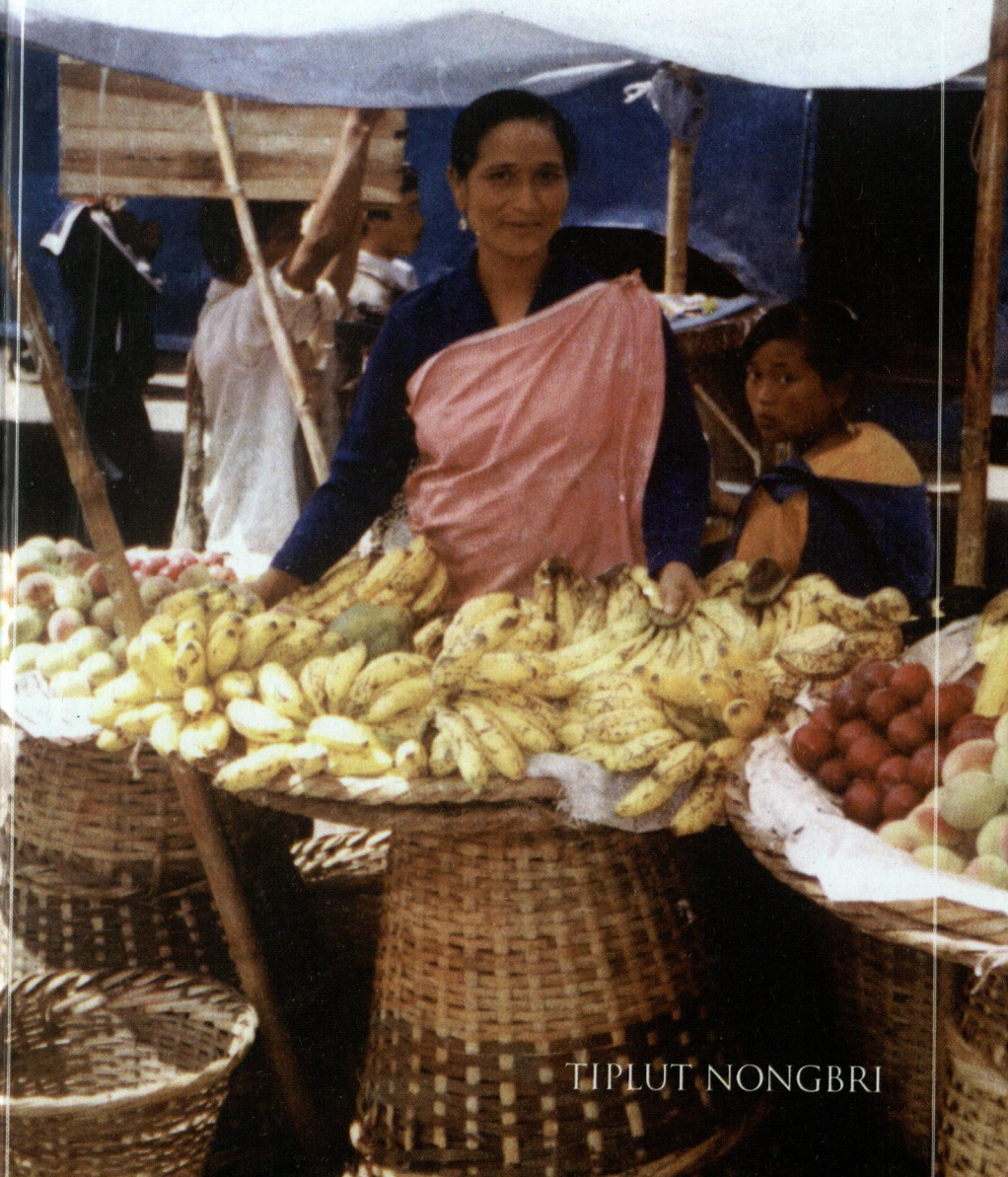
GENDER, MATRILINY, AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The Khasis of North-East India



TIPLUT NONGBRI

THIS BOOK focuses on the economic activities of Khasi women, a matrilineal tribe in North-East India. As an informal group of the market economy, Khasi women are engaged in diverse forms of income-generating activities, ranging from agriculture and commerce to contractual services in the tertiary sector. However, women's contribution to the economy remains a largely neglected area both in research as well as in policy, not only in North-East India but also nationally and internationally. What accounts for this general indifference to the economic role of women is one of the issues addressed in this book.

The central issue however revolves around the question why despite the substantial time and energy Khasi women invest in their business, many continue to stagnate, and why some, after acquiring some measure of success, slide into oblivion.

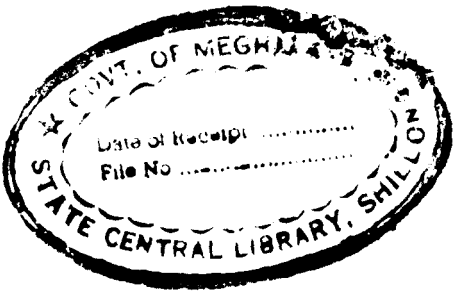
The author adopts an integrated approach, and through her analysis reveals that women's entrepreneurial growth is not only severely constrained by a biased gender ideology but also by the general apathy and inefficiency of the state machinery. An important point that emerged from the data is the close interplay between women's work, gender ideology and the system of kinship and marriage (matriliny), with the state reinforcing the relationships between the three.

TIPLUT NONGBRI teaches Sociology at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Cover design: Visual Vibe
Rs 350

Gender, Matriliny, and Entrepreneurship

The Khasis of North-East India



Tiplut Nongbri

An imprint of Kali for Women

Gender, Matriliny, and Entrepreneurship
The Khasis of North-East India
By Tiplut Nongbri
Published (2008) by
Zubaan
an imprint of Kali for Women
K-92, First Floor,
Hauz Khas Enclave,
NEW DELHI - 110 016, India
Email:zubaanwbooks@vsnl.net and zubaan@gmail.com
Website:www.zubaanbooks.com

ISBN:978-81-89013-76-9

Zubaan is an independent feminist publishing house based in New Delhi, India, with a strong academic and general list. It was set up as an imprint of the well known feminist house Kali for Women, and carries forward Kali's tradition of publishing world quality books to high editorial and production standards. "Zubaan" means tongue, voice, language, speech in Hindustani. Zubaan is a non-profit publisher, working in the areas of the humanities, social sciences, as well as in fiction, general non-fiction, and books for young adults that celebrate difference, diversity and equality, especially for and about the children of India and South Asia under its imprint Young Zubaan.

