

**MUJERES, NATURALEZA Y CULTURA: UNA LECTURA
ECOFEMINISTA DE LA CULTURA MATRILINEAL DE LAS
TRIBUS KHASIS, JAINTIA Y GARO DE MEGHALAYA**
**WOMEN, NATURE AND CULTURE: AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF THE
MATRILINEAL CULTURE OF THE KHASIS, JAINTIA AND GARO TRIBES OF
MEGHALAYA**
**MULHERES, NATUREZA E CULTURA: UMA LEITURA ECOFEMINISTA DA CULTURA
MATRILINEAL DAS TRIBOS KHASIS, JAINTIA E GARO DE MEGHALAYA**

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ABSTRACT

Northeast India, the land of original inhabitants, follows a unique and fascinating culture and tradition as its inhabitants are closely attached to nature. Northeast India is one of those few places in the world, where matrilineal culture is still practiced. In Meghalaya, one of the northeastern states, the practice of matrilineality has been in existence for almost 2000 years among a few tribes. Khasi, Jaintia and Garo, the earliest ethnic communities of Meghalaya appear to be homogenous ones, as the youngest daughter becomes the custodian of the ancestral prospects. This practice where the womenfolk become the custodians of the cultural and natural artifacts has strong parallels in the theory of ecofeminism. By employing ecofeministic perspective to read the matrilineal culture of the tribes, the paper aims to make a parallel study on the ethnic women's affinity towards nature. Ecofeminism celebrates the robust connect between women and nature and asserts that women serve as the advocates for nature rather than men. The paper, therefore, aims to investigate ecofeministic elements among the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo tribes of Meghalaya and tries to express an ecofeministic view concerning family, marriage, religion, and food culture of the Meghalaya tribes.

KEY WORDS: Ecofeminism; Matrilineal; Nature; Culture; Tribe



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RESUMEN

El noreste de la India, la tierra de los habitantes originales, sigue una cultura y tradición únicas y fascinantes, ya que sus habitantes están estrechamente vinculados a la naturaleza. El noreste de la India es uno de esos pocos lugares en el mundo donde todavía se practica la cultura matrilineal. En Meghalaya, uno de los estados del noreste, la práctica de la matrilinealidad existe desde hace casi 2000 años entre algunas tribus. Khasi, Jaintia y Garo, las primeras comunidades étnicas de Meghalaya parecen ser homogéneas, ya que la hija menor se convierte en la custodia de las perspectivas ancestrales. Esta práctica en la que las mujeres se convierten en custodias de los artefactos culturales y naturales tiene fuertes paralelos en la teoría del ecofeminismo. Al emplear una perspectiva ecofeminista para leer la cultura matrilineal de las tribus, el documento tiene como objetivo hacer un estudio paralelo sobre la afinidad de las mujeres étnicas con la naturaleza. El ecofeminismo celebra la sólida conexión entre las mujeres y la naturaleza y afirma que las mujeres sirven como defensoras de la naturaleza en lugar de los hombres. Por lo tanto, el documento tiene como objetivo investigar los elementos ecofeministas entre las tribus Khasi, Jaintia y Garo de Meghalaya y trata de expresar una visión ecofeminista sobre la familia, el matrimonio, la religión y la cultura alimentaria de las tribus Meghalaya.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Ecofeminismo; Matrilineal; Naturaleza; Cultura; Tribu

RESUMO

O Nordeste da Índia, a terra dos habitantes originais, segue uma cultura e tradição únicas e fascinantes, pois seus habitantes estão intimamente ligados à natureza. O Nordeste da Índia é um dos poucos lugares do mundo onde a cultura matrilinear ainda é praticada. Em Meghalaya, um dos estados do Nordeste, a prática da matrilinearidade já existe há quase 2.000 anos entre algumas tribos. Khasi, Jaintia e Garo, as primeiras comunidades étnicas de Meghalaya, parecem ser homogêneas, pois a filha mais nova se torna a guardiã das perspectivas ancestrais. Essa prática em que as mulheres se tornam guardiãs dos artefatos culturais e naturais tem fortes paralelos na teoria do ecofeminismo. Ao empregar a perspectiva ecofeminista para ler a cultura matrilinear das tribos, o artigo tem como objetivo fazer um estudo paralelo sobre a afinidade das mulheres étnicas com a natureza. O ecofeminismo celebra a conexão robusta entre as mulheres e a natureza e afirma que as mulheres atuam como defensoras da natureza ao invés dos homens. O artigo, portanto, tem como objetivo investigar elementos ecofeminísticos entre as tribos Khasi, Jaintia e Garo de Meghalaya e tenta expressar uma visão ecofeminista sobre família, casamento, religião e cultura alimentar das tribos Meghalaya.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ecofeminismo; Matrilinear; Natureza; Cultura; Tribo

