



# Traditional gender roles and changing practices in the State of Meghalaya

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## ABSTRACT

Though a large number of communities around the globe follow a patrilineal system in which the lineage is traced through the father, there are certain parts where the lineage is traced through the mother, known as the matrilineally. A few communities of Southern and North-Eastern part of India follow the matrilineal system, and the “Khasi tribe” of Meghalaya in the North-Eastern region is one such group. The present research aims to study the traditional gender roles and the changing practices in the matrilineal community of the Khasi tribe in Meghalaya. A close-ended questionnaire and a semi structured interview were used keeping in mind a twofold objective of study. A total of 70 questionnaires were filled by 47 females and 23 males from four villages of Meghalaya (Ialong, Mawteneng, Kdonghulu and Smit) and interviews of 5 females and 2 males were conducted. Data was analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The general trends that exist in the traditional gender roles are highlighted and represented using graphs. A descriptive account of the practices related to the field of education, marriage, property, politics and the Khasi society in general as narrated by the resident villagers is discussed. Broadly speaking, as an outcome of the mentioned study we have found that the matrilineal system is still being practiced without much exception. Moreover, irrespective of their educational and financial status, it has been observed that in all the four villages the people did not wish to do apart with their tradition as they find their culture ‘unique’.

**Keywords:** *Gender, Kdonghulu, Khasi, Ialong, matrilineally, Mawteneng, Meghalaya, patriarchy and Smit.*

## INTRODUCTION

Human civilization has traced a long way since the pre-historic times and in the process of biological evolution man has tried to define his relationship with the surroundings he inhabits. The day to day activities and practices of particular groups of people in specific areas lead to the formation of various cultures around the globe. Cultural identity becomes an inseparable and all encompassing aspect of humankind and still continues to be of utmost sociological significance. Biologically, human population comprises two or more sexes and

the sexual dimorphism finds expression in language as 'male' and 'female'. The cultural explanation of differences between the sexes further establishes roles specific to the respective sexes leading to the formation of distinct genders. Ann Oakley [5], in the introduction to her book *Sex, Gender and Society*, 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... [and] how much influence does culture have?" The debate relating to gender disparity in various centuries has brought to the fore the marginalised status of women and their subjugation in the dominant patriarchal cultural order. Regarded as the weaker sex, pioneering gender studies have found women in most part of the world as being the victims of ideological suppression and their conformation to gender based power dynamics continues to reinforce the norms that fuel cultural subjection of women. Various Anthropological and Sociological studies bear testimony to the fact that all the divisions of gender related roles, labour, and power stem from this very socially constructed classification. Women have been largely found to be confined to the four walls and their domestic role is even glorified as the essential attribute of the quintessential female. Femininity is regarded synonymous with meek submission and docile behaviour. In such a cultural condition the lineage is 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 is basically the 'rule by the male head of a social unit (like family, tribe)' (see [1], Chapter 1, pg.8). Though, with education and awareness, the scenario is said to be changing which is evident as women enter the public domain and prove their mettle. Yet it is widely believed and strongly felt that gender equality is still a farfetched dream.

Worldwide, a large number of communities follow a patrilineal system in which the lineage is traced through the father though Matriliney has always existed side by side [3] but in a very low profile. Certain communities from Southern and North-Eastern India follow the matrilineal system. The Khasi tribe of Meghalaya in the North-Eastern region is one such group. The descent is traced through the mother as a result of which children take up the mother's family name, the residential pattern is "matrilocal" where the husband comes to the wife's house after marriage. Here, the property is inherited by the youngest daughter on whom then lies the responsibility of looking after the parents, the maternal uncle playing an important role in the family decision making process; these form the chief characteristics of a matrilineal system [3].

Surviving the cultural clash with the rest of the patriarchal world, Meghalaya's matrilineal society is a repository of traditional uniqueness. The research, based on a sample survey of the traditional gender roles in the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya, aims to juxtapose the culture of the yore against the influences of modern day city life, immigration and inter-cultural interactions and study the changing practices of the society in this effect. Based on the data collected through a close-ended questionnaire and a semi structured interview the report endeavours to tabulate quantitatively the results obtained through the sample survey and study general trends to draw research based conclusions that would serve to support the qualitative analyses of the fieldwork conducted in a stipulated time-frame. Keeping in mind the time constraint and the vastness of the cultural tradition under study, the report is restricted to the findings of the areas visited and studied with respect to the Khasi tribe.

## METHODOLOGY

The present study undertakes a one shot descriptive method in which data was collected from the participants at one go. As a method of study: a close-ended questionnaire, and a semi structured interview were used, keeping in mind a twofold objective of the study. The close ended questionnaire contained questions relating to the domestic, social, political and economical spheres of life whereas the interview contained personal opinions and views about the aforementioned spheres.

For our study we collected a sample data by interacting with the people of some rural areas of Meghalaya in the vicinity of Shillong. The criteria to be chosen in the sample required the individual to be a resident of Khasi hills of Meghalaya. A non-probability sampling was done through the purposive sampling technique to select the participant. To collect the data for the purpose of quantitative analysis the following questionnaire was used.

### QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Age (Optional): \_\_\_\_\_  
Number of members in the family: \_\_\_\_\_ (Male- \_\_\_\_\_, Female- \_\_\_\_\_)  
Location: \_\_\_\_\_  
Educational status: \_\_\_\_\_  
Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

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Please answer the following questions in **yes / no**.

1. (a) Have you been taught / talked to from a very young age to take up domestic responsibilities?  
(b) Was your brother also taught/talked to about domestic chores?  
(c) Have you ever observed any differences in your upbringing vis-a-vis your brother (s)?  
(d) If yes, with the passage of time do you see any change in the society regarding the same?
2. (a) In your society, are the girls given an equal opportunity for education as the boys?  
(b) Was the same true in your case?  
(c) If no, with the passage of time do you see any change in this practice?
3. (a) Are there any female members in your family who are earning?  
(b) If yes, how many? Ans –  
(c) Is the female(s) income in your family a major part of the household economy?
4. Do the male members participate in the functioning of the family:  
(a) Domestically? (b) Socially? (c) Economically?
5. (a) What is the age that females are required to get married as per the traditions?  
Ans.-  
(b) Do the females have the final say for their marriage?
6. (a) Do the females have a say in the reproductive matters?