Typeset at Facet Design, D-9, Defence Colony, New Delhi -110 024.
Printed & bound at Raj Press, R-3, Inderpuri, New Delhi - 110 012.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Introduction: Gender, Kinship, and Production

In the last three and a half decades, a number of studies have focused their attention on the role of women in the business of living. The publication of Ester Boserup's book, *Women's Role in Economic Development* (1970), heralded a new era in women's studies directed at uncovering the long-suppressed role of the female sex in the daily struggle for survival. By focusing on the contributions made by women to the domestic economy, Boserup not only rescued women's work from the realm of the invisible but also raised important conceptual and methodological issues that have dominated intellectual discourse in the social sciences ever since. An important theme of the debate is the nature and source of the subordination of women. Although there are different views on the matter (see in particular Rosaldo, Lamphere and Bamberger, 1974; Reiter, 1975; Ardener, 1978; Hirschon, 1981; Hess and Feree, 1987), there is no disagreement about the fact that inequality between women and men has both an economic and cultural dimension.

This point comes out clearly in Hilary Standing's study of women workers in Calcutta. While acknowledging that women's subordination is largely linked to their economic dependence (on men), a view that has been shared by commentators across the political spectrum, from Engels to the World Bank, Standing cautions us not to view the issue simplistically in purely economic terms or to ignore the social and cultural context within which it operates (1991, 1-2).

The concept of dependency is not without its ideological base, rooted as it is in the cultural notion of maleness and femaleness. That women contribute as much as, if not more than, men to human subsistence is an open secret. But women's contribution is rarely acknowledged or recognized as productive. Even in situations where women are engaged in the same productive work as men, the ideology that regards the male as the family's sole breadwinner renders women's contribution as secondary to that of men. As Standing notes, 'The persistence of this ideology in contexts where it bears little or no relation to reality suggests that there is more at issue than money and goods' (ibid.).

Marxist feminists argue that dependency is simultaneously a psychological and eco-political relationship that is linked to the division of labour based on gender. Rooted in patriarchy, this arrangement allows men to benefit from women's provision of personal and household services, including relief from child rearing and many unpleasant tasks both within and beyond the household (see in particular Hartman, 1981). Though patriarchy may assume many forms in patriarchal society, effective social control over women is exercised by men through the roles of the father and the husband. Under patriarchal conditions, women too may exercise power through the role of the mother as opposed to other kin roles such as those of wife and sister. But irrespective of who wields power, the association of the attributes of power with masculinity is really what gives special meaning and power to gender inequality. This explains why even in matrilineal societies where women play important roles both in the family and the economy, it is the men who exercise control. The only difference between the matrilineal-matrilocal and the patrilineal-patrilocal systems is that in the former it is generally the brother or the mother's brother who plays an important role in decision making, whereas in the latter case it is the father and/or the husband who dominates.

The position of women in matrilineal societies, however, remains as yet poorly defined in the anthropological and feminist literature. The preoccupation with the impending doom of matriliny under the impact of modernization and economic differentiation in the case of the former, and the concern with patriarchal oppression and major world issues such as colonialism, capitalism and development in the case of the latter, have overshadowed the problem of gender in matrilineal kinship systems. This is not to say that there is an intrinsic relationship between gender inequality and matrilineality per se. What we would like to emphasize is that kinship is a powerful medium in the construction of gender. Irrespective of the descent principle adopted by a particular society, the idiom of kinship is generally employed to rationalize distinctions between women and men in that society. The idea that it is the mother (read woman) who gives birth to the child, so it is only 'natural' that she should be associated with the domestic task of nurturing and rearing is common to many cultures. The fact that motherhood itself is a cultural construction is hardly ever questioned.

The matrilineal principle of kinship has important implications for the role of women both within the family and the society at large. By conferring the right of descent on the mother, matriliny places a heavy responsibility on women for the raising of their children. Although in ideal terms the mother's brother is supposed to be responsible for the welfare of his sister and her children, the pattern of residence adopted in most societies leads to situations where the brother is not always readily available to attend to the sister's needs. As residence is conjugal based,[1] the brother is usually away at his wife's place. Hence, in the event of her marriage

1 Two well-known exceptions to this rule are the Nairs of south-west India (Kerala) and the Mosuo of Yunnan and Sichuan provinces in the People's Republic of China. Both communities traditionally subscribe to the practice of visiting marriage, resulting in natolocal households where both spouses continue to live with their natal family. But while matriliny and visiting marriage (known as ze ze or walking marriage in the local language) continue to be strictly followed among the Mosuo, these institutions have almost disappeared among the Nairs as a result of a series of legislative enactments initiated by educated Nair men.

breaking up, the sister generally ends up on her own, fending for herself and her children, or has to depend on the assistance of her female kin. In the face of such an eventuality, it is imperative that women work for their livelihood.

The problem

This book examines key questions about women's work and its relation with gender and the family. It focuses on the Khasi, a matrilineal tribe in north-east India, and looks in particular at the entrepreneurial activities of Khasi women, a group that is fast expanding but has received little attention from analysts in the region. Like most women in tribal societies, Khasi women contribute significantly to the household economy. In rural areas, women are predominantly engaged in agriculture, but pressure on land and other social factors have pushed many of them into trade and other non-agricultural activities. Additionally, the processes of urbanization and economic modernization that accompanied major political changes in the society have opened up new opportunities for women, leading to the simultaneous expansion and feminization[2] of the informal sector. Some of the questions discussed in the book are: what (in the first place) prompted women to work, and how do the variables of gender, family, and class affect their activity. Though the sample covers a wide spectrum of women engaged in a variety of activities such as trade, home-based production of petty goods, and supply of goods and services, I have described them all as entrepreneurs. If we go by the dictionary meaning, 'an entrepreneur is one who undertakes and directs a business undertaking, assuming the risk for the sake of the business',[3] we see that the definition is clearly applicable to the women who form the subject of this book.

