



Matriarchy and Modernity: Negotiating Identity in Contemporary Matrilineal Societies of East India

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Abstract

Matrilineal societies, where lineage and inheritance pass through the female line, have historically offered alternative frameworks for gender roles and power dynamics. In East India, particularly among the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia tribes of Meghalaya, matrilineality shapes social norms, property ownership, and kinship structures. However, as these communities experience increasing exposure to modern education, employment opportunities, urbanization, and globalized culture, traditional structures are being reinterpreted and, in some cases, contested.

This paper explores how individuals, especially women and youth, negotiate identity within these evolving matrilineal frameworks. It examines the tension between cultural continuity and modern aspirations, focusing on three dimensions: education, economic participation, and urban migration. Through a combination of secondary literature analysis, interviews from existing ethnographic studies, and theoretical frameworks on gender and modernization, the research uncovers the subtle shifts occurring in gender expectations, authority structures, and intergenerational dialogue.

Key findings suggest that while education has empowered many matrilineal women with knowledge and voice, it has also introduced aspirations that conflict with traditional domestic expectations. Employment and economic migration, particularly among men, are leading to the rise of nuclear families, reducing the influence of maternal uncles and grandmothers in household decisions. Urbanization has further diluted clan-based land ownership structures, encouraging legal reforms that redefine property rights.

Despite these challenges, many Khasi and Garo women continue to assert their cultural roles while adapting to modernity. This paper argues for a nuanced view of matriliney in transition—not as a collapsing system, but as one that is evolving under pressure. It emphasizes the importance of preserving the core cultural values of matrilineal identity while fostering equitable participation in modern institutions.

Ultimately, this study calls for context-sensitive development models and educational curricula that respect matrilineal heritage while facilitating gender-equitable modernization.



Introduction

1. Setting the Context: Gender and Power in Indian Social Structures

In most of the world, including the Indian subcontinent, power, inheritance, and kinship have historically followed patriarchal lines. Men have been perceived as the primary agents of authority, ownership, and lineage, while women have traditionally been associated with domesticity and subordination. This division of roles has shaped family structures, inheritance laws, community governance, and cultural norms across centuries. Within this prevailing framework, the matrilineal societies of East India, particularly those of the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo communities in the state of Meghalaya, stand as profound exceptions.

These societies have developed and sustained systems where lineage, clan identity, and inheritance pass through the female line. Among the Khasi and Jaintia, for instance, the youngest daughter—known as the *ka khadduh*—inherits ancestral property and is responsible for taking care of the elderly and maintaining the household. Children take the mother's clan name, and women traditionally have enjoyed higher visibility and respect within the family unit.

While matriliney does not necessarily equate to full gender equality—political and religious leadership often remains male-dominated—it does reflect a distinctly different orientation toward gender roles than is commonly seen across South Asia.

2. Problematizing the Idea of “Matriarchy”

It is important at the outset to clarify terminology. While these societies are often referred to as “matriarchal,” the more accurate term would be “matrilineal.” A true matriarchy would involve women holding formal positions of authority in political and religious spheres—similar to the dominant role that men have historically held in patriarchal societies. However, in Khasi and Garo communities, while women may own property and exercise familial authority, political leadership and decision-making roles are often still reserved for men. Therefore, what exists is a hybrid: a cultural system that places women at the center of lineage and social continuity, while maintaining male dominance in other spheres.

This distinction does not minimize the significance of matriliney. On the contrary, it opens up a compelling avenue of inquiry: how do such societies conceptualize power and identity differently? What does it mean to be a woman in a society where one is both the inheritor of wealth and the bearer of cultural responsibility? And how are these roles being negotiated in the face of modern influences?

3. Modernity Arrives: Education, Urbanization, and Economic Transformation

In recent decades, the pressures of modernity have begun to alter the foundations of matrilineal society. Three forces stand out in particular: the expansion of modern education, the shift to urbanized and nuclear family life, and the entrance of women into wage labor and professional employment. These changes have reconfigured family structures, aspirations, and social expectations in significant ways.

First, education has opened up new horizons for both men and women. While this is broadly a positive development, it has also introduced new values—often rooted in Western or pan-Indian ideals of individualism, nuclear family life, and gender norms—that can conflict with traditional matrilineal expectations. Young women, educated and professionally ambitious, may seek to leave their ancestral homes and pursue careers in cities, undermining the tradition of the *ka khadduh* remaining at home to care for elders and carry on the family name.