- (b) Is a girl child more preferred as compared to a boy child?
7. Do the female members in your family have a 'say' in expressing their opinion about important issues, viz., economic and social?
  8.
    - (a) Are you aware of the traditional inheritance laws, specially related to the ownership of property?
    - (b) Does the ownership right of property in the family usually lie with the female member?
    - (c) Have you noticed any changes in the same with the passage of time?
    - (d) If yes, is this change a positive one?
  9.
    - (a) Do women in the family exercise their political rights freely?
    - (b) Do you feel that women in family actively take part in politics?
  10.
    - (a) Do you see in your society any influence of the outside patriarchal system?
    - (b) If yes, do you welcome the change?

For a more comprehensive study the questions touched upon in the questionnaire needed to be elucidated in order to give the objective opinions a subjective depth. Structured solely for this purpose, the interview gave insights into the personal opinions of the Khasi people. Being the first hand account of traditional practices and cultural information, the interviews gave the study more detailed and authentic qualitative data. The interview, being pre-structured but liable to impromptu alterations, mainly dealt with the queries regarding the changing patterns of the tradition of Matriliney in Meghalaya. To conduct the interviews the below given sample questions were used.

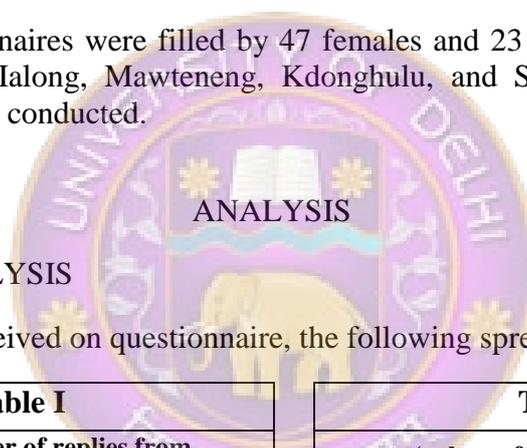
#### SAMPLE QUESTIONS

- Q.1. What exactly is the matrilineal tradition, as traced through the Khasis of yore, supposed to espouse?
- Q.2. Do you think it is true that the city life is affecting the Khasi culture (matrilineally per say)?
- Q.3. How far and in what manner is has the immigration, inter-cultural interaction and the mass media in the modern society affected the tribal culture according to you?
- Q.4. Is it true that the Khasi women turn down the marriage proposals of the Khasi men because they regard them as "unsophisticated and poorly educated"? How true is this claim that some Khasi village boys might never get to attend school, while their sisters may even be educated up to the university level?
- Q.5. Do you agree that, to gain legal access to the native land and property, Khasi women are being used by the non-Khasi immigrants and the plainmen? In your opinion, should the women be disowned as soon as they marry outside the tribe?
- Q.6. Is it true that with the changing times the Khasi Villages are also using the father's last name and following a more patriarchal system? How far is it true that "depression,

anger and resentment are pervasive among young men in the small villages where tradition is the strongest?”

- Q.7. Do you recognize the Khasi culture and its traditional Matriliney as a unique and harmonious one or do you believe the dominant patriarchal order is much more preferable in order to keep pace with the changing times? If yes, why?
- Q.8. Are you aware of the Men Rights Associations functioning throughout Meghalaya? According to you are their claims of Matriliney being the root cause of ills like divorce, alcoholism amongst men, substance abuse etc valid?
- Q.9. Do you believe it is “modern” to have a patrilineal society? What according to you might be the fault lines in the existing matrilineal culture along which such backlashes (among Khasi men and even some women) are emerging?
- Q.10. How far is it true that “men consult their wives before voting in public forums, and the women agree to stay at home when votes are cast”? What is the reason behind such a settlement?

A total of 70 questionnaires were filled by 47 females and 23 males primarily from four villages of Meghalaya (Ialong, Mawteneng, Kdonghulu, and Smit) and interviews of 5 females and 2 males were conducted.



**ANALYSIS**

**QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS**

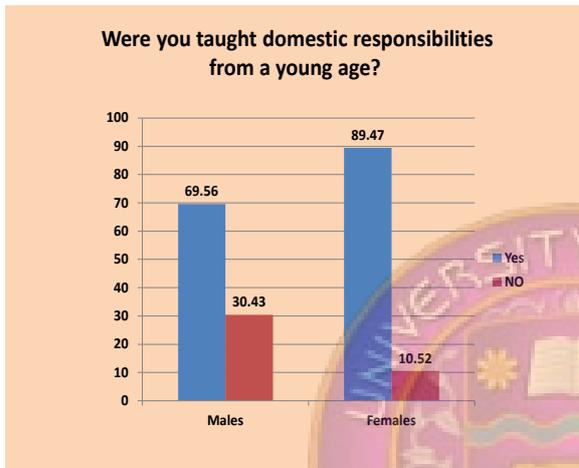
Based on the answers received on questionnaire, the following spreadsheet was made.

Q's	<b>Table I</b>				<b>Table II</b>			
	<b>(actual number of replies from the filled in questionnaire)</b>				<b>(values of Table I in % age )</b>			
	<b>Males</b>		<b>Females</b>		<b>Males</b>		<b>Females</b>	
	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
1a	16	7	34	4	69.57	30.43	89.47	10.53
B	19	4	38	9	82.61	17.39	80.85	19.15
C	3	18	7	39	14.29	85.71	15.22	84.78
D	3	1	11	15	75.00	25.00	42.31	57.69
2a	21	2	44	3	91.30	8.70	93.62	6.38
B	22	1	43	3	95.65	4.35	93.48	6.52
C	1	2	2	17	33.33	66.67	10.53	89.47
3a	14	9	40	7	60.87	39.13	85.11	14.89
B	12	10			54.55	45.45		
C			17	19			47.22	52.78
4a	19	4	41	5	82.61	17.39	89.13	10.87
B	21	2	45	2	91.30	8.70	95.74	4.26
C	20	3	44	2	86.96	13.04	95.65	4.35
5a	20	2			90.91	9.09		
B			45	2			95.74	4.26
6a	21	2	42	4	91.30	8.70	91.30	8.70
B	8	15	15	32	34.78	65.22	31.91	68.09