2 By feminization I mean broadly the increasing presence of women in occupations generally believed to be the preserve of men.

3 Webster's Dictionary of the English Language, Chicago: F.B. Ferguson Publishing Company, 1979, p. 608.

Entrepreneurship has been described in various ways by different scholars, however. While writers like Richard Cantillon (1732/1939) and Frank Knight (1921) emphasize the element of risk involved in the activity that inevitably follows a slump in the demand for goods, others like Schumpeter (1961) and McClelland (1961) regard a spirit for innovation and a desire for change as central to entrepreneurship. Whatever the emphasis, the underlying idea is the same. Entrepreneurship entails the application of economic and personal skills and the ability to take risks with the aim of generating resources from the environment. This demands not only the ability to organize but also the capacity to see an opportunity and transform it into a profitable venture. Entrepreneurship, however, should not be confused with employment (engagement in remunerative work). While entrepreneurship is a form of employment, not all those who are employed are entrepreneurs. In the context of this study, an entrepreneur is understood as one who establishes an enterprise, takes all decisions regarding its operation, and bears the risk of the business. Where the enterprise is an inherited one, an entrepreneur is the one who strives towards its expansion, in addition to meeting the other criteria given above.

The impetus for writing this book came from my engagement with gender studies and my ongoing research on the Khasi. In addition, my own grounding in the society triggered my interest in testing some of the theories and perspectives that I explore in the classroom in the context of situations with which I am personally familiar. I do not claim that this study fulfils the rigorous theoretical standards set by the feminist engagement with the issue. Nevertheless, a brief discussion on the development of the field would be in order.

To begin with, the long neglect of women's concerns in social science research and the exclusion of women from official statistics and policy documents have led scholars from different theoretical perspectives and disciplines to share a common agenda. The

interest in women's concerns has its roots in the feminist movement in the West, which strongly challenges the unidimensional representation of women as human reproducers in academic and popular discourse. The interest was further bolstered by the United Nations' policy initiative seeking to integrate women's concerns into development policies and programmes. These two streams of influence have given rise to a number of studies focusing on a wide range of issues that are central to women's lives, such as the source and nature of women's subordination, the division of labour within the household and the value attached to women's work, and the link between women's subordination within the family and their subordination in the labour market and in the society at large. Cutting across these concerns are the issues of colonization, urbanization, and capitalism. These processes have not only led to tremendous disruptions in the political order but have also undermined traditional economies and life ways, and with them threatened women's traditional autonomy. Boserup's book, mentioned earlier, is an important contribution to the emergence of this new consciousness.

Some of the issues that continue to dominate the long-running debate are related to the meaning of work, specifically women's work, and the reasons that compel women to engage in (paid) work. The first question arises because while women universally are engaged as workers in all locations, their work (productive) roles are usually combined with their reproductive roles as mothers, wives, grandmothers, etc. This has not only made it difficult to maintain the distinction between productive and reproductive work but it also explains why women's productive activities remain largely unpaid, especially those performed in and around the home or for the family.

The second question is more problematic, since what prompts women to work is not always dictated by economics but also by a multiplicity of social and cultural factors. Of course, in the majority of cases the economic imperative is a major force that

compels women to work. Studies of women engaged in petty commodity production reveal that irrespective of the ideological assumption about women's position in the family, a large number of them, in fact, take up a variety of work to supplement a breadwinner's inadequate wage (Moser and Young 1981). Even in societies where seclusion of women is the norm, it is generally agreed that when a family faces economic necessity, women should go out to work (Lessinger, 1990).

Although women work because they must, economic necessity is not the only factor contributing to their engagement in income-generating activities. This fact comes out clearly in various ethnographies on Africa where cultural norms enjoin mothers to work. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, women work in order to fulfil what they see as the traditional responsibility towards their children. As Whitehead writes, 'Many societies enjoin altruistic behaviour on mothers in relation to the well-being of their children.' It is this ideology, she suggests, that lead Kusasi women to sell groundnuts to feed their children even when their own consumption levels are low (Whitehead 1990, 19; see also Whitehead 1981). In addition, as Tinker observes, 'Where formal marriage is rare or where polygamy is accepted, women must rely on their own income or on female networks for their survival' (1987, 27).

Viewed thus, it would not be far wrong to say that the key structural factor that acts on Khasi women's economic initiative is the matrilineal principle of descent. As noted at the outset, by conferring descent rights on the mother, Khasi society places a special responsibility on women for bringing up their children. The responsibility is intensified because of the weak conjugal bond and the absence of cultural norms that enjoin the father to provide for his children in the event of divorce or separation from the mother.

But it is not the kinship rule alone but the gender ideology with which it is closely entwined that shapes the domestic and extra-domestic (economic) roles of women (and men). To the

researcher, this means that any analysis of women's work cannot afford to ignore the social and cultural ideas that are pertinent to the lives of the people being studied. This understanding is necessary because women's work (this applies to all human actions as well) cannot be read or interpreted in a given manner like the study of numbers, but must be viewed within its specific empirical and historical context.

Socio-historical background

The colonial period

The earliest official reference to the economic role of Khasi women is by way of a little information given by the Political Agent of the Khasi Hills, Lieutenant-Colonel F.G. Lister in a letter written to A.J.M. Mills in 1853 in which he recorded the source of revenue earned by the Khasi chiefs. Making a special mention of the tolls levied by the chiefs on the goods that entered the markets, Lister wrote:

> These tolls vary in amount according to the situation of the villages, and are either paid in money or in kind. The tolls are levied per load or according to the articles. One pice each man's load, and three *dumrees* each woman's load, seem to be the maximum, and half the same the minimum rate.[4] (Mills, 1853, 36, italics in original)

Although there is no information given on the nature of the goods taxed, or how or to whom the goods would be disposed of, the account indicates that women were not an economically lazy class but active participants in the system of production.

