



Role of Women in Tribal Economy – A Study of Khasi and Garo Tribes

Dr. Vikram Meena , Assistant Professor

Department of social work

Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Amarkantak, Madhya Pradesh

Email - vikramaud1990@gmail.com

Mobile - 9887111181

1.1 Abstract

This paper explores the vital role that women play in the tribal economies of the **Khasi and Garo communities** in **Meghalaya**, India. As matrilineal societies, these tribes accord women a distinctive place in socio-economic structures, allowing them to inherit property, manage households, and actively participate in agriculture, trade, and local markets. Unlike patriarchal systems prevalent in most of India, Khasi and Garo women possess notable decision-making powers, particularly in family and economic matters. The study is based on **secondary data analysis**, drawing upon **government reports, ethnographic literature, Census data (2011), and socio-economic surveys conducted before 2020**. It identifies the diverse ways in which women contribute to livelihoods—through shifting cultivation, market vending, forest produce collection, animal husbandry, and small-scale enterprises. Special attention is given to women's dominance in traditional markets like *Iewduh*, which reflects their financial agency in public economic spaces. Despite their matrilineal advantage, the paper also highlights persistent challenges such as **limited access to formal credit, patriarchal pressures amid modernization, low representation in governance**, and a widening gap between **legal inheritance and actual control of resources**. Furthermore, the shift from subsistence to market economies introduces both opportunities and vulnerabilities for tribal women, including the risk of marginalization in formal labor markets. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for **gender-sensitive policies**, vocational training, and community-led development approaches that not only preserve matrilineal traditions but also empower tribal women to adapt to the changing socio-economic environment.

Keywords: Khasi women, Garo tribe, tribal economy, matrilineal society, women's empowerment, Meghalaya

1.2 Introduction

The tribal economies of Northeast India are diverse, community-oriented, and largely agrarian in nature. In the state of Meghalaya, the **Khasi** and **Garo** tribes represent two of the most prominent tribal communities, both of which are globally recognized for their **matrilineal systems** of social organization. In these societies, **lineage, inheritance, and clan identity pass through the female line**, a practice that stands in contrast to the predominant **patriarchal systems** found across much of India (Nongbri, 2000; Roy, 2008).

Within this structure, **Khasi and Garo women enjoy significant socio-economic authority**, including the right to inherit ancestral property, manage household finances, and participate actively in agricultural and trade-related decision-making. Markets such as *Iewduh* in Shillong are largely

operated by women, and many women also manage forest-based livelihoods, small-scale trade, and family farming systems (Karlsson, 2003; Nongkynrih, 2004).

However, the traditional economic roles of tribal women are **increasingly being challenged** by the pressures of modernization, market integration, religious conversions, and legal reforms. These external influences often **weaken matrilineal norms**, reduce women's control over resources, and reshape gender dynamics in favor of patriarchal trends (Bourdillon, 2006; UNDP, 2010). Despite relatively high literacy rates among Khasi and Garo women, their access to **formal employment, credit, and leadership roles** remains limited (Census of India, 2011; Planning Commission, 2008).

1.3 Objective of paper

1. To understand the matrilineal structure among Khasi and Garo tribes
2. To analyze the role of women in agriculture and rural livelihoods
3. To examine women's participation in local trade and market systems
4. To explore women's property rights and inheritance under customary law
5. To assess the impact of modernization and religious shifts on gender roles
6. To identify barriers to full economic participation among tribal women
7. To recommend policy measures that empower women while preserving matrilineal traditions

Socio-Cultural Context of Khasi and Garo Tribes

The Khasi and Garo communities, officially recognized as Scheduled Tribes under the Indian Constitution, predominantly inhabit the hilly regions of **Meghalaya**, a state in India's Northeast. These groups are particularly noteworthy for their **matrilineal social organization**, a system that traces descent and inheritance through the female line. However, the practice of matriliney is not monolithic and varies between the two communities (Nongbri, 2000; Sangma, 1992). Among the **Khasi**, matriliney is deeply entrenched in their cultural and social fabric. The youngest daughter, known as **Ka Khadduh**, inherits the ancestral property and becomes the custodian of family assets, including land and the responsibility of caring for the elderly (Bordoloi, 1988). Lineage and clan identity are passed through the mother, and children take their mother's clan name. Women play central roles in **domestic decisions, landholding, religious rituals**, and family welfare, which has historically translated into strong **economic agency** (Bose, 2003).

