’s work, women, especially the young girls, must welcome the evening visitors, young men, to the family and stay awake till they decide to call it a day. This routine is repeated day in and day out. Women may seem to control the household but she is hardly given freedom to handle money. Except in matrilineal societies, the preference at birth is for the boy, and the boy gets preference for education, especially higher education. Even in matrilineal societies like the Khasis and the Garos, the status and role of the *nokna* (Garo) and *khadduh* (Khasi-Jaintia) are not exactly enhancing their status. The *nokna* “does not have control and authority over the property, which is managed by her father and the *mahari* (male relatives of the clan and those married in the clan) if

the *nokna* is still unmarried, or by her husband (*nokkrom* or resident son-in-law) if the *nokna* is married. Ownership and the status of the *nokna* (heiress), is therefore nominal; it seems to be more of an expedient practice so that a daughter is bound by custom to look after aged parents” (War 1990: 10) The same is true of the Khasi-Jaintia youngest daughter (*khadduh*). She does not “inherit, but she becomes the custodian of ancestral property which is in actual fact under the control of her maternal uncles (Kii kni). They make the decisions in the interest of the family and clan. However, since the *khadduh* is the family treasurer who has to meet expenses for the family affairs (births, naming ceremonies, weddings, funerals, etc.), she is allowed to make use of a considerable part of the family property” (War 1990: 10). But the father is the person “in the day-to-day affairs of a family who assumes the role of provider and householder. By assuming this role, the father automatically becomes executive head of the family in its day-to-day affairs. So, he normally takes all the decisions pertaining to and within the nuclear family with the mother playing only a supporting role. Therefore, the role of the Khasi man as maternal uncle (director) and the father (executive head) shows that strong patriarchal structures loom over the Khasi family.”³

4. Women in Public Domain play Supportive Roles

In the domestic domain, women have some visible status and role but in the public domain, even the surface level picture is bleak. Women hardly appear on the scene. However, let us examine the public domain at two levels: the village level (village politics) and the wider level of state or national politics.

4.1. In Village Administration

In traditional tribal societies, the village level administration is carried out by the village chief/headman assisted by the council of the village elders. Though traditionally, the headman and the elders of the village administer the affairs of the village, women are beginning to have a place in some societies like the Mizos, the Angamis, the Chakhesangs, the Sumis, etc. But they play a passive role. The case of Mizo women beginning to take part in village administration

grew out of the sad story of their experience during the days of insurgency in Mizoram in the sixties. Mizoram experienced one of the worst famines in 1960 because of 'mautam.'⁴ Most of the men were in the jungles fighting the Indian army. Women were left to themselves. At times, facing the threat of starvation, they had to sell whatever they had, including their bodies, to survive. The army also forced the people to group themselves into larger villages. Since most of the men were suspected of having connections with the militants, the women were inducted into the administration of these new villages. This is how Mizo women came to take a more active part in the public domain (Lalmuanpuii 2000: 22-26). It grew out of the pain and suffering they endured as only women can. Perhaps because of this, political emancipation is there to stay among the Mizo women. Of course, even in older times, some Mizo women did participate in politics but it was mostly the elite women. The wife of the village chief could take over the administrative duties at the death of her husband, if there was no heir, or in the name of the heir if he was still a minor (*The North East Sun* 2003: 11). This is applicable to many other tribes like the Maos, the Semas, Thadou-Kukis, etc. In a matrilineal society like Khasi, "women have historically been debarred from taking part in decision-making outside the home. The *Dorbar Shnong*, a traditional grassroots decision-making body, which is a vibrant institution that has survived the test of time, is still hesitant in allowing women to play an active and effective role. Though some local dorbars such as Laitumkhrah, Mawkhar and Jaiaw have women participants, and some are also included in the executive committee, things are still at a very nascent stage. It is taboo to think of a woman as the head of the dorbar even if she is qualified to be one. This arises from the fact that women are diffident about claiming their rights. Women who dabble in politics are termed busybodies" (*North-east Telegraph* 2002: 18).