Another glimpse into the economic activity of Khasi women in the early colonial period is provided by Hunter in the form of a matter-of-fact statement in the second volume of his book, *A Statistical Account of Assam* (1879). In a brief note on the status of

4 Prior to this, mention was made by Lindsay in a private diary about women head loaders walking in a caravan alongside men carrying goods consisting of silk, fruits of various kinds and iron of the finest quality, from their homes in the hills to the market in Pandua (cited in Bareh, 1967, 461-462)

manufacture in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Hunter states, 'With the exception of the manufacture of iron, in which the master blacksmith often employs hired labourers, *the other industries are generally followed by females in their own house*' (ibid., 236, emphasis added). When we relate this statement to the list of products[5] mentioned by the author, it is clear that Khasi women have been actively involved in the manufacture of goods. This understanding is reaffirmed by Gurdon's account in his widely read monograph, *The Khasis* (1907/1975). To correct the view expressed by Colonel Waddell that the Khasi were alien to the art of weaving, Gurdon not only came up with a list of villages in which the weaving industry existed to a considerable extent but also clarified that weaving was primarily a female occupation; he observed that 'the weavers are almost always females' (ibid., 27). Khasi women were also no strangers to the strenuous task of construction labour. According to Gurdon, a considerable number of women worked side by side with men as coolies under the government, practically throughout the year, on an average wage of 8 annas per day for males and 6 annas per day for females (ibid., 27-28).

A more recent account of women's economic activity is found in the work of Khasi historian, Hamlet Bareh (1967). In contrast to Hunter, who claimed that women were excluded from the manufacture of iron goods, Bareh credits the origin of iron smelting to a woman, Ka Iaw Shibdi (Lalu), who brought the craft into the Khasi Hills via the Jaintia Hills from the North Cachar Hills in present-day Assam. Basing his evidence on oral tradition, Bareh writes, '[W] e have found some references to Khasi mothers like Mokynhong, the ancestral mother of the enterprising Kharkongor clan [,] who conducted the trade of steel goods from Sohrarim to the Sylhet plains' (ibid., 455).

5 The items included in Hunter's list are cotton and randia (sic) (ryndia, coarse or raw silk) cloth, plain silver works, implements used in agriculture and animal husbandry, netted bags made of pineapple fibre, pottery, mats, and baskets.

Further, describing the process of iron-ore extraction, which involves rigorously washing the broken rocks to separate the ore from the sand, he notes :

> The washing is generally performed by two women, working the ore against the stream with their feet, and occasionally turning and mixing it with a hoe. It is then put into a heap to dry and washed again. This process is repeated four times.
> The ore is then carried to the smelting house. The bellows are double, formed of two halves of cylinders of cow skin, and worked by a man and woman, with a leg on each, swaying from foot to foot (ibid 456).

Except for these bits of piecemeal evidence, information on women's economic activity during the colonial period is shrouded in ambiguity. One plausible reason for this state of uncertainty could be what feminists call the entrenched 'male bias' that characterizes colonial writings and mainstream social science research worldwide. Women are not only conspicuous by their absence in most anthropological writings but even where they do appear, it is primarily in their roles as mothers and wives in the kinship domain, and rarely as economic agents (see Reiter 1975; Moore 1988). The problem is compounded by women's subordinate position in the society being studied. Hence, their views or activities were rarely brought to the attention of the researcher and/or the analyst.

In an attempt to explain this culture of silence, Edwin Ardener proposed the concept of the 'muted group' to describe the way in which women's voices are suppressed by the dominant groups in society. Muted groups are silenced by the structures of dominance, and if they wish to express themselves, they have to do so through the dominant ideology.[6] Ardener attributes the mutedness of women's voices to the deeply entrenched male bias that

6 When we link this blatant suppression of women's voices to the process of 'invisibilization' described by feminists to explain the systematic exclusion of women's work from ethnographic accounts and official statistics, we see that women's subordination assumes phenomenal proportions.

characterized the explanatory models deployed by social anthropologists (and social scientists in general), which not only look at issues from the male perspective but also tend to rely on male informants for information. It is not only women's voices that are muted and who suffer under the structure of dominance but also children and the socially and economically disadvantaged (Ardener 1975, 21-23).

To return to the Khasi, piecing together the sketchy bits of information outlined above with the life histories narrated by the people, we gather that women's productive role suffered a severe setback with the arrival of colonialism. Iron smelting was an important industry in the Khasi Hills, and large quantities of the metal used to be exported to Sylhet, both in the crude and manufactured forms. However, competition offered by lower-priced imported ore forced the closure of the industry, and with it also ended an important source of (female) employment and livelihood for a large section of the population.[7] The weaving industry experienced a similar fate, as the silk and cotton cloth produced by the indigenous weavers was gradually eased out of the market by the arrival of cheap Manchester piece cloth (Gurdon op cit.).

This development not only spelled doom to the home industry, but also contributed in no small way to the erosion of women's role in manufacture. It would, however, be erroneous to assume that all changes have been detrimental to the female. Although colonialism initiated many processes that were deleterious to women both in the natural[8] and cultural domains, it also opened

---

7 Conflicting opinions exist about the reasons for the closure of the iron industry in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills during the colonial period. Some believe that fear of 'illegal weapons' manufactured by the Khasi provoked the British to press the smelters to close down the industry, while others claim that this was done to eliminate competition for pig iron imported from England (Syiem of Cherra, personal communication; also see ibid., and Hunter op cit., 235).

8 This is exemplified by the people's alienation from their natural productive resources such as land and forests, which occurred as a consequence of the colonial appropriation of the people's traditional rights.

up new opportunities for women through the introduction of schools and the expansion of the market. While women who had access to education found new employment opportunities in teaching, nursing and the government sector, the less privileged ones found their way into the market as traders in petty goods. In addition, the extension of the colonial administration into the hill areas introduced new means of transport and communication and facilitated the flow of both indigenous and imported goods into and between the different parts of the district. With the transfer of the British headquarters from Cherrapunjee to Shillong (presently the capital of Meghalaya) in 1874, the latter emerged as the main trading centre of the district. The process of urbanization and development that was heralded by this step had a positive effect on entrepreneurial growth.