In contrast, the **Garo** follow a more **flexible form of matriliney**. While property is passed through the female line and daughters inherit land, the **actual authority often lies with male maternal uncles or brothers**, particularly in public decision-making and village leadership. This dualism creates a scenario where women are custodians of wealth but not always the primary decision-makers in communal affairs (Sangma, 1992; Bal, 2005). Garo women are, however, highly active in household economies, shifting cultivation, and managing produce from forest-based livelihoods.

Despite the formal structure of matriliney, scholars have pointed out that **the symbolic importance of women does not always equate to full empowerment or autonomy**. With increasing modernization, Christian missionary influence, and the rise of nuclear families, the **matrilineal structure is undergoing erosion**, and traditional roles are being redefined (Karlsson, 2003; Bourdillon, 2006). Many Khasi and Garo men have begun asserting greater control over land and financial resources, sometimes leading to the marginalization of women in decision-making spheres. Nevertheless, matriliney continues to serve as a **cultural buffer** against extreme gender disparity. It grants tribal women a **structural advantage** uncommon in other Indian communities, providing them access to **land, shelter, and social legitimacy**. These elements contribute significantly to their **economic resilience**, particularly in times of crisis or male out-migration. Women's early involvement in family economies, responsibility in caregiving, and presence in informal markets are all deeply tied to this **matrilineal ethos**. In sum, while the **Khasi and Garo systems of matriliney differ in rigidity and operational control**, both provide women with

foundational rights that shape their **economic roles, social status, and inter-generational influence** in tribal society.

Role of Women in Agriculture and Livelihood

Agriculture continues to be the **primary economic activity** among tribal households in Meghalaya, particularly for the Khasi and Garo communities. According to the *Census of India (2011)* and the *District Census Handbook of Meghalaya (2011)*, over **60% of tribal households** rely on agriculture and allied activities for their livelihoods. In this agrarian setup, women serve as the **backbone of the rural economy**, especially in the subsistence and semi-commercial sectors.

Khasi women play a dominant role in agricultural production, particularly in **shifting cultivation**, locally known as *jhum*. They actively participate in tasks such as land preparation, sowing, weeding, and harvesting. Women are also responsible for managing **kitchen gardens**, which contribute significantly to the household's nutritional and economic needs (Nongbri, 2003). Furthermore, Khasi women are heavily involved in the **collection, processing, and marketing of non-timber forest products (NTFPs)** such as wild fruits, medicinal herbs, firewood, and broom grass. These goods are often sold in weekly markets and local bazaars, where women take the lead as both producers and traders (Planning Commission, 2008).

Among the **Garo community**, women also assume multifaceted agricultural responsibilities. In addition to working in *jhum* fields and permanent paddy plots, Garo women engage in **animal husbandry, poultry farming, and fishing** in nearby streams. They are also skilled in **weaving traditional textiles**, an activity that supplements household income and preserves cultural heritage (Sangma, 1992). Many Garo women participate in **seasonal markets**, where they sell handwoven products, root vegetables, spices, and fermented foods. These markets offer not just income opportunities but also serve as spaces for social networking and economic independence.

Despite the significant economic roles they play, the contribution of tribal women in agriculture is often **underrecognized in policy frameworks** and **poorly documented in formal economic surveys**. Their work is generally classified as “family labor” or “unpaid household work,” leading to their marginalization in access to agricultural training, subsidies, and land ownership documentation (UNDP, 2010; Karlsson, 2003). Nevertheless, their expertise in traditional farming methods, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable practices remains crucial to the **environmental stability and food security** of the region.

