

# Interpretation of women's Role: An analysis on Khasi tribe of Meghalaya

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by

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To



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## **Bonafide Certificate**

This is to certify that the project report entitled “**Interpretation of women’s Role: an analysis on Khasi tribe of Meghalaya**” submitted by Nandita Mathews to the North Eastern Space Applications Centre, Umiam, Shillong and Central University of Karnataka, Kalaburgi, in partial fulfillment for the award of the degree M.Sc in Applied Geography and GIS, is a bonafide record of the project work carried out by her under my supervision from 01/12/2018 to 31/03/2019

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## **Declaration by Author**

This is to declare that this report entitled " **Interpretation of women's Role: an analysis on Khasi tribe of Meghalaya** " has been written by me. No part of the report is plagiarized from other sources. All information included from other sources have been duly acknowledged. I aver that if any part of the report is found to be plagiarized, I shall take full responsibility for it.

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## 1. Introduction

(Where women of India rule the roost and men demand gender equality)

The past few decades have witnessed a rapidly increasing awareness of the necessity to empower women and achieve gender equality through measures to attain social, economic and political equity and wider access to fundamental human rights improvements in basic health and education. Gender equality and the status of women is low even in most advanced countries. Women in India also suffer from the lack of acceptability from the patriarchal society.

The northeast region of India is a multi-ethnic cultural landscape, constitutes around 12% of the country's total tribal population. Due to the higher prevalence of tribal policies and traditions, it is generally perceived that the women in northeast India are more self-reliant and receives more liberty compared to the other parts of India. Garo, Khasi, Jaintia, Adi, Nyishi, Angami, Bhutia, Kuki, Rengma, Bodo etc are some of the tribes existing in the northeast region where Khasi and Garo tribes of Meghalaya practise matrilineal system of kinship.

Khasi tribe is said to be the earliest immigrant tribes who came from Myanmar and settled down in the north-eastern part of India, contemporarily inhabit the eastern districts of Meghalaya state substantially. The Khasi refers themselves as 'Vilum' which translates as 'hill men'. In contrast to other tribes in Meghalaya, the Khasi tribe is not widely dispersed geographically. They are also found in states of Assam, Tripura and Mizoram in small settlements. (4)

Linguistically the language spoken by the tribes belongs to the Astro-Asiatic language, which is a part of Monh-Khmer group of languages. As northeast India has undergone large scale proselytization into Christianity, most of the tribals follow Christianity as their religion. Tribes in Meghalaya professing Christianity ieKhasis, Garos etc. are relatively more literate and educated as compared to the Sanskritized tribes such as Bodos and Miris.[5]. Khasi tribe also believe in the supreme creator God BleiNong-thaw, for which they believe that this feminine Goddess safeguards them from all the difficulties and troubles of the life. The major festival celebrated among the Khasi people is Nongkrem which is a five-day religious festival falls in the month of November every year.

Khasi and Garo are some of the few dominant tribes where 'Matrilineality' is practised instead of patrilineality. In the Khasi community, children take their mother's last name and customary laws say that all the wealth or property of parents should be inherited only by daughters. Thus the line of descent and inheritance of the property is through the daughter. Hence the status of women is better and they enjoy a certain amount of liberty and self reliance in comparison to other parts of the country.

Role and status of women in various areas are defined using different parameters in different countries. As for the developed countries lower status of the women is indicated with the gender pay gap exists, where the women are being less paid than men in all occupational fields and industries, in their increased downward mobility and in their bigger family responsibilities due to divorce, abandonment, etc. whereas their limited access to resources, services such as education and health, along with their work being underpaid and unacknowledged are features of lower status of women in developing countries.[2].

Gender imbalances exist everywhere in the world. Since the social and family structure, Marriage, Tribal policies, kinship system and the traditions followed by the Khasi tribe are highly women centred, women, belong to this society seems more empowered than any other societies. The study attempts to interpret the status and role of women in the Khasi community of Meghalaya and also analyse the transitions happening nowadays.

