



Cover Page



GENDERED TRADITIONS: WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN MEGHALAYA AND MIZORAM

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Abstract:

Folk sayings play a significant role in retrieving history as they often encapsulate the wisdom, experiences, and cultural values of a community. These sayings are passed down orally through generations, serving to transmit historical events, social norms, and traditional knowledge. They provide insights into the mindset, beliefs and practices of people from the past, shedding light on historical events, cultural practices and societal changes that might not be documented in formal historical records. In this context, this paper takes up for discussion, two important communities of the North East. The Khasis of Meghalaya and the Mizos of Mizoram. Through folk sayings, the paper retrieves the ways in which women were constructed in traditional societies of these tribes and how these perceptions could possibly explain the low participation of women in public life, viz. politics even today.

Key words: North East, Folk Tales, Oral Narratives, Patriarchy, Feminist Women, Tribal, Khasi, Mizo

Introduction:

Oedipus, written by Sophocles is a Greek tragedy about the King of Thebes who unwittingly killed his father and married his mother. Upon realizing his mistake, Oedipus blinded himself. Towards the end of his rather miserable life, this old blind hero sensed the presence of the Sphinx. He asked her why things had turned out so badly for him, "well", the Sphinx explained, your answer to the riddle was only partially correct. Wait a minute he said. You asked me, what walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon and three in the evening? I answered man who crawls as a child, walks upright as an adult but upon reaching old age must use a cane. That is a perfectly good answer. Well said the Sphinx what about women? Come on, said Oedipus when you say man, of course that implies women too, everyone knows that. The Sphinx smiled and replied, that is what you think.

Like Oedipus, our collective social psyche has been dominated by assumptions of male superiority as a social constant, a universal fact of psychological and biological life. These andro- centric assumptions also mean that women's role in socio economic context in the past as well as in the contemporary is invariably supportive and secondary. Myths do not die easily and persist in fact against evidence and in contradiction to the rules of logic. It is therefore hardly surprising that the experiences of one half of the human population have been sought to be subsumed under the general heading of 'Mankind.' A feminist engagement with socio, economic and political issues thus become imperative because it provides us with a sphinx's perspective for re- imagining the story of women's engagement in this world and in so doing, feminist theory affects the answer to some of the basic riddles of society's dynamics. The paper takes stock of some popular sayings in the Khasi and Mizo societies of the North East. This would help understand the general perspective towards women in these societies and perhaps help unveil the reasons behind their under representation of women in politics.

Discussion:

The first tribe under discussion, i.e the khasis., are, ironically a matrilineal society. While authors have romanticized this aspect of the Khasi society, one must understand that the maintenance of social order requires the faithful performance of complex networks of cultural reproduction to produce the effect of untouched naturalness of a "time immemorial", kind of effect. It is only through the gaze of the feminist that the strenuous, complex formatting that goes on below the surface of



Cover Page



what looked smooth and complete can be understood. The hierarchical organization of the Khasi society on the male-female binary can only be understood through understanding complex societal and cultural layers. Hence while among the Khasis, children get their mothers last name, husbands move into their wives' homes and the youngest daughter (*khadduh*) inherits family property, yet women here, are viewed in as much of a prejudiced manner as they are, in patrilineal societies.

Traditionally, Women were given no part in decision making in the society and were barred from all political and administrative affairs of the society. Every Khasi village has its own *Dorbar Shong* or local council which plays a pivotal role in village administration and is prescribed by the *Rangbah Shnong* (village headman) who is elected by only the adult male members of the village. One must note that these traditional bodies which are found in every locality in Shillong are a powerful second tier of Government recognized by the constitution of India. To this day, women are kept out from the functions of these local institutions which reflect the dominant male chauvinist opinion about women being incapable of serious decision making. As a result of patriarchal socialization, both men and women, and even more particularly women, have come to accept these ideas. In this context one can note that the Khasi folk sayings provide insights into the cultural values and perceptions of women within Khasi society. In traditional society a woman who spoke in public was said to be croaking like crows. The attitude towards women is reflected in folk sayings like "*Ka jingim u tiar pha pyrthei*" which means that the woman's rightful place is her house.

This outlook is emphasized in folk sayings such as "*ka kti ki jingtip ioh, ka tip ioh ha ka kam.*" this translates to, "even though the hen strays, it still returns to the coop. The perception about the limitation of a woman's experience or world view is borne out by the saying "*ka Ktein nga la pyrthei, ka dam nga la pyrkhath*" which means that a woman's world is the ladder, a man's world is the bridge. Another popular folk saying which emphasizes woman's role in the household is "*La hagne hokj leit ju nga ju jingnok*" meaning that the woman who balance the pot also balances the world. That a woman's work is within the household, where the man lives a life of comfort is attested by the saying, and "*Ka ktrein ki briew ba ka ktein ki ban bam.*" This means that a woman has a house, a man has a home meaning that it is her duty to turn the household into a home. Age old sayings especially those that advocate limiting woman's freedom and assigns her the domestic corner of labour played a very important part in the overall psychology of the society. What is of even greater concern is that the representation of Khasi women in elected bodies through the decades have been abysmally low. Between 1972 and 2023, (a total of 11 elected assemblies, the total number of women who were elected to the House is 19.) As mentioned earlier, Women are still not allowed to participate in *Dorbar* proceedings or elect members of the *Dorbar*.