4.2. In State and National Level Politics

Participation of women in state and national level politics is even less. In the present Meghalaya Assembly of 60 members, there are only three women legislative members. Nagaland has no woman member. But the very first state assembly of Mizoram had a woman member in the person of Mrs Lalhlimpuii. One may wonder why

women are not seen playing active roles in politics. When talking to a few women during the consultation on women, mentioned above, a number of reasons why Northeastern tribal women are not interested in politics became clear. They consider it a dirty job. Politics is dominated by money and manpower. Women feel that it is only for men. Some women take part in politics with much compulsion from some party members. Women's non-participation in politics can be also due to lack of educated and committed women in certain societies. Speaking for the tribals in Tripura, a woman said that male domination becomes a stumbling block for them. A Garo woman also gave the same reason for the non-participation of women in politics. Mizo women, on the other hand, are actively involved in politics. According to a Naga woman, there are not themselves interested in politics but they act as a backbone to men in politics. According to Patricia Mukhim, a renowned woman writer, "Women nurture the perception that politics is dirty and see themselves as unable to cope up with the pressures and pulls it involves. Women are particularly against the unethical methods adopted by political parties after every election when no clear majority emerges...The practice of muscle and money is alien to most women. They want to win an election on issues and on the principle of fair play" (*North-east Telegraph* 2002: 18). However things are changing. More and more tribal women are willing to contest in the elections. In this year's (2003) election in Mizoram, seven women contested. At present, Meghalaya has three women MLAs, There seems to be no discrimination against women candidates contesting the elections. As regards being Members of Parliament, only two Northeastern women have been elected: Rano Shaiza of Nagaland and Kim Gangte of Manipur.

4. 3. Powerful 'Mediators' (Demi) in War

Though one may not consider this institution strictly a political one, the Demi is certainly one of the most powerful ways in which the Naga women exercise their influence over the public domain. *Demi* (a Chakhesang word) means 'mediator.' A group of outstanding women of the village are called upon to function as mediators. The role of women as mediators in times of inter-tribal war or dispute is not unique to the Chakhesang Nagas but common to all the

Naga tribes like the Tangkhuls, Maos, Konyaks, etc. The Tangkhuls call them *Phukareila* (neutral ladies). They are highly respected for neutrality and called upon to act as ambassadors of peace (Zehol 1996: 30). Even in the head hunting days of old, if these women mediators come between the warring groups in the midst of a fierce fight, they had to stop their fight immediately out of respect for these women. These women cannot be harmed. It is taboo to harm them. This certainly implies the high regard the Nagas have for their women folk.

5. Active Contributors/Participants in Economic Domain

The economic status and role of women will be enhanced if they have property rights like owning, managing, inheriting or selling property. If they also can work for a salary and have control of income, it will add to their economic status (Zehol 2003: 300). An Angami girl does not inherit the ancestral property but she can be given the property bought by her own parents and she can dispose of it as she likes (Kelhou 2003: 55). Similarly a Mao Naga girl does not inherit the immovable property of the parents but she has a right over her husband's property. For example, when her husband dies, she has a right over the property. In the case of a divorce which is agreed upon mutually, the common property of the family is shared equally (Mao 1998: 40). However, in the Chakhesang society, during her marriage, a girl's parents would give her *Liina* (property both movable and immovable), which become more or less her absolute property. The parents could give her even the whole of their *Motsotsiili* (properties purchased during the life time of the couple), except the ancestral property. At the death of the husband, it was exclusively up to the wife to distribute the *Motsotsiili*. She could distribute the properties to her brothers or loved ones and her in-laws could not challenge her. During old age or impending death, the couple who were issueless would divide their *motsotsiili*. Once *Kirhipfiinu* (property movable or immovable, divided during the life time of the couple) is entered into by the couple, the husband's clan could not claim the share of the wife (Zehol and Zehol 1998: 64-65). We have already spoken about the Garo *nokna* and the Khasi *khadduh* as custodians and heiresses of ancestral property. Even if their con-

control over the properties was limited, it nonetheless enhances their economic status in the society. In the traditional tribal societies, the economy was mainly agricultural and the main system of agriculture was *jhuming* (slash and burn method or shifting cultivation). In this, the women had a greater role. Men were usually involved in the initial slashing of the forest. The rest of the cultivation like the sowing of seed, the weeding, etc. was left almost entirely to the women folk. Hence, in societies like the Kukis, the rich yield of paddy was attributed to women and a festival of celebrating the abundance of paddy called *Chang-Ai* (paddy feast) was organized by the husband for his wife. A number of tribal societies like the Chin-Kuki-Mizo group practise what is known as *man* (bride-price). The items of the bride-price consist of *dahpi* (big gong), *khichong* (necklaces with rare beads representing precious stones) and 5-10 *mithuns* (Gangte 1993: 94) (*gaur*, *bos gaurus*, Indian bison). *Mithun* was the most priced domestic animal owned by them. The term bride-price and the items used may make it appear as a commercial transaction. It has certainly an economic dimension in the sense that it is “a compensation for the economic loss, because of the girls being taken away from the family who, as is usual among the Kukis, are the main pillars of family economy” (Gangte 1993: 95).