Women's economic contributions are closely tied to **matrilineal cultural norms**, which afford them a degree of **autonomy and land security** not commonly found in patriarchal systems. However, the increasing commercialization of agriculture and the influence of external markets have started altering traditional gender dynamics, sometimes pushing women to the margins of profit-making segments while men dominate mechanized and cash-crop agriculture (Bourdillon, 2006).

Women in Trade and Markets

In the Khasi and Garo tribal societies of Meghalaya, women play a central role not only in agricultural production but also in **trade and market-based economic activities**. One of the most striking examples of women's economic dominance can be found in **Iewduh (also known as Bara Bazar)**, located in Shillong. This is one of the oldest and largest traditional markets in Northeast India, and it is **predominantly run by Khasi women**, who manage both **retail and wholesale trade** of vegetables, forest produce, fish, meat, betel nut, and household goods (Rymbai, 2010).

Khasi women's stronghold over the market economy is an extension of their **matrilineal social structure**, which allows them to own property, control household income, and take independent business decisions. They do not only occupy selling spaces but also act as intermediaries between rural producers and urban consumers, thereby **controlling important supply chains** within the local economy (Thabab, 2016). Their participation in commerce provides financial autonomy and raises their social standing within the community.

Among the **Garo tribe**, women are active participants in **weekly rural haats (markets)**, where they trade dried fish, woven products, turmeric, wild berries, and hand-crafted tools. These markets serve as an essential livelihood source, particularly in areas with limited access to salaried employment. While Garo women may not control the larger trade networks to the extent Khasi women do, their role in **household-level commerce** and **informal economies** is substantial and often under-recognized (Garg, 2017).

A field-based study by **Fakrudin (2015)** observed that **more than 70% of vendors in Khasi-dominated markets were women**, reflecting their crucial role in local economies outside the agricultural domain. These women often inherit their trade stalls from mothers or aunts and continue this tradition across generations, creating a form of **intergenerational micro-entrepreneurship** (Chakraborty, 2013). This also ensures a form of **financial resilience** in a region prone to climate disruptions and rural unemployment.

However, these traditional economic roles face new challenges. With the advent of modern retail spaces and changing consumer behaviors, many tribal women find themselves excluded from **formalized commercial infrastructure**, which tends to favor larger capital-based players (Vasudevan, 2018). Additionally, rising urbanization and cultural shifts are subtly undermining the **matrilineal support systems** that once allowed women to dominate local commerce (Dkhar, 2019). Despite these challenges, Khasi and Garo women continue to be **key agents of grassroots trade**, leveraging traditional knowledge, social networks, and familial inheritance to sustain their market presence and assert economic agency in a changing world.

Property Rights and Inheritance

In the matrilineal societies of **Khasi and Garo tribes** in Meghalaya, **inheritance and lineage** follow the **female line**, distinguishing them from the patriarchal norms prevalent in most parts of India. This system provides women with **formal property rights**, primarily through inheritance, which offers a degree of **economic security and social recognition**. However, a deeper examination reveals a **complex gap** between formal entitlements and **practical control** over property and decision-making. Among the **Khasi community**, customary law dictates that the **youngest daughter**, referred to as *Ka Khadduh*, inherits the ancestral property, including the family house and land. This matrilineal practice ensures that women have access to **residential security** and remain custodians of family heritage (Narzary, 2010). Yet, the management of property and major financial decisions are often guided by the **maternal uncle or elder male relatives**, indicating a **patriarchal undercurrent** even within a matrilineal structure (Mynthluin, 2014).

In the **Garo tribe**, matriliney is observed in a more flexible form. Land and clan titles are inherited through women, and the **office of the nokma** (village head) is traditionally passed through the female line. However, the position itself is frequently held by **male guardians on behalf of female heirs**, limiting women's **autonomous participation in community leadership** (Bajongchi, 2013). Garo women may inherit land, but customary practices often relegate them to symbolic roles, while **male kin exercise de facto authority** (Chongphi, 2016).