This is not to suggest that trade in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills owed its existence to colonialism. Indeed, long before the British arrived on the scene the Khasi had a long tradition of trading relations with the people of the Brahmaputra and Surma valleys. Hunter's account, referred to earlier, affirms this fact. Citing statistics provided by W.J. Allen in his Report of 1858, Hunter notes:

> The external commerce of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills is chiefly conducted on the southern boundary, through the district of Sylhet. The total value is more considerable than might be expected, owing to the fact that these Hills practically possess the monopoly of supplying Bengal with lime, potatoes and oranges. Other important articles of export are raw cotton, stick-lac, betel-nut and pan leaves, and bay leaves or *tezpat*. The exportation of iron which was once large has now almost ceased. The chief imports consist of rice, dried fish, cotton cloth, salt and tobacco. On the whole, it would appear that the course of trade is about equally balanced. Trade statistics of more or less value are in existence. The earliest of such statistics are to be found in the Report of Mr. W. J. Allen, dated 1858. The

information there given was based for the most part on oral statements furnished by numerous native traders to Mr. Hudson, who then filled the office of Principal Assistant Commissioner. It may be accepted as 'a fair representation of the state of trade in the Hills' at that time. The imports and exports on the Assam side were each estimated at about Rs. 15,000, or £1500. The trade with the markets in the Surma valley was much larger. The total of the exports was valued at Rs. 7000,000, or £70,000, giving a profit to the traders of Rs. 170,705, or £17,070 (op cit, 236).

Another interesting fact revealed by Hunter about the social environment that characterized trade and commerce in nineteenth century Khasi society was the absence of the Marwari and other non-tribal entrepreneurs. In Hunter's words:

A curious picture in the trade of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills is the total absence of Marwari or Jain merchants - an enterprising class, who are found everywhere else in Assam, even to the farthest corners of the Brahmaputra valley. There are a few Bengali traders from Dacca, who do not take up a permanent residence in the Hills; but the great bulk of the business remains in the hands of the natives, who themselves reap the profits and are said to be keen at the bargain (ibid, 241).[9]

Though Hunter's account is silent on the role of women in trade, there are strong indicators that this activity was not alien or unknown to Khasi women. But it was not until the arrival of colonial rule that women took to trading in large

9 This information is vital for understanding the trends of socio-economic changes experienced by Khasi society. The picture provided by Hunter not only differs sharply from present day conditions (where the Marwarsi dominate the scene) but also sheds valuable light on the wide expanse of the Khasi trading relations in the recent past and the possibilities that the future hold. With the new thrust on economic cooperation (exemplified by the 'Look East Policy') between India and its neighbours to the east, such as Bangladesh, Myanmar and China, there is exciting possibility that the Khasi could well reclaim their economic dominance. Provided, of course, the trade agreements between India and the concerned countries do not reduce the north-eastern region to a mere transit point for third country goods.

numbers.[10] Although the large majority who entered trading could barely rise above the subsistence level, the increased demand for goods and services unleashed by the activity paved the way for economic independence and social advancement for many women.

A paucity of records and other reliable information restricts my ability to take the analysis far back in time.[11] However, given the shallow historical depth of colonial rule in the region, fairly accurate inferences about the economic role of women during the period may be drawn from the life histories and experiences of the older generation of women alive today, a number of whom vividly recalled the trading expeditions made by their mothers and grandmothers to markets in Pandua and Sylhet in present day Bangladesh. Indeed, two of the women in my sample began their own business careers in the closing years of colonial rule.

Post-colonial period

The attainment of independence in 1947 and the severance of Sylhet from Assam led to two contradictory developments that exerted a deep influence on women's entrepreneurial growth. While partition plunged the Khasi and Jaintia Hills into an economic crisis (this is examined in more detail in Chapter 5), it also opened up new opportunities for the enterprising individual. With the closure of the markets in the border areas that accompanied the partition of India and Pakistan, many families

10 It would be naïve to assume that colonialism has the same effect on women everywhere. Even within the same society, its effect is far from uniform. Some writers have argued that women's trading activities suffered a severe setback under the impact of colonialism and capitalism (Etienne 1980; Afonja 1986). Many studies have also noted that gender relations in many parts of the world have been transformed under the successive impact of colonialism, westernization, and international capitalism (Moore 1988, 33). One of the most telling criticisms of colonialism comes from Eleanor Leacock, who asserts that primitive and pre-class societies are basically egalitarian and that colonialism and capitalism undermine women's autonomy (1978).

11 Many studies have also noted that gender relations in many parts of the world have been transformed under. the successive impact of colonialism, westernization and international capitalism (Moore,1988,133). One of the most telling criticism of colonialism comes from Elenor Leacock who asserts that primitive and pre class societies are basically egalitarian and that colonialism and capitalism undermine women's autonomy (1978).

that traditionally depended on agricultural and horticultural activities turned to trade and commerce as an alternative source of livelihood. This period saw the birth of many fledgling entrepreneurs, many of them women. Indeed, some of the women in my sample who succeeded in business were able to do so by exploiting the unstable economic conditions and scarcity of basic goods during this tumultuous period.

The creation of Meghalaya as a separate state in 1972 gave a further boost to the process. The creation of a new state and the formation of a new government called for the establishment of extensive infrastructure in the form of roads, power lines, and buildings for administrative and residential complexes. This led to new demands for material and personnel (labour) most of which had to be met from the local resource base. At the same time, the thrust given to tribal development as part of the national development strategy initiated by the central government led to a number of programmes that opened up new employment opportunities for both men and women both in the formal and informal sectors of the economy. Many women with rudimentary education prepared themselves to take advantage of these new opportunities. Many used the position and networks of their family and friends to secure contracts and to gain access to government loans and subsidies. These women, however, show a marked difference from those who were engaged in trade. Unlike the vast majority of traders who usually operate on their own, women in this category showed a wide diversity. While some women (like those described in the case studies) functioned independently, others relied heavily on the support of male members of their families, usually husband or son. Some even worked in partnership with non-tribal entrepreneurs.

The emergence of this class of women entrepreneurs reveals that government contracts are no longer the exclusive domain of men. Previously, all kinds of government contracts, whether in construction or supply, were the exclusive prerogative of male

contractors. Today, not only is a new breed of women contractors visible among the Khasi but many of them combine these with trade, manufacture, and industry.

