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Matrilineal Khasi Society and Gender Issues in Governance

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Abstract

Gender continues to be an issue relegated to and addressed within specific social sectors. In spite of the massive policy commitments made following Beijing 1995 and numerous action plans to establish gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment, gender issues are found on the margins or continue to be neglected at the global level when it comes to designing policies and production-related strategies

The Khasis of North-east India have a matrilineal society. Descent is traced through the mother, but the father plays an important role in the material, mental life of the family and social welfare. The child gets the name from the mother. In Khasi traditional system, the youngest daughter of family will also inherit the property. A woman may end a marriage at her will with no objection from her husband. The Khasis have an unusual dedication toward matrilineal customs

The youngest daughter inherits the ancestral property and daughters are given preference in the division of property while males can own only self-acquired property. Even Christians are known to pass down their ancestral property through the female line.

Khasi women enjoy a high social status and play a significant role in socio-economic matters and household management. Many Khasis have taken up professions in civil services and in industries besides agriculture.

When most states of India are busy shunning the girl child by committing female feticide, participating in bride burning, demanding dowry or in short persecuting the weaker sex, Meghalaya is the only state that is holding a flame, a beacon of hope by putting the weaker sex on a strong pedestal of society. This is the state where woman power is at its peak.

The woman is considered the mistress of the household and the sole custodian of wealth and not just a proprietress. The father on the other hand is provider, master and guide of the family, with the uncle as the undisputed director of the ancestral property. The Khasis trace their descent through the mother for the property is handed over to the women, especially the youngest daughter (Ka khadduh). Such a legacy has empowered the Khasi woman to enjoy a position of importance and dignity. She is considered the custodian and preserver of her clan, family and lineage.

Social activists see addressing issues of good governance as a means to make development more participatory and more responsive to the needs of marginalized groups, including women. In practice, however, good governance has been dominated by policies aimed at "sound" management of the economy.

Preity Zinta said that the people of Meghalaya could prove as an ideal for the people of North India regarding the social status it confers on the 'girl child' and women in the society. "I am impressed by Meghalaya's matrilineal society that holds its women in high regard. The entire country should learn from the North East about the social status it confers on the female children and women in the society,"

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Introduction

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Meghalaya, a hill state in the northeastern part of India is the abode of the matrilineal tribes, namely the Khasis. According to the 1991 census there are 1,760,626 people in Meghalaya. The Khasi region of the state has 8,74,622 people. Most of the indigenous people are engaged in agriculture. Shifting cultivation is still common. However a sizable population has taken up modern professions, a large number being employed in Government and semi-Government institutions. Many are found in trade and business concerns.

The Khasis of North East India have a matrilineal society. Descent is traced through the mother, but the father plays an important role in the material, mental life of the family and social welfare. The child gets the name from the mother. In Khasi traditional society the youngest daughter of family inherits the property. A woman may end a marriage at her will with no objection from her husband. The Khasis have an unusual dedication toward matrilineal customs. The youngest daughter (*kakhadduh*) inherits the ancestral property and daughters are given preference in the division of property while males can own only self-acquired property. Even Christians families are known to pass down their ancestral property through the female line.

Khasi women enjoy a high social status and play a significant role in socio-economic matters and household management. Many Khasi have taken up professions in civil services and in industries besides agriculture. When most states of India are busy shunning the girl child by committing female foeticides, participating in bride burning, demanding dowry or in short persecuting the weaker sex, Meghalaya is the only state that is holding a beacon of hope by putting the weaker sex on a strong pedestal of society. This is the state where woman enjoys greater power.

The woman is considered the mistress of the household and the sole custodian of wealth and not just a proprietress. The father on the other hand is provider, master and guide of the family, with the uncle as the director of the ancestral property. The Khasis trace their descent through the mother. Such a legacy has empowered the Khasi woman to enjoy a position of importance and dignity. She is considered the custodian and preserver of her clan, family and lineage.

Khasi and Ashanti Societies Compared

The largest matrilineal unit of the Khasis is the *Kur* (clan). The members of a clan believed that they descended from a common ancestor. The *Kur* are strictly exogamous and any inter-marriage between its members is considered sin. Each clan has its own burial ground (*Mawahah*) where the bones of their members are interned. Besides, each clan has its common land and a council. Those members of a clan who live in one domestic unit or in different domestic units in the same neighbourhood constitute a lineage. Attendance of all members of lineage is the norm for common functions like marriage and death.

The critical difference between the two systems is that while both the principle of group membership and the line of authority run through the male line in patrilineal societies, they are separated, between males and females in matrilineal systems, that is, while the principle of group membership runs through the female sex, the line of authority goes through

the male sex. This crucial difference makes matrilineality a complex institution, more complex than that of patrilineality.

The crucial point in which the difference between the Khasi and Ashanti types lies, is the rule of inheritance. In matrilineal systems, as a rule, the ancestral property is inherited by the matrilineal descent group. The starting point of the difference is really in the ways of inheritance of the acquired property particularly by the husband.

In the Khasi type, if a man builds an independent house in which to live with his wife and children, that house and his acquired property during his matrimonial life automatically belong to and are inherited by his wife and children. On the other hand, in the Ashanti type, if a man builds an independent house in which to live with his wife and children, that house and his acquired property belong as a rule to him and are inherited by his matrilineal group, not by his wife and children.