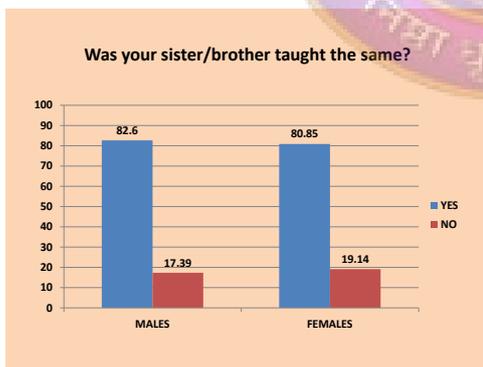
7	21	2	44	3
8a	21	2	43	4
B	18	4	41	6
C	11	11	17	30
D	8	3	13	7
9a	20	3	42	5
B	14	9	30	17
10a	10	13	19	27
B	5	4	10	18

91.30	8.70	93.62	6.38
91.30	8.70	91.49	8.51
81.82	18.18	87.23	12.77
50.00	50.00	36.17	63.83
72.73	27.27	65.00	35.00
86.96	13.04	89.36	10.64
60.87	39.13	63.83	36.17
43.48	56.52	41.30	58.70
55.56	44.44	35.71	64.29

Using the data collected in the above table, the following graphs are obtained with the help of MS-Excel package, which give us a highlight for the main trends in the responses.



Graph 1: Based upon the responses of Q. 1(a).

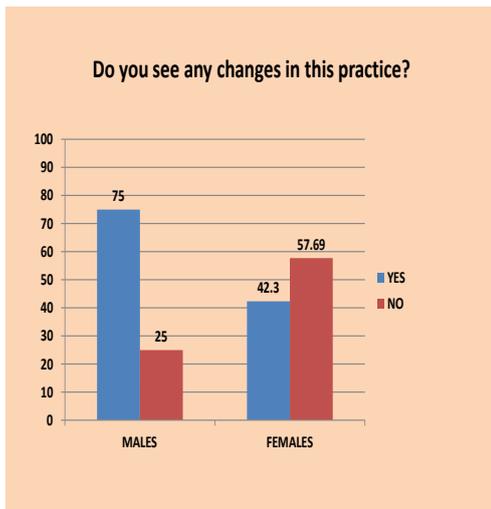


Graph 2: Based upon the responses of Q. 1(b & c).

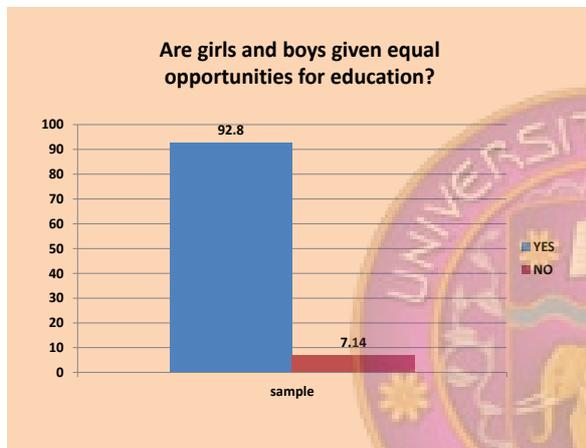
Out of the 23 males who were given the questionnaire 69.56 % answered “yes” that they were taught domestic responsibilities from a young age; whereas 30.43 % answered that they weren’t. Among the 38 females who answered the questionnaire - 89.47 % answered “yes” to this question, whereas 10.52 % answered “no”. This shows that majority of men and women are taught domestic responsibilities from childhood.

Among the 23 males 82.6% agreed that their sisters were also taught these domestic responsibilities and 80.85% of women agreed that their brothers were also taught the same. This further reiterates the fact that, in terms of domestic responsibilities, there exists less difference in the way males and females are brought up.

75 % of the men agreed that they saw changes in the erstwhile stringent division of labour. While only 42 % of the women agree that they see changes in this practice with time. As reported by James Perry [6], males supposedly felt “less than they should” because they had no ownership rights over the land and property. The statistical data appears to be pointing towards an inclination for a change that would make men feel at par with the women in terms of property related rights. Such questions were further taken up to get a more comprehensive and detailed opinions in the interview.



**Graph 3:** Based upon the responses of Q. 1(d).



**Graph 4:** Based upon the responses of Q. 2(a).

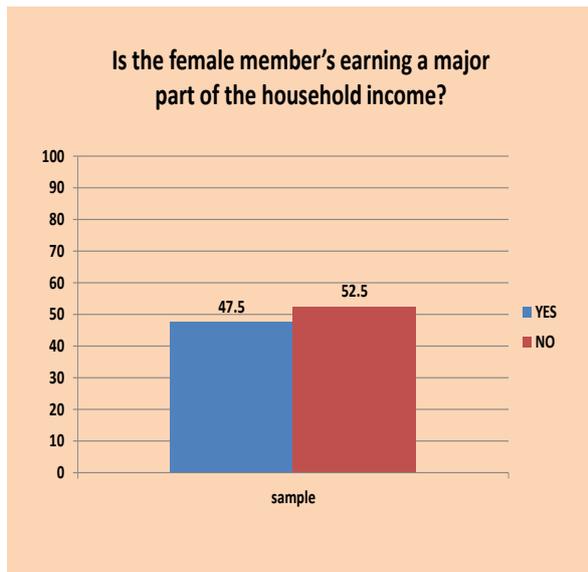
92.8 % of the 70 people answered in the affirmative that boys and girls are given equal opportunities for education. It appears, in accordance with the findings, that in the Khasi tradition discrimination in terms of gender with respect to schooling and educational opportunities is far less.