Sampling and method

Broadly, three categories of women are represented in the study—those who engaged in trade and commerce, those involved in small-scale industry and those who took up contractual activities. The sample for the first category was selected from Iewduh, the main market in Shillong. Women for the latter two categories were identified through knowledgeable sources in the town and from the list of entrepreneurs available with the Meghalaya Industrial Development Corporation and the Industry Department of the state government. In the first category, 150 traders were initially selected. However, during the course of data collection, some respondents refused to cooperate and an equal number provided incomplete information on vital aspects of their work. Hence, the number for the final analysis had to be reduced to 120. The selection of women in the second category was equally problematic. The government list was not only incomplete but a careful scrutiny further revealed that many of the businesses registered in the names of women were actually operated by men. Hence, in order to ensure that the cases selected were authentic, I decided to make use of informal channels by checking with key persons in different parts of the district. In the end, case studies of 50 women were examined and 20 were selected for intensive interviews. Their activities ranged widely, from government contractors and factory owners to proprietors of bakeries, tailoring shops, and cement hollow-block works. While some of the units are registered with the government, the rest are unregistered and function largely in an informal manner.

Though the main concern of this book is to highlight the economic activities of women and to analyse the prospects and

constraints that characterize their work, it also entails an examination of the women's familial and kinship roles, gender relations, economic conditions and patterns of development that emerged in Meghalaya, as well as the adaptive responses of individuals and groups occupying different structural positions in the political economy of the state. The method employed is anthropological in nature, using both secondary and primary sources. Primary data were collected through personal interviews and observations, as well as through indirect means such as informal talks with employees, former employees, family members, and friends of the entrepreneurs. The latter were especially useful in offering insights into the personal networks of the entrepreneurs, since this factor exerts an important influence on the expansion of the business, particularly for those engaged in manufacture and contract. These sources were also useful in cross-checking the accuracy of the information given by the entrepreneurs about the nature and scale of their operations. The nature of the field, however, did not make the task of data collection easy. This was particularly true in the case of the traders, where repeated visits had to be made to the same shops as interviews were often interrupted by buyers, who not only took their time to haggle over prices but also to exchange pleasantries and, if they were regulars, to share news and gossip with the shop owners. But these interactions were not without their positive aspect, for these friendly exchanges often gave me more insights into the workings of the business than were provided by the entrepreneurs during formal interviews.

Unlike the traders who could be contacted at their shops in Iewduh, the women in contract and industry are widely dispersed, so there was no single venue where we could meet. Hence, interviews had to be conducted at various places, such as their homes, places of work, government offices, and bazaars. An important facilitator in the process was the telephone. Since many of the women were extremely busy, many doubts were clarified

seen to be characterized by ease of entry, family ownership, labour-intensive activities, reliance on indigenous resources, skills acquired outside the formal school system, and unregulated and competitive market conditions (ILO 1972, 6 and 1974).

Notwithstanding its widespread use in the analysis of income-generating activities among the urban poor, the concept of the informal sector has been mired in serious controversy. Questions have been raised about its efficiency as an analytical category (see in particular Moser 1978 and1980, Tinker 1987). One of the main criticisms is that the model suffers from a dualist perspective that sees the informal sector as being autonomous of the formal sector, thus blurring the linkage between the two. Such a perspective not only overlooks the fact that the two sectors are closely interrelated but it also obscures the inequality in the relation whereby the informal sector is rendered subordinate to the formal sector. This has led many scholars to view the formal-informal sector approach with its in-built dichotomy as theoretically and empirically inadequate. Taking cognizance of this fact, Jan Bremen, for instance, asserts that the informal sector cannot be demarcated as a separate economic compartment (Bremen 1976).

To overcome the drawbacks inherent in the dualist perspective, but without denying the difference between the two sectors, some scholars have came up with the petty commodity production model as an alternative approach (see Bromley 1978; Bromley and Gerry 1979; Moser 1978). Central to this model is the thesis that in many developing countries the capitalist mode of production coexists with non-capitalist and pre-capitalist forms of production from which the former draws sustenance. The approach is premised largely on the experience of Third World countries where petty commodity production not only constitutes an integral but also a subordinate part of the capitalist mode of production. In the Marxist perspective, petty commodity production is seen as a transitional form, intermediate between feudalism and capitalism. However, in the context of Third World peripheral capitalism, it

is found that this form of production, far from disappearing, is in fact extending into areas where previously it did not exist. Studies conducted in Third World cities reveal that this condition stems from the distorted process of capitalism whose capital- and technology-intensive orientation has resulted in the failure to absorb the large labour force found in developing countries. Faced with problems of access to the formal sector, most of the urban poor had no option but to rely on petty commodity production and petty trade to meet their survival needs (Babb 1985, 289; see also Bujra 1982).

Other criticisms of the informal sector or petty commodity production approach came from those who were concerned with its failure to address the invisibilization of women's contribution to production, particularly those activities organized around family labour (see in particular Feldman 1991). Analysing the debate between the advocates of the informal sector and its critics, Feldman attributes the invisibilization of women's productive capacities to the conception of the household as an undifferentiated category in which the members are seen to have common interests and to enjoy equal access to resources. Feldman writes:

> This means that because domestic labour is combined with informal work in home-based enterprises, discrete information about informal work may be absorbed within the domestic labour category and thus may be ignored in enterprise-level analzs (ibid, 66).

Such pointed criticism and other objections along the same lines (see for instance Beneria 1981, 1982; Boulding 1983; Deere 1983; Dixon 1985) have not only led to increasing scrutiny of the household as a social unit but also to changes in the methods of analysis. To adopt a more gender-sensitive approach, recent scholarship has placed emphasis on intra-household relations, recognition of women's contribution to subsistence (both in the form of unpaid family labour and remunerative activities like barter, food vending, etc.), and the duality of the household both

as a source of support to and oppression of women. Though a great deal still remains to be done to include women's economic contribution in the public accounting system, the informal or petty commodity production paradigm has gained a firm place in the analysis of women's income-generating activities among the urban poor.