Second, urbanization has led to a fragmentation of the extended family unit. Urban housing constraints, labor migration, and the pursuit of higher education have drawn individuals—particularly youth—away from their communities and into new social environments. This physical distancing from the ancestral home often results in a weakening of traditional values, rituals, and communal cohesion.

Third, economic transformation has led to shifts in gender roles. Women in matrilineal societies are increasingly becoming breadwinners, entrepreneurs, and public figures. This has challenged not only internal expectations about a woman's place but also intensified debates about the roles of men in such societies. In some cases, men have expressed frustration over their perceived marginalization, leading to the formation of men's advocacy groups seeking property rights and greater visibility.

4. Identity at a Crossroads: The Emotional Terrain of Transformation

This research seeks to go beyond the legal, economic, and structural analysis of matrilineal society and explore the emotional, psychological, and cultural negotiations that individuals undergo within these transforming systems. What does it feel like to inherit a legacy that ties you to a home and community while being pushed by education and employment to seek mobility and independence? How do young men perceive their roles in families where they are traditionally excluded from inheritance? What conflicts arise between elders and youth as expectations shift? These are questions of identity—not just social identity, but personal and collective self-understanding.

The terrain of identity in matrilineal societies is rich with contradiction and complexity. Women may experience both pride and pressure; empowerment and confinement. Men may feel both relief and resentment—freed from patriarchal expectations of sole responsibility but also alienated from decisions about property and inheritance. The arrival of modernity has not led to

a simple rejection of matrilineal traditions; rather, it has provoked deep reflection and hybrid forms of adaptation.

5. The Research Imperative: Why This Study Matters

In recent years, academic interest in matrilineal societies has grown, but much of the discourse remains limited to anthropological documentation or nostalgic celebration. This paper attempts to push the conversation further by situating matrilineity within contemporary debates on gender equity, cultural survival, and the meaning of progress. Rather than viewing matrilineal communities as frozen in time or as utopian exceptions, this research treats them as living, breathing cultures negotiating change.

This is not merely an academic exercise. Understanding how matrilineal societies adapt to modern challenges can offer broader insights for global conversations on gender justice, cultural resilience, and inclusive development. In an era where dominant systems of patriarchy are increasingly critiqued, matrilineal frameworks offer alternative models of gender organization—ones that are not without flaws but offer valuable lessons on community, care, and continuity.

6. Objectives of the Study

This paper aims to fulfill the following objectives:

- **To explore** how modern education, urban migration, and economic mobility affect traditional matrilineal roles in East Indian societies, particularly among the Khasi and Garo communities.
- **To analyze** the gendered experiences of individuals within these societies, paying close attention to how women and men negotiate identity, responsibility, and aspirations in the face of changing norms.
- **To assess** the internal debates and contestations around tradition and progress within families and communities.
- **To provide** culturally grounded recommendations for policymakers, educators, and development practitioners seeking to support such communities without undermining their values.

7. Research Questions

The study is guided by the following key research questions:

1. How are matrilineal structures being challenged or reinforced by modern education and employment opportunities?
2. In what ways are urbanization and the shift toward nuclear families affecting traditional clan and kinship systems?
3. How do Khasi and Garo women negotiate their dual roles as cultural stewards and modern professionals?
4. What are the experiences and responses of men in matrilineal societies who do not traditionally inherit property?
5. What are the potential futures of matrilineal societies in the context of globalization, legal reform, and cultural change?

8. Methodological Approach

This study employs a qualitative research methodology grounded in ethnographic observation, secondary literature review, and analysis of policy and media discourse. Field data and firsthand narratives—where available—are synthesized alongside existing scholarly research. The use of intersectional analysis allows us to consider how gender, class, education, and geography intersect in shaping individual and collective experiences.

Given the broad spectrum of influences at play—legal, economic, emotional, and ideological—this interdisciplinary approach is critical. The study draws insights from gender studies, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies to provide a holistic understanding of matriliney in modern East India.

9. Scope and Limitations

While the study focuses primarily on the Khasi and Garo communities of Meghalaya—two of the most prominent matrilineal societies in India—it also draws occasional comparisons with similar systems in other parts of the world (e.g., the Minangkabau in Indonesia or the Mosuo in China) to highlight global patterns of matrilineal adaptation.