## **1.2 Review of literature**

Status and Role are two sides of the same coin, in other words, these are two ideas which are indistinguishable. Status is an aggregation of rights and duties; and can be expressed through the medium of an individual. It is the position or space that one holds in society. A role, at the same time, represents the dynamic aspects of status. An individual holds the status which is assigned to him/her socially and does so with relation to other statuses. Then, the individual performs his/her role when duties and rights associated with status are put into effect. In reality, status and roles are inseparably related to each other (Roy 2010: 6).

Meghalaya has granted its women enough freedom and opportunity in social, economic and cultural spheres. The family organisation and structure centres around the women as she is the one who inherits the property rules the house and takes the name of their clan forward through generations. But, when it comes to the public and political domain, they are lagging behind. The women of the Khasi community are not allowed in Durbars or village councils. Though the nokmaship is hereditary the daughter is not the village head, rather her husband becomes the acting Nokma, ie the village head. women are hardly interested in participating in elections which leads in resting the whole political and administrative powers in the hands of men. Even in agricultural fields, women are

playing a very small role in policymaking. One of the important factors lying behind this lagging of women in policymaking is that women are considering the domestic sphere as their domain. They are feeling overburdened with the responsibilities of managing the household, children and working in fields. All they need is a strong movement to make them aware of their part in the public domain and understand them about how their participation in decision making and policy making process can enhance their lives. (Das & Mohanty, 2016)

In most of the tribal societies even if poor, women always possess a special position and role. They have given a notable space in different spheres they play, with great responsibility vis a vis their counterpart men. The Khasi tribe of Meghalaya is such a society, follows matrilineality whereas authority, title, inheritance of the property, residence after marriage and succession are traced through the daughter of the family ie; the female line. So it is considered that they do not need any special effort to make them aware and get social, economic, political or psychological understanding and knowledge to demonstrate their rights along with men in their society as they are automatically placed on an honoured level. They are expected to have free access to education, authority in their family and society, ownership of inherited property and they are supposed to be the heads of their families and have the power to make decisions. Yet, a recent survey in the rural areas of Meghalaya shows that the number of families headed by the male is more in number compared to the families headed by the female. (de & Ghosh, 2007)

In most countries of the world, women remain economically disadvantaged. The thought of women's rights enabled them to question the world about the widespread discrimination that women experience in all spheres of action. Discrimination against women may not be similar in all communities because moral and social beliefs including family traits differ in each society. Even in a matrilineal society of the Khasis in Meghalaya in which women are expected to be independent of violence and discrimination are not free from such issues. One may assume that things could be better for the women of Meghalaya as they enjoy special social status and freedom. And many presume that it can provide the much-needed hope in setting an example to bring about a change in the mindset of people towards women into an acceptable and respectable one throughout the world. However, crime, violence and discrimination against women are reported almost on a daily basis, even in a matrilineal social setup. (Warjri, 2004)

#### **1.4 Aim of the study**

The study aims at gaining a clear vision about the role and status of women in the Khasi community of Meghalaya. Due to the prevalence and practice of tribal and indigenous culture, it is perceived that the women belonging to this tribe experience more freedom and self-reliance.

#### **1.5 Objective of the study**

The study attempts the following objectives

- 1.To identify and interpret the women's status and role in Khasi Community of Meghalaya
- 2.To appreciate the unique social structure of matrilineality, how it has been helpful in empowering the women of the society.
- 3.To analyse the current transitions.

## **1.7 Data and Method**

The present study is performed with the help of both primary and secondary sources of information. Interactive sessions with the locals in the Umiam village have helped to get information in detail. The village has been chosen for the information collection mainly due to the convenience purpose. Snowball sampling method is used to collect the required sample. Pieces of information were acquired by direct interview method and interactive sessions with and without the help of a questionnaire respectively. A total number of n=20 samples were collected and analysed.

