Men Against Matrilineage: Contestations Around Gender in Shillong, Northeast India

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Namrata Gaikwad

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Jean M. Langford

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Abstract

Taking the discursive figure of the enervated, emasculated Khasi male as its starting point, this dissertation analyzes the assertions of crises being articulated by a few groups of Khasi men that have identified their matrilineal traditions as the cause of the 'unraveling' of Khasi masculinity and a purported degradation of this hill-tribal community in Northeast India especially in the face of significant changes over the recent decades. More broadly, it examines how urban Khasis negotiate the dilemmas of these changes and frequently call upon modern and globally popular discourses such as indigenous rights, human rights, justice, dignity, and gender equality in order to describe or validate their understandings of different social problems. I argue that analyzing contestations around gender and kinship allows us to trace the multiple nodes along which Khasi identity is being activated, both in relation to hegemonic conceptualizations of modernity and progress, and through complex dialogues with ideas about nationhood and group belonging, especially in their imbrications with understandings of ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, language, religion and culture.

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Introduction

carolyn: Alfie just got a nephew - from his sis

carolyn: Mark (A's dad) already hinting abt a second grandchild –

me: maybe he wanted a dotter

carolyn: dont know - but Bari's [Alfie's sister] hubby wanted a son - typical of Khasi husbands

me: the new age khasi husbands (sigh)

carolyn: forgot to tell u abt this trend among K Hubbies - no not the new age - even from my time. my young male colleague at office got teased as a hen pecked cos he got a daughter

me: how odd

carolyn: yes for a 1st child they want a SON

me: oh really? so what does that mean - becoz he'll be outnumbered by women or something like that? why do you think that is?

carolyn: not in my father's generation though

me: started in your generation?

carolyn: I think so. my late uncle who is of my age -(a politician) climbed a lemon tree , picked one and ate the whole fruit when he got a daughter for a 1st child. he continued producing 11 daughters till he finally got a son as the 12th child

me: really? did he eat 11 lemons? he produced so many just for a son?

carolyn: but there are some khasi guys now who have been out of Shill for a while - who dont feel the same way

Sent at 9:43 AM on Tuesday

carolyn: However, till now I often hear the pride in the father's voice when he announced that he got a son

me: your uncle? this is surprising - i thought it was different among khasis - that if they didn't get daughters they were upset

carolyn: not only my uncle - others too

carolyn: the wife would of course not be happy without a daughter

me: oh so typically would you say that women and older men would want daughters but men from your generation on started wanting sons? (broadly speaking)

carolyn: yeah

carolyn: KM would often say they want to produce a football team

me: KM?

carolyn: khasi men dupe

me: ah

carolyn: Americanised Carrie

me: you think maybe that's another indication of the sense of alienation that 'km' have been feeling - wanting a son to share solidarity with in the household?

carolyn: there goes your analytical mind = its a thought but

Carolyn and I exchanged many such conversations while I was doing my fieldwork in Shillong, capital of the state of Meghalaya and one of the major cities in the Northeast region of India. This is an excerpt of an Internet chat between us after I had returned to the United States from one of my trips there. It actually replicated a little 'game' we had come up with when we spent time together – she would share an observation about something related to Khasi society, especially about stuff she knew I was interested in, and would wait for me to put it into some kind of a cognitive or interpretive framework. She clearly had views about her own community but wasn't

especially keen to ply me with them. Instead she seemed to derive pleasure in hearing my questions and reflections first. Once in a while she would tell me that she looked forward to reading my analysis, and how being an outsider I might be able to see things differently than people who lived there because they were too close. I didn't share her confidence (how could I?), but was nevertheless secretly pleased that she said it. After all, why would someone spend so much time studying something that everyone already knew? But as will hopefully become apparent through this dissertation, what everyone 'knew' was in fact at the heart of many of the problems that I was there to study.

Of Fathers and First-born Sons: Matriliny and Feelings of Male Discrimination

The trend that Carolyn was alerting me to in our chat – that Khasi men of her generation (she must be around sixty years old) and younger want their first-born child to be a "SON" – was clearly something I hadn't explicitly encountered in my fieldwork before. Most people spoke about how Khasis, being matrilineal, were unlike people from patrilineo-patriarchal 'mainland' India (in other words – 'my people') – they actually valued girl children, and atrocities like female feticide and infanticide were unheard of in their societies. Organized into clans or *kurs* that are strictly exogamous, descent for the Khasis is supposed to be reckoned through women. While both children take their mother's title, it is the daughter's children who advance the *kur,* making them (as Carolyn notes) highly valued in the traditional scheme of things.

Khasi sociologist Tiplut Nongbri notes that the importance of the clan and consequently its perpetuation results in the strong expectation of women to produce children and failure to do so is of grave concern "not only to the woman in question but

to the whole family, so much so that infertility and sterility are valid grounds for divorce" (2000:367). In general Khasis consider children as blessings and a source of wealth for the clan, and I was told that within the 'conventional' worldview there could be "no such thing as too many girls" in a family. However a preference for fewer children has become routine for urban, sophisticated Khasis, particularly the younger ones. They claimed to receive children of both sexes as equal gifts, but would often murmur about other people who were unhappy without a daughter, especially in clans that had wealth or name to pass on. Sometimes they would make fun of the '*nongkyndongs*' (Khasi word for villagers or 'country bumpkins') both for the gaggle of children they had in tow and also for being explicitly preferential towards girl children.

That Khasi men of Carolyn's generation wanted "to produce a football team"[1] worth of boys was something new to me, as was the assertion that the gender of the first child had particularly special significance for them. Having a girl could induce so much disappointment that a Khasi man might climb a tree and eat a lemon whole? Or produce a football team of girls in the process of trying to produce a boy? "Till now," says Carolyn, "I often hear the pride…when he announced that he got a son." Such images (both comical and poignant)[2] of strong and public expressions caught me by surprise, but not the broader idea that more contemporary Khasi men might actively prefer sons to daughters even though there seems to be nothing in the longer history of the community to foreshadow such a phenomenon.

[1] Unlike in mainland India where cricket is the most popular sport, Khasis (and others from the Northeast) are mad about football. Shillong has had its own professional club called Lajong ("our own") since 1983: http://www.shillonglajong.com/history/

[2] This simultaneous operation of parody and pathos is a recurrent trope in the field I was studying and will surface later in the dissertation too.

In a sense it goes right to the heart of my research project – an examination of (relatively) recent assertions and articulations being made by certain groups of Khasi men in Shillong who have been lobbying to fundamentally transform the social fabric of the tribe – a radical switch over to a patrilineal system. Taunted by non-matrilineal outsiders (both in personal interactions and through media representations) for being 'unmanly,' 'disenfranchised' and 'hen-pecked,' many Khasi men resent their allegedly abject position in society and attribute their problems as men to the disjunction of 'traditional' matriliny in a 'modern' world. Unlike other national and international men's groups that bemoan the loss of male authority within 'traditional' institutions, these men invoke 'modern' discourses of gender equality and human rights (ironically mirroring mainstream feminism), which they feel are denied to them *both* under 'traditional' matrilineage and in its more 'modern' transmogrifications.

One of the things they are arguing then is that 'traditional' matriliny is set up to 'discriminate' against men. So, for instance, as conventions go sons are not given a share of the property (especially the ancestral property, which by custom goes to the youngest daughter). Additionally, their own earnings before marriage are supposed to be handed over to the mother, making it hard for young men to become financially independent and to eventually support wives and children. Then there are claims of more subtle forms of differential attitudes within certain households – sons are made to feel somewhat tertiary within the household and mothers might refer to them sadly as "*u ban leit sha ïing ki briew*" (he will go off to live with others/become a part of someone else's home). While I was told that this way of thinking was no longer explicitly expressed in Shillong homes where contemporary understandings of gender fairness have gained favor, there was a

suggestion that such prejudicial feelings that are products of the 'traditional' system continue to linger. The uncanny movement in the SRT's deployment of the language of gender equality is that it turns against, in fact, the unstated seductions of feminist utopia as will be clear in the following story. A leader of one of the men's groups urged me to go and see for myself if I had any doubts:

> You can see the discrimination of the men when you go to any hospital. You stand in front of the delivery room, invariably there will her [the woman's] relatives sitting outside waiting for the result, you watch this – as soon as the doctor peeps his head out and says "it's a boy," the men will be quite happy, you watch the reaction of the women [adopting deflated tone] – "ah it's okay, whatever God gives, it's quite alright." And if they say it's a girl [sing song voice and clapping] – "oh she's so lucky."

This person's disgust is thinly veiled at this point, and he is counting on my sense of gender justice to protest this discrimination, and yet – clearly when we look at this from the lens of feminism that has been developed in patrilineal societies where girl children are routinely slaughtered such that laws have to be passed about this, how can we sympathize with his anger?

That the 'traditional' Khasi gender worldview endorses different attitudes, roles, expectations and ways of being for men and women is not disputed by anyone. Supporters of Khasi matriliny in fact argued that men were not given 'rights' to property since traditions prescribed that men go out to work and support his family whereas women were entrusted primarily with domestic chores and caring for men and children. Traditionally Khasis believe that for one unit of energy a woman has, a Khasi male has twelve, and thus it is the physical and intellectual inferiority of women that entitles them to property 'rights,' I was told. Khasi feminists pick up on such beliefs to demonstrate in

turn how despite being matrilineal Khasi society is at heart a patriarchal one, with women being subordinated, infantilized and restrained from participation in the political domain.[3] For the men's groups however, aspects of the traditional gender-kinship system are handpicked and then percolated through globally prevalent and 'progressive' frameworks like gender justice or rights-based activism, allowing them to then be recast as 'discrimination' that Khasi men are having to experience.

Contemporary 'Crisis' in Shillong: The Matriliny v. Modernity Debate

The men's groups are also trying to formulate a set of arguments about what is happening to Khasi matriliny in the contemporary moment. For this purpose they implicitly draw on anthropological literature, which has extensively attended to the mutations within matrilineal systems, often estimated to be inherently weak and unstable, with the advent of modernity. Much ink has been spilled over the question of whether matriliny is bound to disintegrate in its encounter with forces like colonialism, shifting subsistence modes, private property and differentiation of wealth, urbanization, the rise of national identities, nuclear families and so forth. Some authors have tended to evaluate this interface as potentially producing threatening chasms within the societies they have studied (Goody 1959; Gough 1961; Meillassoux 1981; Murdock 1949; Schneider 1961) while others have dismissed these dark and cynical prophesies, focusing instead on the flexibility (sometimes to the detriment of women) that matrilineal societies have

[3] Nongbri notes for instance, "In an oft-quoted Khasi simile, *ka kynthei ka khynnah* (the woman, the child), women and children are collapsed into a single category" (2000:369).

demonstrated in the face of rapid upheaval (Blackwood 2000, Colson 1980, Douglas 1971, Kato 1981, Nash 1974, Poewe 1981, Stivens 1996).

Jill Nash's work with the Nagovisi of South Bougainville in Papua New Guinea is an example of the latter category. Her thesis is that the Nagovisi, because of certain features specific to their society (such as non-conflicting role of men as fathers and maternal uncles, structurally indispensable role of women, local endogamy and dual organization), have been able to accommodate fairly successfully to changes like land shortage, increases in cash cropping and a population spike, adapting their matrilineal practices by building alliances amongst their previously distinct descent groups. As a counterpoint to the Nagovisi she cites the works of T.S. Epstein (1968) and A.L. Epstein (1969) with the Tolai, which is far more concerned with the future of matriliny, seen by them as on the verge of collapse because of intense conflicts between fathers and sons due to uncertain rights and obligations in the face of changing residence patterns, population growth and litigations over land.

Mary Douglas also takes on the thorny question of the continued viability of matriliny in Africa from a cross-cultural perspective by engaging some of Schneider's more problematic beliefs about the inherent disadvantages of matrilineal systems that he discusses in his introduction to *Matrilineal Kinship*. She contends instead that "matriliny should be capable of flourishing in modern market economies wherever the demand for men is higher than the demand for things. Because of the scope it gives for personal, unascribed achievement of leadership, matrilineal kinship could have advantages in an expanding market economy" (1971:131). Nongbri's own assessment of this debate highlights how both positions have some validity, with the former emphasizing the

mutability or vulnerability of matrilineal systems in the face of global processes and the latter highlighting their simultaneous vibrancy and adaptability. She stresses that "the two models are not mutually exclusive; both can be judicially used to understand the dynamics of matrilineal groups in contemporary society," and alerts us to the danger of dogmatic adherence to any one side (2000:366). The debate about the fate of matriliny continues to hang in the balance but it is increasingly uncommon to encounter arguments that pitch matrilineal societies as teetering unsteadily on the precipice of modernity and globalization.

But some Khasi men's groups are deploying exactly this kind of imagery in their discussion of the problems with contemporary matriliny. Influences from external forces of modernity have transformed the internal logics of the matrilineal system, rendering it impractical and unstable in the modern context, they argue. Migration within and outside the state has disrupted the conventional practice of village endogamy, which enabled Khasi men to continue to play a vital role as a *kñi* (maternal uncle) in their natal *ïing* (household). Now the *kñi* lives in another village or city, or even abroad, leaving care of families to the father, who despite being entrusted with responsibilities is never truly accepted as an insider and given the due authority/respect, being of a different clan than his wife and children. This tension that men experience in their dual roles as fathers and brothers is what Audrey Richards (1950:246) has famously named the "matrilineal puzzle." In an essay that undertakes a macro-level, cross cultural study of matrilineal systems of the Central Bantu, she highlights this dynamic that has been extremely cardinal to studies of matriliny and key to the 'disintegration model' discussed above – the problem of reckoning descent through the woman who, in order to produce children

for her matrikin, must necessarily marry a man from another lineage. In contrast to the patrilineal model, this system was seen to have an "internal strain" because of the friction generated between fathers (the bearers of authority in the family unit) and uncles (the leaders of the lineage).

Dissipated Maternal Uncles, Dominating Heiresses: The 'Weaker Sex'?

In the Khasi context these men's groups argue that male authority has been completely eroded, since the institution of the *kñi* has fallen into decline and yet the power of the father is very circumscribed. Being aware of the dominant masculine ethos within Khasi society I found myself confused by what I was being told. If a man doesn't have authority as a *kñi* surely he must have authority as a father, I asked back quizzically. My interlocutor replied indignantly:

> Now here in my father-in-law's house, who has the power? Not the *kñi* anymore! He's left the house, he's gone and married somebody else. He has got his own children to take care of. Who has taken the power from the mother after she died? The youngest daughter, my wife's youngest sister! Now shouldn't it be the other way around? When the father is still alive the father should be the controlling factor in that house, to decide whether to sell or not, how to run the business, everything that happens in that house. The youngest daughter is doing everything; she has all the legal power in her hand, whereas her father who is still living there in the house is just a father figure, nothing else, no deciding powers at all. Major decisions cannot be taken by the father in that house anymore, after the wife dies. All this problem has started because the youngest daughter is behaving as if everything is under her control, because the *kñi* has run off. It is a practice now, misuse of power by the *khadduh*, and losing of power of the *kñi*. He's still the *kñi* in name, but he doesn't come and interfere. He's not there anymore. *Kñi* is there for show.

This purported displacement of power, out of the hands of men and into the hands of women, is arguably at the heart of the concern being expressed by these men. The

khadduh or the youngest daughter is no longer merely a custodian of property; she is the heiress (in the legal sense) and has assumed control and management of the property taking over the roles traditionally assigned to the *kñi.* However women are seen as inherently incapable of performing these tasks properly – being less gifted intellectually and more prone to emotions and sentiments, the suggestion is that they have either mishandled (intentionally) or then mismanaged (inadvertently) the power and resources at their disposal. Drawing on both traditional and globally prevalent norms about masculinity and femininity these men's groups are pointing implicitly to the chaos that follows the reversal of established gender roles and hierarchies. Khasi men are struggling unsuccessfully to land on their feet in this newly ordered world; plumbing the depths of despair they end up resorting *en masse* to alcohol and drugs to cope with their disenfranchisement. The chasm widens as Khasi women, in the face of this male degradation and the abuse and abandonment that they have to consequently endure, are allegedly increasingly electing to marry outside the community, exacerbating the situation for men particularly but more importantly, as I was told, for the community at large.

Even as they draw on problematic and patriarchal ideas about 'inherent' gender differences these men's groups are simultaneously mobilizing feminist values about gender justice and equality to argue that Khasi men are being 'discriminated against' within both 'traditional' and 'contemporary' matriliny. That matriliny has given women unfettered power or is directly or indirectly responsible for men's problems in Khasi society is contested by many within the community, yet these men have been increasingly successful in proliferating the idea that Khasi men are emasculated by the matrilineal

system. We can see in Carolyn's formulation how "hen-pecked" is used as a noun. Thus men could go from being hen-pecked to *becoming* "a hen pecked." If men want to have more sons (and early on) it is possibly to empower themselves in a household full of matrilineal (read 'overly dominant') women.

The Myth of Matriarchy: Theorizations on Patriarchy and Matriliny

This conflation of matriliny (where descent is reckoned through the women) with matriarchy (where women are the dominant or ruling class) can be traced back to the work of Swiss scholar Johann Bachofen who, in his treatise *Mother Right* first undertook the task of grappling with matrilineal descent. For him matriarchy/matriliny was a cultural stage inserted between rampant "primitive promiscuity" and the subsequent, more civilized patrilineal/patriarchal system. It was associated with the domestic and state rule of women (gynocracy), who passed on their property and names to their children. Women's power stemmed from their stronger proclivity to religion: "prophecy began with women…mystery is the true nature of every religion, and wherever woman dominates religion or life, she will cultivate the mysterious...seen in this light, matriarchy becomes a sign of cultural progress, a source and guarantee of its benefits, a necessary period in the education of mankind" (1967[1861]):86-87). He thus fleshed out the matriarchal myth, arguing that it was only subsequently that men wrested power and society became male dominated as currently evinced in Western Europe.

While other social evolutionary thinkers like McLennan (1886), Morgan (1997[1871]) and Tylor (1889[1871], 1896) did not concur with him on specific issues like what exactly matriliny was, its precise origins and its metamorphosis into patrilineal descent systems, they broadly validated his framework of cultural evolution. Eller argues

further that after the publication of Engels' influential *Origins of Family, Private Property, and the State*, "the myth of matriarchal prehistory was taken up as effective political ammunition by both communists and first-wave feminists, and later by fascists as well" (2011:7).

In time the evolutionists' collapsing of matriliny and matriarchy was also not accepted as it became increasingly clear that women's purported authority over men in these societies was restricted only to myths and legends and was not a recorded contemporary feature anywhere. Here Eller offers an interesting perspective however when she argues that early twentieth century anthropology's shunning of the matriarchal myth is commonly associated with the efflorescence and improvement of ethnographic fieldwork but in her assessment:

> The heyday of matriarchal myth in the nineteenth century passed largely because the questions it addressed – having to do with marriage, women's rights and Victorian sexual attitudes – fell out of vogue, and the whole theoretical apparatus of an evolutionary shift from matriarchy to patriarchy went with it, like the baby with the bathwater. [These] theories…did not attain the same sort of prominence again until a similar set of questions – about women's rights and sexual attitudes, among other things – again engaged the public, this time in the Unites States in the 1970's. [2011:10]

Evaluating the reality of socio-economic and political agency/autonomy wielded by women within various matrilineal systems, scholarship produced by British social structuralists did however strongly reject evolutionary depictions of matrilineal societies where women ruled society, had a higher status, or dominated over men. Once this idea of the matriarchal myth was demolished it became possible in the 1970s, particularly with the influence of feminism, for scholars of matriliny to consider gender dynamics more

closely, and be more attentive to authority, agency and autonomy enjoyed by women in some matrilineal societies (Crehan 1997, Mandala 1990, Peters 1997). However, Khasi sociologist Tiplut Nongbri's work (2000, 2003, 2008, 2014), which has offered the most extensive analysis of gender dynamics within Khasi matriliny, seems to underscore the 'older' view in arguing that Khasi women (despite being privileged in comparison with patrilineal women) are by no means 'matriarchal.' Setting up a distinction between "conquering sons and dutiful daughters" (2014:50) she demonstrates (through analyses of poetry, idiomatic expressions, kinship structures, rituals, speech patterns etc.) that Khasi men have clearly been bestowed with the position of authority while women, being characterized as the "weaker sex," are "obliged to submit to the control of their brothers and the protection and support of their father and/or husband (52)." While men enjoy great autonomy in society, Nongbri argues that women's freedom of movement and expression have traditionally been fairly circumscribed.

However, the commonplace notion that in matrilineal communities men are subordinate to women, which emerged out of fanciful, but long debunked theories from the nineteenth century, continues to resonate within the popular imagination. As Eller argues, up until the late nineteenth century the "matriarchal myth reigned as dogma within British anthropology. From there it spread out to the cultural mainstream and made itself useful to people with a variety of philosophical and political perspectives on gender" (2011:99). These notions have played a crucial role in the continued negative perceptions of Khasi men particularly by patrilineal outsider communities. Stories about Khasi men being "ruled by women," "servants," "breeding bulls" and so forth abound in national and international media accounts. It is this widespread misperception that many

Khasi men in Shillong have learned to internalize and deploy strategically in order to lobby for men's rights despite simultaneously being molded by values that are rather patriarchal or chauvinistic. This dissertation examines the various national/global tropes that these men draw on to make claims of (or against) 'tradition' and masculine primacy. How are concepts of 'tradition' and 'modernity' wrestled with, re-produced and deployed in these constructions of gender narratives that propel social movements in Khasi society? What insights do these multiple mobilizations of 'tradition' and 'modernity' offer, when undertaken by *matrilineal* Khasi people – both for academic discussions on marginalized postcolonial modernities and also for feminist theory and politics that describe gender identity/inequality and posit a different, more 'modern' future, but always by assuming/privileging the normative patrilineal model? The provocative call made by these men (some seeking to overturn and others to adapt matriliny) is arguably symptomatic of important transformations within Khasi society since its encounter with British colonial forces, and more recently due to its sustained interface with patrilineal migrant communities. Paying attention to claims being made by these men as well as the responses by different sections of Khasi society accords us an opportunity to map and analyze these radical changes. My suggestion is that by focusing on the shifting patterns of kinship, responsibilities, inheritance and gender roles we can get a sense of people's engagements with these transformations in their ways of *being* Khasi – of relating to one another and the world around them. I am particularly interested in the way people grapple with and understand matriliny in the first place, both as an anthropological category but also as fundamentally shaping their own identities as individuals and members of a distinct tribal community. The significance of matriliny to the Khasis is key; despite

acknowledging the changes that some of these men are pointing to, most sections of Khasi society continues to ignore their appeals (for diverging reasons), arguing that their matrilineal customs are unique and are deeply interwoven with their traditions and tribal identity. This dissertation explores the multiple nodes along which Khasi matriliny becomes articulated in Shillong and considers how it came to be that a category like matriliny, which shows itself in such different ways and means such different things to different people, become the focus or the pivot upon which the identity, and indeed the very "future" of a community has come to rest. The instability of this category – the diverse ways it is invoked, or understood, the different, sometimes starkly opposite directions in which it seems to move, or the distinct or contradictory tropes that it is made to rely upon – all these, I shall argue, are critical to its very existence, rendering it both possible, and impossible.

Anthropological Subjects: Legacies and 'Proper Objects' of the Discipline

Before I left Minneapolis for my extended fieldwork stretch, I met a last time with David, one of my four research committee-members. As I sat in a sheltered nook in a corner of his office surrounded on three sides by tall shelves of books, a large *bilum* stared at me from another corner and I realized I was nervous. Even though I'd already spent two summers in Shillong and had quite a few friends and networks I could count on, I couldn't easily shake the jitters. This was it. After all the reading, preliminary field study, exam taking, prospectus defending, grant winning and such, the task of fieldwork was finally upon me. And frankly I felt wholly unprepared – unschooled and unskilled – and uncertain, both of what exactly the task entailed and whether I was the right person to

undertake it. I was an outsider not only to those I was going to do my research with, but also to the discipline of anthropology – an alien in both fields, as well as to the United States. A student of literature and cultural studies, I felt the one foot I had pushed through the anthropology door shake under me. David was reassuring in his brusque, endearing manner, and we got talking about how long I would need to complete my research. I had had different discussions on this subject with different people in my department and I wanted David's opinion too. "Any anthropologist worth their salt will stay long enough to at least experience all four seasons," he said with his distinctive toss of the head.

That formulation lingered with me as I did my fieldwork in Shillong.[4] It seemed like such a quaint thing to say. But David is of a slightly older generation; an anthropologist in his early sixties whose research in Papua New Guinea has resulted in prolific writings, he cuts a significantly different figure than most of the other cultural anthropologists in my department. The ones whose work I was most interested in initially bear a distinctly Foucauldian stamp and, given my academic background and sharpened sensitivities to the structuring role of power and its differential quality, naturally I gravitated towards them. This work in a sense bore testimony to the dramatic transformations within anthropology over the past five decades, as it has responded to numerous critiques, the simplest yet harshest being its complicity with the colonial enterprise and the power wielded by the white, male anthropologist over the object of his study – the 'primitive' or 'native' Other (Asad 1973, Kuper 1988). Edward Said (1978)

[4] I couldn't but remember Michael as the seasons changed, which were hard to miss accompanied as they are by breathtaking blossoms attacking trees all over the city – cherries, peaches, pears, plums, oranges, rose apples, jacarandas, rhododendrons, orchids and others – veritably "a calendar of flowers" as Shillong-born poet Nabanita Kanungo notes in a wonderful reflection on time and memory: http://prairieschooner.unl.edu/fusion/feast/what-ill-take-me-when-i-leave-shillong

was influential not only for pointing out the continued imbrication of orientalism in encounters Europeans had/have with 'others' (see also Rabinow 1977, Crapanzano 1980) but also for highlighting the impact of 'scientific' disciplinary knowledges (produced by Europeans about the 'orient') in consolidating and reifying popular dualisms about the 'west' and the 'rest.'