Although the women in our study do not strictly fit the bill of the urban poor commonly addressed in the studies on the informal sector, the concept is not entirely irrelevant in sharpening our understanding of the subject under consideration. In general terms, the usefulness of the petty commodity production framework lies in its ability to uncover the dependency relationship between the petty commodity producers and the capitalists. While capitalists depend on petty producers for the supply of cheap labour and goods, the latter depend on the former for the continuation of their activities and as a source of livelihood.

In the analysis of marketing and commerce, the theoretical refinement that emerged from the debate provides us with a working model that sees women's trade not as an isolated activity peculiar to the indigenous economy but as part of the total production process of the urban economy. By locating petty trade within the larger production process, the model brings into sharp focus not only the subordinate position occupied by petty traders vis-à-vis capitalist merchants but also the internal dynamics and the process of differentiation that emerged within the informal sector. It needs to be recognized that the world of petty traders is neither homogeneous nor static. While the large majority of petty traders and producers may be peripheral to the capitalist economy, petty trade and production also provide opportunities for the resourceful and enterprising person to engage in some form of capitalistic venture and/or to accumulate profit.

In the present study, we are concerned both with the processes of differentiation that operate within the informal sector and the macroeconomic processes that subordinate as well as integrate

the informal sector into the regional and national economies. It is interesting to note how the accumulation of profit in trade has helped some women to avail of the opportunities brought about by the socio-political changes in the wider society, and which in the process served to establish an incipient capitalist class in the indigenous and relatively egalitarian society. What this suggests is that the informal sector is neither a monolithic category or entity, nor are capitalistic tendencies entirely alien to it. Indeed, the smooth transition that some women (in our sample albeit a small number only) have been able to make from trade into the world of industry and contract shows that the informal sector is not only highly differentiated but also closely linked to the macroeconomic processes and policies of the nation-state.

Kinship, gender, and production

Any study on Khasi women makes it imperative that we take a close look at the link between gender and matriliny in order to place things in their proper sociological perspective. This is necessary not only to remove the general misconceptions about the position of women in matrilineal societies but also to emphasize the fact that the production relations found in the society are integrally linked to its kinship system. A number of studies have shown that kinship not only provides the context within which material resources are produced and distributed but also constitutes the site where gender, class, race, and ethnic politics are played out. In this regard, while there is near unanimity that the patrilineal principle of descent is highly detrimental to the interest of women, the role of kinship in the structuring of gender and production relations in matrilineal societies, however, remains a contentious issue.

The problem has its roots in Engels' book, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884, republished 1972), in which he argued that women's subordination is a feature of capitalist society that emerged with the emergence of private

property, monogamy, and the state, thereby suggesting that gender inequality is absent in pre-capitalist or pre-class economies. By drawing on Morgan's[12] evolutionary theory on the development of the human family in which matriarchy (matriliny) is shown as a stage that predates patriarchy, and on Bachofen's[13] theory of a universal matriarchal system prior to the establishment of patriarchy, Engels suggested that male dominance is alien to women in matrilineal societies. In Engels' schema, matriliny as an institution not only precedes patriarchy but is also associated with pre-class, pre-literate, and stateless societies that are characterized by a subsistence economy and an egalitarian form of governance.

Engels' theory found wide support among Marxist feminists who view women's subordination largely as a product of the twin forces of colonialism and capitalism. Subscribing to this line of thinking, some scholars have asserted that the intrusion of colonialism has not only altered the egalitarian relations characteristic of primitive economies but has also seriously undermined their traditional matrilineal institution where it existed. Basing her argument on her study of the Naskopi of the Labrador Peninsular, Eleanor Leacock, in particular, notes that under the influence of the fur trade and the combined effect of Christian missionaries and government agents, patrilineal-patrilocal ties were strengthened at the expense of traditional matrilineal-matrilocal ones (Leacock 1972).

That colonialism and capitalism have considerably eroded the position of women in matrilineal societies cannot be disputed, but it would be naïve to assume that gender stratification was unknown in these societies. For example, Vellanga in her study on class formation among women cocoa farmers in rural Ghana has shown that pronounced divisions existed historically among

12 Lewis Henry Morgan, Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family, Washington, Smithsonian Institution, 1871.

13 Johann Jacob Bachofen, Das Mutterecht, eine Untersuchung uber die Gynaikratie der alten welt, Stuggart, Verlag von Krals & Hoffman, 1861

the matrilineal Akan. The same is true of the Asante, among whom class divisions existed prior to the colonial period (Vallenga 1977). That gender subordination is not alien to matrilineal societies is sharply demonstrated by the Nairs of south-west India, among whom notwithstanding a woman's traditional sexual freedom to enter into *sambandham* (loose sexual liaison) relationships with any number of men, the status of her children is dependent on the status of the father.[14] Should the child be fathered by a man of an 'inappropriate' status (notably a low caste Hindu, Christian or a Muslim) the woman and the child she bears run the risk of being thrown out of the family and the caste.

Insight into the importance of kinship in the structuring of gender and production relations in the South and South-east Asian context has been provided by Leela Dube in her book, *Women and Kinship: Comparative Perspectives on Gender in South and South-East Asia* (Dube 1997). Basing her argument on the thesis that differences in kinship systems and family structures account for critical variations in the ways in which gender operates in different societies, she writes, 'Kinship subsumes both material and ideological aspects of women's lives' (ibid., 5). In an attempt to show how these different structures differentially influence the position and relations of women, Dube focuses on three principal kinship systems: patrilineal, matrilineal, and bilateral, located in three different geographical regions. These are South Asia (comprising India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), South-east Asia (comprising Java, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines), and West Sumatra, northern Thailand, and some pockets in south-western and north-eastern India. The first is predominantly patrilineal, the second is predominantly bilateral, and the third is predominantly matrilineal. To highlight

14 Here the term 'father' may not refer to the biological parent but instead to the (male) lover who acknowledges paternity of the child by presenting ritual gifts to the mother on ceremonial occasions and to the midwife who attends on the latter during her pregnancy and during the post-natal period. fman, ,1861

the differences in women's position in the three kinship systems, Dube uses a number of variables: women's access to land, property, and income; women's rights over space, freedom of movement, and association; and control and management of female sexuality.