INTRODUCTION

'Human mitochondrial DNA which passes from one generation to another through matrilineal hierarchy is the only possible genetic material to trace back someone's culture, customs, and hereditary' (Jobling and Tyler-Smith 2003). Even in the present times, some populations follow matrilineal lineages. Matrilineal lineage is a custom in the institution of marriage where the husband goes to live with the community of his wife. Matrilineal residence operates in a matrilineal society. Father Lafitau in the work, *Early Human Kinship: From Sex to Social Reproduction* depicted the esteemed condition of women in the matrilineal Iroquois society. He praised the matrilineal society calling women a genealogical tree who give rise to a sequence of generations and who are responsible for the contiguity of families. He considers women as the spirits of peace and harmony. (2011).

The crux of a matrilineal society lies in the fact that after marriage, a woman continues to live with her mother's brothers and sisters. She does not go to her husband's family as seen in the patriarchal system. The husband protects and takes care of his sister's children, while the wife takes care of her own children at her home. Matrilineality aims to uphold a woman's freedom and preserve her wealth. It is relevant even for the stability of marriage as women and men remain members of their native families. "In the matrilineal tradition, women get moral support as they are surrounded by their kins. This reduces marital risks and instability in their unions" (Clignet, 1970; Poewe, 1978).

India is a nation with unity in diversity. It is dominantly involved by different etymological, linguistic and religious groups, caste and tribes with varied social and cultural structures, customs, beliefs and practices. There are tribal communities in India with some uniqueness and quirks in terms of social, cultural and historical qualities. Meghalaya, one of the Northeastern states of India, achieves uniqueness because of its predominantly tribal culture. There are three main tribes in the state namely, Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo. Besides these, there are many other smaller tribes like the Koch, Rabha, and Bodo. The Khasi and Jaintia inhabit the eastern part of Meghalaya, while the Garo inhabit the western part. While Jaintia and Khasi belong to the Proto-Australoid Monkhmer group; the Garos belong to the Bodo family. The matrilineal system followed by these tribes has created a great interest among the anthropologists of the present times. This paper tries to analyse cultural institutions like family, marriage, religion and food culture and reads matrilineal culture through an ecofeministic perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While advocating for Ecofeminism which was not yet a reality, Francois d'Eaubonne was cynical about the condition of nature and women under the socialist and capitalist regime that existed when she introduced the notion of Ecological Feminism (Roth, 2013). The right of a mother marks a cultural stage and this cultural stage is not confined to any particular people, family or ethnic group (Bachofen, 1973). Hartung in his paper "Matrilineal Inheritance: New Theory and Analysis" (1985), brings out the mode of the transmission of property in a matrilineal society. He asserts that the matrilineal society follows a uterine descentance wherein the woman gets her property from a female ancestor. This is unlike in patriarchy which follows an agnatic descentance in which a man gets his property from a male ancestor.

Elaine Nogueira-Godsey in the paper "The Feminism of Ivone Gebara" (2013) highlights Gebara's ecofeministic thoughts. She concludes that an individual gets empowered through the theology that exists in his or her community. Gebara finds a relation between ecofeminism and theology. C. Knight in his paper "Early Human

Kinship was Matrilineal,” (2008) opines that mothers would have done best if they could resist male sexual control and take advantage of every child care resource (82). BaffourTakyi in “Matrilineal Family Ties and Marital Dissolution in Ghana” (2007) brings out the positives in matrilineal culture. He finds that Akans (a tribal group), who follow a matrilineal culture have a high rate of secondary education compared to non-Akans. Akans are found to be more urbanized and highly educated too.