Similarly Fernandes and Barbora state that the nomenclature, bride-price, “gives an impression that the man paid a price for the bride. In reality tribal tradition was to view it as a compensation for the loss of a worker, recognition of her active participation in the tribe’s economy that made her an economic asset, not a liability as in dowry giving societies” (Fernandes and Barbora 2002: 24). The father of the girl or the clan sets a high bride-price in order to symbolize the preciousness of the girl to the family (Gangte 1993: 95). The exact amount of the bride-price quoted is hardly realized. For example, the number of *mithuns* was never paid in real terms. It was usually paid in symbolic values of cash or kind. A *mithun* was costing about Rs. 40 in olden days, but even Rs. 5 could stand for a *mithun*. Nowadays a *mithun* can cost anything between Rs. 5000 to 10,000; however, a few hundred rupees or even some other items could be counted as *mithuns*. Another element worth recalling is that the bride-price is never to be paid fully at once, even if one could, but must be done over a long stretch of time. It should be not

completed when the woman is still alive. The social implication of this practice is the continued relationship between the mother's family and the children. Even after the death of the woman, there is what is known as *Longman* (price of the dead body). It is a ceremony in which the nearest living male member of the woman comes to the children killing an animal as a means of consoling them, and the children in turn give something to their uncle in memory of their mother. It is a symbolic reminder to the families concerned, that their relationship because of the mother should not end even after the death of the mother. The children of the woman address all the male members of their mother's clan as *pu* (literally the term is the same as grand father). The significance is that they must respect and honour the male members of their mother's clan as they honour and respect their own grandfather. The respect the Kukis have for the relations of their mothers is so great that no one will dare to displease them or insult them. The daughters of their maternal uncle as well as the girls of their mother's clan are prospective wives for the male children of the woman. All this is done because of the high regard and honour they have for the mother, the woman who gave them life. In the traditional rural based agricultural economy, women's contribution was enormous. Today some tribes are beginning to engage in urban based market economy. Here too, the role of women is vital as one can see in the markets of Shillong, Kohima, Aizawl. The famous *Nupi Keithel* (Women Market) of Imphal, Manipur, leaves no doubt that the economy is in their hands.⁵

6. Need for Liberation from Psychological Bias

The general picture of women, as noted earlier, is positive and enhancing but there are some deep-seated biases against them in many tribal communities. For example, in Mizo society there are traditional sayings that do not speak very well of women: "Crabs and women have no religion, crab-meat is no meat, and woman's word is no word. A woman's wisdom does not cross the village stream," and "a woman and a broken fence are meant to be replaced" (*The Northeast Telegraph* 2003: 16). A traditional Naga saying also has "while women give birth to children, men give birth to fire" implying that "men are simply born inventive and thus are leaders, whereas women are mere learners and followers" (Roy 2000: 28) A Garo

tribe saying states “as a goat is without teeth, so a woman lacks brains” (War 1996: 16) Lucy Zehol mentions negative attitudes of some other tribes regarding women (Zehol 2003: 301-303) For the Nishis of Arunachal, a man’s social status is reckoned in terms of the number of wives and *mithuns* he possesses. The Moyon Nagas of Manipur consider women as having no principles because they do not have a permanent clan, for their clans change into that of their husbands when they marry. The Kukis have the same attitude and call women “*phung neilou, chang neilou*” (a person without clan). For the Lotha Nagas, males have six kinds of strength while females have only five. For this reason they christen the boys on the sixth day and the girls on the fifth day. Even among the matrilineal society of the Khasis, the bias against women is “clearly reflected in the popular satirical saying: *Wei ba la kynih ka iar Kynthei, hangta la wai ka pyrthei* (Once a hen crows, then the world is going to end). The gravity and implication of the symbolic world and of this saying is clearly reflected in the political sphere where women find no place” (Siemlieh 2000: 49-50). The least men folk can do is to make a conscious effort to change this negative mind-set for the good of society in general and for the liberation of the women in particular. The actual role women play in society and the high status they enjoy in many areas of life make this bias an anomaly.