It must be acknowledged that the paper does not cover every matrilineal or matriarchal tradition in India. Nor does it claim to speak for all individuals within these communities. Instead, it presents a snapshot—a layered, evolving picture—of negotiation and identity-making in a changing cultural landscape.

10. Conclusion of the Introduction

The matrilineal societies of East India are at a pivotal juncture. As the forces of modernity sweep across traditional communities, the values and roles that have long defined identity and gender are being questioned, reinterpreted, and, in some cases, abandoned. Yet, this moment of crisis is also a moment of creativity. From ancestral homes to urban classrooms, from family rituals to employment negotiations, Khasi and Garo individuals are not passively watching their traditions fade—they are actively remaking them.

This paper seeks to honor that complexity. By investigating how modern education, urbanization, and employment are reshaping identity in matrilineal societies, it hopes to illuminate not just the challenges of cultural change, but also the possibilities of cultural resilience.

Section 1: Historical Foundations of Matrilineal Societies in East India

The Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia tribes have long maintained matrilineal traditions that predate colonial influence. In Khasi society, lineage is traced through the mother, and clan membership is central to identity. The *ka khadduh* (youngest daughter) inherits ancestral property and is expected to care for her aging parents and maintain household rituals. Maternal uncles hold authority over nephews and nieces, and women have strong roles in family, economy, and religion.

While these societies are matrilineal, they are not strictly matriarchal. Political leadership often remains male-dominated. Yet, women's roles in clan decisions and social legitimacy are critical. Colonial records and early anthropologists marveled at these systems, sometimes framing them as curiosities or deviations from "normal" gender roles.

However, matriliney offered a viable alternative to patriarchy, supporting women's social security and property rights. This system remained relatively intact until recent decades, when economic modernization and state-led development began penetrating the region.

Section 2: Education and the Reconfiguration of Gender Roles

Education has been a double-edged sword for matrilineal societies. On one hand, it has empowered many Khasi and Garo women, equipping them with the tools to access employment, articulate rights, and engage in civic life. Female literacy rates in Meghalaya have consistently outpaced national averages. Women are visible in teaching, administration, and small businesses.

On the other hand, formal education often promotes patriarchal values embedded in mainstream curricula, diminishing the perceived value of traditional roles. The educated *ka khadduh*, once expected to remain in the ancestral home, may now prefer urban jobs and nuclear family structures, rejecting cultural obligations. Parents increasingly favor educating sons to secure family mobility, subtly challenging matrilineal preference.

There is also an intergenerational disconnect. Elders lament that younger women are neglecting cultural duties, while the youth feel constrained by responsibilities tied to clan inheritance. Thus, education fosters aspiration, but also alienation.

Section 3: Employment, Migration, and Economic Transitions

The growth of service-sector jobs, tourism, and government employment has brought economic opportunity—but also dislocation. Young men from matrilineal societies, who historically lived in their maternal homes, now migrate to cities, disrupting traditional kinship structures. Women, too, are increasingly mobile, leading to tensions in household arrangements.

The reliance on maternal uncles is waning. Nuclear families dominate urban spaces, reducing the influence of extended kin. Property disputes are growing, especially when educated daughters challenge or redefine inheritance norms. Some men have begun advocating for equal property rights, citing marginalization in matrilineal arrangements. This has led to movements like the **Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai**, a Khasi men's rights group advocating for patrilineal reform.

Economic independence is transforming gendered authority. While some women thrive in business and public life, others face backlash for stepping out of expected cultural roles. The once-clear identity of women as custodians of culture is now contested terrain.

Section 4: Urbanization and the Erosion of Clan-Based Structures



Urbanization has perhaps had the most profound impact on matrilineal identity. As families move to cities like Shillong or Guwahati, the tight-knit village-based clan structures unravel.

Housing scarcity, cost of living, and anonymity in urban centers weaken community accountability and reduce adherence to matrilineal rituals.

Urban middle-class families often prioritize economic pragmatism over cultural obligations. Marriage choices, naming customs, and inheritance practices are increasingly individualized. Legal systems also privilege patriarchal assumptions; for instance, Indian inheritance laws do not fully recognize matrilineal succession, leading to court disputes.

Women in urban areas face new forms of gender bias not present in village systems. While they may have more economic freedom, they also face workplace discrimination, safety concerns, and limited access to community networks.