Manisha Rao in her study, *Ecofeminism at the Crossroads in India: A Review* (2012), discusses that a woman’s harmonious relationship with nature should be analysed on the basis of various parameters like gender, caste, class, creed and division of labour. There is a correlation between the problems affected by both women and nature in a patriarchal society as patriarchy uses women and nature as tools to exert their power. According to the 2011 census, the tribal population of India comprises about 8.6% of the total population. Forest plays an inexplicable part in the lives of these people as they are dependent on it for food and their livelihood. They consume wild plants and plant parts through traditional hereditary knowledge (Phawa et al., 2019).

Gitika Das and Abhijit K. R. Bezbaruah (2011) who made a study on the social change and position of Khasi women found out that in earlier times, females used to dominate in various economic activities. Later, their male counterparts too started involving in it. This tribe which is following a matrilineal culture limits the size of the family as they know the benefits of a small family. Even though such measures were taken, more women among them remained illiterate than men (4-5). B.K. Tiwari in the paper, “Impact of Cash Crop Cultivation on Gender Relations Dynamics in Khasi Community, A Matrilineal Tribe of Meghalaya, India” (2006) speaks of their property ownership. He discusses that the exposure to the market has not changed the matrilineal system of property ownership. Women continue to dominate in the field of finance and trading of products. Men dominate in the fieldwork, but property remains with the women in the family.

Erik De Maaker and Vibha Joshi in their article, “Introduction: The Northeast and Beyond: Region and Culture,” observes that the tribal communities of Northeast India experienced a considerable socio-cultural reform over the last century and a half. Changes are now very evident in the political and administrative system, economy, and education and even in their religious outlook. Many converted themselves to Christianity. Modern agricultural methods like sedentary farming were introduced on hilly areas. Life improved dramatically over the years (2007, 384). Adding to these reforms, SriramAnandanarayan opines that organisations working for the upliftment of Adivasi communities should look beyond issues of identity and focus more on labour and gender problems (Anandanarayan, 2010, 302)

FAMILY, MARRIAGE, RELIGION AND FOOD CULTURE AMONG THE TRIBAL

Khaai

Khasi considers family as the most significant unit of the society. Elders enjoy a considerable position among the members of the community. Parents are viewed as Gods and their words are taken with utmost reverence (Piyashi and Kedilezo 2016). Ladies in the family are given great respect. At the time of a festival or feast (Bamkhana), elders are served the meals first. After hunting, the villagers present their head man with the most important part of the hunted animal like its head. They follow a joint family system which strengthens their helping and sharing nature.

Among the Khasis, ancestry is traced from the side of mother only. The youngest daughter in the house takes the responsibility of her mother in her absence (Kothari 2019). The youngest daughter is considered as a very important person in the family as she is the one who needs to take care of the entire family - her parents, children and divorced brothers if any. If the family is devoid of any girl children, the ancestral property goes to the daughter from the maternal side, as it is the custom of the tribe that the property should remain inside the mother’s family.

Among the Khasis, religious beliefs and performance of rituals have changed over time. Most Khasis follow Christianity and “both men and women enjoy equal share of power and authority to perform religious ceremonies” (Ellena and Kyrham, 2018). Marriage is conducted according to Christian rituals. Some of the rituals are conducted according to the native Khasi traditions as they have not completely forsaken their traditions. The Khasis observe various religious rituals like the bride-seeing ceremony. In Niam Khasi (the customary religion of the Khasis), the groom’s visit to the bride’s house along with his maternal uncle marks the onset of marriage ceremonies. The latter part of the ceremonies occurs in the church as usual (Kasum and Bakshi, 1982). There is a ceremony of exchanging rings called ‘Sanjan’ which represents the bonding of the bride and the groom.

The rituals following the death of a Khasi too is unique to the community. They give respect to their dead by paying homage to the departed soul. “Khasis believe that the spirits of their forefathers visit their home after three days of their last rites. In order for the spirits to enter their house, they keep all the doors and windows opened. (Kasum and Bakshi, 1982). As part of the funeral ceremonies, they offer liquor, cereals and other essential edibles to the spirit. They bury their dead at ‘Jokhatham priom’ - the entombment land and the leftover bones are gathered and kept in the clan house.