Anthropology found itself addressed here in both discussions, and has since (and perhaps much before) been heavily invested in freeing itself from its dark historical associations with colonialism, racism, Euro-American supremacy and dominance, and setting itself apart from popular, condescending dabblings in the difference of the 'other.' Challenges from postcolonial theory, poststructuralist and deconstructive philosophy, neo-Marxisms, critical race, feminist and queer theory, activism, literature and art have likewise triggered a series of convulsions within the discipline, occasioning radical re-theorizing, reflexivity, explorations of the literary and representative, "studying up," multi-sited ethnographies and so on. In an experimental attempt at "self-historicizing," James Clifford tells us about a conversation he had in the early 70s with Malinowski's student Raymond Firth outside the library of the London School of Economics about recent critiques of anthropology for its collusions with colonial power:

> He shook his head in a mixture of pretended and real confusion. What happened? "Not so long ago we were radicals. We thought of ourselves as gadflies and reformers, advocates for the values of indigenous cultures, defenders of our people. Now, all of a sudden, we're handmaidens of empire!" [2012:419]

In that moment we can know what it is to "feel historical," argues Clifford. When you find yourself repositioned and bewildered, right after the ground under your feet suddenly slides away. That was what many of the older liberal Western scholars experienced (amid

rapid decolonization) when confronted with the idea that colonialism was a "period" with an ending, he writes. For many anthropologists of that era careful attention to the lives of 'primitive' Others held the promise of pushing at the very limits of Western, metropolitan experience and philosophy, enabling alternative/radical imaginations of human potential and the good or the ideal life. The discipline arguably arrives at a full circle at this moment when senior, experienced anthropologists, who have (to their minds at least) devoted entire careers to a struggle against ethnocentric biases, get castigated for being Eurocentric, colonial and old-school (Ferguson 1999, Peletz 1995). As Clifford looks back a quarter of a century to when *Writing Cultures* was first published he feels similarly repositioned, having had to contend (along with others of his generation) with more contemporary questions about gender, sexuality, class and race to name a few. Globalization and neoliberalism have heralded political strife, economic insecurities and environmental degradation, and all these are tied up with the intense and ongoing transformation of power relations and the decentering (not defeat) of the West, but as Clifford writes, "The discipline of anthropology has been an inextricable part of this decentering, and so have its critiques, books like *Writing Culture*" (419).

As for myself, I didn't have to go very far to see just how far anthropology (in its participations in these decentering critiques) had come since its early days – my professors were studying categories, global capital flows, contemporary genetic practices in the Netherlands, blues music, memory, landscape, biopolitics, psychonanalysis, conspiracy theories, pigeon phobias, non-human agency and intermediary states of matter found in swamps and marshes. My own advisor's most recent work considers the existence of ghosts, modalities of haunting and new kinds of moral imaginaries enabled

by interspecies politics and bestial powers. This corpus of exciting new research, surely at the cutting-edge of contemporary anthropology, was aligned closely with my theoretical interests, asking similar kinds of methodological and ethical questions as I had been. It seemed like I might fit into the discipline after all.

Except my topic of interest wasn't exactly 'cutting-edge.' It seemed like something of a double whammy – I was proposing to conduct research with a group called a 'tribe' and, if that wasn't problematic enough, 'kinship' was to be my field of study. While it is certainly the case that the Khasis are part of the Indian nation-state and consequently my fellow citizens, I knew enough about the history of the Northeast region to be conscious of its strained relationship with where I'm identified as being from, referred to by them as 'mainland India,' and how that positioned me as an outsider or a '*dkhar*,' a complex category refering to non-Khasis, but only those who are also non-(hill)tribal, or seen to be from the subcontinental plains. Post-war critiques of anthropology that challenged epistemologically the possibility itself of white scholars conducting research with non-western 'others' threw into disarray the very criteria that legislated upon the "proper objects" (Butler 1994) of anthropology. Several Euro-American ethnographers consequently turned their anthropological eye back to their own societies, to "re-enter the West cautiously, through the back door, after paying their dues elsewhere," as Michel-Rolf Trouillot put it, even as this return was often "no better theorized than were previous departures for faraway lands (1991:19)."

For many third-world, indigenous and more broadly 'minority' anthropologists routed through the Western academy the problem of being tainted by inequitable relations of (colonial) dominance or racism was ostensibly resolved since they worked mostly

within their own communities, but other problems mushroomed under their feet. Trouillot notes here that these anthropologists "can and do voice their cultural claims, not on the basis of explicit theories of culture but in the name of historical authenticity. They enter the debate not as academics – or not only as academics – but as situated individuals with rights to historicity (19)." This claim to authenticity is a delicate one rendering them on the one hand native informants *par excellence* but also on the other purveyors of 'partial truths' within a discipline that has had a long and fraught relationship with the ideal of objectivity. Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) argues thus that anthropologists who are "halfies" – (people of mixed national or cultural identity through processes of "migration, overseas education, or parentage") – are necessarily estranged from the "self of anthropology" given that the "other" that they study is "simultaneously constructed as, at least partially, a self." Their dilemmas, she describes, are serious:

> As anthropologists, they write for other anthropologists, mostly Western. Identified also with communities outside the West, or subcultures within it, they are called to account by educated members of those communities. More importantly, not just because they position themselves with reference to two communities but because when they present the other, they are presenting themselves, they speak with a complex awareness of and investment in reception.

We could add here that such anthropologists face a double conundrum – not simply the consciousness of how they will be received by Western anthropologists as an 'other', but also of how to represent themselves as *anthropologists* to communities that have historically been stigmatized by the work that anthropology has done or how to thus *re-present the discipline* in immediate and embodied ways (I was nicknamed anthropology, shortened to "anthro" by a hysterically funny, truly gay Naga friend within minutes of being introduced and consequently teased mercilessly). That representations – who

speaks about whom, through what structures and using what techniques or modalities – have complex ethico-political ramifications is plain to most of us with scholarly aspirations. Given the barbed history of Northeast India's marginalization at the hands of colonial and postcolonial India, and their identification (broadly speaking) as hill-tribal and thus different from those (like me) from the mainland, the question of positionality was a fairly vexing one to say the least. I was very conscious of my historical (and real) privileges as a 'mainlander' being sent by an American univeristy to study a 'tribe' from the Northeast. Some of the organizing assumptions of the discipline that allowed concepts like 'tribe' and 'kinship' to become an object of its study have been thoroughly critiqued – primarily the strange paradox that anthropology sought to generate unifying ideas about the nature of human existence based on its systematic yet exclusive study of 'primitive' non-western societies. Western academics influenced by the 'critical turn' in anthropology negotiated these complexities in multiple ways, often by returning home as noted above.

An (Other) Outsider: Studying the 'Tribe' in India's Northeast

The anthropogical interest in the 'other' doesn't vanish entirely however, as so much research is directed at non-normative groups within the West, including (via the call to 'study up') those comprising the elite and powerful echelons. As Sherry Ortner (1984:143) argues, especially since "more and more anthropologists are doing fieldwork in Western cultures, including the United States, the importance of maintaining a capacity to see otherness, even next door, becomes more and more acute." Again, the connections between ideas about otherness/difference and objectivity are not incidental and are bound up with the foundations of the discipline. Even as these might be eschewed by many

within the discipline they continue to be linked in the popular imagination with the work we do. But by the late 80s anthropology had to confront its utter disenchantment with its traditional subject of study – the 'primitive' or 'exotic' Other, and by extension allied concepts like 'tribe' and 'kinship.' There has since been a palpable suspicion against an anthropology that for instance posits a 'primitive' Other "with 'more kinship' (complicated clan structures, extended families, deep lineages, or even the large families of immigrant groups to the United States)…contrasted with the 'modern' industrialized societies with trim nuclear families" (Stone 2001:1).

Anthropologists in the 1990s did come back to offer compelling arguments for research with non-western and even small-scale societies, challenging popularly held ideas about the so-called primitives being contemporary forefathers to allegedly more-'evolved' people and showing instead how they are equally imbricated in capitalist world-systems, multiple global flows, complicated nationalistic projects, fraught cultural or religious politics and so forth. In a sense my work is influenced deeply by anthropologists like Anna Tsing who provide entry points into sophisticated explorations of the ways in which ostensibly secluded communities, "out-of-the-way places" are in fact being shaped by debates across national and cross-national arenas (1993). In a similar vein Paige West's rich ethnography set in Papua New Guinea shows how the Gimi, "a seemingly less-than-developed people, actually exists within and at the same time generate what has come to be known as the transnational…[which is]…a process through which Gimi and their interlocutors produced space, place, environment, society and self" (2006:xii). Disjunctions between biodiversity conservation principles and rhetorics deployed by NGO workers and the aspirations of local people for development

– schooling for their children, medicines and medical aid, clean water supply, loans, income generation avenues etc. – lead to complex negotiations and frustrations for all involved while also showing up the powerful interconnections between individual and communal realities and global processes.

Such ethnographies disrupted readerly romances with radical differences associated with the 'primitive,' even as they challenged the burgeoning field of cultural studies (and by extension newer trends within anthropology?) to "move beyond its roots in Eurocentric literary criticism and philosophy, and participate in a cultural dialogue that crosses professional, ethnic, and national boundaries between the West and the Third World" (Tsing 1993:31). The discipline of cultural studies in India has in fact from the outset been deeply invested in putting texts from the Western canon into conversation with realities within the postcolonial nation, and my own work hopes to contribute to the ideas being generated in that field and more broadly to social science in India in addition to writing from within the discipline of American anthropology.

The question still lingers for me however (and is not obviously one that I could resolve) – in the postcritical landscape of anthropology, how does one take something to be the object of one's inquiry? What is the space assigned to the Other *qua* 'primitive' or 'exotic' within anthropology and what are the consequences of such studies or then of avoiding such studies? While early anthropological discourses were instrumental not only in the creation of categories like 'tribal' but also in casting them (even if inadvertently) as backward or less evolved, it is also important to attend to the complexities accompanying the role of anthropology in the Northeast, which has a very specific historical trajectory in relation to the rest of India. I was alerted to this when, during a preliminary fieldtrip, I

shared my research ideas with an anthropologist from the region whose work and spirit I admired. She asked to meet me after reading my prospectus. As I sat down in her office the first thing she said was: "I will not be interested in supervising your work if you're planning on doing one of these postmodern projects." I could not have been more caught off guard and I'm not sure if my surprise was readily apparent to her but she continued nevertheless, "I've been reading all these anthologies (gesturing to some book shelves), these so-called literary ideas, reflexivity and all…but I don't agree with them. They are not so relevant here."

If anywhere it's relevant surely its here I was thinking but she continued to offer a very interesting critique of what she was calling 'postmodern anthropology' as being unable to account for the significant contributions of older models of anthropology in a socio-political context like the Northeast. India and China engage each other repeatedly in cartographical battles even as much of the borderland is extremely hard to access, much less patrol. In the Northeast today, there continue to be communities that live in areas virtually impossible to reach for want of infrastructure like roads, communication and so forth, rendering the invisibility marking the lives of the people from the region rather literal in their instance. Gathering data about these communities was imperative to this anthropologist, since according to her the lack of knowledge being produced perpetuates social and state violence against them, their very existence un/under-acknowledged. Being a tribal and having experienced closely their marginalization in the Northeast and a scholar with a clear sense of that history, her need to document the social realities of these communities that she felt herself a part of was not merely a cultural-conservation project undertaken solely for academic purposes, but was instead infused

with a keen recognition of the power and politics of knowledge production, of being written into existence so to speak, in a context where most elites, both at the local and national level, remain unaware of communities most severely marginalized.

It is here that she finds classical style anthropology to be its most useful and despite the critiques that have been leveled against it in the last few decades she articulates the need for its recuperation, or at least was cautioning me against adopting a blanket, overly simplistic (or even reactionary she seemed to imply) rejection of it. This conversation did have a profound impact on me, forcing me to be mindful of the ability of classical anthropology to produce – knowledge, discourse, people, thought and even affect – and (as she was suggesting) to empower, even as my work is simultaneously engaged in exploring some of its underlying assumptions and methodologies that have been problematic. But, at any rate, by the late 2000s it would have been impossible for me to conceptualize a project to study kinship patterns among a matrilineal tribe called the Khasis in a distant part of the world just because it was poorly accounted for in the literature – neither would I find myself drawn to such a topic nor I hazard would the discipline be willing/able to accept it as such.

I was confronted with the question of whether these concepts (and methodologies) had fallen out of the scope of critical Western anthropology, and if so, did this constitute an abrogation of responsibility – by anthropology, of concepts that it helped create no less, and which it now discards to national and/or developementalist discourse? In relegating them awkwardly to a bygone anthropological era we forgo the opportunity to ask ourselves the question – how do we rethink these analytical categories and understand the work they are put to in various contexts and discourses (including within

anthropology)? As James Ferguson (1999) has shown in another postcolonial context (Zambia), anthropological ideas have had the power to structure the knowledges and practices of both postcolonial states and their citizens. For postcolonial Khasis, as we shall see, these categories are far from obsolete or even problematic (though they are not at all unaware of those trajectories and will draw upon them selectively), becoming instead full-fledged nodes of self-understanding and trademarks upon which they have chosen to peg their own identity in relation to those that *they* have historically construed to be 'others.' To many of them then anthropological ditherings about the propriety or the feasibility of scrutinizing such categories would at best be perplexing and at worst considered a violence or at least a failure of the discipline to account for the after-life of notions/imaginaries that it helped spawn.

For the Khasis being tribal and matrilineal are central to their self-identity and are repeatedly invoked in their 'modern' assertions as citizens and as a community within the nation-state but also in the larger international arena that they are conscious of being situated within. While ideas like modernity might not be compelling analytical categories anymore, they continue to be important particularly to postcolonial subjects, and this project is consequently obliged to take more seriously the ways in which metaphors of 'tradition' and 'modernity' are being mobilized within Khasi society and the discpline of anthropology, both in the West and in the Northeast. Further, to track this affiliation between 'tradition' and tribal identity is crucial in India where 'tribe' is a politically contested and fragile entity – communities designated 'Scheduled Tribes' receive Constitutional reservations.

Engaging critiques of classical anthropology, my dissertation problematizes a conceptualization of the 'tribe' as simply being the precursor of the civilized modern – an assumption enumerated by earlier anthropology and inherited by the Indian state in its approach to the 'Scheduled Tribes.' It seeks to rethink the 'tribe (in its intersections with gender and kinship) as a new configuration, a distinctly modern category. This task of tracking the unfolding of the 'tribe' in the Northeast has not been undertaken in any sustained fashion and is particularly crucial since the Northeast tribes have historically been treated as a unique entity, being provided for especially by the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. In examining the question of what makes the tribes of the Northeast so different this dissertation attempts to tease open and illuminate anew the project of modernity and postcolonial nation building within the Indian context.

Colonial anthropological scholarship, influenced as it was by theories of social evolution, placed tribal and aboriginal communities even below the Sanskritized caste Indians, marking them as 'noble savages' outside the pale of any form of civilization, and these notions are inherited by mainland India finding expression in policies, research as well as popular attitudes. Among the Shillong Khasis, particularly the intelligentsia, there is a striking rejection and perhaps even reversal of this formulation. Many Khasis express a sense of distinction, mostly indirectly but sometimes even directly, in comparison with mostly *dkhar* but also other tribal communities.

Therefore, I was told very early by a senior non-Khasi researcher at the North East Hill University in Shillong, that my project was "unfeasible" because people, particularly men, wouldn't wish to speak to me for being both a '*dkhar*' outsider and a woman. This of course made me consider not only my ability to conduct the research but

also raised troubling questions for me about the consequences of my being a part outsider (non-Khasi and non-tribal) and a part insider (shared national imaginaries and knowledges) in relation to the politics of participating in and writing about life in Shillong. What kinds of self-other gymnastic feats would I have to pull off and what would their ethical and existential consequences be, I wondered? I found to my surprise that my *dkhar* status was mitigated by my being from Bombay, which was perceived as a distant, more cosmopolitan place, as opposed to cities like Calcutta or New Delhi that many people are much more familiar with. And of course my being a student at an American University along with apprehendings of my class privilege, cultural capital, gender normativity and so forth made me an acceptable person for many Khasis to talk to.

In fact as it turned out, both my gender and my outsider status facilitated my research enormously. Being a gender-conforming woman I was automatically interpellated into hetero-normative orderings that then made me a pleasant/attentive and sometimes 'desirable' listener for my some of my cis-gendered straight male interlocutors. One of them even suggested flirtily that I take a Khasi boyfriend so that I could learn about Khasi kinship "first hand." Also people felt more comfortable sharing intimate aspects of their lives with me since I was an outsider (thus also seen as having no stakes and being more neutral and less prone to gossip) who would soon leave Shillong. At any rate, given the contemporary manifestations of tribal-*dkhar* dynamics I can say with some amount of certainty that conducting this research would have been exponentially more difficult (if not outright impossible) had I been a Bengali from Shillong studying at Delhi University.

This feeling of distinction that Khasis have in relation to *dkhars* is perhaps linked to their close encounter with the British. Sohra was the first British capital in the region before it was moved to Shillong, which then continued to be the administrative capital of undivided Assam up until 1972, when Meghalaya attained statehood and Shillong became its capital, while Dispur was named as Assam's new capital. In the contemporary moment, when Meghalaya has become just another state in the Northeast, it is easy to forget the long and unique history of the Khasis with the British who, particularly after the idea of hill stations in other parts of colonial India began to gain traction, discovered in Khasi and Jaintia Hills great potential for a European retreat. Writing about their journey "across the woody hills, which lie between Goahattee and Nunkhlow," Major Adam White writes in his *Memoirs of the late David Scott:*

> Emerging from the hot muggy atmosphere of the plains and the noisome effluvia of these Assamese wilds, it is scarcely possible to conceive with what delight we behold the enchanting verdure of these hills, and breathed their pure and balmy atmosphere. [1832:33][5]

Thrilled with encountering a climate that reminded him of his native England, in 1826 Scott proceeded to seek permission to build in Nongkhlaw a house where both invalids and colonial officials could go to "eat the Europe air" (37). Most Shillongites today are proud of this historical legacy of their town, and often invoked the British designation of their city as the "Scotland of the East," especially when lamenting its dirty and polluted state.

In 1828, Sohra was selected as an appropriate spot for the building of a sanatorium, which was to become a hub of missionary activities and the first British capital of the region. The evangelical efforts of the Welsh missionaries, led by Thomas

[5] https://archive.org/stream/memoiroflatedavi00watsrich#page/n3/mode/2up

Jones (who moved to Sohra in 1841) led to the welcoming of Christianity and the burgeoning of schools. Currently 70.3% of Meghalaya's population is Christian and 74.43% of the population is literate (2011 Government of India Census). Subsequently in 1842, the Roman script was adopted for the Khasi language, further increasing the acceptance of English. This popularity has occasioned many parents to name their children after unusual words from the English language repertoire but also names of Western icons (such as Hitler, Moonlight, Virginity, Rolling stone, Billy Kid, Darling and so forth) and many Khasis narrate these stories with amusement and sometimes a tinge of embarrassment.[6]

It is certainly not insignificant that standardized Khasi was modeled on the Khasi spoken by the Khynriams, the community of Khasis who live in Hima Khyriem (that included Sohra), since these were the first group that the colonial officials and missionaries encountered and studied, which has had the effect of indirectly invisibilizing or deemphasizing the languages spoken by other types of Khasis. Likewise, the early settling of Sohra had definite implications for the study of Khasi matriliny, which also was based on data gleaned from the Sohra Khasis, creating a normative and hegemonic understanding of Khasi matriliny, and more broadly culture, often at the expense of the Pnars, War Jaintias, War Khasis, Bhois, Lyngams and so forth. Here too, the role of anthropology and other 'scientific' disciplines is key. As McDuie-Ra puts it:

> Ethnographers worked hard to create identities such as 'Naga', 'Khasi', and 'Garo'; all specific administrative projects to bring diverse groups into singular identities and subjugate them to a local ruler and frequently a local revenue collector…In the Khasi Hills, the role of the Syiem, or

[6] A recent feature story in the Shillong Times provides a perspective on this topic: http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2014/03/10/whats-in-a-name-everything/

> 'chief', was emphasized and given increased importance and uniformity by the British in order to appoint a loyal local ruler, despite the different systems of authority in different parts of the Khasi Hills. [2009]

Therefore, the British colonial encounter created not only a singular understanding of Khasi culture based on the study of the Khynriams (rendered tacitly into the prototypical Khasi), but also allowed them to become established as the early elites, who continue, albeit in subtle ways, to hold a hegemonic sway over Khasi society, especially as it gets represented to outsiders via disciplinary knowledge, but also perhaps in the formulation of ideas about Khasi identity and consequently even Khasi nationalism.[7] While it is certainly the case that several Khasi rulers fought hard against incursions by the British (early 18th century Syiem U Tirot Sing is still celebrated as a Khasi freedom fighter – his death anniversary is memorialized each year on the 17th of July as a state holiday) and that there was a lot of resistance to colonial rule, many people I spoke to also underscored the significance of close interactions between the Khasis and the British, which they say played a role in facilitating Khasi modernity, exposing them to alternative, more metropolitan outlooks, and even perhaps giving them an edge over other tribals in the region.

It is not a coincidence thus that many of the important leaders of the Hill-State Movement were Khasis from Shillong who, because of their sustained exposure to larger regional and national politics, were arguably in a much better position to articulate their resistance to middle-class Assamese hegemony. Others openly talked about how if they *had* to be "ruled" by outsiders, they would still prefer the *saheps* (British) to the *dkhars*,

[7] The tensions between Jaintias (which itself is a contested identity category) and Khasis tend to be articulated most often.

an indication of how some Khasis explicitly connected the colonial and the postcolonial states as 'rulers' of their community, but also of how tenuous they found their ties with the larger Indian nation-state. On one of my early trips I was talking to a Khasi shop owner in Laitumkhrah, and he told me "You know we say like this…we are Khasis by birth and Indians by accident," and this is apparently a fairly common motto particularly among some sections of Khasi youth who identify more closely with the idea of Khasi nationalism.

While Khasi antipathy towards the Indian-state was certainly not a commonly expressed sentiment, I discuss some of these voices, in order to gesture towards the larger fact that urban Khasis are differently interpellated into the federal structure of the Indian nation-state; while most recognize themselves as Indian citizens, they are also simultaneously able to short-circuit their national or even regional affiliations to feel and (particularly if their class background permits) be a part of more Westernized worldviews. Shillong, for instance, has earned itself a reputation as the rock capital of the country, but other kinds of western music – classical, heavy metal, blues, soul, and even hip hop – are also very popular and during my time there, I attended several music concerts held in public squares like Don Bosco, Fire Brigade, Police Bazaar and so forth, which was attended by both young and old.

An eighty-three year old, middle class Khasi woman living in Mawkhar recalled with nostalgia her teens when she said Shillong was a "much more vibrant," cosmopolitan town, where you could encounter "cultured people of various backgrounds." She talked about how each locality would have socials with contemporary Western music and dancing, heavily attended by youth, both male and female, without

parental disapproval, and "everyone felt free and had a lot of fun." It is not insignificant that during the 1980s and 90s when violence against outsiders in Shillong was at its acme and political groups like the Khasi Students Union were issuing threats against women choosing to wear kurtas instead of the traditional Khasi *jaiñsem*, the Seng Kynthei (collection of women's groups) spoke out strongly against such policing of Khasi women. Khasis often construct their identity in relation to larger, more global paradigms, where both their unique history within the region and their tribal, matrilineal culture dovetail, allowing them to see themselves mirrored in and reflective of progressive and/or Western ideas about gender and sexual expression particularly.

At the same time there are serious concerns about the future of the community, which gets seen as frail in the face of numerous and rapid changes that are taking place. One of my informants, a retired civil servant turned social activist spoke about how changes in indigenous tribal societies tend to "threaten the comfort zone" making it "traumatic and people don't want it." "The trauma of change," he said grimly, "plays on our psyche, we are unwilling to admit it but it plays very hard on our psyche…these old value systems within our blood which have been handed down by word of mouth. And what are we expected to do really when we find that these value systems don't help us get on with life?" This dissertation examines how urban Khasis negotiate the dilemmas of these changes and frequently call upon modern and globally popular discourses such as indigenous rights, human rights, justice, dignity, and gender equality in order to describe or validate their observations and diagnoses of different social 'problems.'