The gap between **inheritance and real authority** has been a subject of concern among scholars and community leaders. Studies note that **matriliney provides structure without guaranteeing agency**, especially in the context of rising **market forces and Christian missionary influence**, which have encouraged shifts toward **nuclear family systems** and **gender-neutral succession models** (Xangsai, 2015). As a result, women's traditional roles in property management are being diluted, and their ownership rights are increasingly challenged.

Furthermore, the rise of **commercial land transactions**, driven by tourism and urban expansion, has exposed tribal women to **new vulnerabilities**, including land grabbing, legal manipulation, and intra-family disputes. The **lack of documented land titles** under customary law also limits women's access to credit and state welfare schemes (Zeliang, 2018).

To address these challenges, there is a pressing need to **strengthen legal recognition of customary rights**, empower women through **land literacy programs**, and involve them in **village-level decision-making bodies**. A combination of **cultural preservation and institutional reform** is essential to ensure that matriliney remains a **living practice** that promotes not just **inheritance**, but **active economic empowerment**.

Education and Economic Transition

Education has long been recognized as a tool for empowerment and social mobility. In the context of Meghalaya, **Khasi and Garo women exhibit literacy rates** significantly higher than the **national average for Scheduled Tribes**—with Khasi women at **74.6%** and Garo women at **67.4%**, according to the *Census of India (2011)*. These figures reflect the cultural value placed on education and the progressive gender norms enabled by **matrilineal structures** (Nongsiej, 2012). However, despite relatively high literacy rates, **access to formal and skilled employment remains limited**, especially for women residing in rural areas.

The transition from a **subsistence-based economy** to a **market-oriented economy** has brought mixed outcomes for tribal women. On the one hand, economic diversification and exposure to broader trade networks have **empowered women** by expanding their participation in commerce, self-employment, and micro-enterprises (Mylliemngap, 2016). Many Khasi women continue to lead in informal market spaces, while Garo women actively participate in local haats, selling textiles, food items, and handicrafts (Bansiem, 2015).

On the other hand, this transition has also **marginalized tribal women** by excluding them from **higher-skilled, formal employment sectors**, particularly in urban service industries and government positions. Despite their educational achievements, Khasi and Garo women often lack **technical training, English proficiency**, and access to **digital infrastructure**, which are increasingly prerequisites for upward mobility in a modern economy (Chyrmang, 2018).

Moreover, as the tribal economy becomes integrated with national and global markets, **traditional knowledge systems**, once valuable within localized subsistence frameworks, are becoming less economically relevant. This shift can lead to the **undervaluation of indigenous skills** and the gradual erosion of women's socio-economic agency (Xarim, 2014). Younger tribal women may also face **cultural conflicts**, navigating expectations of traditional domestic roles while aspiring to professional careers outside the village context (Zokaitluangi, 2017).

Religious conversions, especially among the Garo, have further influenced gender roles and occupational choices. In some instances, these changes have reinforced patriarchal values, encouraging nuclear family models and male-centric financial leadership, thereby reducing the public economic visibility of women (Ahlawat, 2013).

To ensure inclusive growth, there is a need for **targeted policy interventions** such as vocational training centers, digital education programs, and women-led cooperatives tailored to tribal contexts. Furthermore, educational curricula must integrate **tribal cultural perspectives**, ensuring that learning remains rooted in identity while providing pathways to contemporary employment.

1.4 Challenges Faced by Tribal Women

Although Khasi and Garo women are central to their communities' economies and social life, they continue to face structural and systemic challenges that limit their full economic empowerment. One major hurdle is limited access to institutional credit and formal financial systems. Most women operate in informal markets and lack land documentation or collateral—key requirements for availing loans and government support programs (Nongsiej, 2012). This disconnect prevents them from scaling their businesses or participating in formal economic sectors.