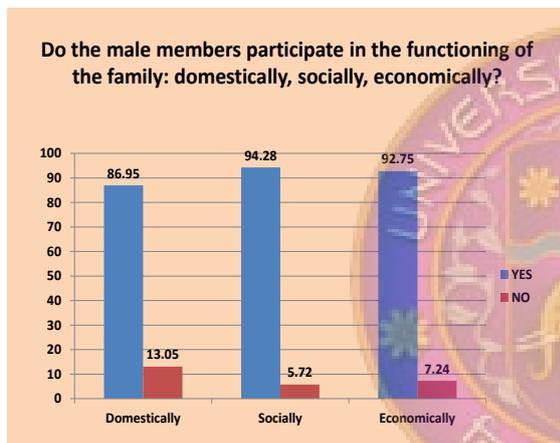
**Graph 5:** Based upon the responses of Q. 3(a).

77.14 % of people who answered the questionnaire said that the female members in their family were working. This indicates that in majority of the families following the Khasi tradition (who were approached), female members were earning.

Out of the 37 people who filled in the questionnaire, 47.5 % answered that the female member's earning was a major part of the household income whereas 52.5% answered otherwise. This shows that in many Khasi families under consideration, the major income of the household came from the earnings of the female member. The graph in fact shows almost a balance in the sample, with 47 % of families agreeing that the female's earning constitutes a major part of the household income and 52.5 % stating the opposite.



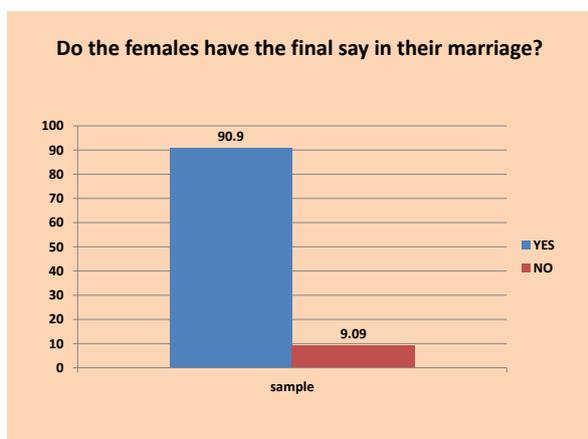
**Graph 6:** Based upon the responses of Q. 3(c).



**Graph 7:** Based upon the responses of Q. 4.

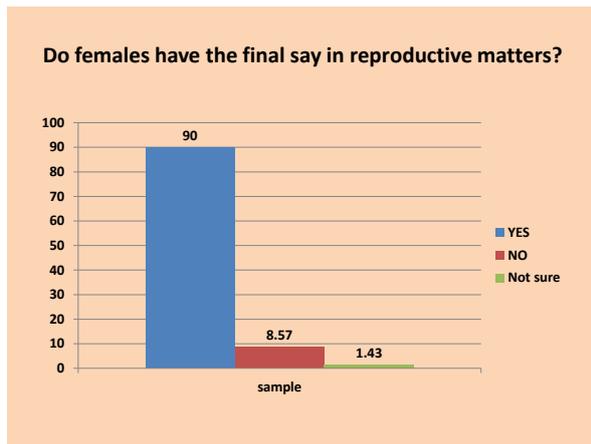
From the graphs, it can be seen that in all three spheres namely domestic, social and economic, the male members participate as much as the females in a Matriliney. This information provides us insight into the myth of Matriliney: that women hold all the power and are the major decision makers.

90.9% out of 22 people answered that yes, women do have the final say in their marriage. A mere 9.09 % answered otherwise. This point towards the autonomy in decision making that women enjoy in these households.



**Graph 8:** Based upon the responses of Q. 5(b).

90 % of the total sample agreed that women do have the final say in reproductive matters like family planning, gaps between child births etc. 8.57 % answered no whereas, 1.43 % of the people weren't quite sure. The staggering statistics is furthering the evidence of the fact that women are free to exercise their reproductive rights in this matrilineal tradition.



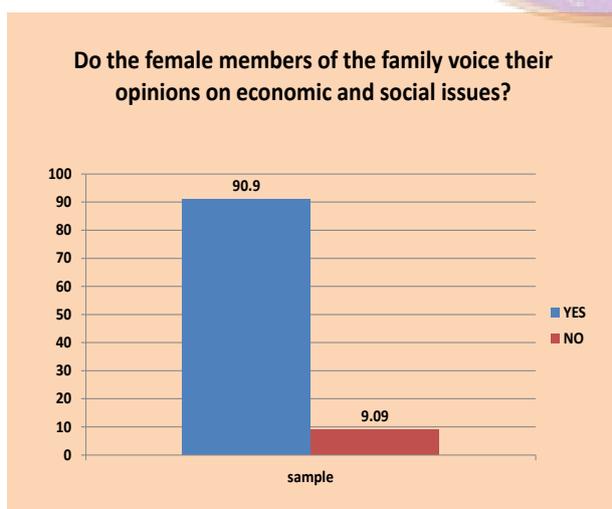
**Graph 9:** Based upon the responses of Q. 6(a).



**Graph 10:** Based upon the responses of Q. 6(b).

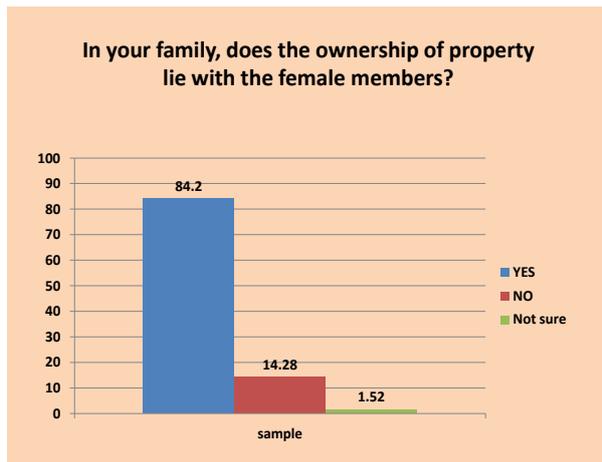
67.14% of the sample answered “no” whereas 32.85 % answered “yes” to this question. This shows the possibility of the fact that majority do not, per say, prefer a girl child over a boy child or vice-versa.

90.9 % of the sample agreed that females do voice their opinions on economic and social issues whereas a mere 9.09 % did not. This indicates that women, as much as men, participate and voice their opinions on important economic and social issues.