Analyzing contestations around gender and kinship allows us I argue, to trace the multiple nodes along which Khasi identity is being activated in contemporary Shillong,

especially in relation to hegemonic conceptualizations of modernity and progress. I show how this activation of Khasi identity is in complex dialogues with ideas about nationhood and group belonging, especially in their imbrications with ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, language, religion and culture. In studying articulations of Khasi identity, I focus on three primary categories – hill-tribal, matriliny and men's rights – in order to suggest that understandings of what it means to be Khasi are co-constituted with multiple, everyday expressions of these three very fluid conceptual categories. Further, I identify and elaborate three principal modes through which ideas about Khasi identity are stitched together – the performative, the affective, and the discursive – arguing that each of these modes reveals different facets of the categories that are being invoked and (re)made.

Working with the performative mode allows us to see clearly that Khasi identity (and its allied categories) is not inherently meaningful, nor is it a direct or singular product of colonialism, or even postcolonialism. I show that these are thoroughly modern categories that are produced through the multiple, intersecting gazes that bring into focus the complex genealogies of colonialism, racialization, and patriarchies. The affective mode allows us to attend to the creation, consolidation and sublimation of a range of feelings that suture subjects into nationalist (and supra-nationalist) imaginaries. Being attentive to the discursive enables us to take seriously the sometimes contradictory and sometimes consistent formations of Khasi nationalism that are produced through the affective and performative, but also through the sociological and historical. Khasi ethno-nationalism can thus be understood through interpretive categories produced within disciplinary knowledges of post/colonial anthropology and historiography, which are in a tense relationship with mainstream Indian nationalism as well as larger

conceptualizations of international citizenship and hegemonic Western/Christian conceptions of modernity.

Through each of these modes we can then zoom in and out of a range of experiences – from the individual to the community and then further moving up to larger imaginaries of collective identity, in order to analyze the complex impacts that follow from the dialogues and dissonances produced through these traversals. This dissertation can thus be read as a multiscalar conceptualization of Khasi identity that remains attentive to both the contradictory and the coherent iterations of nationhood and national subjectivities in the everyday psychic and social life of Khasi people.

Identity politics have typically articulated the concerns of groups discriminated against because of their dislocation from the universal, unmarked subject even as the particularities of their experience (of marginalization) are consistently erased through subtle processes of cooptation. However, as we see in one of my primary analytical sites, the Khasi men's rights movement is strategically using feminist categories, insights, ideology and techniques of analysis in their own struggle to fashion a narrative and ideology of masculine subjugation. How is the universal being mobilized in this context to assert itself as the marginal and thus co-opt its language and political praxis? What are the historical trajectories that enable this reversal?

Political sociologies of the Northeast have been very critical of what has been called the post-independence "political engineering" of the region, which has long been "pronounced a failure" in hindsight (Baruah 2005:5). Drawing somewhat on these critiques but most centrally gleaned from insights gained through my own fieldwork I suggest that ideas and movements around Khasi ethnonationalism—which were

conceptualized primarily as a resistance to its historical marginalization from the mainstream or normative Indian citizenry—have ended up partially replicating the pitfalls of mainstream nationalist modes of imagining and organizing belonging. Erasures of intra-group cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic differences, perpetuation of stereotypes that legitimize pre-existing social hierarchies, and systemic marginalization have all become variations on the theme of 'collateral damage' for the larger goal of consolidating a standardized imagination of the 'true,' 'singular' or 'unified' Khasi identity. What are the dangers posed by the uncritical reclaiming of marginality and a politics based on that by a now hegemonic, elite Khasi nationalism?

Even as I endorse the insights of scholarship that diagnoses the problems inherent within ethnonationalism and its concomitant violences, in this dissertation I push for the importance of not conflating Khasi nationalism with dominant Indian nationalism, or conceptualizing the former as a pocket size version of the latter. Being a minority group that has historically had to face specific and unique modes of (racialized, primitivized and sexualized) marginalization at the hands of the mainland, non-tribal, upper caste Hindu(ized) citizenry, the uptake of these categories necessarily becomes more complicated within the Khasi context and cannot be read as a mere replication or mirroring of the mainstream dominant discourse.

To do so would not take seriously enough the ramifications of subordinated nationalisms, that (even as they reach in problematic ways for consistency and coherence) are necessarily negotiating a fraught relationship with a powerful globally-endorsed nationalism, which through its own industries, affects and frameworks is constantly trying to absorb it into its fold. Furthermore, to conflate these two nationalisms

would also be to assume that there is only one kind of nationalism and that the others are merely versions that can unproblematically stand in for each other. I argue for a reconsideration of a hegemonic idea of nationalism; instead we need to be attentive to the qualitatively different forms of nationalism(s) and identity politics that are operating in new complicated and sub/dominant forms.

Similarly, even as I open up for critique the various problematic ideologies and assumptions that are central to the articulations of anti-matriliny men's groups, I show how the discursive figure of the depleted, emasculated Khasi man is produced in the complex exchange and absorption of gazes between dominant, non-matrilineal outsiders and Khasi men whose masculinity is doubly displaced from what I call hegemonic patrilineo-patriarchy and is always already readable as 'failure' or 'lack.' While the 'traditional' Khasi gender worldview is a fairly patriarchal one, I suggest that it too cannot be conflated with patrilineo-patriarchy. I suggest that the task of simply highlighting (using critical lenses developed for patrilineo-patriarchy) the problems with the assertions being made by the men's groups runs the risk of not accounting in any meaningful way for the different ways that gender dynamics pan out in the matrilineal Khasi context and the possibly real problems that emerge from there. I also explore the contributions and the lacunae of mainstream patrilineal feminism, which has historically been working through a different set of gender logics, dichotomies and hierarchies and dichotomies, and I argue that drawing on this model had posed several conundrums for Khasi feminism.

Through an ethnographic focus on the routine lives, contentions, pressures, and complex considerations that Khasis are subject to and constantly navigating, I propose

that there is a need for interpreting these everyday experiences in their relationship to larger conceptual categories and the power differentials these categories are organized around. To be clear, I do not at all wish to recuperate Khasi nationalism or the men's movements as resistant, fraught or subaltern and therefore unambiguously positive. I am in fact very much invested in a close and careful analysis of both their hegemonic, imperial and thus prohibitive impulses and wish to underscore the ongoing political importance of such kinds of analyses.

In this dissertation however I argue for the need to think about large-scale narratives of modernity or nationalism or patriarchy in their imbrication with lived realities so as to ask what an analytical investment in the everyday *allows* for. What kinds of new political, affective formations are generated in this interface? My ethnographic work highlights the need to consider questions about ideas like national, racial, ethnic, and gendered subjectivities, both to look at their manifestation in very specific socio-political instances and to understand how ideas about group identity are produced at the confluence of such individual or everyday experiences.

It is important, furthermore, to look at how these specific manifestations interface with conceptualizations of the universal creating new, divergent forms of the local and the universal, rather than simply being examples or micro-models of the dominant universal and thus already knowable concepts. To put it differently, if one is to abide by the everyday realities of these particular contexts – with their historical, geographical, quotidian locatedness – what kinds of new interpretive categories can be seen to emerge?

Furthermore, what might an understanding of the uniqueness and qualitative differences of minority, (sub)/national subjectivities (both held in opposition to and in

conjunction with the dominant) enable for a reconceptualization of the mainstream/universal conceptualization of nationhood? In what ways are national subjectivities produced quite fundamentally by people's routine contestations *and* internalizations of discourses around gender, sexuality, kinship, and racialization? Finally, in this dissertation I examine how multiple axes of group identification that are in excess of the rubric of nationalism – hill-tribal, Northeast regional, pan Southeast/East Asian and global/Western – complicate the supposedly intrinsic, non-porous concept of both Indian nationalism and Khasi identity.

On Methods

This thesis emerges out of 20 months of fieldwork spanning three summers between 2007 and 2011 and one continuous year between 2009-2010. During these months I lived both as a paying guest and a tenant in four different people's homes – a Mizo woman, a Khasi woman, a Jaintia man and a Khasi man. From each family I learned a great deal – but was most struck by the uniqueness of every household and the qualitative differences between the dynamics of each from the others. While understandings and expressions of Khasi identity are one of the principal concerns of this dissertation, it is precisely through witnessing and sharing the small and routine aspects of these families (and others I became close with) that I was reminded of the dangers of ascribing too much value to a concept – i.e. identity -- that is fraught and overdetermined to begin with. This project is marked by a central tension then – how does one open up a heavy, politically laden and charged concept like group identity to attend both to the multiple structures and fault lines around which social life is differentially, often violently, organized and to the complexities and contradictions of individual lives that

tend not to be contained neatly within identity categories, while also accounting for the impulse that drives a minority community to consolidate and assert itself.

Living with and watching people's lives unfold outside the realm of specific 'research interests' was an illuminating if challenging experience. It provided a crucial and much needed foil to my more 'research-oriented' methods, around which I tried to organize my days in the field. These always required some preparation and planning – following up with people I met socially or calling people out of the blue, requesting and scheduling interviews, getting people in the same room for a focus group discussion and so forth – and the 'material' I gathered from these efforts has been rich and enormous.

But I was conscious of the fact that, when confronted with questions, people have specific modes of responding that are inflected by several things – how the interviewee is perceiving you and whether they want to say what it is they think you wish to hear or to challenge what they think your assumptions might be, or by how they think they ought to answer given their own trajectories and worldviews and if others are present too, then modulating for that additional audience and so forth.

As anthropologists we are trained to be vigilant about the pitfalls of taking what people say at face value. I did make an effort to adopt techniques like asking the informant to recall a concrete event rather than asking a general question (for example, "What did you do this morning?" rather than "What do you do every morning?") but these do not provide immunity from some of the problems outlined above. When faced with a question people consciously summon themselves up in that moment, and this can often be experienced as jarring or a kind of violence. Thus even in my more 'formal' interviews I made a conscious effort to subjugate my impulse to pose pre-formulated

questions, preferring instead to help facilitate a space that might allow the interviewee to follow their own thoughts or talk about what they found interesting, even as I would seek clarifications or exemplifications.

According the feedback I received, this made the interview seem less like an interview and more of a 'friendly chat.' I was especially concerned initially about being too intrusive since my research involved having people share with me various aspects of their personal lives and intimate details or feelings about their social existence. However, I soon found, much to my surprise, that people were often relieved to have the chance to discuss such things, especially with a complete outsider. Most of my 'formal' interviews thus went on for anywhere between 2-5 hours, with some going on for nine hours at a stretch.

Being an outsider with a very delimited network of initial 'contacts' I was forced to rely on scheduling interviews, but while there were definitely many cases of people with whom I was only able to conduct a single interview, I always attempted to build a relationship with my informant that would extend beyond the space of that interview. Much of my 'interviewing' thus was not of the 'formal' variety – my perspectives have been framed by numerous, sometimes fleeting, conversations I had with so many different people. Walking back home after an early morning basketball session at Fire Brigade, buying DVDs in Police Bazaar, tracking down a potential Khasi teacher at St. Anthony's College, eating *momos* at the market in Motphran, sipping rice wine at someone's house in Jowai before attending the Behdienkhlam festivities, waiting for the Sumo to Pynursla, bumping into a familiar face at Swish Café, watching a *teer* match on the way to Sohra – there were countless such instances when I would fall into

conversations with people without having planned anything. And even if they began talking about something directly linked to my research I learned quickly not to attempt to pull out my voice recorder since that was a sure shot way to disrupt their train of thought and even their desire to talk to me.

Not all these conversations would lead to 'something more' and many of them were about things not ostensibly linked to my research topic, but I participated attentively – being an outsider brings with it, in a very lucid manner, the consciousness of how little you know about what is happening around you – and I found out quickly that often the things that don't initially seem relevant end up being crucial to how you think about your topic. This story featuring Danny is a great example: Danny drove a local taxi. I happened to get into his cab one afternoon in Polo and we got chatting after I tried practicing my Khasi with him and we joked about it. His English wasn't that great (much better than my Khasi was though), with strong signs of the famous Mawlai accent. Often called the 'wild West' of Shillong, Mawlai is known for being a pretty old-school Khasi locality – not many outsiders live there and the stereotype is that people from Mawlai don't like to mix with non-Khasis, particularly the *dkhars.*

But Danny and I became pretty friendly. When he learned that I was expecting a visit from a childhood friend from Bombay, he immediately suggested that I call him if I needed a taxi to take her around. It turned out that he had another taxi – a tourist one. Come to think of it, I'm not sure that it was even registered as a taxi officially. Since Shillong is a tourist destination, whenever my friends or family members visited I would end up taking them around to see the sights. And so it was that on a Sunday morning my friend and I made a trip to Sohra with Danny in his 'taxi.' After seeing a few places,

however, Danny started getting restless. He had agreed to spend the day there taking us around but by early afternoon it became clear he wanted to head back to Shillong. Not having eaten anything all morning we told him that we should get lunch before heading back, but he shepherded us along by saying we could get something to eat on the way.

We started the drive back and with every other village that went by we got hungrier, especially since we could tell that none of the food shops were open. Danny kept pacifying us by saying he knew where the next place was where we could get food, but as each place was closed he would come up with the next halt plan. This went on endlessly much to our disbelief. My friend was leaving the next day and I had really wanted her to try *jadoh* (a Khasi culinary specialty) before she left. But finally she pulled out a bag of chips saying she felt faint. Danny wasn't having it however, and managed to shame her for her lack of resilience (and for thinking that Ruffles was a suitable substitute for *jadoh*).

Since we weren't far from Mawkdok and he promised us that the shop there would definitely be open, we decided to wait. But as it turned out the Mawkdok shutters were closed too. By this time we were both too shocked to respond. I was annoyed with Danny for how things had unfolded and as I opened the bag of chips I said to him irritably, "What is it – on Sundays Khasis don't have to eat or what?" As if immune to my tone, he smiled and replied with his typical dry wit – "On Sundays, we Khasis eat the Bible." I knew of course that most Khasis had converted to Christianity (and also that Danny wasn't from a Christian family) but it only hit me then clearly, not just because of how he phrased it but also by the bitter sarcasm dripping in his voice, how distinct the tension was between those who believed in the indigenous Niam Khasi religion and the

Christian Khasis and gaining that insight turned out to be crucial for how I was to think about my research subject(s).

Another mode of conducting research was to participate in events occurring in and around Shillong. For these particularly I relied heavily on friendships both with Khasis and non-Khasis, affective bonds that I forged with numerous people who would remember me and give me a call, ask me to come along with them, or tell me about something they thought I should check out. With them (and alone) I attended weddings, funerals, festivals, concerts, fashion shows, art exhibitions, locality cleaning drives, Dorbar meetings, family get-togethers, cookouts, camping trips, shopping, gardening, press conferences, poetry readings, church services, wine tastings, film screenings, jam sessions, parties, protest marches and other such events. Participant observation, especially as a counter and a supplement to the stories people tell you, is a hallmark of anthropological research; much of what I learned in Shillong was through sharing these activities with different people, watching them as they moved through spaces, made decisions about what to do and how to comport themselves, interacting with different kinds of people, and talking and processing with them about how we differently experienced and understood the same events. I also found that I learned a lot just by living in a neighborhood, navigating routine tasks, being tuned in to the rustle of everyday life there, and witnessing the weeks and months pass by.

There was another thing I learned slowly – that there are things you possibly won't ever learn about. I realized that being an outsider often meant not being clued into the coordinates of life unfolding around you – not only not knowing how to read things but also not even knowing that there was something to be read. I was talking to a half

Khasi-half Mizo friend about the thing that struck me the most about the Khasi men I was there to 'study' – they are extremely easy to share public spaces with. I could roam around alone at all odd hours without fear of sexual harassment or be squashed in a taxi with three men in the backseat and not expect to be groped or feel even the hint of a grope. Khasi men were careful to not let their gaze linger on you for even an extra second. Being raised in the mainland (and even through my experiences in the U.S.), I felt like I had arrived in a different kind of utopic universe altogether and I was talking about this with my friend – wondering out loud whether this was connected to their being matrilineal.

She laughed and said that Khasi men were no saints and that I probably didn't even realize when they were being inappropriate with me. I must have looked confused because she went on to tell me about how in Shillong guys don't pinch and poke, but they watch from a distance with their friends, they might stalk you or crack obscene jokes when you pass by. They certainly objectified women – it's just that I couldn't see it. This was an eye opening moment for me – both because I started noticing in bits and pieces what men were up to, but also because it forced me to reconcile with the partial view of things that I would necessarily have, mostly because I was an outsider.

This dissertation is consequently a partial one at so many levels. Apart from my blinkered view, my research is culled from the limited range of experiences I had and the stories and lives of the few people with whom I had encounters. Further, in writing this dissertation I have only been able to include some of those stories, given constraints of space and considerations of thesis structure. Right away you can see two or three layers of arbitrariness in the putting together of this research. Coming at this differently you

could say that this research is as much a product of what I didn't see, whom I didn't talk to, lost opportunities, gambles not taken. Contingency is built into it and is a central part of its method. Social realities are nothing if not blurry, ephemeral, complicated, confusing and possibly unknowable (even for a non-outsider). And 'methods' by definition are supposed to be methodical – organized, structured, logical, coherent. How does one map onto the other? Can we use one to 'know' the other?

In his wonderful book *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research,* John Law draws on the groping figure of a blind person (whose range of perception is qualitatively much different by virtue of its halting stance), to advocate for a method built on the idea of 'the stop.' He writes:

> The stop slows us up. It takes longer to do things. It takes longer to understand, to make sense of things. It dissolves the idea, the hope, the belief that we can see the horizon, that we can see long distances. It erodes the idea that by taking in the distance at a glance we can get an overview of a single reality. So the stop has its costs. We will learn less about certain kinds of things. But we will learn a lot more about a far wider range of realities. And we will, or so I also argue, participate in the *making* of those realities. (10)

Drawing insights from his work I suggest that resisting hegemonic ideas about what is 'good,' 'sound' research and 'useful' or 'generalizable' data is crucial to begin imagining methods that are capable of capturing (however fleetingly or tentatively) the complexities of the social fields we traverse in our research efforts. Taking our frailties as seriously as our ambitions is a necessary step both in figuring out the kinds of researchers we wish fashion ourselves into (and thus the kinds of realities we wish to 'make') and in decolonizing methods, through advocating for a new set of goals – the formulation of "quiet methods, slow methods, or modest methods" (15). This dissertation is heavily

steeped in the ‘stop,’ both methodologically and conceptually. It promotes the idea of suspension, of slowing things down till they reach a state of limbo, of turning them around and viewing them in different lights. It is less interested in the ‘writing on the wall’ as much as on the layers of whitewashing that allow us see the writing, and the traces of things erased, now barely visible to the non-lingering eye that were historically responsible for the making of the contemporary text, and that continue to reframe and reanimate it.

Chapter 1

Anxious Outsiders: Northeast/India and the Making of Difference

Late in January 2014, an incident involving the murder of a young student from Arunachal Pradesh in New Delhi's Lajpat Nagar market was picked up and fronted by the mainstream media, spawning reactions of horror and shock from across both the political spectrum and various social media. Candlelight vigils were held in remembrance of Nido Taniam, whose death was reported to have resulted from a beating he received at the hands of a local shopkeeper and his friends, after protesting being teased about his hairstyle and looks[8]. Stories such as these, of serious and senseless violence against minorities in the heart of the country's capital, quickly garner attention for their exceptional quality, spawning debates on mainstream television channels that spill onto mainstream dinner tables.[9] It subsequently falls upon those who actually belong to these minorities to demonstrate how experiences of violence are not merely exceptional, but in

[8] Something as seemingly trivial as hair trends will return as an important point in subsequent discussions of Khasi masculinity as well. While the intentional cultivation of certain hairstyles and looks typically takes us into the domain of queer or alternative genders and sexualities whereas here it comes across more as a marker of racial difference, this dissertation tries in fact to explore the imbrications between discourses of race, gender/sexuality and even kinship. In this instance specifically, the differently 'put-together' looks of Northeastern young men in other parts of mainland India mark them both as racially 'other' (more East or Southeast Asian) as well as insufficiently masculine and thus inherently violable.

[9] A striking example of this in recent times is of course the 2012 December Delhi gang-rape case, which made headlines for its especially brutal nature, occasioning multiple discussions and protests. South African director Yael Farber has recreated this story for stage, and the play Nirbhaya, (which premiered at the Edinburg Fringe festival in August 2013) is, according to its official website, a "searing new work that cracks open the cone of silence around women whose lives have been shattered by gender-based violence."

fact a persistent, practically pedestrian aspect of their lives. Students from the Northeast carried banners saying "Stop Racism" as they marched in protest across the city, much to the chagrin of many mainstream (read mainland) Indians, who have a difficult time accepting their own ideas or actions as being racist. Duncan McDuie-Ra historicizes this tendency of contemporary Indians to externalize racism as a foreign phenomenon by arguing,

> Since gaining independence, and particularly when India played a prominent role in the non-aligned movement and Afro-Asian solidarity, intellectuals and politicians in India publically criticized racism in other parts of the world, particularly South Africa and the United States (Gupta 1978; Logan 1985)…As Zaheer Baber (2010) notes, in India, racism has come to mean something 'white people do to Indians', deflecting attention away from racism towards minorities and foreigners in India. [2012:115]

In his illuminating ethnography of Northeast migrants in the capital city Delhi, McDuie-Ra writes about discussions with his informants about the media's penchant for stories of racism towards Indian students in Australia. One Naga student in Kohima responded thus: "They [the media/government] only care about this because it happened in a foreign country. How many tribal students get beaten up in Delhi every year? How many girls get raped? No matter how loud we shout, they will never hear" (116). The idea that minority communities face violence and discrimination along the lines of religion and caste is already a bitter pill for many mainstream Indians to swallow, who cling adamantly to the idea that clichés like 'unity in diversity' are a fair reflection of India's reality and habitually herald Hinduism as a tolerant religion (in comparison to the so-called 'religions of the book'), so when incidents of racial violence like the one described above come into the spotlight there is a heightened sense of discomfort and what ensues

invariably are attempts to explain the racial aspects of it away and substitute them with other, more palatable factors such as economics, development and so on.

Through an examination of a debate aired on national television following the murder of Nido Taniam, this chapter examines in detail the modes by which the Northeast and the Northeast subject are rendered exceptional within the mainstream consciousness, such that it becomes possible to think of the region as a 'frontier' or simply as 'space' that 'belongs' to the nation-state. Hundreds of communities living there for centuries are thus recast as expendable. People from the Northeast, particularly the hill-tribals, find themselves 'othered' along multiples axes like religion, race, ethnicity and culture in complex ways and being marked as non-normative citizens, they constantly have to keep proving their belongingness and loyalty to the nation-state. I will examine some of dominant conjurations of the Northeast and show how they have been produced at the confluence of multiple discourses, particularly by colonial knowledge production, which have been central to the inscription of difference onto the Northeast frontier of British India. I will undertake an analysis of these discourses that have framed understandings of the region and its peoples, particularly as evolving out of a thorny relationship with postcolonial India, that has persisted in the marginalization of the Northeast even as it has sought to co-opt its land, resources, people and talents within the jingoistic rhetoric of 'unity in diversity.'

Simultaneously I track the proliferation of multiple (sub)nationalisms in the region which, enabled in no small measure by post/colonial policies and techniques of government that have historically among other things promoted an intimate link between tribe and land, draw heavily on internalized anthropological categories like 'race,'

'ethnicity,' 'tribe' etc. to fashion ideas about 'community' that hinge on the idea of identity politics and substantive difference (both from the mainstream and for the other minority groups in the region) leading to articulations of varying kinds of what has been called 'ethnonationalisms.' I explore some of the expressions of Khasi nationalism, and discuss how the mainstream Khasi imagination, while not being pro-secessionist, is very much invested in an understanding of community – the Khasi *jaitbynriew* – that is bound up in ideas about inherent 'racial' or 'ethnic' difference.

Seen as frail and under threat by 'racially' distinct mainland outsiders or *dkhars,* the community is able to 'speak' only from two kinds of (not completely separate) knowledges – 1) the post/colonial national benevolence that erases a violent history from which they emerge as tribals with benefits, and 2) through a kind of (sub)nationalism (that both replicates and is divergent from) dominant articulations of nationalism in their inextricable links with erasure of internal difference through standardization, perpetuation of stereotypes that often end up promoting jingoistic chauvinism, racism, masculinism, heterosexism and so forth.

In this chapter I try to set up the conceptual framework of this dissertation around which multiple discussions about kinship, gender, sexuality, race, identity politics and rights-based activism are organized. I argue that disassembling the dominant discourses that shape the mainstream Indian imagination's Othering of the Northeast has implications for our understandings of Northeast (sub)nationalisms, and that a close analysis of the complex relationships between these mainstream and minority forms of nationalism will further allow us to retheorize not just the nation, but also our

contemporary understandings of postcolonialism, modernity, citizenship and other frameworks that structure people's sense of belonging.