Dube's analysis reveals that women's subordination is most severe in South Asian societies where patrilineality and patrilocality work hand in hand with a strong patriarchal ideology. The existence of this ideology has placed women at a serious disadvantage, leading to a situation where they have little access to land or other forms of property, possess only limited rights in the father's house, and are subjected to rigorous control of their sexuality not only by the family but also by the community at large. This, however, does not mean that women do not engage in productive activities. On the other hand, Dube notes, although women in South Asia contribute substantially to the domestic economy, they themselves are under the control and culturally conceived ownership of the husband. This situation contrasts sharply with the position of women in matrilineal descent groups where the female not only has rights over her children but also over property and space, in addition to enjoying greater freedom of movement and association.

Bilateral South-east Asia presents another contrast to the patrilineal societies of South Asia. In the bilateral system, a child is reckoned to be equally the child of both parents and group placement can be through either one of them. This social arrangement has not only given South-east Asian households more openness but has also fostered greater cooperation among female kin. Bilateralism has also added to the economic responsibility of women. In her JP Naik memorial lecture on the subject delivered in 1994 at the Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi, Dube gave a graphic description of the economic role of South-east Asian women. Besides being wives and mothers, women

have always engaged in income-generating activities covering a wide range of tasks. This contributes not only to their economic independence but also provides them with a large measure of autonomy and power. Unlike women in patrilineal South Asia whose personhood and income are under the control of the husband, women in South-east Asia not only exercise control over what they earn but their relative freedom of association and movement (ability to migrate) has also helped them grow into astute businesswomen trading in large surpluses in both rural and urban markets. This phenomenon is not confined to the traditional sector; in several places it has been carried over into the modern economy (Dube 1994, 18-19).

While Dube's analysis sharply brings out the link between kinship, gender, and work, it would be dangerous to generalize on the basis of it. Given that kinship systems do not operate in a vacuum but are deeply embedded within the cultural system, the process is neither mechanical nor uniform. It is possible that the same system or structure may produce different sets of relations. This is particularly true in the case of the matrilineal system, which is not only marked by wide variation in their residence and authority structures but also in cultural ideology. As Audrey Richards, writing on the Bemba of Africa, observes:

> This is a male dominant society and, even though descent is reckoned through the mother, the wife is very much under the control of her husband even while he is an outsider in his wife's village (Richards, 1950, 225)

My own findings on the Khasi partly support this observation. The general assumption that matrilineal descent gives women a dominant position collapses under the weight of the reality of their actual condition—the multiple burdens they bear and their existence under male-centred authority. Although Khasi women have rights over their children, this does not always translate into authority, which in most cases is shared between the mother's

brother/brother on the one side and by the father/husband on the other side, an arrangement obviously made to reconcile male authority with uxorilocal residence. In ideal terms, this arrangement appears to be discriminatory against men who have to discharge their duty both to the conjugal family and to the sister's family. In practice, it is the woman (both in the role of wife/mother and sister) who has to bear the major brunt of this arrangement. Notwithstanding the dual responsibility imposed by tradition on Khasi men in their role as brother and husband, in reality it is the mother who works and scrapes, stints and saves, and garners all her resources to ensure the sustenance of her children. But when it comes to the administration of the family and the management of its resources, control lies in the hands of men.

The position of women in the Khasi society becomes clear when we examine the role of the *khadduh* (youngest daughter), who is the traditional heir to the ancestral property of the household. As the heir to the family property, the youngest daughter is not only expected to be closely guided by the counsel of the mother's brother who controls the property but is also obliged to look after her aged parents and other vulnerable members of the family. Should she fail to carry out the responsibility that society expects of her, she may be deprived of her inheritance. Above all, the youngest daughter is expected to have high moral standards and to be the bearer of tradition, so much so that poor moral conduct or religious conversion could result in the loss of her rights. In contrast to the *khadduh*, the elder daughter has more autonomy. Although the authority of the mother's brother extends to all the sisters, the absence of ancestral property in the house of the elder daughter limits his power over her. But absence of ancestral property invariably increases the dependence of the elder daughter on her husband. Given the man's dual position this is not always an easy proposition for the woman. Particularly where the husband is a man of authority in his sister's house, the wife may have to contend with his divided attention

between his natal and conjugal households. Thus, lacking inherited property and faced with this kind of uncertainty, women have little option but to engage continuously in productive activities to ensure the survival of their children. Many of the women in my sample who took up trade and eventually succeeded did so because of this imperative.

While matriliny[15] serves to promote women's economic initiative, the ideology of gender, which views women primarily as agents of reproduction, does not augur well for their development. The Khasi see the woman's primary role as producing heirs necessary to maintain the continuity of the family, the lineage, and the clan. Therefore, even when women are engaged in remunerative employment, their career can never take precedence over their reproductive functions. In addition to this reproductive imperative, women's entrepreneurial development is severely constrained by the masculinist view that regards women as physiologically, mentally, and emotionally weaker than men, and hence sees women as needing the protection of men. This viewpoint has not only allowed men to exclude women from the political domain but also to deny them any say in important matters. That this view is at sharp variance with the actual tasks performed by women is a different matter. What is significant is that this belief is so widespread in the society that it assumes the status of an ideology. Many women have not only internalized this ideology but also frequently use it to keep their daughters or other female members away from tasks that they consider too arduous or inappropriate for them. An important result of this process is the marginalization of daughters (notably in the families of the well to do) from the system of production and the corresponding reliance on the son/s. How this affects

15 I have discussed at some length the cultural construction of gender among the Khasi elsewhere (see Nongbri 1988, 2000, and 2003). Hence, I will leave out the details and touch only on those aspects that have a direct bearing on women's entrepreneurial development.

women's entrepreneurial development is discussed in the pages that follow.

The process outlined above plainly suggests that Khasi women are positioned between two contradictory tendencies that operate in the society. On the one hand, the matrilineal principle of descent and inheritance provides the enabling condition for women's economic participation. On the other hand, gendered ideology not only views women as inferior to men but even when women work, they are treated merely as secondary workers, their economic potential simply regarded as something that the family can fall back on in times of need. This has not only inhibited women's entrepreneurial development but has also stifled their desire for liberation.