As recently as March 2023, The Meghalaya High Court noted that changes for granting equal rights to women in elections in local bodies governing tribal communities in the state would be better received if it comes from within the community rather than being imposed by a court order. In January 2020, Bose swell Khongthohrem, a former headman of Nohwet, under the state's Pynursla subdivision had filed the petition against the *Syiem* and the *sordar* (head of several villages in a specific area) concerned for allegedly denying women their right to take part in the election process of the village *Dorbar*, or council. Mr. Khongthohrem said he was removed through a secret ballot as head man after he defied the tradition to let women vote. Taking cognizance of the matter, High Court of Meghalaya ruled that the women in the state have the right to participate in the election of the heads of traditional village bodies. But as already noted, the same Court also ruled that change should be endogenous and not judicially imposed. However, with only 4 women legislators in a house of 60, this empowering change is still far from materializing.

Another tribe that the paper takes up for discussion are the Mizos. A strictly patriarchal society, their gender bias is reflected in sayings like, "*Ka takin pawh awm a, ka kawr pawh awm*" which translates to, whenever there is a woman, there's gossip or the saying which goes, "*Ka thu zarash ka ril a, ka pasal a dang tawk.*" Which loosely translated means that wherever a woman sets foot, it becomes a market. Another folk saying related to women is, "*Ka thla ropui kan sa maw?*" or can u pick the moon? Meaning that women's expectations or demands can be unrealistic or difficult to fulfill. The popular perception of women being gossip mongers and irrational beings, reinforced through folk sayings were



Cover Page



conveniently used to relegate women to the periphery of society. Traditionally, decision making in Mizo society was the domain of men. The administration of the village was carried out by the chief aided by the council of Elders or *Upa* who were the main administrative assistants to the chief. The important office which decided practically all issues in the traditional society was exclusively dominated by the men.

Moreover, the *Zawlbuk* or the traditional Bachelor's dormitory, a powerful institution which exercised the greatest sway in establishing social norms and customs among the people totally excluded women from participation or presence. The exclusion of the women in all the so called democratic process of the tribe was justified and advocated through folk sayings which were explicitly biased against women. Sayings like, "*Ka nghak saa, ka khot saa; ka hriat loh, ka dong loh*" meaning that a woman who goes out often brings shame; a woman who speaks out, brings disgrace. These re- in forces restrictive norms, suggesting that women should stay confined to the home and not express themselves. "*Ka tlangval saa, ka thuangval saa*" another folk saying means that woman who goes forward loses her worth. Other sayings like "*Ka takinka ngaihsak lai, ka khawngaihna aw*" or wherever there is a woman, trouble follows associates' woman with causing problems, perpetuating a negative stereotype. "*Ka hmeichhia'n ka hmeichhia -na ka hre awm a, ka thianhlimna awn lo*" or where there's a woman, there's quarrelling where there's quarrelling, there's crying.

This saying unfairly portrays women as the source of conflict and implies that their presence leads to emotional distress. Many other sayings portray women as engaging in idle talk. The attitude toward women is also reflected in the derogatory old Mizo sayings like, Crabs meat is not counted as meat, as women's word is not counted as word or the saying that a woman's wisdom does not extend beyond the limit of the village water source.

As earlier discussed, myths do not die easily and persist in the face of reason. Even in the present context, the belief that a woman's rightful place is within the confines of her home has stopped women from being active participants in the political space. Despite having more registered female voters, in the past three state elections, 2013, 2018 and the most recent one in 2023, no woman candidate has been elected to the 40-member state Legislative Assembly. Political analysts attribute the failure of women to win the assembly election to the Mizo society being strictly patriarchal and the major political party's refusal to field women candidates. In fact, the social opposition to women getting an upper hand is so deep seated, that in 2011 the congress ruled Mizoram Government had opposed the food security Bill that sought to make women the head of the family in the ration cards.

Conclusion:

Folk sayings reflect the cultural values and norms of their time and an analysis of the same can help us better understand how attitudes towards women have evolved and how they can be aligned with contemporary values of gender equality. A Feminist sensitivity that comes from a change in gaze from looking beyond the obvious and into the shadows of patriarchy, has helped us understand that on a gender scale, democracy is not a level playing field: it is biased against women. In the context of the Khasi and Mizo society, the perceptions and biases against women are too deep seated and complex to think that mere representation of women in the decision-making bodies would be enough to solve the skewed power equations between the genders. However, this could certainly be a starting point to taking a step towards women's empowerment.

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