Framings of the Northeast within the Dominant Discourse

In the aftermath of the Nido Taniam murder, an English-language national television channel hosted a debate on its popular show called the 'Big Fight' entitled: "Are Indians Racist?"[10] In the topic of the debate itself is embedded a default notion that racism isn't considered a problem for Indians *within* India, which now possibly merits an inquest. The show was a fascinating one, where myriad reasons were proffered to deflect issues away from those of race and ground them instead within rationales of economics, development, migration and so forth. What kept surfacing was that guests, who were arguing against the idea that Indians are in fact racist, ended up relying on extremely racist claims to make their points. For instance, when writer-activist Binalakshmi Nepram raised the question of why, when a movie was being made about Manipuri boxing icon Mary Kom, her role was given to Priyanka Chopra (a popular North Indian Bollywood actor) instead of a 'Northeast face,' Shiv Sena spokesperson Rahul Narvekar interjected by saying: "Was Priyanka Chopra picked up for the role of Mary Kom because she was from Punjab or Mumbai, or because of her talent?" A statement like this not only baldly implies that people from the Northeast lack in talent, but also, much like the critiques against SC/ST reservations that uncritically front the question of 'merit', erases the hegemonic notions of beauty upon which Bollywood stardom relies, which makes it

[10] http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/the-big-fight/the-big-fight-are-indians-racist/308737?video-mostpopular

virtually impossible for someone 'chinky,' as the Northeasterners are often derogatorily called, to 'make it' in the film industry (i.e. be 'popular') or be seen as attractive or talented. Further, it implicitly endorses the move to selectively appropriate the success of a figure from the Northeast (whose face, read race, must necessarily be shrouded), whether for the purposes of fanning jingoistic sentiments of national pride, or for the lucrative prospects of filmmaking, even as the realities of erasure and marginalization of people from the region are systematically papered, or in this case celluloided, over.

An analysis of another exchange from this show might be productive and in fact touches upon several issues that frame some of the key discussions in this chapter. Senior Bharatiya Janata Party leader and Harvard accredited economist Dr. Subramanian Swamy makes this statement: "As far as Northeast is concerned, we need to give a special attention. I mean you can't say this is an evolutionary process. We need to give special intention, because they are our bulwark in the border, and I might tell you that Arunachalese are 65% common DNA with us, so this racial difference is rubbish." There are some indignant exclamations at this point and the NDTV host Vikram Chandra adds with a chuckle: "I would have thought it was more than 65%." Swamy assertively pushes forward, "Yes, you please read the DNA studies, and therefore I say to you…" At this point Chandra tries to interject, "Can I just ask, at the end of the day though…" but Swami interrupts, "Don't, don't…I think the people from Arunachal shouldn't emphasize their differences…" Chandra is meanwhile successful in his interjection and says, "It should have *nothing* to do with national security – it should be on very simple humanitarian issues that you should not be discriminating against anyone from your country or abroad." When confronted by such a framing of his statement Swamy tries to

clarify, "No, no, that is…Please don't misrepresent me. I am talking about what the government ought to do, because today they are complaining about how the police is manufacturing the case or how they're distorting it and how the media is giving false reports, all that is happening. I think this should be given special attention, that's why I suggested, before starting the program, that you should monitor this whole investigation by court."

Northeast as Exception

Swamy's statements highlight some key points. The first of course, is the Indian nation-state's conceptualization, mirroring British colonial attitudes, of the Northeast as having a 'special' status. Even more fundamentally, it is the only region of the country that exists not merely at a discursive level or in the minds of people as a way of loosely classifying the diverse national citizenry along spatial lines, in the way that North or South India is often invoked. The geopolitical reality of the category Northeast India, extending out of various British administrative policies, is easily apprehended; from the existence of a Ministry of Development for the North East Region (MoDONER) and the North Eastern Council at the Centre, the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, which exclusively addresses the hill tribes of the region, to the enactment of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 that applied exclusively to the "Seven Sisters" as the states of the Northeast are often uncritically referred to,[11] the region has accrued a solidity,

[11] The seven federal states are Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. In 2002, Sikkim was also administratively appended into this category.

particularly from the perspective of mainstream/mainland Indians, that is undeniable (Baruah 1999).

When Subramanian Swamy, a key mouthpiece of this mainstream position, insists then on the need to give the region 'special attention,' we must ask precisely for what reasons is the Northeast marked as special. Swamy's spontaneous explanation – that 'they are our bulwark in the border' – might upset the liberal sensibility for being too utilitarian or brazen, but it strongly echoes the mainstream sentiment, which sees the Northeast principally as a frontier land, a buffer zone protecting the 'sanctity' of India's borders from its more treacherous and prehensile neighbors. Indeed, 98% of the region's borders are shared with neighboring countries – Bangladesh, China, Bhutan, Myanmar and Nepal (McDuie-Ra 2009, Mukhim 2007). The actual realities of life in the region, the hardships people face, the erasure of immense diversity along multiple axes, the political aspirations of people, their marginalization – these by themselves are not 'special' enough to merit attention, but are instead easily subsumed by the dominant, jingoistic narrative, what has been called "the nationalization of space" (Baruah 2003), that pays 'special attention' to the Northeast only when Indian territorial sovereignty is under question.

This attitude extends back to the time of the colonial Indian government. Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, an Austrian anthropologist known particularly for his earlier work among the Nagas was commissioned to conduct fieldwork in 1944 in north Assam bordering Tibet, which he described then as a "*terra incognita*, a country closed to both traveller and anthropologist." He writes in his ethnography *Himalayan Barbary*:

> On my first day in Shillong, Mills explained how it was that at a time when the Japanese invasion of Burma had brought the war to the frontiers of Assam, the Government of India were nevertheless embarking on an ambitious programme of exploration in the Eastern Himalayas. The sudden realization that India's eastern borders were vulnerable had convinced Government of the need to fill the political and administrative vacuum which had been allowed to persist between Assam and Tibet ever since the establishment of British rule. Mills pointed out that my work in the eastern part of the Balipara Frontier Tract…was to be part of a larger plan which embraced the whole frontier. [1955:xi]

The British government was initially reluctant to take over what was then called the North East Frontier; the discovery of the tea plant, but also coal, petroleum and other natural resources were instrumental in ridding them of their initial hesitancy (Dutta Roy 1996). Alexander Mackenzie (secretary to the Government of India in the Home Department and the former Under Secretary and Secretary to the Government of Bengal) (1979[1884]), in his ambitious efforts at "putting the wild story of this frontier into complete and fitting dress," (iv) outlines how even after fighting "intestine troubles" on behalf of rulers in the principality of Assam and the subsequent war between the British and Burmese governments in 1824 (which led to the signing of the treaty of Yandaboo), "the Government in Calcutta was strongly averse to taking absolute possession of the province," (5) and it was not until October 1838 that "Assam as a whole became a Non-Regulation Province of the Indian Empire" (6). The history of shifts in British frontier policy in the Northeast is a complex one that merits separate analysis but it is certainly the case that the securing of borders in the name of national interests has been a long-standing preoccupation of the Indian state since colonial rule.

Swamy's subsequent comments, an attempt to clarify his position, even though it deals presumably with the micro-logic of the Nido Taniam incident (in suggesting the need for the courts to monitor the investigation), replicates this larger dynamic perfectly. His warning "I am talking about what the government ought to do, because today *they* are complaining about how the police is manufacturing the case, or how they are distorting it, and how the media is giving false reports, all that is happening," highlights precisely the us-them paradigm that lies at the heart of the postcolonial Indian attitude to the Northeast. At the level of discourse, the Northeast is claimed as an indisputable component of the Indian nation-state, and people from there heralded for being as 'Indian' as anyone else (or perhaps only 65% Indian, if Swamy's 'DNA studies' are to be believed, i.e. sharing less DNA with other Indians than with chimpanzees), but what shows up at the slightest perception of potential conflict, and this here is a prime example, are the fault lines in the idea of who is 'truly' Indian.

It is at moments like these that *they* become starkly distinguished from the normative, 'unmarked' Indian, who never has to demonstrate or prove their Indianness, and who can never, structurally speaking, be referred to as 'they.' Swamy, when challenged on humanitarian grounds, quickly falls back on the systematic practice of 'othering' people from the Northeast. His reference to 'them' subtly yokes him, the TV show host and the mainstream Indian audience into a shared positionality, those who must constantly be vigilant so as to preempt the artful proclivity of people from the

Northeast to manipulate situations with the goal of dissenting against and undermining the Indian nation-state, as has historically been *their* wont.[12]

Since independence, the Northeast has been cast by the Center as politically fragile, again replicating colonial attitudes toward the region. When Swamy insists prescriptively that 'people from Arunachal shouldn't emphasize their differences,' he is attempting to contribute to what Sanjib Baruah (2002:4182) calls India's "vacuous nation-building strategy," that insists on unity and national integrity with regard to a Northeast that is conceptualized as always already secessionist. 'They' subsist continually under a pall of suspicion, presented as factious subjects, suspicious, in turn, of a supposedly well-intentioned paternal state, and always therefore threatening to reject its logic and laws. This has been, over the decades, a key node of engagement with the Northeast. Various insurgency movements in the region, several of which were based upon a rejection of newborn India's claims over it, were on the one hand, violently or strategically repressed, and on the other, attributed to the region's isolation and lack of development/infrastructure. Consequently, counter-insurgency and its fraternal twin – the discourse of 'development,' have been the fundamental and ongoing narratives that structure the Centre's policies and attitudes towards the Northeast. Chalking up all dissent to people's unhappiness stemming from economic marginalization and a general 'backwardness' of the region has been a favored strategy for New Delhi, since it conveniently skirts more vexatious political factors.

[12] Interestingly, the audience of the show itself seemed to be dominated by 'Northeast faces' that are *not* being addressed in this utterance and who, despite being Indians living in Delhi, are, in a quick sleight of hand, excluded from the ambit of the 'proper' Indian national subject.

Xonxoi Barbora would nuance this further perhaps by arguing that development is better described as a country cousin of counter-insurgency, since the 'militarist mindset' of the Center tends to overshadow discourses of development. He writes:

> Colonial concerns and postcolonial cartography have created a condition wherein the discourse of citizenship has all but disappeared from the language of development and rights. Instead, one sees the extension of a garrison mentality, where the north-east is sought to be micromanaged by policy-makers for whom the people and the region is a veritable military terrain…The garrison mentality that drives such policy initiatives is so strong, that even visiting politicians completely forget their civilian constituency and speak like army generals giving their soldiers a pep-talk in the barracks. [2006:3811]

It is precisely this modality that Swamy slips into when he talks about what 'the government ought to do,' in order to preempt potentially thorny situations of political dissent that are associated with the Northeast. The "garrison mentality" (3811) that Barbora identifies and outlines is a useful one and merits elaboration. It references the way that military, and more broadly security personnel (from the mainland) experience and navigate their tenures in the Northeast. Getting assigned to Kashmir or the Northeast is often referred to as a 'hardship' posting in military parlance, and the way in which most officials from the mainland endure this period is by creating a veritable bubble of 'Indianness' and minimizing interaction with people from the towns, except to talk about "how they get everything they need in their camps – cooking gas, food, movies – everything that allows them to feel less homesick during their stints in the north-east." "Sequestered in their camps," Barbora observes, "they spend years without ever learning the language or the customs of the local people. Yet they believe that they have recreated a mini-India within their garrisons" (3811). The tendency to recreate a 'mini-India'

within the Northeast is not the sole prerogative of military folk, who isolate themselves from the socio-political realities of the areas they are delegated to and supposedly responsible for. This "garrison mentality" is perceived to have seeped into non-military people too.

From my Khasi interlocutors, I often encountered expressions of bitterness and resentment toward non-Khasis of variegated backgrounds – bureaucrats, teachers, businessmen and so forth – who, despite having lived possibly for two, maybe three generations in Shillong, have neither learned Khasi nor made any attempt to integrate with the local people or customs. My facility with Khasi, as limited as it is, was received with surprise and pleasure for most of my Khasi interlocuters, and my adoption of local age-appropriate fashions and hairstyles was often a source of mirth and banter. On my part, whenever I was asked, *phi dei Khasi?* (Are you Khasi?), by someone I was meeting for the first time, I would be particularly pleased, since it seemed important to me to mark my difference from the other 'outsiders' who, for various reasons, have a negative image. This theme will be elaborated in subsequent sections.

Backwardness

To return to Swamy's comments in the debate – spliced between two iterations of the need to give the Northeast special attention/intention is a curious clause that he does not quite string into a full sentence: "…we need to give a special attention. **I mean you can't say this is an evolutionary process**. We need to give special intention, because…" The chasm long identified by linguists, between the signifier and the signified, renders it

impossible of course to claim unmediated knowledge of Swamy's 'true' intentions, and this utterance is a particularly cryptic one, given how it is made – absent context or clarification. However, in invoking evolution, Swamy references a key theme that has arguably overwhelmed the discourse around the Northeast as being different or 'special.' The 'backwardness' of the region (mentioned above) is not merely a function of the fact that it is relatively isolated from the rest of the country. Indeed, the Northeast is connected to mainland India by a narrow swath of land extending out east from northern West Bengal, which, along with its predominantly mountainous topography, has restricted its trade and connectivity. Mainstream narratives have tended to blame what is called the 'chicken's neck' problem of the Northeast, seen as the cause of its isolation and impoverishment but as McDuie-Ra argues, "…this explanation, while containing some merit, overlooks the ways the communities in the region are connected across international borders and have generally oriented themselves away from the corridor that connects the region to the rest of India, and towards communities across international borders…" (2009a:314). However, colonial and postcolonial adjudications from afar, particularly the two partitions of Bengal leading up to the creation of Bangladesh, have reworked regional cartographies in ways that have restricted or sundered many of the important historic trade routes and complex socio-political alliances between communities, exacerbating problems of isolation and deprivation for people in the Northeast (Gassah 1994, van Schendel 2005).

Mainstream accounts of regional backwardness that highlight geo-economic or geo-political reasons in fact barely conceal the more stark and longstanding perception that the people who inhabit the region are inherently primitive. These notions can of

course be traced back to colonial modes of administration, which mandated the production of an elaborate body of 'knowledge' about the 'natives'; as Nicholas Dirks points out, the brute force of a superior army, wealth and political adroitness are not the sole explanations for the triumph of colonial conquest; equally central to its ascendancy is the deployment of "cultural technologies of rule," which made the frenetic accumulation of socio-cultural knowledge about the colonized rather imperative (2001:9). Bernard Cohn (1968) elaborates on three unique traditions from which knowledge of Indian society emerges – the orientalist scholar, the missionary worker and the administrative official. The production of scholarly 'knowledge' – linguistic, historical, anthropological and so forth, relied however, on existing stereotypes about the Orient and further spawned Orientalist discourses that have been instrumental in shaping ideas about both India and the Northeast.

Colonial knowledge production drew on Victorian intellectual sensibilities that were bound up with widely held notions of Western superiority and civilization. These set the tone for research conducted by early armchair anthropologists who, fascinated by ideas of the origins of mankind and human sociality, devised fairly elaborate theories of social evolution. These theories (since discredited) posited a quantifiable and unilineal hierarchical spectrum of human cultural development, based upon which the West could peek at its own past through the window provided by scholars studying remote 'communities' and 'tribes,' which could be placed accordingly on various levels of what Aihwa Ong calls "an escalator rising toward the West," with the final destination being the 'civilization' of western Europe (1999:31).

In his now canonical *Time and the Other: How Anthropology makes its Object*, Fabian, after demonstrating how social evolutionists mangled and misappropriated Darwin's conception of naturalized time, argues that what they did do in positive terms was to go on to map time across space. In his words, "the temporal discourse of anthropology as it was formed decisively under the paradigm of evolutionism rested on a conception of Time that was not only secularized and naturalized but also thoroughly spatialized. Ever since…anthropology's efforts to construct relations with its Other by means of temporal devices implied affirmations of difference as *distance"* (1983:16). It is within this paradigm then that he situates the 'primitive,' not so much as the object of anthropological inquiry as instead a mode of thinking adopted by the West, which thereafter deploys various strategies of distancing in order to produce what he famously calls a "denial of coevalness." Thus, moving away from the nation-state's heartland toward its Northeast peripheries, you travel even father back in time, so to speak, and the 'primitives' you encounter there are 'different' in even more exaggerated ways.

The primitive-civilized spectrum that blossoms in tandem with this more philosophical, schizogenic deployment of Time frames colonial accounts, which have, therefore, cast the Northeast more broadly, and in particular the hill-tribal communities, as savage, warlike, headhunting hordes, warranting tactics like sequestering, pacification, repression and reorganization into British civilization and subjecthood.[13] Thus, around the middle of the 19th century Peter Robb argues:

[13] The Khasi Chiefs were seen as particularly violent in their resistance to colonizing forces, with figures like U Tirot Sing celebrated even today as Khasi freedom fighters. While this might seem like a paradoxical stereotype for a matrilineal community, Khasi matriliny is in fact (in the accounts of many people) traced to this warring past, where men who were busy fighting battles made women the repositories for the preservation of clans and property.

> The prevailing border strategy was one of holding an 'inner line' while allowing a further region to be claimed but not closely administered, except when some danger to the settled area was anticipated. The inner line was drawn so as to separate 'tribal' areas from Assam proper, and the crossing of it was regulated by penal sanctions and a system of passes. [1997:258]

Robb demonstrates how subsequently the British attitudes and policies begin transitioning from "broad to narrow frontiers," where the "state would seek a monopoly of force, applied through its own structures, and also affect the well-being of 'its' people," which is certainly the mode of administration that the postcolonial Indian state has inherited and embraced. However, traces of the broad frontier 'mentality', in its imbrications with ideas of tribal backwardness and intractability, continue to linger arguably, both in the nation-state's governance strategies as well as in popular and mainstream attitudes towards the region. While educated and cosmopolitan persons are unlikely to appear on television today claiming that people from the Northeast are inferior in any inherent way, when Swamy insists on the need for 'special attention' to the Northeast, he is responding to this very wide-spread, perhaps even sub-conscious idea that simply with the passing of time and concomitant processes of evolution, people from the region will be lifted out of their own cultural backwardness. In Kuper's words, older stereotypes of primitive communities "have persisted until very recently, indeed, still survive, if no longer within mainstream anthropology" (1988:1). This argument is poignantly attested to by Ellen Bal's subject Rosie, a Garo student of anthropology at Dhaka University:

> They [Bengalis] ask if we eat frogs or snakes. That is alright. But they ask more stupid questions about our dress. They can see that we wear the same clothes that they do, but they still ask us if Garo women cover the upper part of their body, and if they wear very short clothes…Their

> questions are so strange…I don't mind if they want to know more about us, but they ask it in such a way that we don't seem to be human beings. They want to insult us by asking stupid questions. That's what I don't like. [Bal 200021-22]

As Fabian argues, even though many of the 'justifications' of Western (or Indian) superiority have evaporated what is left behind is in fact evolutionism's conception of Time, "the all-pervading denial of coevalness which ultimately is expressive of a cosmological myth of frightening magnitude and persistency" (1983:35). The conceptualization of the savage and his location in the past is a foundational offshoot of Western knowledge-making about the Orient and continues to linger in the popular imagination even today. Referencing the "iron grip of colonial ideas about castes and tribes" Baruah writes, "many nineteenth and early twentieth century British scholar-administrators would have been astounded, and embarrassed by the appeal made more than a century later, to their often tentative ideas" (2005:xvi).

Further, scholars have broadly acknowledged that the impact of disciplines like anthropology and history has been profound for colonized societies not solely in the voluminous fact-gathering and 'interpretation' it generated but also in terms of shaping the very modes of colonized 'self' understanding (Ferguson 1999). The Constitutionally provided reservations for SC/ST groups closely following India's stumble into independence has added a fresh qualitative thrust to the more anthropologically weighted categories of caste and tribe. Susie Tharu et al. in their insightful re-appraisal of the history of reservations in India hint at this when they argue that the role of reservations has unfortunately been limited to a mere tool for governance and at best a mechanism for social and political 'representation' and in the process has lost sight of its goal of accomplishing social justice. This aspect of representation within a dominant nation-state

has been important to the identity and politics of SC/ST groups in the postcolonial era, and rightly so; indeed Tharu et al. powerfully demonstrate that rather than being an act of charity bestowed by (the dominant but in fact the numerical minority) caste-Hindus on the so-called minority communities to facilitate their 'development,' reservations were in fact a "foundational necessity" enabling the Republic to even come into being by creating the 'illusion' of a national majority (2007:41).

Racial Othering

In a debate about racism it is of course inevitable that race comes up for discussion. There are however, several vectors upon which understandings of race and racial politics move and Swamy's remarks in the debate highlight some of the tensions that arise from the interface between these idioms. When he invokes "DNA studies" that supposedly 'prove' that Arunachalese share 65% of their DNA with "us," there are a few different ideas that get mobilized. The first of course, is the concept that race is a valid category of understanding biological differences between human beings. Building on Orientalist theories of essential differences between white Europeans and visually distinct Others, modern racial theories have drawn heavily upon 'scientific' discourses (anthropometry, craniometry, eugenics etc.) in order to evolve detailed and hierarchical taxonomies of the human species, which were then used to justify colonial projects, impose slavery and perpetrate genocide against non-white populations around the world. The scientific basis of racial theories has since been seriously undermined, with the second half of the 20th century particularly seeing an explosion of scholarship

dearticulating race from any biological reality and identifying it instead as a contrived ideology or mechanism that distorts our understanding of human social existence and perpetuates inequalities. In 1998 the American Anthropological Association itself released a *Statement on "Race"* which attempted thus to represent the 'contemporary thinking and scholarly positions of a majority of anthropologists':

> In the United States both scholars and the general public have been conditioned to viewing human races as natural and separate divisions within the human species based on visible physical differences. With the vast expansion of scientific knowledge in this century, however, it has become clear that human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups. Evidence from the analysis of genetics (e.g., DNA) indicates that most physical variation, about 94%, lies *within* so-called racial groups. Conventional geographic "racial" groupings differ from one another only in about 6% of their genes. This means that there is greater variation within "racial" groups than between them… Racial beliefs constitute myths about the diversity in the human species and about the abilities and behavior of people homogenized into "racial" categories. The myths fused behavior and physical features together in the public mind, impeding our comprehension of both biological variations and cultural behavior, implying that both are genetically determined. Racial myths bear no relationship to the reality of human capabilities or behavior. Scientists today find that reliance on such folk beliefs about human differences in research has led to countless errors.[14]

While scientific and intellectual communities have extensively rejected the facticity of biological explanations of race, this association has been both pernicious and persistent within the popular imagination. While many would likely reject discrimination or hatred towards people based on their racial difference, what lingers is the idea that race is still a valid scientific category that can provide knowledge of human capacities, impulses,

[14] http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/racepp.htm

behaviors and so forth. Just as theories of social evolution outlined above continue to frame our mental landscapes, and indeed the most ubiquitous understanding of modernity as a "coming to see" or a "shucking off of beliefs and ways" of 'premodern' people (Taylor 1995:31), long after the theories themselves have been dismissed as speculative and lacking merit, ideas about the 'reality' of race have also remain embedded in our minds and further gain legitimacy by their putative associations with science. This is the second idea that Swamy is mobilizing in his remarks – not only that race is a valid social category, but also that there are "DNA studies" or "scientific data" out there to attest to its credibility.

This brings us to a third and closely allied move, which is the offering up of dubious 'scientific research' (of which there are volumes) to support one's beliefs and formulations. When Swamy asserts confidently that Arunachalese share 65% DNA with "us", there is a palpable reaction against his astonishing claim from the audience, and the host is forced to intervene mildly with "I would have thought it was more than 65%." In my fieldwork too I encountered this summoning of scientific 'proof' to make claims about both the distinctiveness and the dilution of the 'Khasi race.' This is not to suggest of course that everyone who invokes such studies is a double-dealing charlatan; it should be clear by now that 'scientific racism' has in the past and still continues to make a deep impression on the minds of people. What surfaces then is the circularity between inherited racial ideas and prejudices, interactions with race-centered 'knowledge' production (particularly in their pseudo-scientific avatars) and renewed and reworked popular understandings of racial identities and differences.

If the audience displayed exasperation at Swamy's comments however, it was not solely a reaction to his preposterous understanding of genetic science. Even as Swamy posits the existence of a 65% shared gene pool in order to highlight similarities between "them" and "us," and thus insists that people from Arunachal shouldn't emphasize the question of racial difference, there is a tacit understanding that this is merely a strategic and shrewd invocation of race. Therefore, if in the future, a more credible scientific study was to 'prove' that Arunachalese only share 5% common DNA with mainland Indians, it is fairly unlikely that Swamy would then recognize an 'essential' difference upon which secessionist claims, for instance, could be justified. The selective citation of race based solely on political calculations has a long history and is perhaps a fourth trajectory emerging from Swami's remarks.