## **1.6 Description of the Study Area**

The region located on the north east part of India are regarded as the North Eastern Region (NER) and it consists of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim.

The state Meghalaya is one among the seven administrative units of northeast India with an area of 22,720 sq. km, and a population of 3,211,474 and located between the 25.4670° N, 91.3662° E latitudes. Meghalaya is a landlocked state bounded to the north by Goalpara, Kamrup and Nowgong districts and on the east by KarbiAnglong and North Cachar Hills districts of Assam and south and west by Bangladesh, sharing an international boundary of 496 km. The state is one of the wettest places in the world, recording an average of 12,000mm of rains a year. Major languages used in Meghalaya are Khasi and Garo with English as an official language. The capital city of Meghalaya is Shillong located at an altitude of 1496 metres above sea level. Meghalaya shows rich biodiversity and natural resource potential with its enormous geographical diversity. The Population of Meghalaya is predominantly tribal which constitutes 85.53 % of the total population of the state. About 81 % of the population lives in rural areas and dependent on primary economic activities.

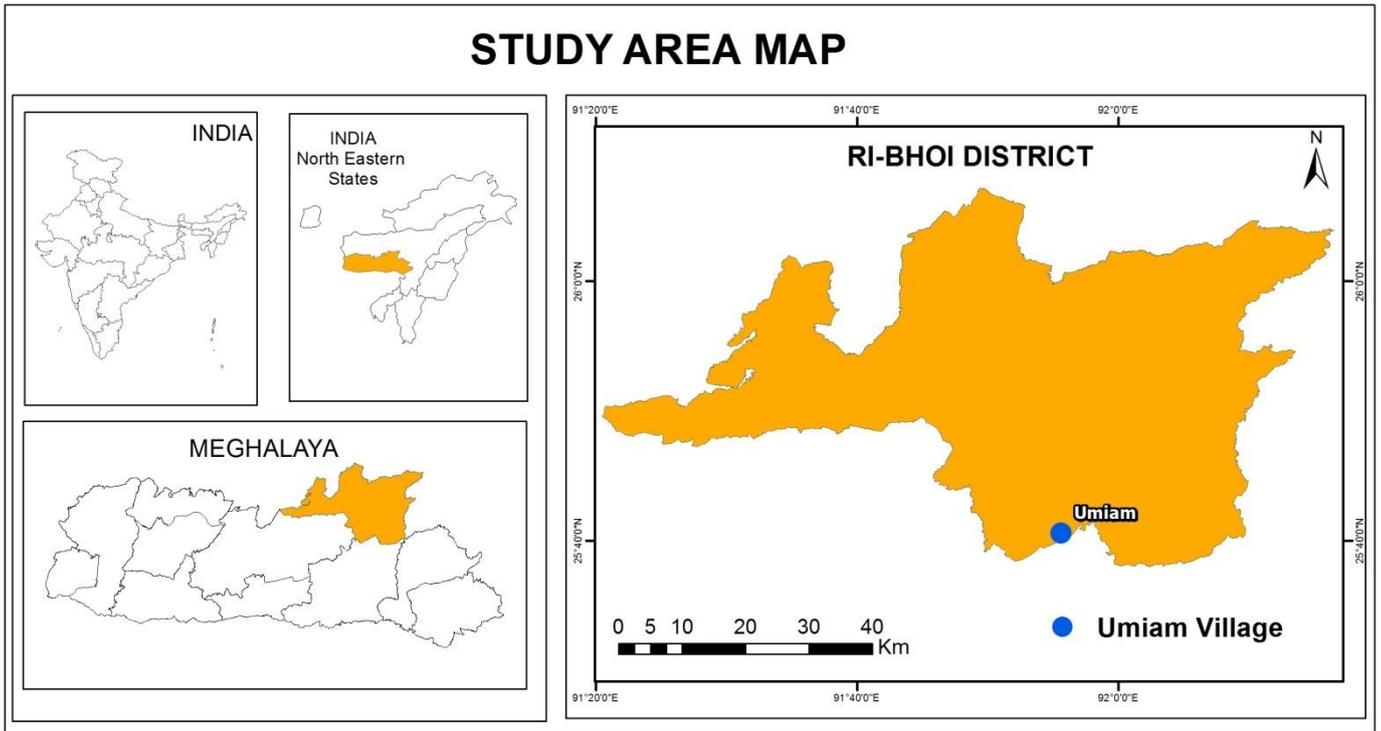


Fig.1 Study area map

Ri-bhoi District is one of the Districts of Meghalaya. The District was carved out from the erstwhile East Khasi Hills District and lies between North Latitudes 25 15' and 26 15' and between East Longitudes 91 45' and 92 15'.The district headquarters is situated at Nongponh.

Umiam is one of the villages in Ri-bhoi district situated 15 km away from Shillong. Umiam is famous for its picturesque locations and scenic beauty. Umiam Lake is one of the major attractions of this place which is a manmade lake. Study and the survey has been conducted in Umiam village locally named as Barapani. The village is chosen purposively on consideration of conveniences such as access and communication.

## **1.9 Results and Analysis**

### **1.9.1 Education & Employment**

Of all the samples collected only 15% of the females are graduated. Most of the females are drop outs from the school. Only 10% of the females are qualified above 10<sup>th</sup> class. Lack educational qualifications lead most of the women to not able to go for better jobs and this reflects in the income which they earn too. But ,in the present day society ,most of the women are educating their children irrespective of their gender. This can be analysed as a better social change.

### **1.9.2 Economic Participation**

Of all the samples collected 80 % of the women are engaged in economical activities. The types of economic activity which women participate are different from what men participate. The economic activities which women participate give less income than the economic activities which the men participate. Even if the economic participation is present from the female side, the income which they earn is comparatively less than the