The Khasi tribe follows an agrarian culture and lifestyle. They practice shifting cultivation and cash crop cultivation. They grow cash crops like betel leaf, betel nut, orange, corn, millet, and sweet potatoes. Though men and women equally share their duties during harvesting, more responsibilities are vested in the hands of women. Men plow the fields and women help in weeding. Women take control of the finance of the family and trading of products (Tiwari, 2006).

Jaintia

Jaintia households, in the present study, are mostly found living in a joint family. The unit of the Jaintia social organization is the family, which consists of a grandmother, mother, sisters, brothers, maternal uncles, aunts, nephews, and nieces. Sometimes, grandfather or father is found to reside with them. This is therefore a matrilineal joint family. Sen (1985) opines that a Khasi-Jaintia family resembles a joint family with the mother as the head and custodian of the family properties and maternal uncle as the decision making authority. In the event of the death of the mother, the authority of religious performance and custody of property goes to the youngest daughter. In case the parents have no daughters, the adoption of a female child is allowed, preferably from their clan for the continuance of family lineage.

The Jaintia marriage system is based on rigid clan exogamy. The ‘night-visit’ marriage system in which the husband comes to his wife’s house after dusk and leaves for his mother’s house before dawn is practiced so long as the marriage bond remains (Sen, 2004). In the traditional system, when the husband used to visit his mother-in-law’s house he did not eat, smoke or even partake the betel-nut in the house; the idea being since none of his earnings go to support this house, therefore, it is not etiquette for him to partake of food or other refreshments there. But with the advent of Christianity, urbanization, and modernization; this system of marriage is losing its ground (Chakrabarty, 1995).

The religion of the Jaintias, their social habits, customs, beliefs, and practices resemble those of the Khasis except for the large village of Nartiang (Moffatt, 1985). It is observed that in Nartiang, Mihmyntdu, and even in some houses at Jowai, the Jaintias generally deliver the baby at home. In Nartiang, most of the Hindus after delivery, feed the baby a little water mixed with sugar. The first food they feed the baby is smashed rice with banana and a little sugar. The Christians in Nartiang, Niamtre, and in Mihmyntdu and in some houses at Jowai also follow this practice.

After death, the Niamtre and the Hindu Jaintias cremate the bodies while the Christians practice the burial system. The Niamtre and the Hindu Jaintias, however, do not burn the infants, they bury them instead. The Jaintias believe in the existence of the spirits of the deceased ancestors (Chattopadhyay, 1988). Behdienkhlam, one of the most popular religious festivals of the Jaintias, is held in Jowai at a place called Wah-Aitna during the months of June and July every year. Behdienkhlam which means 'driving away the plague' has been derived from two words - beh-dien (or dieng) that means 'driving away with sticks' and Khlam meaning 'plague or pestilence'. 'Khlam' was described as a she-demon causing cholera, epidemic, plague and pestilence and 'Dieng' meant tree. The festival was based on a cult of tree-worship.

The staple food of Jaintia people are rice and meat. And apart from other crops cultivated in the region; wild edible plants are also present in large numbers. These wild edibles not only provide inexpensive food but they also contribute to the diet of the people in this tribal community. The main occupation of Jaintias is agriculture. Besides agriculture, the people also have a practice of collecting wild edibles, depending on their availability. They collect wild edibles viz. tubers, shoots, leaves, and fruits, etc. (Singh et al. 2012).

Garo

Garo is a significant matrilineal tribal population of Northeast India occupying generally the Garo hill district of Meghalaya. They call themselves 'Achikmande' which actually signifies 'Hill man' (Playfair 1975). A study on the matrilineal system among the Garo and Khasi carried out by F. K Lehman in 1969 observed that though women have the rightful ownership of the ancestral property, the controlling power and authority over it are in the possession of men. In a matrilineal framework, the responsibility and the authority over the property pass from mother to the youngest daughter.