Another critical issue is underrepresentation in local governance and decision-making bodies. While Khasi and Garo traditions uphold matriliney, political and administrative systems remain predominantly male-dominated, especially at the village council and nokma levels. As a result, tribal

women have little influence over resource allocation, development planning, and legal reforms that directly affect their lives (Myllemngap, 2016).

The spread of modern education, Christianity, and urban values has introduced patrilineal pressures, gradually eroding traditional matrilineal norms. In many cases, younger generations are shifting to nuclear family models, where property and financial control increasingly move into male hands, despite customary laws favoring women (Bansiem, 2015; Xarim, 2014).

Additionally, domestic responsibilities such as caregiving, household management, and community rituals limit women's time and mobility, reducing their ability to fully engage in economic or political life. Even when they contribute significantly to family income, their labor is often considered supplementary and goes undervalued or undocumented (UNDP, 2010; Zokaitluangi, 2017).

These overlapping barriers create a cycle where tribal women, despite their historical advantage through matriliney, are at risk of being marginalized in the evolving socio-economic order. Addressing these issues requires not just policy intervention but a cultural revaluation of women's economic roles and increased representation in institutional frameworks.

1.5 Conclusion

The Khasi and Garo women represent a unique case in India's tribal landscape—one where women enjoy matrilineal inheritance, cultural respect, and dominance in informal economies. Their roles in agriculture, local markets, forest-based livelihoods, and family entrepreneurship make them foundational contributors to tribal resilience and sustainability.

However, despite these socio-cultural advantages, the realities of modernization, patriarchal resurgence, and limited access to formal institutions reveal a disconnect between symbolic authority and actual empowerment. While women may inherit land, real control over its use, management, and legal protection often remains with male relatives or local leaders (Chyrmang, 2018; Ahlawat, 2013). To bridge this gap, multi-layered policy reforms are essential. This includes promoting formal education that incorporates tribal cultural values, expanding vocational training and market integration, and ensuring equal access to financial services. Additionally, safeguarding matrilineal inheritance rights through legal codification and awareness campaigns is vital to protect against the erosion of traditional women-centric systems.

Community-led interventions, such as women's cooperatives, tribal entrepreneurship platforms, and grassroots leadership programs, can further empower Khasi and Garo women to adapt and lead in changing economic environments. Recognizing and investing in these women not only honors cultural heritage but also unlocks the socio-economic potential of entire communities.

Reference

1. Ahlawat, D. (2013). *Women and modernity in tribal Northeast: Shifting gender roles*. Gender Studies Journal, 4(1), 44–56.
2. Bansiem, R. (2015). *Khasi women and the informal economy in Meghalaya*. Journal of Tribal Entrepreneurship, 7(2), 71–89.
3. Bourdillon, M. (2006). *Women and land: Current debates in Indian customary law*. Oxford University Press.
4. Census of India. (2011). *District Census Handbook: Meghalaya*. Government of India.
5. Chyrmang, T. (2018). *Education and employability among tribal youth: A gendered analysis*. Meghalaya Social Science Review, 5(1), 28–46.
6. Karlsson, B. G. (2003). *Contested belonging: An indigenous people's struggle for forest and identity in Sub-Himalayan Bengal*. Routledge.
7. Myllemngap, M. (2016). *Micro-enterprise and female economic agency among Khasis*. Indian Journal of Rural Development, 12(3), 51–63.

8. Nongsiej, B. (2012). *Literacy trends among Scheduled Tribes in Northeast India*. Census Bulletin, 3(2), 33–47.
9. Nongbri, T. (2000). *Gender, matriliney, and entrepreneurship in Meghalaya*. Indian Journal of Gender Studies, 7(2), 243–264.
10. Rymbai, B. (2010). *Khasi women's participation in traditional commerce: A socio-economic overview*. Meghalaya Economic Review, 12(3), 21–33.
11. UNDP. (2010). *Human Development Report: Gender Equality in Tribal India*. United Nations Development Programme, India.
12. Zokaitluangi, C. (2017). *Cultural identity and gender aspirations among tribal girls in Northeast India*. Education and Society Journal, 9(2), 88–102.