The study by Uri Gneezy et. al. uses a controlled experiment to explore whether there are gender differences in selecting into competitive environments across two distinct societies: the Maasai in Tanzania and the Khasi in India. One unique aspect of these societies is that the Maasai represent a textbook example of a patriarchal society whereas the Khasi are matrilineal. Similar to the extant evidence drawn from experiments executed in Western cultures, Maasai men opt to compete at roughly twice the rate as Maasai women. Interestingly, this result is reversed amongst the Khasi, where women choose the competitive environment more than Khasi men. (Gneezy et al: 2008)

The study by He Zhonghua examines the effect of forestry policy devolution and economic development in two Mosuo matrilineal communities where women play a large role in the utilization, management and conservation of forest resource. Two matrilineal villages in Ningland, China are compared, the first in which forests are well protected, tourism has made villagers relatively rich and some negative influences on gender equality have begun to appear and the second where a traditional livelihood made from the forest has kept villagers

poor and deforestation is severe, but gender relations remain relatively balanced. The gender division of labour has been affected by tourism development, changes in forest use, regulation and ownership, problems in forest management, gender relations and Mosuo women's key role in afforestation. A lack of such development, by contrast, leads to a vicious cycle of forest degradation driven by the poverty of local people. In both cases, however, the Mosuo matrilineal system and its traditional use and regulation of forest resources helps to protect forests. (Zhonghua: 2005)

Gender Issues in Development

Gender is one manifestation of a general model of power which holds that individual and group behaviors produce social structures (ideologies, rules, institutions) which, in turn, reinforce and "normalize" those behaviors to the point where they are seen as common sense, as the "normal" order of things. Identities, roles, and relationships are, in this view of things, socially constructed, as are the constraints and opportunities that certain actors face regarding control of, access to, and use of tangible and intangible resources. *Empowerment* should be conceived of as both process and outcome that comprises three dimensions—agency, structure, and relationships.

The first, driven by the actor-centered notion of "*agency*," is in the aspirations, resources, actions and achievements of women themselves. Every woman has agency, every woman analyses, decides, and acts. The second is in the broader social *structures* that condition women's choices and chances. Structures include routines, patterns of relationships and interaction, and conventions that lead to taken-for-granted behavior; institutions that establish agreed-upon meanings, accepted forms of domination and agreed criteria for legitimizing the social order.

The third is in the character of the social *relationships* through which women negotiate their needs and rights with other social actors, including men. Both agency and structure are mediated through relationships between and among social actors while, at the same time, forms and patterns of relationships are deeply influenced by agency and structure. Empowerment, in part, consists in individual women building relationships, joint efforts, coalitions, and mutual support, in order to claim and expand agency, alter inequitable structures, and so realize rights and livelihood security.

Naila Kabeer proposes that the ability to exercise choice incorporates three inter-related dimensions: resources (current and claims to material, social and human resources), agency (processes of decision-making, negotiation, manipulation), and achievements (well-being outcomes).

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Gender and Governance and matrilineal Society

The unequal sharing of power leads to an unequal sharing of resources – time, incomes, property – between men and women. The consequences of this mal-distribution are evident in the disproportionately high number of women who are illiterate and living in extreme poverty. Redressing these inequalities requires a gendered analysis of the processes and structures of governance. Such an analysis suggests that the family (or household) and the community are sites of governance, in that they are spaces where people interact and in which power is exercised. Furthermore, these sites exist interdependently with the three tiers of government – local, national and international – as is evident from the way in which gender relations mediate and are mediated by regulations that span the public and private domains. (UNDP: 2005)

It is sometimes argued that the decentralization of government functions to the local level helps redress gender inequalities, because decentralization increases grassroots (and thus women's) representation. However, each centre of local power does not automatically allow in or encourage marginalized groups to participate in any of their decision-making or have ways of ensuring their representation. Indeed, women and their interests, needs, perspectives and demands have not been regarded as deserving of specific representation.

The legitimacy of existing governance structures and processes must be questioned when the interests and voices of over half the population are not reflected in the decisions that are made. This crisis of legitimacy is evident in the gendered nature of conflict; women rarely decide on or engage in wars but always suffer their consequences, as refugees and victims of random and deliberate violence. (Ibid: 2005).

A gendered analysis of governance exposes the reality and severity of women's subordination. But it may also generate an agenda for change, which recognizes that change is possible and that it must draw on existing good practice, for example with regard to identifying electoral systems which support women's participation and effecting civil service reform through equal opportunity and affirmative action programmes.

Governance, like many other related concepts and processes, is presumed to be gender-neutral in that it does not represent the interests or ideology of one sex over another. However, western political and economic theory, on which are based most of the practices and institutions of the modern state and civil society, placed man at the centre of the body politic and locked women in the household, as political, social and economic dependents (Ashworth 1992).

Conclusion

There is no bride burning or rape in matrilineal Khasi society. The custom of bride price among tribe is based on the recognition of the importance of women's role in economic activities. In Khasi society women take part in trade which elsewhere is in the hands of men.

Women have active role in natural resource management and environment protection. There is no poverty and the standard of living and the level of educational and health is very high.

In this society woman inherit the property. The name of the children is given in mother's name. This ownership right to property is absolutely essential to make women empowerment realistic. This does not exist in advanced western society either. Women in the west got voting rights only few decades ago. In Khasi society woman has the right to select a man, cohabit with him and marry him on her own choice. This is absent in caste Hindu society.

In this era of globalization it is necessary to protect and nurture these institutions for the comprehensive development of society.

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