Conclusion

The discussion might have uncovered many skeletons in the cupboard of the apparently rosy picture of tribal women in the North-east. One thing is clear. No culture or system, either patriarchal or matrilineal, is perfect. Discussions are taking place, for example, on the merits and demerits of matrilineal system among the Khasis and the Garos of Meghalaya as shown by the papers of the book: *Matriliny in Meghalaya: Tradition and Change*. The solution also does not lie in doing away with one system or adopting another. Patriarchal and matrilineal systems are part of our cultural heritage. They have their positive values as well as negative ones. What needs to be done is to be open, and to constantly and critically subject our systems to close scrutiny to change the dehumanizing or oppressive elements in our cultures. As Christians, we must be able to subject our cultures to the transforming power of the Gospel values. The position of women

in the Northeastern Catholic churches is said to be lower than those of women in the CSI and CNI churches (War 1996: 16) This is the challenge that must be addressed. John Gray's now famous book *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus* tell us that the solution to men-women relationship lies not in doing away with their distinctive characteristic features but in recognizing and giving each its due importance and place. Put in another way, we can say that the solution is not to put one up at the other's expense but to realize their complementarity. They need each other for completion and wholeness. Equality does not mean being the same in everything. Men cannot be women as women cannot be men. Equality is to respect each other's uniqueness. What needs to be avoided or done away is whatever dehumanizes or oppresses.

While writing this paper, reports of alarming rates of wife beating were published in the local papers (*The Meghalaya Guardian* 2003: 1). According to these reports a survey conducted by the *National Health and Family Survey* (NHFS) has shown that the Northeastern states have recorded an alarming 74 per cent of husbands who beat their wives, while all India average is only 56 per cent. It further reports that most of the women in the region, except Nagaland, are likely to support wife-beating if the wife neglects the children and the house.

One possible explanation for this aberration could be the fact that the Northeast is undergoing a period of transition in every aspect of life. Many things are blurred. It could also be due to, on the one hand, women trying to assert themselves and claiming certain rights while, on the other hand, men are still trying to prevent this. Whatever the case might be, one thing seems to be emerging. Women are realizing more about their rights and privileges and are standing up to claim these, as in the **International Fortnight Protesting against Violence** in 2003 women and girls launched their rally in Shillong with the headline: **More Muscle to Women's Movements** (*The Telegraph Northeast* 2003: 15). The tribal women of the Northeast have much to be proud of, but they have to go many more miles before they realize their dreams and aspirations.

Notes

1. Taher, A. C. Bhagawati, "Ethnic Realities of Northeast India," Talk during a *Symposium on Culture and Formation*, 11-13 November, 2003, Guwahati.
2. A Consultation on women was organized by *Advisory Board for Missionary Activities* (AMA) at Guwahati, Assam, in August, 2003. Many of the things I am sharing in this paper are fruits of discussions in that Consultation. A number of recent publications and Seminars have also addressed issues of women in the Northeast. Cf. Soumen Sen, ed., *Women in Meghalaya* (Delhi: Daya Publishing House, 1992); Pariyaram M. Chacko, ed., *Matriliny in Meghalaya: Tradition and Change* (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 1998); Lucy Vashum Zehol, ed., *Women in Naga Society* (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 1998); Walter Fernandes and Sanjay Barbora, eds., *Changing women's Status in India: Focus on the Northeast* (Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2002); Walter Fernandes and Sanjay Barbora, eds., *Modernisation and Women's Status in North East India: A Comparative Study of Six Tribes* (Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2002).
3. Brightstar Siemlieh, *Patriarchy in Matriliny*, 49.
4. Famine resulting from the flowering of bamboo and tremendous increase in the number of rats. *Mau* means bamboo, *tam* means increase.
5. One could argue that the majority of these women are Hinduized Meitei women. But the fact is that they did not inherit this trait of active involvement in the economic affairs from Hinduism, but from their tribal past. Before they were converted to Hinduism, the Meiteis were also tribals.

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