The Garo community is broadly divided into five matrilineal clans, namely - Areng, Marak, Momin, Sangma and Shira. Cross-cousin marriage is broadly common among the Garo tribes. If a woman dies before her husband, it becomes the obligation of the dead wife's family to find another wife for the widower. Since substitution spouses are frequently given to old widowers, the bride is usually much younger than the man she weds (Yadav and Manish 2012). Consequently, a unique kind of marriage is observed among the Garos where along with the widow, the unmarried little girl is additionally hitched to the substitution groom. Just like replacement wives, replacement husbands are also much younger. Therefore, a distinctive system of marriage is found among the Garos in which along with the widow, the unmarried daughter is also married to the replacement groom. This stems from the feeling that it is unfair to expect a young man to marry a widow unless he is also given a younger wife who has never been married or at least promised another wife in the future (Sikdar, 2009).

Religion is perhaps the greatest factor of progress in the area. Indeed, even before the coming of organized religion like Christianity, Hinduism had supported their culture change. The procedure of Sanskritization was found in some Bodo-speaking communities in the Garo Hills area (Karlsson, 2011). SongsarekGaros, the real inhabitants of Garo hills, follow a conventional religion, since neither do they consider themselves as Hindus nor do they have any position in the caste hierarchy. Thus, despite the change in religion, sometimes some aspects of culture either get amalgamated or remain the same.

For instance, Songsareks traditionally cremate their dead, but with the advent of Christianity in the Garo Hills, changes in their funeral practices have been noticed. SongsarekGaros have started burying the dead (like Christians) except for the important ones among them. Traditionally, Garos have many festivals and ceremonies which are mostly connected with various phases of cultivation and harvesting as they are rooted to agriculture (Ahmed et al., 2010). Wangala is the prominent festival of the Garos and is celebrated in honour of the Sun-god (Maaker, 2013). Bamboo flutes and drums are an integral part of religious ceremonies and social functions (Yadav and Manish 2012).

Garos have important and valuable information regarding the medicinal effect on humans. They practice conventional Ayurvedic and present-day allopathic medication. They have a rich knowledge of herbs, mixtures, and decoctions and also visit present-day medical centers. Rice is the staple food of the Garo tribes which they consume three times a day – morning, noon and night. Fish, meat, vegetables, and eggs are consumed as side dishes (Rahman and Most, 2012). Fruits are generally considered to be a food meant only for children and not adults.

ECOFEMINISM: A THEORETICAL APPROACH

Ecofeminism is both a social movement and an ecological ideology which focuses its attention on environmental studies, feminist studies, ecological activism and modern science to analyse the bond between culture and ecology and explicates the reverberations of this relationship on environmental politics (Batricevic and Nikola 2019). Environmental problems and women issues are the main concepts of ecofeminism. Ecofeminists have different views on how capitalism exerts power and how patriarchy becomes the cause of environmental issues and how environmental issues lead to the oppression of women and marginalised sections of the society.

Ecofeminists believe that ecological sustainability will depend greatly on the roles played by women (Buckingham, 2004). Eco-feminism which was introduced in the early 1970s, played a major role in the emergence of environmental movements led by women. Ecofeminism recognizes the notion that historically, women are more concerned on environmental issues than men. Industrial revolution started by a profit oriented patriarchal and capitalist society did more harm than good to the environment. Women's activism during the apex of the industrial revolution in order to protect the environment has been very critical as women were the major victims. Women's involvement was considered crucial for the conservation of the environment as the industrial revolution has been doing harm to society with women being the major victims (Parpart, 2000). Ecofeminism, which was introduced during the 1970s, was further developed with the declaration of the United Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985).

Several UN-supported initiatives were undertaken to bring together global and non-legislative organisations, under one umbrella to fight for the cause of improving the status of women in the society. Strikingly, in those meetings, one of the major subjects discussed was the relation of women with the environment. Members incorporated that ecological debasement and contamination are pulverizing delicate ecological systems worldwide and dislodge environmental communities, which progressively undermines the sustainability of the individuals and also deteriorates healthy environmental conditions. The seriousness of the reality of the global environmental crisis has now constrained reactions from a wider range of political and social activists. Most of the members considered ecological issues and environmental degradation as problems affecting the entire ecosystem and women in particular and they tried their best to stand against these issues and protect the environment in which they live. Their reactions to these issues were intelligent and pragmatic and it is in this context that ecofeminism emerged.