Yet, urban women also form new solidarities—women’s cooperatives, cultural groups, and advocacy networks that attempt to reclaim and reinterpret matrilineal heritage in modern contexts.

Section 5: Cultural Adaptation and Resistance

Despite these transformations, matrilineal identity is not disappearing. It is adapting. Many Khasi and Garo youth participate in cultural festivals, language preservation initiatives, and women's rights groups that integrate traditional values with modern frameworks. NGOs and educational institutions are experimenting with culturally inclusive curricula.

Women elders now engage in dialogue with the younger generation to preserve rituals in more flexible forms. Some families allow daughters to pursue careers while still maintaining ceremonial ties to ancestral homes. Men, too, are finding new roles—becoming more involved in child-rearing, supporting matrilineal customs with contemporary interpretations.

Rather than viewing modernization as a threat, some activists frame it as an opportunity to democratize matrilineity—making it more equitable across gender and class lines.

Conclusion

Matrilineal societies in East India—most prominently among the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia communities of Meghalaya—offer a unique window into alternative social organizations, particularly in their treatment of gender, lineage, and inheritance. In a global and national

context dominated by patriarchal norms, these societies have drawn considerable academic interest for placing women, especially the youngest daughter, at the center of kinship and property systems. However, the intersection of matriliney with the forces of modernization—namely education, employment, and urbanization—presents a rich and complex field of negotiation, transformation, and identity reconstruction. This conclusion synthesizes the key findings of the study while exploring their broader implications on policy, cultural preservation, gender equity, and the understanding of modernity itself.

1. Reframing Matriliney: From Static Tradition to Dynamic Framework

One of the central insights of this research is the reframing of matriliney not as a rigid, monolithic tradition but as a dynamic social framework capable of transformation and reinvention. Traditionally, matriliney in the Khasi and Garo societies was not just about property passing through women, but a more holistic socio-cultural system encompassing familial responsibility, clan identity, religious practice, and communal land management. In such systems, women—especially the *ka khadduh* (youngest daughter)—held social and cultural responsibilities that extended beyond the domestic sphere, often making them stewards of continuity and moral authority.

Yet, as the research demonstrates, these roles are increasingly being reinterpreted by younger generations who are exposed to external influences through education and urban life. Rather than rejecting matriliney outright, many women and men are finding new ways to embody or challenge these roles. The conclusion, therefore, is not one of decline, but of *negotiation*. Matriliney is evolving—not necessarily eroding—and this evolution reflects a deeper truth about all cultural systems: they survive not by isolation, but by adaptation.

2. Education: Enabler and Disruptor

Modern education plays a paradoxical role in the trajectory of matrilineal societies. On one hand, education has served as a vital enabler, equipping Khasi and Garo women with the intellectual tools to navigate broader political and economic landscapes. Educated women are now participating in professions, civic bodies, and entrepreneurial ventures, helping to break stereotypes and affirming the idea that tradition and empowerment can coexist.

However, education systems in India—and indeed, globally—are often embedded with patriarchal and Western assumptions about family structures and gender roles. As young people from matrilineal communities move through these systems, they are sometimes taught, implicitly or explicitly, that their cultural heritage is “backward” or “other.” This dissonance can cause young women to internalize a desire to distance themselves from matrilineal obligations such as living in the ancestral home or acting as cultural caretakers.

In particular, the shift in aspirations from communal responsibility to individual mobility is significant. Young women, once expected to remain rooted to their clans, now envision lives of professional ambition in cities like Shillong, Guwahati, and even Delhi or Mumbai. While this is a mark of progress, it also contributes to the weakening of extended kinship networks and traditional family cohesion. Education thus emerges as both a tool of liberation and a force of cultural disruption—its impact is ambivalent and layered.

3. Economic Participation and Changing Gender Norms

Employment opportunities, economic mobility, and market integration have transformed the economic foundations of matrilineal societies. Where earlier the economy was based on agrarian and barter systems deeply embedded in clan and communal frameworks, today's economy demands individualism, competition, and relocation. As more women enter wage labor, entrepreneurship, and government jobs, they are gaining financial independence—but not without cost.

Traditional roles once imbued with cultural capital are now often viewed as limitations. The ka khadduh's duty to care for the ancestral household, once a badge of honor, can now be seen as a burden that limits freedom and professional growth. Simultaneously, men in matrilineal societies—long deprived of property rights and often culturally positioned as secondary figures—are expressing a sense of disenfranchisement. This has led to the formation of men's rights organizations like *Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai* (SRT), which call for a more equitable share in inheritance and authority.