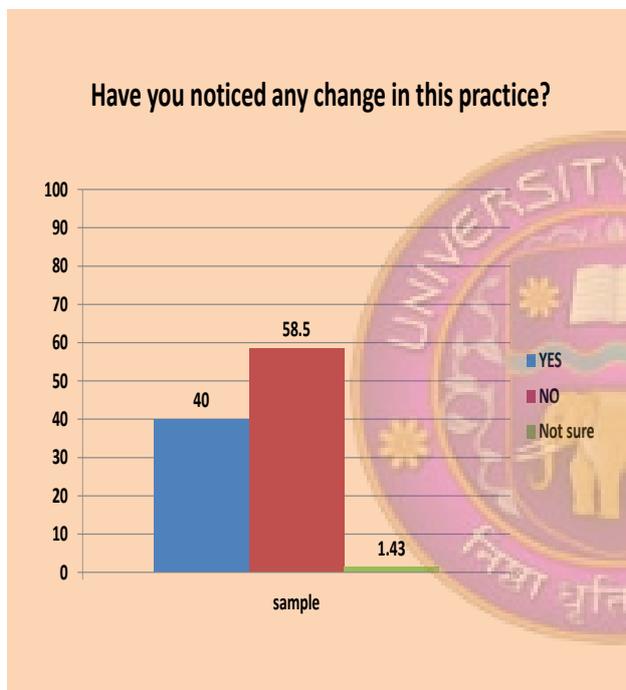


**Graph 11:** Based upon the responses of Q. 7.

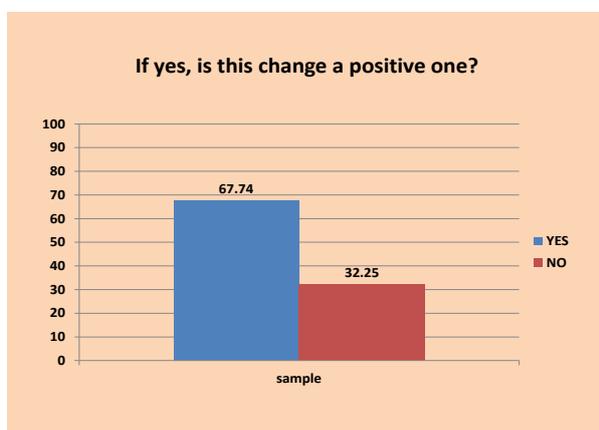
84.2% out of nearly 70 people, answered that yes, the ownership of property does lie with the female members of the family. 14.28 % of the sample, however, answered otherwise whereas 1.52 % weren't sure of either. These numbers might indicate that although there might be some gradual changes in the tradition, the inheritance and ownership of property rests mainly with the female members of the family.



**Graph 12:** Based upon the responses of Q. 8(b).



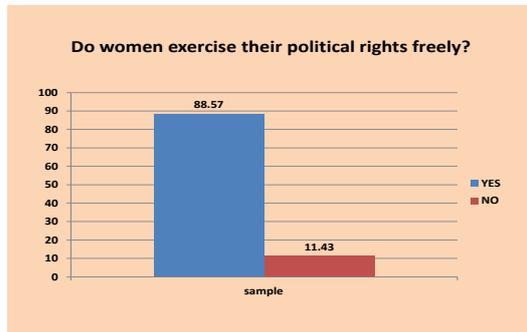
**Graph 13:** Based upon the responses of Q. 8(c).



58.5% of the people in the sample believed that there have been few changes in this practice whereas 40 % thinks that the practice of the females inheriting and owning property is changing. The former believe that the most stringent of the Khasi traditions is the law of inheritance that entitles the youngest daughter in the family or the 'khamkadun' to inherit the majority of the family's property and wealth. The latter, however, sees this tradition changing gradually and both males and females sharing the family property. However, the majority seems to deny that this practice is actually changing.

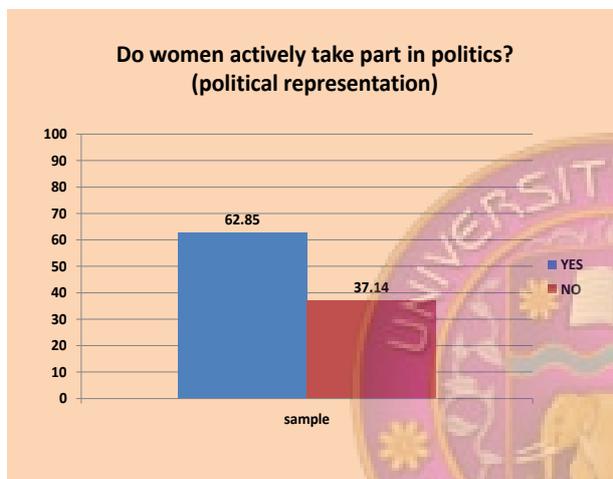
67.74 % of the people who answered yes, the traditional laws of matrilineal inheritance are changing; also felt that this change is a positive one. Their reasoning was that there is a more equal division of property, usually according to the parent's discretion and the resources available which seemed fairer to them. 32.25 % thought that this was not a positive change as one should be encouraged to value the tradition and adhere to the same.

**Graph 14:** Based upon the responses of Q. 8(d).



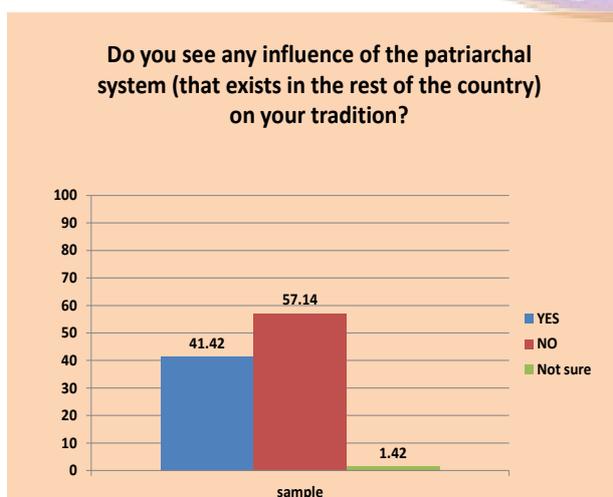
88.57 % agreed that women do exercise their political rights freely whereas 11.43 % responded otherwise. This is pointing to the fact that majority of women do exercise their political rights.