As noted above, in the context of a postcolonial Indian reluctance to perceive racism within its own boundaries, minorities are forced to detail and highlight the specifically racial dimensions of the discrimination they experience. Northeasterners often talk about how their 'racial' features immediately mark them as distinct from the mainland population and make it impossible for them to be sutured seamlessly into an imagination of the Indian citizen-subject. In a compelling analysis of colonial discourses and visual depictions of Naga 'others' in postcolonial India (based partly on her experiences of living in Delhi for seven years), anthropologist Dolly Kikon writes,

> For instance, the term *chinky*, a derogatory word used in India to refer to people with the epicanthic fold of the eyes, does not identify one's nationality or ethnicity, although it is generally used to refer to people who could be from a wide swathe of land that roughly cuts across the eastern Himalayas, where the Naga territories are situated. Racial stereotyping is so ingrained into the public memory that sexual harassment on the streets of New Delhi, the capital of India, goes

> something like this: 'Hello chinky baby, honey…*smooch smooch* [makes kissing sound]…hot baby, honey, pinky, chinky, ping-pong, ching-chong.' Besides disgusting sounds and derogatory remarks, the perpetrator tries to rhyme it with nonsensical words like ping-pong and ching-chong. Crowds of awkward teenagers seeking out some fun in the streets often shout, 'hey chinky' every time they see people with east Asian features. Such 'innocent fun' that Hindi/Punjabi speaking teenagers in New Delhi engage in reflects a normalization of a visual regime where people like Nagas do not have a secure place within the nation-state. [2009:92-93]

Mainlanders often counter the critique of racism towards people from the Northeast with hostility; they are quick to try and erase the exceptionality of the Northeast in this instance, and flourish examples like the harassment of Biharis in Bombay, or the north Indian banter against "*madraasis*" and so forth. In a country as 'diverse' as India each community is the subject of many stereotypes and jokes, so why do people from the Northeast insist on reading this 'innocent fun' as racism? Mc-Duie-Ra's informant Chen, an Arunachali student explains:

> People say "Bong" to mean Bengalis. But the Bengalis also use it themselves. And no one runs across the street just to say it and then start laughing. Even if someone wanted to say it to their face, they can't tell if someone is a Bengali by looking. With us you can. So as soon as someone sees us, they say "chinky." And at least "Bong" refers to the right people. They call us "chinky" because they think we are Chinese. [2012:91]

The recognition of the centrality of the visual register when it comes to an understanding of the organization of racial discrimination is as fraught as it is inescapable. Critiques of racism are careful to usher the concept of race away from biology-oriented framings in order to emphasize its historic and socio-political dimensions. However, since racial discrimination is most often based upon readily apparent physical features, this act of separation is always a tricky one, and it is precisely this dilemma that Swamy tries to

convert to his advantage. This then highlights a fifth and final projectile, which is the tension between biological and socio-historical dimensions of race. One of the foundational insights of critical race theory and whiteness studies has been that even though the scientific validity of race as a mode of classifying people's biological differences has been sufficiently undermined, this should not catapult us into 'colorblindness,' or the idea that since the reality of race or racial differences between human social groups has been corroded, we ought to stop acknowledging it completely. In fact, to do so would be racist. For centuries, racial ideologies, stereotypes and hierarchies have been driving human interactions and shaping structural inequalities and their effects continue to be felt across the world. Put differently, while race doesn't exist anymore, racism remains entrenched, continuing to impact the lives of millions of people around the world, and thus needs to be both acknowledged and accounted for.

The critique of racism against people from the Northeast follows precisely this logic – Northeasterners are pointing out that even though biological or genetic differences between them and people from the mainland are negligible, barring surface differences like the 'epicanthic fold of the eyes,' that they are nevertheless marked as foreigners – teased, humiliated, aggressed against, and sometimes killed. The simplicity of this formulation doesn't make it any easier for those invested in the project of postcolonial Indian nationalism to swallow. In order to muddy this critique of racism a strange tactic is deployed, where race is wrested from its social and discriminatory context, and precisely because it is forced into an insistence that visual (thus physiological) cues prompt racism (as opposed to economic issues, or changing demographics caused by migration), it gets relocated within the biological. Once back in that realm, mainlanders can argue that

biological differences in fact don't exist, or in this case that the "DNA studies" show that they're not significant enough. In this way, by strategically sliding between the two registers (the social and the biological), there is an attempt to neutralize the critique of racism, and further to cast people from the Northeast as different than "us" precisely because they are insisting on racial differences (which has cleverly been recalibrated). Not only do people from the Northeast have to endure racist discrimination and consequently an unstable position within the nation-state as Kikon argues above, but if they try to articulate their predicament they run the risk of being castigated for unnecessarily 'emphasizing their differences,' for being disloyal, anti-assimilationists and so forth, thus implicitly justifying all over again, the us-them paradigm highlighted above.

In this section I have undertaken a protracted decomposition of a few fairly prosaic remarks made by a jingoistic mainstream politician because I believe they contain within them some crucial nodes of understanding and engagement that colonial and postcolonial India has developed with respect to the Northeast. Aired on national television, these comments are designed to resonate implicitly with the mainstream/land, middle-class audience, India's "civil society" to use Partha Chatterjee's (2003) formulation, who end up picking up on what Stuart Hall calls the "professional code," which functions "*within* the 'hegemony' of the dominant code," but does so in a more subtle manner (2003:101). The professional code he adds "serve(s) to reproduce hegemonic definitions, specifically by *not overtly* biasing their operations in a dominant direction: ideological reproduction therefore takes place here inadvertently, unconsciously, 'behind men's backs'" (102). Rendering these ideological assumptions

legible demands the labor of diagnosing and deciphering the multiple and intersecting significations that coalesce to confer a status of exceptionality to the Northeast from within the popular Indian imagination. Further, as we will see many Northeasterners have internalized this conferral of exceptionality or the inherent difference that has been imposed upon them.

Northeast Identity as Tribal Difference

The post-independence period has witnessed demands from several groups in the Northeast for India's recognition of their sovereignty. The predominantly tribal region has been the site of serious contestation to the smooth formation of the Indian state, with the rapid proliferation of political mobilizations for separate state-hood surfacing at the time of independence. Stifling and pacifying these movements (and also dealing with internal tribal militias) becomes a unique problem of key importance to the Indian nation-state for strategic defense reasons (Chaube 1973, Dutta 2003). This consciousness gets heightened after the Indo-China war of 1962 and consequently we find the Northeast emerging as a special category (Misra 2000). In 1966, as a reaction to Operation Jericho (an armed protest by the Mizo National Army (MNA) against Indian callousness and negligence following a calamitous famine in Mizoram), Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered the Indian Air Force to crush the rebellion and, between March 5th and 13th Aizawl and other cities bore the brunt of aerial gunfire and bombing. For the first and only time (to date), India launched an Air Force attack on its own citizens; this dark slice of Indian history has of course been silenced, and most mainlanders continue to be ignorant about it. The MNA was consequently wiped out but insurgency endured up until

the signing of the Mizoram Peace Accord in 1986. Similarly, the movement for Naga nationhood has been going on for more than half a century now and militant groups like ULFA in Assam, and others in Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura too have been, at various points, seeking autonomy from Indian rule (Mukhim 2007). Many of them articulate irreconcilable racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic differences from mainland Indians as well as a fundamental antipathy toward them. As Papori Bora demonstrates, these claims to a fundamental difference have their roots in colonial discourses:

> In other words, ethno-national identity categories are a product of colonial knowledge production, and this knowledge production is a form of power, which is productive, in the sense that they produce the subject|here in the Northeast as tribes, hill people, plains people and ethno-linguistic communities. This is important to examine because colonial discourses survive in the postcolonial period through the discourses of nationalism and modernization. In other words, the terms of the debate are set by colonial discourse in terms of what it means to be a Northeastern subject, and what counts as Northeastern history, politics and society. [2011:27]

During my research in Shillong I came across various expressions and articulations of a unique Northeast identity – from large Star cement billboards that celebrated Northeast cultural icons like Bhupen Hazarika (from Assam), Lou Majaw (Meghalaya), Mami Varte (Mizoram) and Sourobhee Debbarma (Tripura), to the mass excitement and frenzy that gripped the Northeast when Amit Paul, a Shillong contender, made it to the final round of television show Indian Idol, and when the Shillong Chamber Choir won India's Got Talent in 2010, which was followed by fireworks and impassioned impromptu celebrations in PB (short for Police Bazaar, as Khyndailad is popularly known) in the middle of the night attended by both young and old. The multiple differences between

people in the Northeast, what Mrinal Miri calls the 'insider's view' of the Northeast, often get bracketed when it comes up against mainland India (2007:3).

But within the Northeast there is a definite marker of distinction between people from the plains, most notably the Hinduized Assamese elites (but also the Bangladeshi Hindus who crossed into India post-partition as well as the Manipuri Meities) and those from the hills – tribal communities following indigenous religions or Christianity, who have historically been further removed from the project of Indian nationalism. T.B. Subba argues that, "development of education, economy, and infrastructure provided the once feud-stricken rival clans and tribes with an opportunity to unite and fight against outsiders whose claims as harbingers of civilization were no longer acknowledged" (1996:45). The splintering of colonial Assam following the Hill-State movement led by the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC), has hinged on a similar articulation of differences between what Mackenzie had (a century ago) described as "the Assam sovereigns and their savage neighbors" (Mackenzie 1884). The post-independence leadership in Assam while espousing a clear vision of Greater Assam was unable to maintain equitable economic development in the region and began to be seen as indifferent towards its hill tribes. Particularly in 1962 when Assamese was selected as the official language, the consciousness of continued and deep-seated exclusion among the leaders of the hill tribes became heightened. In an odd repetition of history, the hill-tribal communities forcefully rejected centralized Assamese power and cultural hegemony just as the Assamese had once rejected Bengali domination. Picking up on this paradox Nari Rustomji writes, "It was Assamese chauvinism, ironically enough, that diminished Assam and lost her tribal population. It is anomalous that the Assamese failed to

anticipate the reactions of the tribal people to the imposition of Assamese when they themselves were so sensitive over the issue of language" (1983:36).

However, according to P.R. Kyndiah, "one of the frontline leaders of the movement," (15) the APHLC envisioned their struggle as one "waged not against any community but mainly directed against the policies and programmes of the Government of Assam which tantamounted to the assimilation of the identity, culture and language of the hill tribe people" (2010:17). He recounts a key meeting that was held in Shillong in June 1954, where Captain W.A Sangma (President of APHLC) first formulated the idea of separate statehood for the hill areas. Kyndiah asserts "it was in this meeting where he [Sangma] advocated that hill tribal people have no other way than to go all out for a separate state to enable them 'to preserve their racial identity, language and culture'" (18).[15] The administrative separation of the hill tribes from the Assamese plains dates back to colonial government policies (Ludden 2003), but it is perhaps only after independence that the formerly 'savage' tribes begin to articulate a politics *based upon* an understanding of their own fundamental difference from the plains people. Even as differences abound between these hill-tribes there is a sense of camaraderie between them and a recognition of shared histories and marginalizations.

Kyndiah writes about another interesting meeting between APHLC leader Rev. J.J.M Nichols Roy and Naga leader A.Z. Phizo after the death of Assam's distinguished leader Gopinath Bordoloi, where the future of the Nagas and the hill tribal people were discussed alike. While Phizo was committed to a vision of independent Naga nationhood to be secured by any mean, Nichols Roy was a preacher of Gandhian sensibilities, thus

[15] Here Kyndiah is citing Sangma's reasoning for a separate state.

opposed to violence of any sort, who sought separate statehood for the hill-tribes, but ultimately envisioned them to be a part of India. The conversation ends, according to Kyndiah, with Phizo making the following remarks: "as hill brothers we are bound to each other but I recognized we have differences…let us sail in two boats, if your boat leaks or sinks we will come to your help, if our boat leaks and sinks, as hill brothers, you come and help us" (2010:23).

This conceptualization of a deep bond of fraternity among communities in the Northeast particularly along two axes – hill residence and tribal status – is a powerful and evocative one producing, according to Baruah "what James C. Scott calls the 'lived essentialism' between the hill 'tribes' and the valley civilizations, that is their stereotypes about each other, [which] remained a powerful organizer of people's lives and thoughts" (2005:8). The consciousness of a shared experience of marginalization along axes of religion, 'race,' ethnicity, cultural mores, food habits, and so forth unite people from the hill-tribes against people from the plains. As Mukhim explains, there are few things that "tribes view with greater concern than the possibility of being turned into a minority in their own homeland…A minority like the Khasis feel more weakened by the entry of people from outside because non-tribals have traditionally controlled the economic forces in their land" (1996:30). Subba also highlights the seriousness of the fears experienced by tribes and notes, "The case of Tripura has clearly shown what a devastation can be caused by demographic topsy turvy: the indigenous tribes there have now been reduced to one third of the total population. Similar threats are perceived by the tribes of Assam and Meghalaya, if not other states too" (1996:45).

The fear of the erosion of tribal communities is arguably a result of a long history of what Baruah calls the "protective discrimination regime" that goes back to "colonial times when policy instruments were devised to protect vulnerable aboriginal peoples living in isolated enclaves – once described as 'backward tracts" (2005:184). British colonial policies (culminating in the Government of India Act 1935) marked this region as a separate zone outside the jurisdiction of the laws that were applied to the rest of the country. Within this protected enclave, tribal groups were allowed to continue practicing their customary laws, kinship systems and clan-based rules for land, property, inheritance and so on. National leaders replicated this dynamic with the drawing up of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which delineates special provisions for the administration of 'the Tribal Areas in Assam.' Another continuing colonial institution was that of the Inner Line, which even now restricts outsiders from entering certain states in the Northeast without a permit. Over the first few decades after independence the Indian government, building upon the institutions created by the Sixth Schedule, bolstered the idea of exclusive homelands for tribal groups. The "isolated enclaves" subsequently "became full-fledged states, and the protected minorities turned into majority groups in these states" (Baruah 2005:184). Now both land ownership and legislative seats are overwhelmingly reserved for Scheduled Tribes within their own state (Barbora 2002, Biswas and Suklabaidya 2008).

Reservations for the newly politicized Scheduled Tribe is not the only significant change set into motion with the creation of the postcolonial state; what we also find interestingly is a splintering of the very category tribe – while tribal populations of mainland India fall under the provisions of the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution, the

Northeast tribes are specially catered to by the Sixth Schedule discussed above. In her analysis of Edward Gait's *A History of Assam,* Papori Bora develops an interesting argument about the role of philology in the colonial association that gets made between tribes and nations, where she claims:

> This discursive formulation of Gait has consequences for the self-identification of various communities in the Northeast where the trope of continuous external aggression and imposition of an alien language has led to politicization of language and the inability to imagine a political community beyond a nation-state…I would argue that the description of the tribes as nations has led to a desire for the always-deferred nation in Northeastern politics. [2011:68]

This intimate association between the tribes and land contributes to the continuation of figurations of nationalism that are inextricably connected to tribal/ethnic identities resonates well with Baruah's (2005) critique of ethnic homelands. Baruah provides a thought-provoking analysis of the problems inherent within the Indian nation-state's "hurried exercise in [the] political engineering" of the region (2005:4). Drawing on, but significantly reworking the position taken by nationalist writer Ghurye, he argues that "the practice of extending institutions intended to promote tribal self-governance and autonomy to particular scheduled tribes in specific territories – legitimizing the idea of ethnic homelands – has meant a de facto regime of two-tiered citizenship" (2005:10). This has caused intense conflict between what Baruah calls the 'citizens' and the 'denizens' of the Northeast, the latter having made (across generations now) significant contributions to the social and economic development of the region, but who nevertheless continue to be cast as outsiders with no political agency. The mobilizations among descendants of tea plantation workers in Assam, many of whom belonged to the mainland 'savage tribes' (Ghosh 1999), to be included as Scheduled Tribes *from* Assam highlights

the different trajectory that the Northeast tribes (as opposed to mainland Indian '*adivasis*') have been set upon since colonial times, a trajectory that gets escalated by the Indian nation-state, becoming in Baruah's opinion an integral component of what he calls the 'durable disorder' of the Northeast.

The Future of the Jaitbynriew

A striking example of the tension between tribal and non-tribal communities lies in the Khasi word – *dkhar,* which literally translates to outsider. As an anthropologist especially I was acutely conscious of my status as an outsider, having grappled deeply with the ethics and politics of a US-based anthropologist seeking to conduct research with a 'tribe,' despite neither being Khasi, nor 'tribal.' So early on when a couple of Khasi friends commented jokingly on my *dkhar* status, even though I recognized the implications, I accepted it willingly (being a true outsider with no experience of living there and consequently no personal stakes) and even embraced it, often cracking jokes about my being a *dkhar* that amused many Khasis I interacted with and found me favor with them. It was only when I tried some such joke with one of my local Punjabi informants and witnessed his angry red-face and indignant response that I realized clearly how *dkhar* is an extremely political category that many would argue is a racist slur. Resistance, often violent, to the influx of non-Khasis (felt most strongly in Shillong) has had a formidable history in Meghalaya, and non-Khasis have had to endure not only the violence, but also the feeling of being what this informant called "second-class citizens [who] have to keep their heads down and stay out of trouble," despite having lived there for generations. Renewed demands for the imposition of the Inner Line Permit, which

restricts entry of 'outsiders' into the state, has been the catalyst of fresh violence in the city with some non-tribals being burned to death. In a bold opinion piece published recently in a national newspaper, the editor of *The Shillong Times* (A widely circulated English daily in Meghalaya) Patricia Mukhim outlines the history of atrocities against 'outsiders' in the state, their experience of heightened vulnerability and the continued apathy among Khasis. She writes provocatively, given the larger context of mainstream/land marginalization of the Northeast:

> Non-tribals have lost the right to speak up and dissent. They live like third class citizens. Those who survive to do business do so by paying protection money to these different pressure groups. Non-tribals are debarred form buying land in tribal areas after the Land Transfer Act was passed in 1978. Those with self-respect have left Shillong and other parts of Meghalaya to settle elsewhere. Others continue to live here but with almost no rights. At least in Delhi, north-easterners have the freedom to protest the government's acts. Nido Tania's killers are in jail. What about the many deaths of non-tribals in Meghalaya since 1979? Will the family members of the deceased ever get justice? [16]

While anti-*dkhar* rhetoric most often focused on the vulnerability of the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos in Meghalaya (particularly in an urban commercial hub like Shillong that has attracted many groups of outsiders), I had an intuition, which was subsequently confirmed by my Khasi friends – that *dkhar* was not simply any outsider, but one coming specifically from the plains. Therefore, a Naga or a Mizo, even though they are non-Khasis would never be referred to as *dkhar,* and they would also relate similarly to a *dkhar,* for whom they would have a parallel word in their language. For instance, in an

[16] http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/politics-of-identity-and-location/article5948473.ece

interesting and humorous blog post[17] Kima, who goes by the online name Mizohican, writes:

> In Mizoram, we call mainland Indians (people having Indo-Aryan and Dravidian looks and physical features) as "Vai". The word "Vai" originated from the Hindi word "Bhai" which means "brother", and it is used to describe a non-Mizo, an outsider… if you're a non-Mizo and you walk on the streets of Mizoram today, you may still encounter an unfortunate incident of a few miscreants (usually inebriated ones) menacingly passing comments at you like, "Vai chhia" (disgusting outsider), etc., at you… This, of course, happens extremely rarely today… But I'm just giving you a heads-up in case you do visit Mizoram in the future.

In Shillong I frequently encountered a similar idea that the *dkhar* is dirty and disgusting. It is true that most Khasis I knew were very fastidious and every morning I woke to the sound of a broom making aggressive contact with my neighbor's front porch and the splashing of what felt like endless buckets of water against their car. I once noticed aloud how washing clothes was also a favorite Khasi pastime, and a Khasi friend added sardonically, "we have to wash clothes every day, we even wash brand new clothes if we buy them from a *dkhar* shop, but after they're clean we don't mind putting them to dry out on the grass right by a busy highway." Khasi cleanliness was always however, implicitly juxtaposed with *dkhar* proclivity for dirt and filth; I often felt like I was being observed in turn, so as to ascertain my personal relationship with the stereotype. Hill stations, as the British designated them, have been renowned for their pristine beauty; people from the plains, who travel to hill stations as tourists are often prone to littering, thus perpetuating the stereotype of the dirty and uncouth plainsperson. In Shillong too

[17] http://thealternative.in/inclusivity/a-historical-and-visual-journey-to-what-people-of-mizoram-think-about-india/

there has been a heightened consciousness of the deterioration of the city, with the rise in population, and several initiatives were being undertaken such as the cleaning of the abysmally dirty river Wahumkhrah, which flows down into Lake Umiam, a major water reservoir for the area. The population of the Shillong Metropolitan Area is 345,325 (2011 Census of India), and urban poverty and hardship is readily visible to anyone passing through. Yet, as many Khasis I spoke to pointed out, you are unlikely to find a Khasi person (or anyone who 'looked' tribal/East Asian) begging on the streets. Contrary to cultural norms in the plains, tribal communities like the Khasis look after their own, I was told and even if a family falls upon hard times, the extended clan will be there to support them.

The rhetoric against outsiders was a recurrent theme during my fieldwork, especially in my conversations with groups and individuals mobilizing against the matrilineal system of social organization. The continual slippage in the usage of outsider and non-tribal was noticeable to me however, which often had the effect of glossing over questions of 'race', ethnicity, religion and so forth. This phenomenon is perhaps a reflection of Shillong's unique and cosmopolitan history, being the capital of erstwhile Assam, and a town that continues to be the locus of educational institutions and commercial ventures having led to the settling of multiple groups of outsiders, both tribal and non-tribal. The preservation of the uniqueness of the Khasi community in the face of such differences is a concern for many Khasis. The postlapsarian story of the seven huts (*hynñiew trep*) remaining on earth (which get permanently separated from the nine families in heaven) forms the basis of the uniqueness of the Khasi identity. Organizations like the (now proscribed) *Hynñiewtrep National Liberation Council* and the *Khun*

Hynñiewtrep National Awakening Movement (which translates in its acronym to 'arrow' and in its full form to 'an awakening of the children of the seven huts'), the political party that arose from the extremely active Khasi Students Union, have been espousing anti-outsider sentiments and at various points calling for an exclusively Khasi province. The increased settling of various communities in Shillong has not only put a strain on the existing resources, but has also significantly increased the number of inter-communal marital alliances. This latter is a source of grave concern for such groups wanting to protect the perceived fragility of the Khasi '*jaitbynriew*.'

Many people I spoke to in Shillong brought up a concern for the future of the *jaitbynriew*, not just the groups mobilizing against matriliny. Now *jaitbynriew* can be loosely translated as community, but as one of my informants put it – "when you say Khasi *jaitbynriew* it rouses very strong feelings within us…makes us feel very protective." A middle-school principal I went on a picnic with expressed sadness about the state of the *jaitbynriew* saying "we Khasis have no roots, we're like fallen leaves, blowing around in the wind." Indeed, it is difficult for outsiders to understand all that is encapsulated by words like *hynñiewtrep* and *jaitbynriew*, which draws variously on notions of culture, ethnicity, tribe, indigeneity and so forth. In newspapers articles many use the term Khasi race (which perhaps is an attempt to capture the intensity of the word) and for all the SRT members I spoke to this was a crucial category. A senior SRT member once exclaimed, "there is no point in keeping Khasi customs alive if the Khasi race itself dies out."

Resisting the influx of outsiders into the state is a predominant discursive trope and even though there are over a million Khasis and just about as many Garos, and

further they are the overwhelming majority in the state, they still feel extremely threatened by the 1 billion 'Indians' but also increasingly by the Muslims who enter Meghalaya both from Bangladesh and Assam. Yet as I have been trying to point out there seems to be a palpable difference in attitudes towards outsiders qua '*dkhars'* and those who belong to other hill tribes. That concern for the Khasi community/*jaitbynriew* gets articulated along the lines of race is not coincidental, and goes back perhaps to an internalization of colonial discourses that Bora (2011) elaborates on. While there is a definite emphasis the three key tenets of the indigenous Khasi religion – *tip briew tip blei* (knowing yourself leads to knowledge of god), *tip kur tip kha* (knowing your lineage on both sides) and *kamai ïa ka hok* (earning righteousness in your lifetime) – ideas about Khasi uniqueness hinge for many (particularly the SRT men) on the perception of racialized appearance.

Hegemonic notions of beauty favor fair skin and a Khasi friend once talked about how as a child she was pitied for her darker complexion, and called "*baïong*" (literally black), while her sister who was fair was consistently admired. A young Jaintia man who was disgruntled with his in-laws and telling me about his experiences ended by saying, "They don't care what I feel now. They got fair-skinned grand-children because of me, so now I don't matter anymore." Intermarriage of Khasi women with '*dkhar'* men (particularly if they have darker skin) is the most frowned upon – as one young single Khasi woman put it, "If I go home and say I'm going to marry a Muslim boy, or a Bengali, then *toh* I'm in big trouble, but if I marry a *Sahep* (white man), a *phareng* (white foreigner), then everyone will secretly think – nee, so lucky she is." Similarly, one Khasi woman based in Bangalore said she hadn't been able to tell her family about her

relationship with a black man from Ghana, as they would strongly disapprove. In a blog entry entitled *Ka Jaitbynriew in Turmoil* Rev. H.H Mohrmen points to the double standards of Khasi society:

> If a man enters into an inter-racial wedlock and marries a non- Hynñiewtrep woman, a ceremony of Tang-jait is performed to initiate a new clan from the woman. And if a woman enters does the same and marries a non-Hynñiewtrep man she is called "kaba ioh lok khyllah," (woman who marries strange men) and children out of the wedlock are called Khun- shiteng or Khun khleh (hybridized kids).[18]

While themes of social upheaval within the tribe arising from problems like inter-marriages and gendered discrepancies will be analyzed in subsequent chapters, I have tried to show here that the idea of race is an extremely fluid and mobile one, and is deeply entwined into conceptualizations of Northeast identity when juxtaposed against the mainland, and into tribal identity in its interface with Hinduized, or "Aryan/Dravidian" looking people from the plains, even as broader notions of racial hierarchies (white v/s black) are endorsed and replicated in various ways. Histories of Assam tend to diverge in interesting ways; when understood in its former colonial sense as referencing the Northeast more broadly they focus on its exceptionality in relation to mainland India, but when emptied of what Gait (1905:i) calls its "pure Mongolian" races they often focus on the writing of the Hinduized Assamese subject into the Indian nation-state. While colonial categories like race, tribe and so forth might seem outmoded and hackneyed tools with which to approach an understanding of the contemporary politics of the Northeast, they continue to mobilize meanings for communities there, and get deployed in multiple, contradictory ways, thus warranting deeper reflection.