This tension illustrates how economic modernity is unsettling established gender norms. It does not simply empower women—it compels a renegotiation of what empowerment and fairness mean in societies that already gave women prominence, but not necessarily political dominance. The path forward may not lie in fully adopting either patriarchal or matrilineal models, but in forging hybrid frameworks that respect cultural heritage while promoting gender parity.

4. Urbanization and Cultural Dislocation

Urbanization introduces perhaps the most drastic disruption to matrilineal traditions. In urban spaces, nuclear families replace extended clans; ancestral homes give way to rented apartments; ritual observances become logistically difficult; and children grow up distant from the rituals, land, and language that shaped their identity. The anonymity and fragmentation of urban life contrast sharply with the communal intimacy of matrilineal villages.

Legal frameworks in urban India also do not accommodate matrilineal inheritance patterns. Property laws default to patriarchal norms, making it difficult for women to assert traditional

rights outside their cultural regions. Moreover, land value inflation has led to increasing property disputes and a marketization of ancestral land that once had deep cultural and spiritual significance.

Despite these challenges, urban Khasi and Garo communities are not passive. Women's collectives, student unions, and cultural organizations are springing up in cities, creating new spaces for dialogue, cultural expression, and mutual support. These urban cultural nodes reflect a desire not just to preserve tradition, but to *reclaim* and *redefine* it on their own terms.

5. Agency, Resistance, and Reinvention

Throughout this research, a consistent theme has been the agency of Khasi and Garo women in responding to the pressures of modernity. While modernization has led to stress, conflict, and loss, it has also sparked resistance and creativity. Young women are crafting hybrid identities that blend tradition and aspiration. They wear the jainsem (traditional attire) at festivals but work in offices during the week. They honor clan rituals but challenge inheritance norms that prevent women from selling land. They lead community initiatives, protest legal injustices, and demand inclusion in local governance.

This agency is not limited to women. Men are also navigating new identities—some by resisting traditional exclusions, others by embracing gender equity within matriliney. Intergenerational dialogue is becoming more critical. Elders and youth are increasingly aware of the need to find common ground, to prevent the total erosion of cultural systems while embracing the best that modern life offers.

What emerges from this study is a portrait of cultural negotiation rather than cultural collapse. Modern Khasi and Garo individuals are not simply abandoning tradition; they are reinterpreting it. They are not passive recipients of modernization; they are active agents in shaping its meaning in their lives.

6. Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this research carry important implications for policymakers, educators, and civil society actors working in matrilineal regions:

- **Legal Recognition:** There is a need for Indian property and inheritance laws to acknowledge matrilineal customs formally. This would help reduce legal disputes and protect women's land rights in matrilineal regions.
- **Culturally Sensitive Education:** Curricula in schools and colleges should include modules on indigenous knowledge systems, including matriliney, to validate and educate

youth about their heritage.

- **Urban Planning and Housing:** Government schemes in urban Meghalaya should consider extended family models and incorporate community spaces that facilitate cultural continuity.
- **Economic Programs for Women:** Initiatives promoting women's entrepreneurship should build on matrilineal norms of collective stewardship rather than individual accumulation.
- **Men's Inclusion in Gender Equity Dialogues:** Promoting gender equality in matrilineal societies must include men's voices—not to revert to patriarchy but to co-create fair systems.

7. Matriliney as a Lens to Reimagine Modernity

Finally, this study offers a broader philosophical insight: matriliney challenges conventional narratives about what modernity should look like. It reveals that empowerment does not always mean Westernization, and that tradition is not inherently oppressive. In fact, matrilineal systems may offer valuable alternatives to patriarchal excesses—by emphasizing balance, interdependence, and communal responsibility.

In a world facing deep crises of identity, alienation, and inequality, the negotiation happening in matrilineal societies of East India offers lessons in pluralism, flexibility, and resilience. These societies compel us to think differently about gender, community, and progress.

In conclusion, matriliney in East India is neither a relic of the past nor a utopia immune to challenge. It is a living, breathing social organism—negotiating, adapting, and surviving in the face of change. If supported with empathy, cultural sensitivity, and inclusive policy, it can continue to thrive—not in opposition to modernity, but in conversation with it.

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