**Graph 15:** Based upon the responses of Q. 9(a).



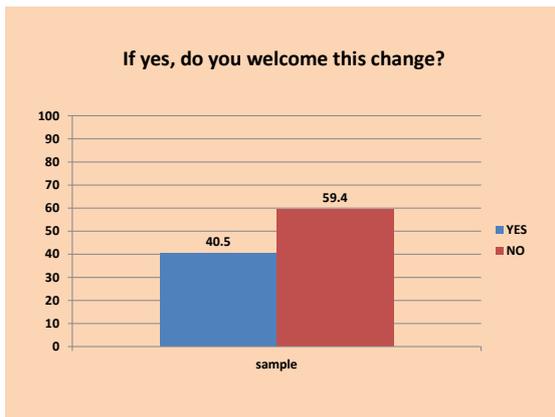
62.85 % people agreed that women do actively take part in politics (in terms of political representation in self governing bodies) whereas 37.14 % people said that they don't. From general observations it was found that women's representation in political bodies were lacking. Some villagers also reported that women were not allowed to be a part of the self governing bodies in the villages called "Darbar Shnong".

**Graph 16:** Based upon the responses of Q. 9(b).



57.14 % of the people in the sample agreed that the patriarchal system has been and is influencing the Khasi tradition. 41.42 % of them answered otherwise. 1.42 % weren't sure of either.

**Graph 17:** Based upon the responses of Q. 10(a).



59.4 % answered in yes, i.e., they do welcome this change whereas 40.5 % answered no.

**Graph 18:** Based upon the responses of Q. 10(b).

## INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

This is an analysis of the seven interviews taken from the Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, India. The sites of research were four villages in Jaintia Hills along with the cities of Shillong and Cherrapunjee. The villages were chosen by random selection. Five women and two men have been interviewed. They were interviewed in different locations and were in no way related to each other. They have been chosen by interviewees randomly and there have been no specific criteria for their selection. However, the fact that they are from different age groups, sexes, classes, professions and families gives us different opinions and a more holistic view of the matrilineal system of the Khasis under study. The findings are based only on the limited research conducted by our team and does not make any assumptions about the different kinds of people who are living in Meghalaya or their actual living conditions. Culture is a constantly changing entity and the study documents only certain observations that have come out of the ground research. In spite of the differences in the social contexts, there are certain trends and commonalities in the interviews. For effective analysis they have been categorised in the following way:

### Matriliny

The secondary texts that were referred to, stated that matrilineal system existed in some parts of India and Meghalaya being one such unique state having a surviving matrilineal tradition was taken up as the area of study for this respective project. The interviews conducted in the due course of the project related field-work revealed that Matriliny is an integral part of the Khasi society of Meghalaya since time immemorial. While getting the questionnaire filled with the help of our translator Madam Mimi in Kdonghulu village of Ri Bhoi District, a sixty-two year old woman, Priscilla Rymbai was asked how the entire concept of matrilineally came about. In reply to the same she said that she doesn't know as "*it has always been there*".

After interviewing more people it was found that due to the warrior nature of tribes, men used to stay away from their land in order to martially protect their tribe and hence fighting inter-tribal wars that kept them gone for years together. Hence, it gradually evolved that women became the care-takers of the land and property and eventually the children grew up taking their mother's title. In this way the entire lineage came to be traced along the mother's title and matrilocal marriages began to happen. Further it was revealed that the youngest daughter

known as the “*khamkadun*” was the one who inherited the entire property according to the tradition but with the passage of time property is being in some measures shared amongst the siblings. The sixteen year old Ibakordor Phama of Ialong village in Khliehphyunap (West Jaintia Hills District) called her few months old cousin sister “*the queen of the house*”.

It was confirmed in all the interviews that even though there have been some change in the thought process with progressive as well as modern education, but the cultural system has stayed intact and still continues throughout the villages and cities. A primary school teacher, Shivolet Jalong interviewed in the village Mawteneng, Ri Bhoi District Meghalaya said, “Actually in the past according to tradition the women take control but now a days it is not like that. People are wise so they must decide together. According to me, in our tradition women enjoy maximum power. In other cultures I find it oppressive.” She further said that it is especially continuing through the class differences that exist in society meaning that people of a higher class who can ‘afford’ to give their children equal rights do so while the ‘natural’ way to go about passing on property among the lower classes is to give it to the youngest daughter because of lack of education and awareness.

A school headmistress who was interviewed in a village called Ialong in Khliehphyunap, West Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya said that among illiterate Khasis, females are still the heads of the household and they are very strict about the matrilineal tradition which has been passed on to them. She also added that property is irrevocably related to titles and those who have titles are given the property. It was informed that the men who were demanding for the father's titles to be taken were doing so mainly so that they can get access to property. Groups like Syng Rymmpai Thammai (SRT) who are fighting for men's rights mainly so that they can get more access to property which is traditionally not given to men. When asked about her views on SRT, Madam Mimi said, “*Thammai means ‘change’. They want to make it into a new generation.*” Further regarding the relation between taking title and gaining access to property she said, “*When they want the title to be changed the property also shifts to the father. Once you ask for father's title the property also is asked for.*” Asked whether she thinks that in the villages the matrilineal tradition is still alive and in the city it is dwindling, she responded, “*Even in the city 80 % still want to preserve it.*” Asked whether she agrees with such Men's Rights Groups she said, “*First thing, I support Matriliny myself, because once you change it into patriarchal or patrilineal system the whole thing changes. In our society when we give them the title of the mother the father has a different title. So even if the male comes to the wife's house, he is not supposed to change his title. In our culture we cannot marry anyone of the same clan also. It would be a consanguine marriage. So in our society you'll find very less handicap people because we are very strict in this case. Though there are handicap people but very less.*” This relates to the concern raised for Matriliny in the light of Patriliney being desired in the modern world in James Perry's article [6] in Shillong Times entitled ‘Some thoughts on Khasi Matriliny’, “within a generation or two many will not know if they are marrying/dating a relative, since they have taken their father's clan name while others continue taking their mother's.”