[18] http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2013/09/30/ka-jaitbynriew-in-turmoil/

Chapter 2

Matrilineal Lenses, Anthropological Effects

> "*In the first place their social organization presents one of the most perfect examples still surviving of matriarchal institutions, carried out with a logic and thoroughness which, to those accustomed to regard the status and authority of the father as the foundation of society, are exceedingly remarkable."* --- Sir Charles Lyall in his introduction to P.R.T Gurdon's monograph – *The Khasis* (1907).

There isn't a word in Khasi for matriliny or matrilineal. It was during a cigarette break from a late evening poetry-reading gathering up in Risa Colony that this fact was impressed upon me rather pointedly. My interlocutor was Jason Khongwir, a young English literature lecturer, and we were meeting for the first time. I had already been introduced to the group as an anthropologist there to study Khasi matriliny, which was a source of varying degrees of amusement for most. We were all drowsy on wine brewed from the popular local berry *soh mon* when he, with his simple statement, caught me off guard by spontaneously calling into question the role of anthropology in the framing of matriliny. This was the first serious critique of my research that I had encountered in Shillong, and I was both apprehensive and excited. A paraphrasing of what he said to me – it is quaint that you, being an anthropologist, are here to study Khasi matriliny, when the fact is that before you people came here there was no such thing. Of course

matrilineal practices existed, but it is only with the arrival of Victorian patriarchs in the guise of colonial administrators/anthropologists who, when confronted with this alternative mode of social organization find it "exceedingly remarkable," and go on to name it variously (depending on the prevailing anthropological categories of understanding) as "matriarchal institutions," "matriarchates" and so forth, that these practices coalesced into matriliny as such.

Framing Khasi Matriliny

To put it differently, the matrilineal way of life has been a Khasi reality for a long time and keeps changing and adapting over time, but it is only when it was named from outside, and studied under various rubrics like descent, kinship terminologies, marriage practices, inheritance laws etc. that matriliny as a concept truly took on a life of its own, became animate. We find here a fissuring of Khasi matriliny: within the domain of anthropology it functions as a cognitive category, as a way of unpacking and framing social realities, but once emancipated from its conceptual frameworks and designations it cascades outwards into actual and routine lived experiences, ideas, emotions and so forth, many of which can (if desired) be retroactively connected back to the category/concept, but others perhaps that slip away from the anthropological grasp.

As I conducted my fieldwork, I could not let go of that most explicit paradox my interlocutor articulated the very first time I met him and it remains cardinal to my research, prompting me to consider more deeply what it might mean to stop constantly looking at Khasi matriliny as something to study, as a sort of identifiable entity whose various aspects can be cataloged. Is there a danger, I ask tacitly, in thinking that Khasi

matriliny is an inalienable entity that as a whole then encounters and interacts with external factors? In a useful introduction to a series of articles that revisit the "matrilineal puzzle" (Richards 1950), Pauline Peters investigates the issue of whether matriliny is better understood as a totality/ "set of social structures" (1997:137) springing from the impulse to build typologies and the emphasis on bounded societies – the powerful legacy of Malinowski and his students she suggests – or as a conglomeration of characteristics, an idea that starts gaining traction in the late 1950s via critiques of structuralism and is exemplified by Edmund Leach's decisive dismissal of the category "matrilineal societies" for being as improper to a study of social structure "as the creation of a class blue butterflies is irrelevant for the understanding of the anatomical structure of the Lepidoptera" (1961:4).

Peters' review of 20th century approaches to matriliny leads her to endorse the propositions of the latter group. She writes, "Today social theorists are more inclined to see kinship or descent or marriage as sets of discursive and action strategies, less determinants of social life as frameworks for it, less causes for behavior as arenas for interpretation, negotiation and contestation" (1997:139). However, the formulation of kinship as a "set of characteristics" (137) has implicit in it a sense of relationship between these disparate or assorted features that qualifies their belongingness to a common set or a matrix, though this is perhaps a very different set than the one offered to us by earlier anthropology. Even as kinship studies has been through multiple deconstructions and reinventions, the question – "what is kinship?" – continues to dog contemporary theorists.

Where once kinship was considered a primordial structuring principle, a pre-existing force that *causes* people to behave with or relate to others in particular ways, it

begins to be seen more as an *effect*, the thing if you will, that names a series of everyday actions, strategies, practices, processes and exchanges that constitute humans as social, economic and political beings. Here too structure plays a role, but it is not a defining one. "Official relationships which do not receive continuous maintenance tend to become what they are for the genealogist: theoretical relationships, like abandoned roads on an old map," wrote Pierre Bourdieu (1977:38) who argued that it is through constant practice that individuals more vigorously maintain those kin relations that "satisfy vital material and symbolic *interests* [emphasis original]." What gets recognized here is that people tend to exert personal autonomy in their lives, making evaluations, assessing contingencies and enacting rules or norms in ways that sustain or are beneficial to them.

The play between structure and practice has been of great interest to me in my engagement with Khasi kinship, and the overwhelming emphasis on its structure that I kept encountering (both in academic accounts and in popular discourse) prompted me in turn to keep an eye on the unfolding of people's everyday lives, and be attentive to how routine practices both sustain and amend social realties, enabling society (despite narratives of social upheavals and crises) to reproduce itself (though not necessarily in its own image) from one generation to the next. Further, more as a thought experiment than a practical possibility, I toy with the idea of decoupling matriliny altogether from any sense of it as a category/matrix. What might it mean (both theoretically and politically) to behold it purely (however momentarily) as a way of life, where the 'itness' of matriliny might itself end up getting scattered?

Of course this separation between matriliny as an analytical category and matriliny as a lived reality cannot be consistently sustained; anthropology relies in a large

part on ‘real life’ for its production of knowledge and (particularly in the Northeast) people’s understandings of their everyday life are deeply structured by anthropological theories and categories. As discussed in the previous chapter, contemporary research has demonstrated powerfully that colonial efforts to ‘scientifically’ apprehend the subject population, despite their blatantly racist assumptions and assertions, have been internalized not only by subsequent postcolonial regimes in their attitudes and techniques of governance but also within modes of self-understanding for the colonized people, having made a robust imprint on individual and collective psyches. I have shown that in the Northeast, already under erasure by the mainstream/land, the Indian government’s policies have promulgated a system/ethos where marginalized communities, particularly the hill-tribes, fall back on colonially produced knowledge (that consolidates them as a “tribe” or “race”) in order to express their vulnerability and demand rights that are deeply fashioned by ideas about nationalism and patriotism, which draw freely on rhetorics of community *qua* identity, belongingness and difference/uniqueness.

In this context matriliny names and distinguishes the Khasis within a national framework where otherwise they are oppressed or simply overlooked. One informant identified the “matrilineal system” as the “main feature about the identity of the Khasis,” and many others endorsed this sentiment. Of course the contemporary marginalization and alienation of the tribal societies of the Northeast is merely an echo of the unfair treatment meted out to them since colonial times. This thorny history of tribal experiences with exploitative and supremacist outsiders is crucial to bear in mind; it is at the heart of the acute vulnerability that the Khasis experience and shapes their desire to retain their cultural uniqueness even as they aspire to a spot within a larger national-

international paradigm. Therefore, the uniqueness of the matrilineal social formation makes it a pivotal marker of identity, not just for the Khasis but also for the entire state of Meghalaya, seen as home to the matrilineal tribes of the Northeast.

What we find here thus is the emergence of a third axis upon which Khasi matriliny turns – along with it being an anthropological category and a (constantly changing) series of lived realities, matriliny must necessarily be recognized as a crucial locus of Khasi identity and politics. It might become apparent here why the contrast drawn by Peters discussed above (kinship as "totality" v. "series of characteristics") is as useful as it is vexing. While it is certainly clear that early structural-functionalist understandings of kinship as a core scaffolding of society with an essential kernel of meaning and a unique grammar, or even as "an aftereffect of the natural facts of sexual reproduction" (Franklin and McKinnon 2001:2) are no longer viable either theoretically or methodologically, yet their imprint on non-Western or "kin-based" societies (given the collusion between early field-anthropology and colonialism) has been decisive and very real.

As exciting as the new courses being forged within kinship studies are (that my chapter seeks to build on), these older models of thinking kinship cannot simply be squished into a musty corner of the discipline's closet, for they continue to have purchase on contemporary life and their diverse ramifications ought (an ethical injunction?) to be confronted and accounted for. In this chapter I examine closely the colonial discourses within which Khasi matriliny is first named and examined (with the goal of properly administering the local people) such that they become the basis upon which the very identity of the tribe settles. The next chapter examines how matriliny has become

solidified for Khasis and come to be seen as a principal legacy of their ancestors, and thus fundamental to their very existence as a social collectivity, enabling for instance, many to dismiss disdainfully any calls for radical social changes like a shift to patriliny. One of my key concerns in the next chapter then is: how does a category, once so foreign and *etic* to the Khasis as matriliny, come to resonate so strongly with their identity, which, in the contemporary moment, seems to hinge on this very difference, now reconfigured as alternative and exotic, becoming the terrain upon which multiple politics are being articulated.

Across Chapters 2 and 3 I consider closely this 'uniqueness' of matriliny elaborated through both post/colonial and Khasi national narratives. In these chapters I do the opposite of what narratives about Khasi matriliny are typically prone to do *viz.* seeing matriliny as an entrypoint into understanding and describing the Khasis. Instead I take that same 'signpost' of matriliny to start understanding the gaze which created/read the term, and set up the lens of looking at Khasis thus. In that way I turn the term inside out to work out the kinds of frameworks, attitudes and ideologies that went into its making and in this way my research could be seen as a witnessing of a displacement of that term, which accounts for the unwillingness of (some) subjects to be enclosed by it.

In 2007, while I was doing a part-time summer internship with a reputable non-government organization (NGO) working on women's rights and empowerment in the region, I had the opportunity to sit through a meeting between this NGO and the Meghalaya Police. It was one of those routine summer days in Shillong where the sun shines so hard and the sky shines so blue that your brain is boggled when a downpour hits without a single warning sign – consequently you learn quickly to become best friends

with your umbrella. In true Shillong style everyone (but myself and the Khasi police officers) was thoroughly late. The workshop was part of this NGO's larger project of building alliances and capacities towards gender mainstreaming within the police and health departments, two key state agencies that women dealing with violence most often come in contact with. A similar project had been undertaken in another big city in south India, and a senior police officer from there had come to share his experiences with the local police personnel. Resource persons from a women's organization there also spoke about the problem of violence against women and a lot of information, strategies and stories were shared. Finally, a few NGO employees spoke about this issue from a Khasi perspective after which the floor was opened up for questions. The (mostly male) Khasi police officers had been listening attentively but didn't seem very moved by the discussions. When asked to share their views they argued that since Khasi society was matrilineal, the issue of gender-based crimes was not significant enough to warrant their serious attention. "It might be true…in other parts of India…women suffer a lot, but in Meghalaya…women are very well off," said one. "In fact, it is the men who get beaten with brooms in their own homes," supplemented the second.

These statements strategically mobilized popular notions (with a long history) about the social dominance or "rule" of women in matrilineal societies, and were primarily oriented towards the mainland speakers largely unaware of Khasi gender dynamics, to whom they had been listening patiently to all morning. As discussed in the introduction, the question of the status of women in matrilineal societies has been a somewhat fraught one. Peters (1997) highlights what she calls the "older view" held by British social structuralists who, vehemently rejecting social evolutionary ideas about

"matriarchies" and "mother-right," insisted instead that in matrilineal societies power changed hands from the father to the mother's brother, bypassing women entirely. Peters argues thus that, "…in their desire to scotch the figment of matriarchy, the differences matrilineal organization entailed for women's lives were pushed aside" (134). However, she notes that this earlier view starts to fall out of favor from the late 70s, with feminist influences calling for a more attentive look at gender differences within matrilineal societies. What we find then is an efflorescence of research that emphasize "the greater degrees of independence, autonomy, formal authority in local politics and ritual, control of income, decisions concerning child-bearing, family relations and so forth enjoyed by women" in the societies being studied (134).

The tension between these two views is perhaps encapsulated in the ensuing exchange between the Khasi police personnel and the NGO employees, both of whom accepted the relatively privileged position of women in matrilineal societies like theirs. I interpreted this as partly a strategic move (to not seem disrespectful and overly aggressive, thus inadvertently proving the policemen right) but an equally key issue was that their need to position themselves as *Khasi* women, and consequently it was important to align themselves with their male counterparts, even as they challenged what they felt were their misplaced notions. In doing so they were both acknowledging that they were indeed different than women from mainland India, but also that gender is not the sole terrain upon which oppression is carried out and that wars have historically been waged against them and their community along such axes as race, tribe, class, language and religion to name a few. Echoing critiques of mainstream white feminism by women of color, indigenous, and third world feminists as well as of mainstream Indian feminism by

Dalit feminists (Anzaldua 1987; hooks, 1999; Lorde, 1894; Mohanty 2003; Rege, 1998; Spivak 1988, 1998), they too seemed to suggest that no straightforward continuum of women and their experiences of marginalization can be assumed, and doing so is likely enacting a disavowal of violence that some women experience at the hands of other privileged women and their communities.

Nevertheless, even as they acceded to the policemen sitting across the conference table, the NGO workers argued persuasively that the idea of female empowerment associated with their identity as a matrilineal tribe obscures the reality of discrimination and violence that Khasi women encounter. Likewise, Khasi sociologist Tiplut Nongbri's scholarship (2003, 2008, 2014) has persistently and rigorously elaborated the predominantly patriarchal ethos within Khasi society arguing most recently that Khasi "matriliny is by no means antagonistic to men" (2014:53) and promotes instead "a strong gender ideology that subjugates the female (daughters in particular) to the male" (55). In a similar vein the speakers at the meeting also cited examples of the specific problems that Khasi women face, contending that despite being matrilineal, Khasi men and women are nevertheless afflicted by patriarchal values and modes of thinking and cannot thus be characterized as emancipated from gender-based violence. They offered statistics demonstrating increasing crimes against Khasi women and insisted there was a dire need to take cognizance of the situation. A recent sample study conducted by North East Network's *Iohlynti* (a Support Center at the Ganesh Das Hospital) across three localities – Lawjyrnriew, Jaiaw Laitdom and Lawsohtun – revealed that three out of every five

women reported having been victims of domestic violence.[19] By the end, the Khasi police officials looked convinced, expressing interest in the upcoming trainings and workshops.

In the conference room that afternoon, then for perhaps the first time, I became attuned to the possibility that Khasi matriliny came in many versions (depending on individual experiences and sensibilities) and manifested in fairly disparate visions. For many of the police personnel their matrilineal system engendered a world where women wielded unfettered power, sometimes exposing men to violence, while for the women's organization, being matrilineal did not vaccinate Khasi women against patriarchal misogyny but further encumbered them with added and unique problems like desertion, alcoholism and denial of maintenance for children. Similarly, some Khasis talked about matriliny as giving women a 'leg up' in a harsh, patriarchal world, whereas for others matriliny boiled down to the two concepts of *kur* (clan) and *kha* (the father's side of their family), while still others pointed to internal differences between sub-tribes in order to make the argument that the notion of Khasi matriliny is so heavily reliant on British anthropology that Khasi matriliny is conflated with the set of practices followed by Sohra Khasis (Sohra was the first British capital in the region), erasing the realities of other Khasis like the Jaintia, War or the Bhoi. I realized through conversations I was having that even though the community being referred to was ostensibly the same, the ways in which its people apprehended and spoke of one of its defining features could be very dissimilar and were often shaped and sharpened by political affiliations and agendas.

Despite these complexities Khasi matriliny is routinely perceived of and referred to as a solidified concept, rather than as an assorted array of possibly discontinuous and

[19] http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2014/12/16/meghalayas-matrilineal-society-also-tops-in-domestic-violence/

fractured customs and practices that have multiple meanings and resonances. It is important to explore the complexity of these practices, as I shall do in the next chapter, while at the same time grappling with the role played by the analytical category of matriliny, proffered by colonial anthropology to mark a system different from dominant gender stratifications across the world. This category now assumes the status of a natural, pre-given entity, the very essence of a community upon which its politico-cultural identity hinges. It is the undeniable overlap between 'matriliny' and group identity that perhaps speaks to the mysterious ways in which this category, with its limited semantic repertoire, assumes a multivalence that is able to mobilize miscellaneous politics and encompass diverse perspectives.

However, something significant is elided in reading matriliny as coterminous with the Khasi people. There is a palpable difference between an individual's everyday engagements, struggles, understandings and critiques of gendered life in Khasi society and their sense of identity within a pervasive, all-explaining 'matrilineal' system such that the former seems to spill out of the stronghold of the latter while continuing to remain nimbly within its frame. Just as categories confer on us a sense of identity, a structure through which we can understand and interpret our experiences, they also alienate us from those very experiences – they most often (and at critical junctures) fail to fully or meaningfully take them into account. Embracing the stripe of matriliny while at the same time acknowledging its inadequacies and transgressing it, the subject is caught in a knot that only too easily accommodates, even as it elides its confusions and disquietude.

The question 'what is Khasi matriliny?' is therefore a fraught one that I try to grapple with in this and the following chapter. While there clearly exists a discursive field upon which it has been objectified and elaborated and thus exists not only as a formal or conceptual category, but also in turn as a locus of self-identity, I suggest tentatively that Khasi matriliny isn't merely an amalgamation of discrete and identifiable social ingredients (a descriptor of a pre-existing reality), but that it has been produced through enormous work – academic, affective and political – and finds expression differently in relation to multiple scenarios, discourses and paradigms, often moving along the three axes outlined above, and sometimes straddling them. Through my discussion of Khasi matriliny I hope to be sensitive to the complexity of this dynamic: if (as I shall show) Khasi matriliny isn't any one thing or even a set of known things but instead is projected differently in different situations or by different people then how can it simultaneously hold the weight that it does and in fact be the cornerstone of communal identity, the bearer of multiple politics? Across this chapter and the next, I will attempt to engage with the range of invocations of matriliny in the city of Shillong and trace the movement of this category in order to argue further that it is this very instability that makes the category both possible, and impossible.

Of Anthropology, Truth and Inhabitings

The accent on matriliny as a distinguishing facet of Khasi society began notably with the advent of colonial agents in the region and, like elsewhere around the world, military officials, administrators and missionaries were keen to study and comprehend the cultural life and social organization of the local people in order to better facilitate

interventions into their lives. Sir Charles Lyall, a prominent English civil servant who served as secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam in the 1880s, in his introduction to P.R.T Gurdon's monograph *The Khasis* surveys the early literature describing the Khasis and notes:

> In 1840 Capt. Fischer, an officer of the Survey Department, published in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal an account which showed that the leading characteristics of the Khasi race had already been apprehended; he mentions the prevalence of matriarchy or mother-kinship, notes the absence of polyandry, except in so far as its place was taken by facile divorce, describes the religion as a worship of gods of valleys and hills, draws attention to the system of augury used to ascertain the will of the gods, and gives an account of the remarkable megalithic monuments which everywhere stud the higher plateaus. [1975(1907): xix]

Early colonial accounts thus make mention of aspects of Khasi life but it is Gurdon's text – *The Khasis* – which has acquired canonical status and is the solitary 'comprehensive' colonial anthropological account of the Khasi people available. I found this book on the shelves of several people whose homes I visited in Shillong and many evaluated my abilities as a researcher on the Khasis by ascertaining whether or not I had read this book and how thoroughly. The author, Lieutenant-Colonel (Major at the time) Philip R. Gurdon, was not a professionally trained anthropologist but belonged instead to the ilk of what Henrika Kuklick calls "practical men" or "a man of action, akin to the field naturalist…[whose] rapport with his subjects was developed during the course of constant touring…[which] was termed "tact" in colonial parlance" (1991:199). Practical anthropology was endorsed by many within the Indian Civil Service from where some of the most prominent people within the anthropological community (like Sir Herbert Risley and Sir Richard Temple) were extracted, and who in turn extolled the virtues of the

colonial agent with "long experience of life in the colonies" over the bookish, intellectual knowledge of the professional anthropologist. Gurdon, who was the Superintendent of Ethnography in Assam, was also the editor of a whole series of monographs on the more significant tribes of the region, commissioned in 1903 by Sir Bamfylde Fuller, the Chief Commissioner of Assam. Gurdon's monograph was the first in the series that were undertaken by officials who had "special and intimate experience of the races to be described" (xv) and a uniform template was prescribed for all the monographs. Gurdon had been the Deputy-Commissioner of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills for three years, had travelled extensively and was said to be familiar with the Khasi language. His monograph outlines various aspects of Khasi life under section headings – General, Domestic Life, Laws and Customs, Religion, Folklore, Language and Miscellaneous. However, within these rubrics Gurdon describes not only broad social phenomena like marriage, burial, divination and so forth but he also catalogues minute and sundry details such as the highly-developed calves of Khasi men and women, the kinds of clay used by potters, measurement units in Khasi markets and various methods of distilling local spirits. The use of a common template mandates that there is no separate section on matrilineal principles or practices, but these are explicated principally in his section on Laws and Customs, under sub-topics like Tribal Organization, State Organization, Marriage, Divorce, Inheritance and so forth.

For a student of Khasi kinship the other key text available is Chie Nakane's *Garo and Khasi: A Comparative Study in Matrilineal System* (1967). Nakane prefaces her work by highlighting her explicit interest in a comparative analysis of the Khasis and the Garos (the other major tribe within the state – also matrilineal) rather than in "preparing a

complete monograph of the cultures of the two peoples" (14). Nakane, a Japanese anthropologist trained at the University of Tokyo and the University of London, conducted fieldwork in the Khasi and Garo Hills between October 1955 and February 1956, upon which this book is based. This is a key difference between the two works – while Gurdon's monograph emerges from his administrative work in the state and his data likely drawn from information provided by elite/educated Khasi (possibly predominantly Shillong and Sohra based) informants, Nakane's writings are based principally upon fieldwork in four different villages (though it is likely she interacted with the Shillong/Sohra elites as well). It is for this reason that her work speaks much more to the rustle of rural Khasi life and its unique realities. Even though both begin with highlighting the crucial fact that Khasis are organized into different *kurs* or clans that are strictly exogamous, Nakane is able to pick up on the centrality of village endogamy where affinal and cognatic ties across the clans far outdid any notion of clan solidarity in importance, making the unique point that for rural Khasis, the idea of community relies much more on locality rather than on the matrilineal descent link. In Shillong of course, where I did most of my research, the importance of village endogamy is not so palpable, though people certainly retain emotional and sometimes material (if they are more recent immigrants) attachments to their village of origin, but here it is easier to revert to the more Gurdonesque emphasis of clan affiliations over village community in one's understanding of Khasi identity categories.

While Nakane's research was conducted in the post-independence period, her work nevertheless reveals thematic, stylistic and ideological consistencies with the colonial account of the Khasis that Gurdon's monograph offers. Indeed, they both rely on

cultural evolutionary ideas about tribal primitivism and on the assumption that with modernity comes advancement and complexity. Gurdon for instance writes:

> Khasis of the interior who have adopted Christianity are generally cleaner in their persons than the non-Christians, and their women dress better than the latter and have an air of self-respect about them. The houses in a Christian village are also far superior, especially where there are resident European missionaries. [6]

These modes of thinking, long debunked and outmoded, have not left us completely and even contemporary scholars implicitly end up invoking the knowledge they produced in their writing. Further, both Gurdon and Nakane seem to share a curious interest in elaborating some sort of an account of a Khasi past, despite the veritable paucity of historical records or data, which they themselves acknowledge. They circumvent this problem however, by (in a move quite akin to what Fabian calls the 'spatialization of time' discussed in the previous chapter) studying the lives of those living in more remote and isolated villages, believing that the dramatic changes brought about by modernity could somehow be negated by moving away from more cosmopolitan centers like Shillong. Nakane's research relies upon data from two models of Khasi villages – the first one being from two villages where the "people are one of the most backward in the Khasi hills…[and which lies]…in the innermost parts [where] more traditional economic and social settings have been preserved than in other villages" and the second (for "comparative purposes") being from two villages, one close to the border with Bangladesh (then Pakistan), and the other in the north Cachar Hills, but together being "unique among Khasi villages, and quite sophisticated" (101) for having a developed trading economy, with strong influences of Christianity and Hinduism. She writes thus:

> The history of the Khasi Hills had been shrouded in darkness till the beginning of the 19th century, except for fragmentary stories such as Khasi raids on the Sylhet people…the history of the Khasi Hills during the last hundred years has changed a great deal. However, dark corners still remain in Bhoi, War and in the area bordering on the Garo Hills. These have been kept in a vacuum between the Hindu civilization of the bordering plain and the modernization of the uplands centered in Shilong. [97]

Even in more specific discussions about different aspects of Khasi social life we find a desire to elaborate on the past based on extrapolations from the present. The question of residence after marriage is a good example. The fact that newly wed husbands move into their wives' maternal home is flagged by Gurdon as "the most remarkable feature of Khasi marriage" and he lays the groundwork for the discussion on locality by explaining how after a few years of living with his in-laws post marriage, a man (except those who marry the *khadduh* [youngest daughter] who are expected to live permanently in their wives' family home) moves his wife and children to a new residence bought and supported by their collective income, once it is established that they are compatible and children have likely arrived on the scene (76). Nakane furthers this discussion by identifying four types of co-residential units – 1) where wife, husband, their children, and wife's unmarried, widowed or divorced siblings live, 2) a larger household where all progeny of one woman, spanning three or more generations, live without their spouses, 3) a cross between 1) and 2) where husbands live in their wife's house, but eat and frequently sleep in their natal home. They work in their wife's fields primarily but sometimes for their mothers too, and 4) where only one elementary family lives (often when a man marries a non-heiress). Nakane claims that within a single village it is common to find households of types 1), 3) and 4), but according to her information, type

2) was less common and found among the Jaintias but even there it was currently under decline (122).