Ecofeminism was introduced into the academic world during the 1980s. Many scholars and activists took the area as their main focus of study and they started to connect exploitation of natural resources and exploitation of women together. They considered that both the issues need immediate attention and redressal as they are integral part of a nation's development. French feminist writer, Francoise d'Eaubonne, is widely regarded as the founder of Ecofeminism. Her work 'Feminism or Death' is considered to be a milestone in ecological philosophy and feminist movement of the early 1970s.

She started an ecology movement called *EcologieFeminisme* (Ecology Feminism or ecofeminism) in Paris in 1972. In her work *Feminism or Death*, she blames patriarchy for overpopulation, pollution and environmental degradation. She cites the significance of the relationship between women and nature and advocates the necessity of women's activism to protect the Earth (Mellor, 2000).

Christian theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether was the first to bring the concept of New Woman, New Earth. This concept establishes the connection between women and the Earth (1996, 1998). Susan Griffin, an outstanding writer, dramatist, and screenwriter, wrote *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Insider Her* (1978), a long composition in which she portrays the bond between women and nature. She argues that along with women, nature is also a victim of men's violence. Ecological historian and logician Carolyn Merchant's feminist theory is based on an ecological lens. In 'The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution' (1990), she shows how the present-day mechanical worldview of science has empowered the concurrent misuse of nature and subjection of women.

Finally, ecofeministic approach should not only deal with the women-gender-environment interrelationship, but it should also discuss how women can work for a sustainable development safeguarding the environment (Nieves Rico, 1998, 21). Ecofeminism has had a significant impact on preserving the environment. Ecofeminists assert that the strong relationship women have with nature help them to work for the preservation of nature combating environmental degradation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: A MATRILINEAL VIEW OF ECOFEMINISM

Ecofeminists establish a bond between women and nature through the popularization of various customs, traditions, rituals and values which are centered on the Mother Goddess, the Earth, and various living beings. Ecofeminists argue that the biological features of women help them to unlock the secrets of nature. It is in this sense that scholars introduced the notion that women are closer to nature than men. As ecofeminism believes in the bond between women and nature, matrilineal culture too gives importance to both women and nature. Women serve as the agents who transmit matrilineal culture and tradition. Matrilineal culture has close ties with ecology and feminism. Through an ecofeministic lens, the paper discusses the various aspects of matrilineal culture among the tribes in Meghalaya.

Karen J Warren (1997) proposes her idea of connection between feminism and ecology by stating that "concerning feminism and environment, feminism also may be vital not only for women, animals, and the Planet Earth, but for the development of worldviews and practices which are ecologically responsible and socially just for all" (pp. ix–xxvi). Ecofeminism has been used as "an umbrella term for a wide range of different positions concerned with the associations between the unjustified authority of women, kids, people of colour, ethnic minorities, traditional people, customary values, poor people and the unjustified control of nature" (Warren, 2000). From this, it is understood that ecofeminism is concerned not just about ecology and women but it also studies and tries to find out solutions for the issues that concern various minorities and ethnic groups including tribals.

Ecofeminism takes into account the fact that women significantly contribute to the successful adaptation to changing natural conditions. They do such through their basic knowledge, experience, critical thinking, agency, social institutions and unique role in farming, food security, livelihoods, income, age, generation, management of households and natural resources in differing eco-frameworks, participation and support in a variety of socio-cultural, political-economic, historical and environmental establishments. Many factors contribute towards shaping up women's relationship with the environment.

Their lifestyle, location and the social framework play a major role. Apart from these, gender systems, ethnicity and class structure too helps in building this relationship. Moreover, it is seen that this relationship gets modified throughout a woman's life.

Indian environmental activist Vandana Shiva's works bring out the Indian notions of ecofeminism. She delineates Prakriti as "the feminine principle considering the reasons in which it protects everything and is ecological in behaviour. Feminism as ecology, and ecology as the restoration of Prakriti, the source of all life" (Shiva, 1988). The idea of 'Prakriti' can be taken as the crux of Indian philosophy.

Prakriti philosophy sees nature through the eyes of a woman. The death of prakriti marks the death of the entire human race and other living beings as there is a great bond between nature and the living beings. By explaining the 'feminine principle,' Shiva proposes that "women in India are an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and in practice" (Shiva, 1989). As Prakriti is considered as the protector of all life forms, women in the matrilineal culture are regarded as the protectors of their family, tradition and culture.