## Marriages

It was found through all the interviews that love marriages are common in Khasi culture and women have the final say in marriage. A retired doctor P. Kharbuli who was the second of eight sisters and stayed with her nuclear family only, was interviewed in Smit Village of Wahingsyiem District. She said that love marriages are a norm; “*Money is devil, love is God. We marry out of love and not out of dowry and build family out of love and trust.*” But as

Madam Mimi said, intra-clan marriages were found to be a taboo. It was also reported in the interviews that people marry within the same religion since there are very few places where a mixed population lives.

The villages covered were either entirely Catholic or entirely Hindu. For example Kdonghulu village was only inhabited by Christians. The impact of religion on the matrilineal tradition was found to be negligible as Madam Mimi who was a Christian herself said, *“As Christians also we take the title of the mother. We do not give the title of the father. It is just that the religion is different.”* Further it was found that arranged marriages took place but were few in number. *“I have seen only TWO arranged marriages in my life”*, said John Lyngdoh, a farmer in Kdonghulu. Women have a say in deciding who they are going to marry, *“I decide who I marry, when I marry, if I marry”*, said a young woman from Ialong village who refused to tell her name.

Furthermore it was said that divorces aren't a taboo but occur very rarely even though cases of domestic violence exist. According to Dr. P. Kharbuli the wife has the right *“to chase her husband out”* if he tortures her but she said it is a “rare” occurrence in the interiors except for certain chronic cases where the husband is a drunkard and so she said *“when the male will roar like a tiger or a lion”* the woman has to part with him. Also she added that if females do not earn males *“beat”* and *“torture”* the wife. Therefore females need to take their own stand. As far as the divorces are concerned even in villages like Mawteneng where people speak only Khasi and haven't been educated a lot, it was found that even though divorces happen rarely, they take place without social ostracization. It has been observed that many men marry the youngest daughter only for her property though in more educated and urbane localities, both the spouses own property together. Mr. John Lyngdoh who was interviewed said that even though the property belonged to his wife, they had invested in property after marriage and now they owned it together.

### Property

It was found that people generally preferred to keep their ancestral property instead of selling it. Out of all the families that were spoken to and all the people who were interviewed, none of them had sold their ancestral property. In more educated families, they also invested in property to add to the family wealth. They divided it among all the children even if certain members don't stay with the family or are going away to work/study. Dr. P. Kharbuli told that as a result of the stringent old traditional adherence her younger sister got all the property and as a result she had to feed for her own self. She said that she herself was fighting for the division of land between all the sisters. As for herself she'd divide her property equally among her children. She even said that sometimes men may feel *“powerless”* and *“desperate”* because some females are *“dominating”*.

It was found through other interviews as well that boys were beginning to get a share in the property but only among educated and upper class families. But among less educated and lower classes, the tradition of passing on the property to the youngest daughter continues without there being much opposition to it since they do not think it renders men powerless. Assumption behind a matrilineal system was found to be that men are physically stronger and can fend for themselves. *“Men should also work in the Khasi tradition. We make them work because we think they are strong and they can earn more than the woman. So if they go outside they can at least survive. Women are not always strong so they have a part in the property.”* said Madam Mimi. Thus as a measure to give women more security, property is given to her.

## Education

It was found that both girls and boys were given equal opportunities to study in most of the families that were interviewed. However, it was also said that if resources were limited then children were sent to school based on their abilities/interest/will according to a headmistress interviewed in Ialong village. Madam Mimi was recorded saying, *“Yes, we love the girls as well as the boys equally. There are some parents that I have heard of who love their daughters more than sons. It depends on your own mentality but according to our society we love boys and girls equally, since the beginning.”* According to Dr. Kharbuli education is becoming more important and people are taking their own decisions, *“the world has changed with education”*. As per Madam Mimi, *“[the husband] has to hold his own title. So he retains it. He maybe a father to his children but he is also a “mama” (uncle to his sister’s children). As a “mama” he has such a good authority. He has an authority over his nieces and nephews. The respect for the “mama” is very high. The male has strong powers as “mama”. The first hair cut after one year of the baby’s birth will be done by the “mama”.*”

But according to Dr. Kharbuli’s account, uncles now a day hold less power regarding the property and are less interfering which she validated by quoting example of her own brother who lives separately with his own family and does not, as per her, interfere in their family matters. Hence it was found that people understood the importance of making decisions together and giving rights to all their children. *“Education is the main thing. Without education there is no understanding between the mother, father and children”*, said John Lyngdoh. The power hierarchy among the sexes seems to be less in a matrilineal system and boys don’t seem to be ‘powerless’ even though it was said to differ from person to person.

## Politics

I was clear through the interviews that women participated less in political affairs because they were considered ‘shy’. *“Women are a bit shy so they don’t want to take part in politics.”* said Madam Mimi. Dr. Kharbuli said, *“Men naturally do not want to argue with females”* so they are not allowed at all in the “Darbar Shnong”. She said that *“females talk sense-less”* and that this was rooted in the traditional belief that the female stands for *“one power”* whereas the male stands for *“twelve power or ‘khatar-bor”* (‘khatar’ meaning twelve and ‘bor’ meaning power). It was also found that even though women vote and exercise their political powers, but because men are supposed to be making more ‘rational’ decisions they are the only ones considered fit for *“Darbar Shnong”* which is why they are by consensus made the chiefs of the villages. *“District council members know better than to argue with women”*, said a resident of the Smit Village. Dr. P. Kharbuli did mention that there existed a group of women in each locality known as *‘Seng Kynthei’* where women found representation. It was also found that in places where there is no interference from MPs/MLAs under a constitutional amendment; people of the village decide who takes decisions for them through a *“Darbar Shnong”*.