male. Economic participation of women in a wider sense can only be achieved by better education.

### **1.9.3 Political participation**

Political participation of women contributes to women empowerment in a wider sense. It is a major path to women empowerment and participation in the decision making process will lead to empowerment of tribal women in true sense. Of all the data collected only 4% of the women take part in village council meetings which is called as 'DorbarShnong', presided over by the village headman named as RangbahShnong. Political participation of women in the local meetings are increasing now a days compared to the past, says the locals.

### **1.9.4 Family life & Marriage**

Due to the prevalence of matrilineality, the family organisation in every Khasi family is women centred. The youngest daughter of the family is considered very important.

Marriage ceremony in Khasi community is conducted in a very simple way, compared to other part of the country, where only the close family members and friends are invited. The marriage takes place either in the church in the presence of the priest, for the Khasi Christian community or near the households of the bride and groom. Marrying outside from the tribe is still not accepted by most of the people of this community and the laws says that getting married to a Non-Khasi shall make them lose all their privileges and benefits as a member of the tribe. No dowry system or female foeticide is present among Khasi tribe.

Of all the samples collected 60% women are married, 20% are widowed/divorced and the rest 20% are unmarried. People are not much concerned about marriage or divorces. Divorcees are allowed marry again after a year.

## **Findings & Conclusions**

1. Due to the prevalence of Matrilineality, Khasi women who belong to the area of study as well as for Meghalaya experience more freedom and liberty compared to other places. Women possess a very important role in the family too. Most of the families are said to be women centred.
2. Even if the economic participation is present for both the genders it is observed that women earn less than men and the households led by females possess less economic standards compared to the households led by men.
3. Educational status is found to be less for the females of the study area. This forces them to work for small scale jobs and earn comparatively less.
4. Education is a powerful tool to social transformation and this has to be paid special attention because almost 80 % of the women are having below 10<sup>th</sup> class education.
5. It is pleasant to note that the families are educating their children irrespective of their gender now a days and this will definitely result in a social transformation.

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