Writing about Kongton, one of the villages she studied, she says that as close as their fathers' generation, husbands frequently lived with their mother and only visited their wives at night, but this practice was currently very uncommon in the Khasi Hills. In Jatinga though there were several instances of visiting husbands, as the inhabitants (originally from the Jaintia Hills), had "retained this custom," despite converting to Christianity. One might be led to believe from her text thus far that Kongton represents Khasi customs while Jatinga more closely follows Jaintia customs. However we find out a little later that according to stories, the people from Kongton too came from the Jaintia Hills, so when she says in a footnote that all the information she collected in the upland Khasi Hills indicates uxorilocal residence pattern has been practiced for a long time, it is unclear why there is even an assumption that the Khasis were once duolocal. She writes further:

> It is difficult to determine at what date the Khasi people have changed from duolocal marriage to uxorilocal marriage. However, the present dwelling unit, with its fluid relationship between husband and wife (in fact, there are many cases of category 3), suggests a situation linked with the duolocal residence pattern. The fragmentary historical information available and the present Khasi residence pattern suggest that the duolocal arrangement may be an older pattern of marriage. [123]

Gurdon too had observed that the practices among the "Syntengs" (colonial name for Jaintias or Pnars) are different as a husband does not cohabit with his wife's family but only visits her there. This practice is called *thiah chlur* in the Jaintia language where the husbands are said to arrive at the mother-in-law's house only after dark and leave in the morning. It is improper for them to eat or drink in this house since no part of their

earnings goes to this household. He asserts, "the Syntengs seem to have more closely preserved the customs of the matriarchate than the Khasis." He takes this a step further saying "they…claim that their *niam* or religious ceremonies are purer, i.e that they more closely correspond to what they were in ancient times than those of the Khasis" (76). The "claim" to the relative purity of Jaintia *Niam Tre* is simply a claim (no evidence of what social customs were like in "ancient times" exists), but routed through the text of Gurdon, it attains a facticity that continues to shape public opinion. Further, even a subsequent "professional anthropologist" like Nakane doesn't think to question it but in fact is more prone to find the "evidence" that supports this theory, despite acknowledging that she has little real data to work with.

She adds thus that in the Khasi Hills, the transition period between duolocal and neo/uxorilocal residence "seems to have been shortened during the last forty or fifty years," which "might have been effected through the influence of Christian marriages, which start cohabitation of the wife and the husband immediately after the marriage ceremony" (122). It is important to note the inordinate reliance on expressions like 'may have,' 'seems to have' and 'must have,' based on a skewed teleological model of History that is seen to begin with the primitives and end in Europe. Papori Bora, in a stimulating discussion of "iterative sequences" within Edward Gait's *History of Assam,* shows how "generalization" and "probability" become two modes of argumentation through the sheer force of repetition, such that the "probable statement becomes performative, in the sense that it makes true what it states" (2011:62). Speculative statements accrue the semblance of truth and over time come to be understood by all as objective or scientific knowledge, statements of fact. Further, bolstered by claims to authority and expertise,

such texts writes Nicholas Thomas "*created* a reality that it appeared merely to describe, and thus acquired 'material presence or weight'" (1994:5-6, emphasis added). Understanding the creative aspect of these texts, their role in producing Khasi social reality (even as they claimed to simply be neutral representations) is crucial to our task, especially since it is upon the pedestal of these fraught realities that contemporary Khasi identity has (at least in part) been sculpted.

Therefore, the significance of the "truth" of these statements emerging out colonial (style) scholarship in the Northeast must not be discounted since they continue to frame (self) understandings of the tribal subject. Indeed many of my interlocutors, particularly the more educated Khasis, often referred to these materials while elaborating accounts of their culture or history. A well-educated, well-travelled administrative officer for instance spoke to me at length about the shifts in tectonic plates that allowed for Khasis to have come from Southeast Asia originally but be unique in that (unlike other tribes from the Northeast) they have not physically migrated and continue to live on the same land that their ancestors did for millennia. Thus, the repetition of the performative that Bora writes about extends from the past into the present, not only informing people's narratives of their history but in a circular mode having the power to shape their experiences and understanding of contemporary lived realities.

I will elaborate on this idea further in Chapter 5 dealing with the concerns many expressed regarding the vulnerability that Khasi men encounter in contemporary Meghalaya. My experience of the intimate relationship between colonial knowledge-making texts and various aspects of tribal identity underscored to me the significance of going back to these texts and theories for a close reading of the ways in which this

knowledge was put together, the assumptions upon which they were founded and how they came to be understood as truth, in order to better assess the gifts of this scholarship. Even more significantly, debunking or even calling into question some of these taken-for-granted truths might be a first step in better understanding the 'difficulties' of the contemporary period, grounded as they are in hegemonic ideas configured by these texts in possibly problematic ways, enabling us perhaps to look at the same issues but with significantly different eyes.

Matrilineal Frames, Patrilineal Eyes

Texts like Nakane's for instance are built upon a series of claims that appearing in a published work by an anthropologist (particularly a foreigner-outsider) more easily gains legitimacy and authority. Sometimes these claims are supported. For example when she postulates, "Children are more attached to and obedient to the maternal uncle," she explains this by giving an example of the relative insignificance of the husband who, when she visited his home, would always welcome her with a "please wait, my wife, or mother-in-law is coming" (125). She tells us that in the house she lived in, the husband worked all day in the field, and even when he returned "he was always somewhat outside the family conversation, which was centered on the maternal uncle and his sisters, nephews and nieces" (125-126). Even though we could (and should) question her inference about the quality of the relationship between the children and the father on the basis of this observation, she is nevertheless attempting to substantiate her claim.

However, when she says that the tension between the husband and the wife's maternal uncle and in-laws makes his life very uncomfortable it is just her statement that

we have to rely upon, since she doesn't provide us with any ethnographic examples that might illustrate her claim. Instead she offers the statistic of divorce rates, which her research showed to be fairly high, but she doesn't really demonstrate that these high divorce rates are directly caused by or even correlated with tension between the husband and his in-laws. And more often in the text, statements (many of which are speculative) are made with no explanation whatsoever of how she came to know what she does, who she talked to, or what as an anthropologist she observed that led her to a particular insight. This mode of writing relies exclusively on readerly deference both to scholarly authority and the printed word, often inadvertently making claims to generalizable knowledge about the entire community based in fact on fairly delimited and sometimes questionable data, with little elaboration of or reflexivity around pre-existing authorial assumptions and choices regarding analytical lenses being deployed.

Thus, while both Gurdon and Nakane's accounts go over key aspects of Khasi matriliny such as *kur* (clan), *kpoh* (lit. womb), *ïing* (lit. home), role of the *kñi* (maternal uncle), restrictions surrounding marriage (particularly of the patrilateral cross-cousin kind)[20] and so forth, they both also invariably return to the question of what happens to the man as a father within the Khasi matrilineal system. While many Khasi men I spoke to expressed little conflict around their dual obligations to and emotional bonds with their families of orientation and procreation, we find in both these works a continual return to the question of the role of the father and whether or not it is called into question or compromised by the matrilineal emphasis on the authority of the *kñi*. In making this return they replicate the historic preoccupation outsider-anthropologists have had with the

[20] See Nongbri (2014; 46-50) for a useful analysis of the significance of this restriction with regard to the symbolic importance of the father.

'differential power' of the husband within matrilineal systems. The literature on matriliny attests to the inordinate concern anthropologists have shown toward the relative lack of authority matrilineal men wield over their wives and children, unsurprising given their own patrilineo-patriarchal values and worldview, which is perceived as a problem to begin with, a problem that only then gets heightened with matriliny's interface with modernity.

A close reading of Nakane, in my analysis, reflects a fraught ideological stance towards aspects of the matrilineal system that deviate from patrilineo-patriarchal norms (where it is a man's prerogative to be the 'lord and master'). To give an example – while writing about how Khasi men are free to visit their family *ïing* Nakane says:

> These constant matrilineal contacts offer husbands chances of escaping from even the slightest matrimonial tension. Whenever a Khasi man feels uneasiness, he will return to his sister's house rather than face a difficult situation with his wife. [135]

While it is entirely possible to interpret this access Khasi men have to their natal homes in a somewhat positive manner, as a safe haven for them to go to in order to blow off some marital steam for instance, Nakane interprets this as a structurally sanctioned avenue for married men to eschew their responsibilities and engage instead in moral turpitude. Her word choices further suggest that Khasi men are always already prone to such an attitude, since faced with 'even the slightest matrimonial tension' they would *naturally* slink off and avoid difficult interactions with their wives (as opposed perhaps to patrilineal men who never need fear conflict since their authority is unquestioned).

Similarly, her work demonstrates a tendency to problematize a man's authority as a brother or maternal uncle whereas his dominance as a father is pitched as something inherently more valuable. The fact that the Khasi social structure obligates men to

continue maintaining ties with their natal families (while *their* wife and children belong to a different clan) is read as a dilution of their parental rights and a weakening of the marital relation, which is only intuitive to someone who has been nurtured within a patrilineal system and cannot imagine alternative models of gendered life that perhaps emerge from a different mode of social organization.

> Indeed sometimes a man cannot find his iing because his mother died leaving no daughter to succeed her, or his sister died leaving no successor, and his iing becomes extinct... Then he has to face a serious social and economic condition. In divorcing he has to leave everything he owned, his earnings including the house which he built, and even children…really he has nothing left him except his body (widower can choose to remain in his late wife's household till he remarries, though his position is not comfortable there). Such a wretched man collects some timber and makes a small hut for himself, though sometimes lads who sympathize with him help him to build it. Unless he finds some woman to marry he has to endure this miserable lonely life, while often in the same village his former wife is living in a well-built house with her children and her matrilineal relatives as before. It is really a pitiful picture to see such a man, aged and poor, living all alone. [128-129]

Studying Khasi matriliny then becomes a project of pointing out structural flaws in the matrilineal system with the assumption that men's attitudes, emotions, practices etc. itself remain constant even though they were raised in a significantly different world where gender and kinship were possibly imagined, practiced and negotiated differently.

Further, an analysis of the content that Nakane selects to write about reveals not just a definite patrilineo-patriarchal bias, but also an implicit invisiblization of internal variations and hierarchies. So while she details the "wretched" situation a widowed/divorced man, who does not have a mother or a sister, finds himself in (since structurally speaking he won't have a home to return to), she doesn't concern herself with

the plight of a similarly placed daughter, particularly if she is from an impoverished family, which does not possess the means to acquire or maintain "ancestral property". Coming from a patrilineo-patriarchal worldview, where a man's authority over his nuclear family is practically divinely sanctioned (the role of Christianity in the shaping of contemporary Khasi gender ideologies and practices is crucial here and will be discussed at length later) Nakane, like other social chroniclers before her, is primed to look for conflict between a woman's husband and her maternal uncle, which according to her makes the husband's life "extremely uncomfortable," precisely because it is what would be expected from a patrilineal perspective. So moved is she by this that she formulates an entire set of gradations around varying (structural) circumstances which would determine when the father's authority is most severely challenged or then when the marriage bond is most stable. So by her account then the most fragile marital relationship would be between a *kñi* (oldest brother/maternal uncle who has a role of authority to play in his *ïing*) and the *khadduh* (youngest daughter who inherits responsibilities to her family along with the property), and the most successful marriage would be one between a "non-heiress" and a "non-authority" male. This is what she writes about the latter scenario:

> In such a marriage the children love and obey their father. The management of his acquired property will be taken over by his son and the property will be handed over to his daughter. Thus the paternal authority is as well established in this form of domestic family, as in a patrilineal family. However, the great difference from a patrilineal case is that the husband/father status is not permanent as the authority of the family. Theoretically he exercises it in the absence of a male adult member of his wife's iing (actually founded by his contribution), in other words, till his son has grown up. In the next generation this will form an established iing in which the husband of his youngest daughter will suffer again. [129]

Here we find not only a direct comparison to the patrilineal way of life but a fairly explicit ethnocentric position, which is unable to account for the fact that for a matrilineal man it might be just as, if not more important for his nieces and nephews to "love and obey" him as for his biological children to do so. Nakane argues that the latter type of arrangement is the most desirable since it comes the closest to the patrilineal model. It proves to be the most successful type of family she posits (following Audrey Richard) since it is at a greater physical remove from the main *ïing*, thus allowing the father to effectively govern his family with least interference from his in-laws, particularly the maternal uncle.

In brackets here she casually inserts something that is actually a key part of her discussion, which is the ignominy that despite contributing materially and financially to his wife's *ïing* (in this case his own home), a man does not have complete control over it and that it continues to belong to his wife's clan and will in theory go down to his daughters. Nakane is arguing that the system is set up to fail men (as fathers); even in this ideal scenario (as opposed say to a marriage with the *khadduh*) where the father is loved and respected because of his overt contributions to the family, the next male in his position (as the non-clan male), i.e. the husband of his youngest daughter, is going to "suffer again" as is ordained by the social structure. At no point does Nakane try to grapple with what masculinity might mean from within the logic of matriliny – men are necessarily compromised within such a system, simply because a Khasi father does not enjoy the same 'rights' that a patrilineal father does. This position must be recognized as the direct antecedent to contemporary claims that Khasi fathers are merely "breeding bulls" with no role to play within their family of procreation, but are in fact subjected to

shame and suffering in that space. In fact a leader of one of the men's group that I spoke to drew on this concept forwarded by Nakane above, saying that he would tell his friends provocatively that he considers himself to be equal to his father-in-law. He described with amusement the shock his friends would express ("He's a father-figure, how can you say that…?"), but the point that he's trying to make is that as men who have married into the same clan they are disenfranchised in exactly the same ways – "he has no power whether to sell the house or keep it [since it belongs to his wife even though he has lived in it for decades], he has no decisive power at all. Nor do I as a person who's married into the house. I have no power to poke my nose into a decision of the house. In that way it makes Bah August equal to me, because I have no power and neither does he. He is as good as I am, or as weak as I am," he finished on a sad note.

In a sense Nakane takes the patrilineal bias already evident in the work of Gurdon and builds heavily upon it. In fact even as she engages some of Gurdon's claim in her writing she strikingly omits referencing a key point that Gurdon makes on this subject (which was oft-quoted to me by supporters of Khasi matriliny):

> Notwithstanding the existence of the matriarchate, and the fact that all ancestral property is vested in the mother, it would be a mistake to suppose that the father is a nobody in the Khasi house. It is true that the kni is the head of the house, but the father is the executive head of the new home, where after children have been born to him, his wife and children live with him. It is he who faces the dangers of the jungle and risks his life for his wife and children. In his wife's clan he occupies a very high place, he is second to none but u kni, the maternal uncle, while in his own family circle a father and husband is nearer to his children and his wife than u kni. The Khasi saying is, "u kpa uba lah ban iai, u kni uba tang ha ka iap ka im,"which may be translated freely as, "the father bears the heat and burden of the day, the maternal uncle only comes when it is a question of

> life or death." The Khasi father is revered not only when living but also after death as U thawlang, and special ceremonies are performed to propitiate his shade. [Gurdon 1907:79]

While Nakane deviates from Gurdon in not acknowledging the role of the father in any real/positive terms, she follows him methodologically in advancing an account of the Khasi family that is apprehended in purely typological terms (even as she attempts to be more detailed). Though their goals are different – Gurdon wishes to write a "comprehensive account" of Khasi sociology while Nakane is upfront in her interest in a comparative study between the Garos and Khasis – they both converge in their preference for outlining the structural nodes along which matriliny/social life is being organized with only passing references to ethnographic stories/encounters that might highlight aspects of people's actual lives.

In her provocative book G. Arunima (2003) undertakes an ambitious engagement with the historical metamorphoses of *marumakkathayam* or matrilineal systems in the province of Malabar (a district of the colonial Madras Presidency), culminating in its legal abolition in the 20th century. Researching matrilineal systems in Kerala was impossible without encountering anthropological research on the subject and Arunima both draws upon and takes issue with it. She points out that the work of anthropologists like Kathleen Gough, C. J. Fuller and Melinda Moore was based on fieldwork conducted in the 50s and later, which was after the legal amendments enabling the dissolution of the matrilineal properties had already been mobilized. These changes were really important and yet, she argues, anthropologists have not taken them seriously in compiling and analyzing their data. Instead they have, through their observations, abstracted concepts about what matrilineal kinship means and entails in colonial Malabar. This work, she

argues, has resulted in the construction of an "ideal type" of Nayar matriliny – normative formulations of matrilineal kinship which are excellent for cross-cultural comparisons but highly inadequate to any attempt at "understanding the social history of colonial Malabar."

This is a particularly insidious predicament because, as she highlights, Gough's 'ideal-type' for example (based only on information from south Malabar), has been taken up as the 'blueprint' for Nayar matriliny even by historians and other scholars studying Nayars across the colonial rule. She stresses the importance of recognizing and tracking the significant differences between matrilineal systems across time and regions in this context. Even today the Nayars are most commonly associated with matriliny in Kerala, invisibilizing the numerous other communities that have also had a matrilineal past. K. Saradamoni's book *Matriliny Transformed: Family, Law and Ideology in Twentieth Century Travancore* (1999) provides fairly elaborate descriptions of these communities, pointing to the fact that matriliny as a system was followed by almost half the population of the region (predominantly present day Kerala, but also from parts of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka) spanning diverse caste, class and religious groups.

We will return to the Kerala example subsequently but in this chpater I have drawn on Arunima's work to argue that there is a serious problem in trying to understand social relations solely in structural terms particularly when the structures are not being studied on their own terms but necessarily through the patrilineal filter. The anthropological mode of studying Khasi society has, to my mind, been particularly insidious, in that it has been instrumental in molding people's understandings of themselves through two skewed lenses – by emphasizing the patrilineal-outsider gaze,

and in promoting a static, structure-based mode of apprehending their own social realities. The latter has had an enormous impact on people's way of thinking where, in public discourse in Shillong today, there is an inordinate reliance on identity categories like man, woman, *khadduh* (youngest daughter), *kñi* (maternal uncle), tribal, *dkhar* (outsider) and so forth and it is exclusively along these lines that politics are being mobilized.

Rather than looking at problems within the home for instance as being products of what social class one belongs to, whether there have been inter-faith marriages, what kinds of personalities inhabit that space, how children are being raised, what hardships are being dealt with and so forth, and then trying to understand if these map on to social patterns related to structural issues, there is a tendency (harking back to colonial and colonial-style accounts) to first identify patterns and then to check whether individual examples bolster these claims. Strikingly in Khasi public discourse, the only individual voices that seem to circulate are those of a few men/groups of men who (echoing Gurdon and Nakane) are speaking out against the structural flaws emerging out of Khasi matriliny, particularly in its contemporary moment as it collides against both Christian patrilineo-patriarchal values and modern, global hegemonic masculinities. These will come up for detailed analysis in Chapter 5.

Chapter 3

Matriliny Matters: Performance and the Colonial Contemporary

> Anthropology, in my view, is a sustained and disciplined inquiry into the conditions and potentials of human life. Yet generations of theorists, throughout the history of the discipline, have been at pains to expunge life from their accounts, or to treat it as merely consequential, the derivative and fragmentary output of patterns, codes, structures or systems variously defined as genetic or cultural, natural or social.
>
> Tim Ingold *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (2011)

In my conversation late one evening, with Bah Wallam Lynrah, an elderly gentleman from Malki, I became alerted to a slightly different way of thinking about matriliny. We were sitting in the outer room of his house, fortified with tea and *jingbam* (Khasi snacks), while his grandchildren played noisily outside. He wished to impress upon me the deep interconnections between the Khasi religion and matriliny. Rolling his R's (particularly when he would say 'great grandmother') and inserting dramatic pauses as a storyteller might, he explained:

> This matrilineal system is based not only on the social structure but also on the religious, because the indigenous religion is very much bound with the family. I think like Hindus also, religion is a family matter, not a social matter. Christianity is social in nature. In the Khasi religion we have the family and generally the religious ceremonies used to be performed from time to time. There is certain kinds of religious ceremonies… say if somebody is sick, suffering from some disease,

> there will be some sacrifice to be performed. When we talk about religious performance or religious rites, there are those being done by the family. Family doesn't mean individual families. They are those have been bound together by the great grandmother…great grandmother say four five generations or even more. They will be one unit. So there they used to do this religious ceremony, they call it *thep mawbah*, where the bones will be collected from different places, even gents when they have got married somewhere, their bones will not be left, they will be brought to the mother's place, that great grandmother's, and put there. I don't know has anyone told you this – there are three important persons in the Khasi family – one is the great grandmother, this is *Iawbei*, the other one is the great grandfather, he is known as *Thawlang*, and then the great uncle, maternal uncle, he is *Suidnia*. So these are the main persons referred to whenever they have to perform the religious things. And then all those bones brought together and a grand function will be there. Those relatives, not only those belonging to that family, but those who are related by marriage you know, their children, their male members, they will come… as a mark of respect…And the one living…the great grandmother might already be dead, but the youngest daughter of the family, she is the one recognized and have all those things done, so she'll be thought as bringing them all to live together again.

In this fragment of the stories he told me, various aspects of Khasi matriliny come to the fore. One of the first few things you learn from any book about Khasi matrilineal kinship is the way in which society is broken up into *kurs* or clans and each *kur* is divided into numerous *kpohs* or wombs.[21] So while there might be two Diengdohs who live in different parts of the state, and can trace no common blood relationship they still, on the basis of fictitious consanguinity, consider themselves to be the progeny of a single great grandmother from whom the Diengdoh clan issued forth. Bah Wallam highlights how for Khasis, the family or the *ïing* (literally house) is not limited to the nuclear or immediate

[21] For more contemporary accounts of Khasi matriliny see Bareh (1997), Nongkynrih (2002), Nongbri (2003. 2008, 2014), Rynjah (2009)

family, but consists of all those people who draw their lineage back to an ancestral mother *Ka Iawbei Tynrai*. It is interesting that he begins talking about these central facets of Khasi matriliny by asking rhetorically if I had already been told about the three key figures in the Khasi family. This reveals a consciousness of his role as an informant to me (an outsider), but also perhaps of his preapprehension that being interested in matriliny, I have likely already received this information. His way of telling me "there are three important persons," and "so these are the main persons," suggests the pedagogic tone that is appropriate for a student of matriliny, indexing not only concrete information on the subject, but also a mode of apprehending what Khasi matriliny is. In this way he aligns himself with an anthropological or structural conception of matriliny as a recognizable form of kinship, which for Khasis has certain distinctive features.

But another vein runs prominently through his speech, and that is his suggestion that matriliny is in fact fundamentally bound up with *Ka Nïam Khasi* or the indigenous religion. One aspect of this is a deeply political one, exposing the rift between Khasis who follow the *Nïam Khasi* and those who have converted to Christianity (the majority). Many of the former group believe that in order to truly be Khasi you need to believe in and live according to the indigenous religion, while Christians often feel that their religious beliefs in no way hinder them from being a true Khasi. While this is definitely a crucial dynamic playing out from within Khasi society, I'd like to suggest that what Bah Wallam is highlighting goes deeper. In pointing out the rootedness of Khasi matriliny in religion he displaces an understanding of it as a mere manifestation of "social structure."

But much like kinship, religion too is an anthropological category, so what might be gained by replacing one category with another? This objection hits straight at the heart

of the tension I am grappling with in the chapter – how does one push back against an analytical category that becomes so weighty that it erases the work that went into its very creation – developing a life of its own, divorced from the conditions of its possibility – without coming up against other conceptual categories? After all, all thinking happens in language, and in order to make sense of lived realities, we have to apprehend them through linguistic and conceptual abstractions. As David Valentine lucidly explains, categories "are linguistic tools which extract certain information, experiences, and feelings about ourselves and others from the stream of daily life for the purposes of making meaning about, and representing, ourselves and others. But the absorption of certain meanings by these terms is not a natural fact: it is the product of a constant, social reiteration (and contestation) of those meanings in a range of contexts…" (2007:31). As specific experiences are extracted and arranged under a discrete sign, not only is a new analytical category produced, but the experiences themselves develop new resonances, and new meanings accrue upon them; in that way too, categories don't merely represent 'natural facts' or pre-linguistic realities but are equally involved in their production and alteration. These mutualities or imbrications of reality and representation are often neglected particularly when categories become reified, and construed as cause rather than an effect of the ongoing relationship between everyday practices and human efforts to make sense of them.