## Society

The interactions pointed towards a society which had the traditional matrilineal culture intact but was encountering and incorporating certain changes. There were some families where the head was a woman and the property went to her but still the whole family made

decisions regarding the property together. Among lower classes, as it was said in certain interviews, sometimes women came under a lot of pressure because of domestic violence and unemployed husbands because they didn't have the responsibility of taking care of the household. "*Same like other place, men drink and sit women run shop*", reported a young Eva Monica woman sitting in her shop in the Ialong village. It was found that people considered the society more harmonious as compared to a patriarchy because of a limited power hierarchy. Madam Mimi said, "*Most [people] feel proud of their culture because it is a unique culture.*"

While Dr. Kharbuli said that it is an "*exception to the world*" and "*change is complicated*" in the Khasi tradition. Asked whether the outside patriarchal culture was affecting the matrilineal tradition in modern times through inter-cultural interactions, Madam Mimi said, "No. I do not see any impact only some followers are there. No substantial impact. There are only some men who want property. I think it [Matrilineally] will stay and will continue to go on as it has." Shivolet Jalong referred in the preceding text replied to the same question in a slightly different manner saying, "Actually it is not affecting. But as time passes some change should also be there which is good. Power should not be given only to women. There should be equal rights."

## DISCUSSION

The task of studying the traditional gender roles in the matrilineal society of Meghalaya was accomplished through the sample survey conducted in the four villages of Meghalaya namely Mawteneng, Kdonghulu, Ialong and Smit. It was found that the cultural practice of taking on the title of the mother was practiced without any exception. Even in certain cases like that reported in the interview by a young woman named Kyrsoilang Rymbai, where her brother after marriage would give his children his wife's title but did not move into her maternal house, it is clear that the woman's title is not abandoned. Irrespective of their educational status, it was found that in all the four villages the people did not wish to do apart with their tradition and found their culture 'unique'. As far as power divisions between male and female were considered, majority affirmed that there was more or less equality in the roles that men and women had to play. According to Dr. P. Kharbuli, matrilineal culture is "*much better, especially in this educated world*" as the husband cannot torture the wife and there is "*no acid pouring or killing of the wife*". Even though the erstwhile practice of giving the entire property to the youngest daughter "khamkadun" was considered to be changing with time in a way that parents were dividing the property equally among their children, whether boy or girl; it still depends on the financial status of the family. The better the economic standing of the family more are the chances of equal division of property. But it was found that the youngest daughter still remains the custodian of the family property and the care-taker of the parents. The role of the maternal uncle in the matters regarding the division and disposal of property was found to be substantial but was also said to be reducing with the passage of time. Father was considered as important in decision making as the mother but generally it was established that the mother was more liable to have the final say. Co-operation more than dominance appeared to be an integral part of the seemingly harmonious Khasi culture. Marriages were found to be consensual and mostly out of love rather than forced and women had the final say in the matrimonial matters. Even in reproductive matters women were said to have a say but, as Madam Mimi pointed and the family size of each person recorded in the sample questionnaire showed, having more children was preferred. This indirectly points towards the concern regarding the reproductive health of the women but as the area was not ventured deeper into in the course of this study,

to make any comment on the same would be inappropriate. As far as the political rights of women are concerned it was found that the results coincided with Thomas Liard's statement, "*Power at home is in the women's hands; in public it's in the men's* [4]." This appeared to be the result of the same ideological conditioning of women that is at the heart of the patriarchal cultures that a woman is intellectually inferior and men are the rational forbearers in any society. Even though women were not pressurised when it came to voting, in the light of such prejudices it makes any conclusion regarding their autonomy in terms of exercising the political rights, complicated and ambiguous. As far as the market place was concerned women were found more in the shops not only in villages but also in the city to which the Bara Bazaar area in Shillong city bore testimony.

## CONCLUSION

Taking into consideration all the inferences, each supported by numerical statistics based on the collected sample, it can be said that the Khasi society of Meghalaya is matrilineal but cannot be referred to as a Matriarchy parallel to the dominant patriarchal world culture. The culture is more like a balance of both the sexes and like yin-yang both the genders fit into each other in their social functioning. As far as the changes in the traditional practices are concerned, they were more of those that evolved within the tradition with time; such as the equal distribution of property among all children, educational egalitarianism and in some cases even the males were said to be becoming more dominant as compared to the past. According to Dr. Kharbuli, in case of inter-cultural marriages, if the husband is more dominant then the title of the father is taken and another title is created because of the communal resentment. This, as she said, creates confusion as too many titles were cropping up making it difficult to trace the lineage. As far as any outside influence of patriarchy is considered, in accordance with Madam Mimi and several others' accounts, it is negligible and in very less proportion. Though people agreed that the outsiders marry the "khamkadun" only for property and use them, especially in the interiors (as told by Dr. Kharbuli), such cases were reported as being rare. The cultural distinctiveness and the traditional allegiance of people in the light of modern day influences of the outside world make Khasi tradition a culture worth noting and a society one of its kind.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The present research article is an outcome of the study made during the University of Delhi expedition Gyanodaya-V, titled: "Dharohar – The Glory of North East" undertaken during the period December 18-29, 2014. In fact this has been possible only by the assistance, guidance and stimulating influences of many helping hands. For this first of all our team expresses the gratitude's to our honourable Vice-Chancellor Professor Dinesh Singh for his innovative vision behind the organization of such an event which gave an opportunity to students and teachers to have a firsthand experience through field work during this journey of learning.

We are grateful to Professor Chander Shekhar (Chairman, Gyanodaya-V) and the entire team at the University of Delhi who put their best efforts to organise the event, and made it a memorable experience for all of us by giving their indispensable advice, constant encouragement and vigilant guidance time to time all through.

We value the information given by John F. Kharshiing, Grand council of Chiefs of Meghalaya and Professor Pabok Diengdoh, Synod College, Shillong which widened our horizon of knowledge. We express sincere thanks to our guides Mrs. Aisuklin Kharsati and Mr. Ashim Biswas, our interpreter Ms.Mimi and the villagers of Meghalaya for their co-operation, hospitality and assistance which enabled us to interact with them in an enriching manner. We also thank IRCTC staff for providing us with every possible facility to make such a long journey comfortable. Last but not the least; we express gratitude to Mrs. Preeti Dhawan, Vice Principal, Lady Shri Ram College For Women and Ms. Deepika Papneja for providing us with the opportunity to be a part of the memorable journey of Gyanodaya-V, which is now resulting

into the present research article.

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