The Northeast of India has a mostly tribal population and these people are known for their harmonious relationship with nature. The tribals follow an ecological, cultural and linguistic heterogeneity and support religious pluralism (Das, 1996). Tribal women play a major role in protecting the environment. Meghalaya, one of the Northeastern states, has many women activists who are actively involved in working towards environmental protection (Agarwala, 2006).

This state is also known for its matrilineal social order. Khasi, Jaintia and Garo tribes follow a matrilineal culture. In the Khasi tribe, after the marriage of the son, he is allowed to live only in his wife's house. Daughters live with their mother and earn for the family. Even today, women get the most respected place in the Jaintia society. She supports her family and kids as men do in a patriarchal society (Kapadia, 1980). Khasi women take care of the family property and its wealth. The mother serves as the agent who binds together the religious faith, traditions and rituals of the family and society (Kyndiah 1990; Bareh 1997). In Jaintia and Garo systems too, mother is considered as the authority of the family. The house belongs to the mother.

An ecofeminist reading of the matrilineal culture of the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia tribes is very apt because of the unique matrilineal hereditary practices among these women. They enjoy a high status in society. They regard mother as God. Women take descent from their mother. They carry their mother's surname as well as their clan's name. They consider that the power of mother is the foundation of all prosperity and that she should not be violated or abused at any time (Nongbri, 1994). A girl child is given preferential treatment as she is regarded as a valuable asset. Women are relatively more educated than men and women get more respect because of this.

Traditionally, ecofeminism is considered as a social movement that aims for the betterment of the social, economic and political opportunities of women across the world. Ecofeminism emerged as a new strand in feminism and works also for improving living conditions of women and humanity in general without destroying the environment. As more women pursue education and work in various fields like men, it is necessary that men should also take part in domestic chores. Work should be shared between both men and women (Mies & Shiva, 1993). Studies reveal that women in matrilineal communities of Meghalaya, especially the Khasis, Jaintias and Kharos, "enjoy a better position and lead a harmonious life than in a patriarchal society" (Wapanginla, 2003).

Women in these communities do every work as their men do, including business and marketing and even agricultural activities, without any fear of sexual harassment. The mother has the authority to control the profit of even a wedded child. YodidaBhutia and Georgia Liarakou (2018) in their study on matrilineal culture among North-Eastern tribes reveal how men and women share their responsibilities as part of their culture; both of them pay their bills equally and both seriously take initiatives to protect the environment by judiciously using the available energy, reducing wastage (4). Even for taking contraceptives, “both the genders equally share their responsibility in family planning strategies as prescribed in the family planning program of the state” (Oosterhoff et al.,. 2015, 1114).

In the paper, “Gender and nature in the matrilineal society of Meghalaya, India: Searching for ecofeminist perspectives,” Bhutia and Liarakou opine that in a matrilineal society, even though women have a considerable share of power, men are considered to be the power-holders. Matrilineal society gives a fair share of power to men in the case of decision-making. Men also have authority over management of property even though women inherit the property (Bhutia and Liarakou, 2018). One can find that a matrilineal society is more balanced than a patrilineal society in the sharing of property, power and authority. Matrilineal societies which are limited to only some parts of the world, safeguard their ecosystem just like they take care of their family. They have a high regard for the world in which they live and protect it for their future generations.

CONCLUSION

A matrilineal culture accomplishes a distinctive social and cultural standard of living for the Khasi, Garo and Jaintia tribes of Meghalaya. The study shows that their culture is ecology-oriented and that they consider the environment as part of their life. They have an indigenous farming culture and have a great knowledge of herbs and its medical applications. An analysis of the marriage, family, religion and food culture of these tribes shows how these tribes integrate nature into their daily lives. They regard nature as their mother. Nature plays a significant role in their lives and they show extreme enthusiasm to preserve her.

Over the years, women became victims of environmental degradation caused by men. Ecofeminism is the rise of women against patriarchal dominance on both nature and women. Ecofeminists popularize the idea of women being the protectors of nature. As women are closer to the environment than men, they become leaders of sustainable development. The tribal women of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo take a great initiative to preserve their environment, and their matrilineal culture can be considered as a culture that gives equal importance to women and nature.

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