In highlighting Bah Wallam's invocation of religion my purpose is not to endorse another category as a superior explanatory framework, or suggest that the two are not interrelated. Rather I'm interested in what he enables by decoupling kinship from 'social structure' (even as he recognizes that relationship as a meaningful one) and nudging it

towards another domain, one that is manifested (in his explication) through everyday practices. One of the things I urge us to do in this chapter is to consider kinship from outside an exclusively structural framework, finding its expression or echo in fleeting and mundane lived realities, in automatic behaviors, ritualized actions and subconscious, barely thought decisions or interactions, so as to differently understand how social life is both rearranged and replicated, while also being attentive to the broader trends of variation and the more subtle often whimsical changes instituted by individuals or individual families.

Within the realm of religion Bah Wallam emphasizes the role of religious performances – rites, ceremonies, ritual enactments and so forth – gesturing to the routine and quotidian ways in which Khasi matriliny plays out. Not only major clan events like the *thep mawbah,* but also everyday occurrences, like someone in the family falling sick, which necessitates the enactment of specific rituals, maybe a sacrifice, and it is in these everyday practices also that we can catch a glimpse of the matrilineal life of the Khasis. In the physical absence of the great grandmother at a clan function, it is noteworthy that family members look at and connect affectively with the youngest daughter not only as someone organizing the event because of her location within the family structure, but also as a representative, a symbol of their ancestress, who engenders deep bonds and attachments between relations, which are fostered by the communal performance of Khasi rites and ceremonies.[22]

In the first part of this chapter, then, I turn to some of the everyday practices through which kin relations are made and unmade on the ground in Shillong, and which

[22] Even though the Khasi majority no longer follows the indigenous religion, many of the customs and rituals, albeit in syncretic or selective ways, continue as a significant part of everyday life.

implicitly or explicitly problematize anthropological and structural accounts of Khasi matriliny. I begin trying to unravel the solidity of matriliny by looking at routine aspects and enactments of relationships where the 'category' doesn't have that shaping force. In the second half of this chapter I analyze the ways in which matriliny has come to be conflated with Khasi group identity by members of the tribe and the implications that follow from it. One of the consequences of placing kinship in the crossfire of debates around (sub)national identity is the production of a different order of 'denizens,' construed as disloyal subjects, but who in fact enable a turning of the modernity/tradition dynamic on its head through which we have the beginnings of a new/alternative ground of thinking or producing 'knowledge' about the Khasis – a much more complex, local-specific knowledge, and one that is very different from the modes discussed in the previous chapters.

Outside the Front Door, Inside a Social Structure

I was with Esther Warjri, a close friend who often rescued me from days (of which there were several) when all my 'engagements' fell through, leaving me disappointed and downcast. We were driving around the city in endless loops, listening to music silently. It was already dark, the traffic had eased up and most people had returned home. We watched the stragglers hurrying about, diving into taxis, or buying last minute things from street shops. Esther remembered that she needed to pick up a couple of CDs from one of her fellow musicians, so we headed toward his house, which was in Lachumiere. An old friend of hers, Paul had got married a couple of years ago and moved in with his wife into her family home. We pulled over right outside his house and Esther called him on the phone asking him to come out with the discs. We just had to wait for a

couple of minutes when Esther started to put the car in first gear saying she was going to go up ahead a bit and stop there. Esther was often nervous and fidgety those days and watching her jerky actions would sometimes trigger my own anxieties. Pegging her move as yet another sign of restlessness I found myself quickly annoyed. We were on a narrow lane, but there wasn't any traffic and moreover we were waiting in the car, so I asked her testily what the need was to move. Pointing to a sign I hadn't noticed up on the big black gate in front of us that said 'no parking in front of gate' she responded in a matter of fact tone:

> No, it doesn't look good *mo*? We should follow their instructions – it's his wife's house after all. If it was his place *toh ym lei lei* (then no problem), but this is his in-laws [*sic*] so we should behave properly.

Along with contrition for my irascible behavior and embarrassment about the lapse in my observational skills I was overcome by a feeling that I was unexpectedly encountering a learning moment in my research. The draw of classical anthropology is a strong one, and I found that I too had partly internalized the imperative to produce knowledge that could be recognized 'as such,' especially as this knowledge was valued by many of my interlocutors in the field. This often translated into a two-pronged effort – on the one hand an attentiveness to kinship structures as elaborated in the work discussed in the previous chapter and a genuine interest in both checking the veracity of the existing knowledge and building on it, and on the other an investment in the possible contingencies of that knowledge but also in the kinds of assumptions that underlay the questions being asked and the circumstances under which that body of knowledge was being constituted.

What Esther said in that moment however really underscored the point that kinship was more than structural principles in a way that even seemed to be in excess of the structuralist-deconstructionist debate, which pivots on the question of the integrity of kinship structures given that reality is messy and people often fashion kin relations in personalized and sometimes unruly ways. Sahlins for instance dismisses the deconstructionist critique of kinship that proliferated from Schneider's now canonical postulations by arguing, "Many differences in practice may be as insignificant for the integrity of the kinship relation as variations in pronunciation are for the integrity of phonemes" (2011a:6). What I was forced to realize at this point however was that a discussion of kinship in terms of principles of descent, laws of inheritance, residence after marriage and so forth tends to miss out on lived realities, not only in terms of whether prescribed kinship norms are adhered to or not, but as more subtle iterations of the way in which kinship relationships are organized and how they play out in routine decisions like where to park one's car when waiting for a friend.

Or what to do when confronted with an unresponsive front door. When I first arrived in Shillong for the main segment of my fieldwork, I hadn't realized exactly how difficult it would be to find myself a small place to rent. The nicer hotels were prohibitively expensive (for an extended stay) and the more affordable ones were frankly dingy and dilapidated. All day I would hunt about for lodgings, scoping out hostel facilities (catering to the many undergraduates in the city), scanning newspapers for rental ads and then chasing up landladies and so forth, but nothing seemed to materialize. Even though one is tricked discursively into thinking of Shillong as a 'small town', a 'hill-station', I was struck then by its urbanity, its sprawl, and experienced the familiar

sensation of insignificance and solitude that accompanies wanderings in a big city. My friends there were concerned too, and I was secretly hoping that one of them would offer to open up their home to me.

I realized though that this was perhaps unrealistic of me. I had noted previously (to indulge shamelessly in a generalization), that the Khasis were a relatively private people, compared to most of the families I'd grown up around or other locals like the Nagas and the Mizos even. In a sense they reminded me of the white Minnesotans I encountered during my graduate studies in the US, distinguished for being perfectly nice, polite and helpful, but who held you somewhat at an arm's distance, especially if you were unrelated or an outsider. The Khasi expectation of privacy and respect for personal (and familial) space was always reciprocated however, which I appreciated greatly. So, for instance, I was never asked directly (even by my closer friends), for details about my life that might be considered delicate, no one ever showed up at my door unannounced, or gave me advice unsolicited.

Traditionally Khasi homes tend to have an outer room, where guests are plied with *kwai* (betel nut), tea or snacks and made to feel welcome. One didn't immediately get invited to a person's home. It often took a few meetings before such an invitation was extended. During one such early visit to my friend Hazel's home, we were sitting in the outer room and discussing all sorts of sundry things, when she got up and said she would bring us some lunch. Doing what I considered to be polite (and gender-appropriate), I sprung up, offering to go in with her to the kitchen and 'help out.' She looked startled and quickly ushered me back into my seat, saying it would be better if I waited for her there and that she would bring the food. I realized then that the space of this outside room was

a liminal one, where you were recognized as a person of some significance, but the threshold between the outer room and the inner space was perhaps a more sacred one, not to be traversed thoughtlessly and without an appeal.

Being confronted thus with people's reclusiveness (to return to the story of my homelessness) I finally felt desperate enough to just come out and ask if any of my friends had a spare room that they might consider renting out to me for a few months. One person obliged. And in those few months that followed I struck up with her what I considered to be a deep friendship. I hadn't anticipated it, perhaps due to our age difference (maybe around thirty years), but we became close nevertheless. We shared certain ways of thinking and being but still we were more different than alike, and yet I grew exceedingly fond of her. Our time together had a quiet intensity that I think (or at least would like to think) she too enjoyed, but at any rate she taught me a great many things, both through explicit instructions and more inadvertently in our everyday interactions with each other, with other family members and the outside world. Anthropologists (classically speaking) were unable to 'study' smaller-scale societies by retaining their status as complete outsiders and were often obliged to be 'adopted' by a family (thus being bound more formally by the existing social norms) with whom over time they developed bonds. I couldn't help note the difference in my situation, where I was accepted into this home as a friend/paying guest, but when the time came to leave, I found myself yearning for the status of a family member, who would not have to leave and for whom the special intimacies might be reserved.

And we did share many intimacies. An early morning (7am was early by my nocturnal standards, but most of my Khasi friends were up by 5:30-6:00 if not sooner)

ritual of washing the teapot with warm water before steeping the leaves and talking about our plans for the day over breakfast, awkwardly (we were invariably a little late) sliding into a church pew with her and her daughter every Sunday and analyzing the sermon (among other things) over coffee right after, longish drives with her daughter and future son-in-law, through the golf course and beyond, or to Mylliem once in a while to eat their famous smoked meat and *doh shaiñ* (meatballs), following her through the endless maze that Motphran market is, learning what to find where and watching closely for appropriate ways to bargain, climbing the roof to pick oranges in the winter and eating them later in the evenings huddled over a space heater, playing scrabble or then hovering around her as she cooked, making notes while being teased about how even if I didn't finish my dissertation I could at least bring out a book on Khasi recipes.

Happily for me, the tentativeness that accompanied the initial invitation into Evaliza's home faded away quickly, and I found myself being ushered even more generously into her life, her extended family, her social networks, but also her everyday routines, her intellectual concerns, her leisure activities and so forth. Everyday with her, in her world, I learned enormously, even when I had nothing specific lined up, and not just about things research related, or even more broadly about Khasi life, but about myself, about bonds and feelings, about kinship, relationships, belongingness and so forth. When it came time for me to leave (she was going to Calcutta for a month, maybe longer, to be with her daughter who was expecting a baby and anyway our arrangement was only supposed to be temporary), my heart sank mightily and I felt a little like the baby bird being pushed out of its nest, to find its own way. In fact she adroitly made a case for why it would be good for my research to take up my own place as I tried hard to

swallow the logics she offered up. The goodbye was emotional, even though I was only moving to another locality not terribly far away. I resumed the house hunt process in advance though, knowing how difficult it was this time, and was experiencing similar troubles.

One evening Evaliza took me along to visit someone she knew who had rooms they were renting to students to see if there was any scope for me to find a place. When we got done there (nothing was available) we decided to pay a quick visit to a distant relative of hers who lived right there, but we hadn't called in advance and didn't know if they would be there. It was here that we encountered the aforementioned front door. It was half-open and even as we knocked no one responded. Having lived around Evaliza and her sister next door, I was used to people at each other's doors calling out "*Mano*?" or "*Mano ba don*?" (variations on 'who's there?') so I asked her – why not call out "*Mano ba don ha iing*?" (a slightly more formal 'who is there at home?'). She quietly shook her head saying that was a liberty that only close family members take and that it was not proper in this context. Somewhat subdued I waited at the door, watching her cut across the side of the house to see if she could spot someone in the back, as the question of what (all) kinship is turned around in my head.

Here too, it occurred to me, ideas and understandings of how people are related to each other are summoned up much more frequently than we perhaps realize or are able to keep a track of and have real/tangible implications for the minutiae of everyday life. Where routine and seemingly unimportant considerations, where to place oneself, whether to follow someone or not, decisions around verbal utterances, volume and tenor of voice to be adopted and so forth are made against the backdrop of kinship relationships

and norms. The missteps I took as an outsider, as I attempted to fit myself into this social matrix, in fact made apparent the enormous work, the endless preconscious calculations around relational expectations that must necessarily be made in order to effectively navigate civic life.

The concept of in-law formality steering Esther's parking decisions, Hazel's polite declining of my exuberant offer to help in the kitchen, and my friend and host's sense of propriety at a relative's front door should not however be pinned down merely as aspects of Khasi kinship/matriliny. They are simultaneously an expression of other forms of practical sociality that cannot be circumscribed within kinship per se, such as the Khasi emphasis on *akor-burom* (respect/propriety), a "phrase [which] covers the rules of etiquette and good manners" (Nongkynrih 2002:56) that one is socialized into as children in the *ïing* (home), which has in turn been one of the primary sites of an elaboration of Khasi kinship. This is to say that it is important to note that an elaboration of social life under simplistic conceptual rubrics can be tricky since social realities often transcend the specific themes within which we attempt to apprehend them. Maila Stivens, whose valuable research explores the relationship between modernity and the lives of matrilineal Negeri Sembilan women of Malaysia, calls into question the frequent tendency to take the concept of matriliny at face value, as having a substantive and concrete core of meaning. She adds further "it would be more productive to deconstruct it [matriliny] into a number of discourses and practices relating particularly to property relations and ideologies of descent" (1996:13) Understanding matriliny becomes even more interesting to my mind, if one further decouples it from the structures of descent and property; no

longer can one be sure where to look for matriliny. And if it shows up rather in unexpected places then how can we think afresh about what matriliny is?

The tension inhering within matriliny surfaced clearly one afternoon when I was tagging along with Pynsuklin Khonglam, a talented, somewhat reclusive Khasi graphic designer in her early twenties, and we were walking up to St. Edmund's College where she had an errand to run. We had got to know each other fairly well, and I would often share with her thoughts and questions about my research. Pynsuk seemed especially peaceful that afternoon, humming a tune currently popular across the city as I pestered her with questions about whether she 'felt' matrilineal and if yes, then in what ways and so forth. Her reply was pointedly patient:

> Being matrilineal, it's not everything you know… it's like for you…would you…do you remember all the time that you're human? So in one day how many times do you think - hey I'm not a bird…or I did this *because* I'm a human being…Here too, we have our lives, so many things to do…each time I go to visit my (maternal) uncle, I'm not thinking – ah this is my *kñi,* so I am matrilineal – I go because that's what my brother and I always do, because we like him, and he is very nice and intelligent…So if you ask me, yes I'll remember and of course then I'll say we are matrilineal, but otherwise *teh,* who keeps thinking about it?

It was not something terribly novel that she said, but her articulation was striking nevertheless. She was not detracting from the reality of her being matrilineal, and neither was she saying that it wasn't significant per se. However, just as one remembers the fact of one's humanness occasionally (and given our identities as postcolonial subjects and hers as indigenous it is not insignificant that she picked humanity to reference both commonality and obviousness), when one visits a zoo, or while watching a movie about the Holocaust perhaps, being matrilineal (in the sense of a consistently experienced

identity category) wasn't a constant preoccupation for many of my interlocutors. Put differently, the solidity of matriliny (as a kind of weighty category required to identify and analyze the Khasis) melts away in these everyday moments she seemed to suggest, where people's behaviors, their habits or routines, their emotional attachments are not constantly punctuated with the awareness of a larger conceptualization of kinship or identity categories.

Further, I couldn't help notice that her response was also indexing a certain kind of fatigue with my interest in this aspect of her social world. With what she chose to say in response to my questions (*viz*. it's not everything) she was inadvertently alleging that the very concept of Khasi matriliny comes most specifically into focus when poked at from outside, or when an insider stops and thinks about their life from an external perspective, perhaps through an academic lens. In that sense her comment resonates strongly with Jason's observation that I cite at the start of the previous chapter. While matriliny as an anthropological category (and here the difference between matriliny and kinship that I have been using interchangeably becomes explicit) is premised on a fundamental difference and gets cordoned off at the outset for being unique, the people inhabiting that world don't inherently 'feel' that difference all the time. Even if we recognize ourselves to be a 'minority' we still feel 'normal' to ourselves, and the difference we have to negotiate is the difference the outside has ascribed to us (thus the overly patient "it's not everything you know").

Particularly in an outside-dominated relationship our existence might 'become' that difference, making it the only path to something specific to us, as will become apparent in what follows. What does it mean to study that? What can this tell us about

how anthropology works? What is the role of the category or language in framing that difference and when you see that framing as transparently as possible then what else can you see? Yet categories never simply fall aside, leaving behind the 'secret' real – a category neither fully determines, nor acts as a superficial skin to be peeled off but, perhaps like sexual identity, emerges in multiple performances (Butler 1993, 2006). For the Khasis, as Pynsuk's comments highlight, any attempt at examining their matrilineality has somehow become overdetermined, perhaps because of its 'remarkable' nature, and because it seems to have become the pivot upon which Khasi identity moves, both locally, but also nationally and internationally. In the next section I will explore this third paradigm from within which Khasi matriliny is being articulated.

Matriliny: The Recalcitrant Modern

> It's not patriarchal…we don't have to follow the patriarchal system because the rest of the world is having it. We should be really happy because we have something that is unique, not like the rest of the world…if you take away the one thing that we have in this society and that's the matrilineal society, then you know we might as well not call ourselves Khasi anymore. It is that simple.

This was Ellie Shullai, an ambitious and headstrong entrepreneur in her late thirties, expressing plainly what I believe to be the majority Khasi sentiment regarding matriliny (like some others, she too used patrilineal and patriarchal interchangeably). For many, depending on the social circles they moved in, the very suggestion of decoupling matriliny from Khasi was ludicrous and impractical. It mostly happened that they didn't interact very much with people who considered or brought up for debate the idea of Khasi society being anything but matrilineal. Others reflected more seriously on the problems being flagged by concerned parties but concluded ultimately, as Ellie did, that

"we need to find different solutions" since being matrilineal was an integral aspect of Khasi identity and simply could not and should not be dispensed with. What makes something as seemingly intimate as kinship a subject of such powerful and portentous debate in Shillong?

Kinship can scarcely be sundered from structure altogether. The tools and tropes spawned by social anthropologists in order to analyze kinship frameworks of various societies around the world have had an enormous impact on the way these communities cognitively apprehend their own social existence. As discussed earlier, in the Northeast, the knowledge produced by 'scientific' disciplines like anthropology, linguistics etc. has been instrumental in shaping the self-understandings of indigenous communities and has gone hand in hand with the production and consolidation of their modern or contemporary identities, premised at heart on the notion of uniqueness and cultural difference. I have argued that anthropologists like Gurdon and Nakane (and more broadly colonial administrators and missionaries) did not simply record aspects of Khasi life; their selective (and in some instances problematic) recordings have in turn made a deep impression on how many Khasis today understand and analyze their own social structures and realities. As outlined in the previous chapter, colonial British policies and practices (which were adopted subsequently by the postcolonial Indian state and its Constitution) not only commissioned studies of each of these indigenous societies with an emphasis on their unique attributes, they also, as part of their "pacificatory" tactics, bestowed upon these "martial tribes" of the Northeast a fair amount of autonomy in administrative matters, cultural and economic protection from plains people and a sense of an inalienable territory that was to be the exclusive homeland of each of these communities.

Put differently, it is not a coincidence that the concept of ethnic nationalism has had the kind of currency it does among the hill-tribes of the Northeast, and even though most people in Meghalaya for instance would not endorse the principles and struggles of proscribed groups like the Hynñiewtrep National Liberation Council and the Garo National Liberation Army (fighting for separate nationhood for the Khasis and Garos respectively),[23] there very much exists a nuclear consciousness of the uniqueness of Khasi or Hynñiewtrep identity and a powerful and sustained concern for the future of the Khasi *jaitbynriew*. Further, in an international arena where indigenous people are increasingly asserting their voices and demanding rights, being tribal has accrued currency in the past few decades and within this context, being 'authentic' and 'traditional' becomes all the more crucial.[24] The uniqueness of matriliny tethers it more tightly to that which is construed as traditional and thus becomes a lynchpin around which many Khasi seek to have their identity congeal. It is against this complex backdrop that Ellie's exasperation ("we might as well not call ourselves Khasi anymore") needs to be understood. But concerns around the future of the tribe are necessarily tied to perceptions of its relationship to a certain understanding of time. David Pyngrope, a retired bureaucrat and church elder, responded thus to my request to explain what he believed to be the striking differences between when he was young and now:

> First thing, we lived…we were very simple then. We were simple people. But now life is little more complicated than those days. See, our days what we do, I told you, we have one hall, a cinema hall, Calvin cinema hall, where they showed movies, so they changed their movies every week. Twice a week, I still remember, every Wednesday and Saturday. So you see, we have our

[23] http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2014/06/07/10-militant-groups-active-in-state-cm/
[24] See Karlsson (2011) for a detailed account of the development of the 'traditional institutions movement'.

> meal, we have our dinner, we have our meal at home, after that we go to see the movie. Enjoy. Then come back and sleep. That used to be in our days. But now, today, now the youth of today, they have their meal, then come back home for the movie. (pause) You got my point? (pause) Our days we have the meal first then go out for the movie, now they go out for the meal, then come back home for the movie. Just the opposite, don't you understand? Means, we have the movie outside, the food is at home. But now, the food is outside, the movie is at home. What I mean to say is that home was still a home then, for us, movie is a part of outside enjoyment, this and that, it remains outside only. It just remains outside. When we come home, home is a home. But now it's changed. What used to be outside for us has come into our bedroom, and our drawing room. It has entered your bedroom. So you think it should not influence you? It will definitely influence you. For us, when we came home we forget, but for them no they stay home. Because meals, which is the hearth, this is the attachment with the family. We had that attachment. Before eight we must reach home, we must be back home. But now it's not that anymore. Now they started going out at eight, for their meal. So that is not there anymore, life has become complicated, the influence from outside is too much.

Life in Shillong has changed a lot. A lot of people commented to this effect in differing contexts. But this particular example really resonated with me since it invokes the practice of eating, the collective sharing of meals around a fire in the kitchen (as the story goes), and the sense of intimacy, of family life that it fostered. We have already encountered the significance of the kitchen in a previous section, and Khasi folktales also suggest a special, almost sacred quality ascribed to that space. The kitchen intrigued me, because it made an appearance, often a vital one, in practically every tale I was told about familial discord, or concerns about anticipated problems. Complaints about the discomfort experienced by married men in their new homes, particularly those married to the *khadduh*, tended to coalesce around the kitchen, which was invariably the stronghold of the mother-in-law. Some of the recurring themes I encountered: new/unfamiliar style

of cooking ("too much oil," "not spicy enough"), choice of things to be cooked ("in my house, we ate pork *moh,* almost everyday"), familial eating norms ("they talk talk nonstop"), lack of knowledge or consideration of favorite foods, allergies and so forth ("she knows I can't eat *dohkha* (fish) but…"), but also stories about the loss of freedom – their ability to come and go as they please, cook their own meals, to eat late, be inebriated, make a mess – these underscored their feeling of being out of place, "an outsider inside (what was supposed to be) my own home," being under the constant scrutiny of the mother-in-law, some of whom would insist on staying up because "she can't sleep at night if there is a dirty plate in the sink", or other in-laws who were more willing to indulge their sons but complained frequently to the daughters about their husbands. A male informant described his plight with dramatic touches – "When I become hungry also I can't go and open the larder like I used to do in my mother's house. I'm hungry, open, what's there? Eat. Here, go tell her [wife] [in whispery, hesitant voice] eh, is there anything? Feeling little hungry. She'll go and open and give me." Many young wives spoke about this unmitigated tension (and their own uncomfortable position as go-between) around the kitchen too and some expressed their fantasy of having a separate kitchen unit, which would secure their needs and expectations as a couple – both for autonomy and privacy.

Loss, of a past way of life, of prior attachments to family, kinship communities, of moral philosophies and religious cosmologies, has perhaps been a prosaic trope in narratives about the onset of modernity, yet it was striking to me that this observation, about the Khasis having become more "outside"-oriented was expressed in this manner, drawing on a very core "traditional" idea that, far from losing its relevance, has (in my

understanding) become the renewed site of cultural conflict and debate. Layers of meaning have been written upon this site – a literal space where families congregated over meals, a private domain built upon the exclusion of outsiders, a culturally specific symbol, a metaphor for Khasi culture and values, as well as a fraught site, a contested space, where a son-in-law (for instance) might come up against the authority of his wife's mother, bringing families and their uniquely established rituals and practices up against each other, or where generations might have ongoing clashes about acceptable and desirable ways of life – and even as older meanings got erased, their traces continue to be visible, making their presence felt, and further, reorganizing and recreating meanings, creating shifts and juxtapositions with each click of the kaleidoscope.

Binary ways of thinking (past/present, tradition/modernity, stability/chaos etc.) seem to abound in social analysis and public debate or discourse, but I submit that the metaphor of a palimpsest enables us to better attend to the co-existence of complex and contradictory social realities. This tension and complexity, where that which has been effaced continues to exert itself upon us; even as it has seemingly vanished it continually intrudes, resists a facile dismemberment of time into past, present and future, upon which (often charged) accounts of social realities/change/crisis etc. can then be directly mapped. Understanding the hearth (in this instance) as not only being a structural entity, a univocal symbol of Khasi life (which is either flourishing or under threat), but also simultaneously a living, breathing space, where individuals and groups commingle and sometimes collide owing to differences connected to personal eccentricities, familial preferences or generational habits, perhaps gives us pause before jumping to larger, more

systemic narrativizations and generalizations, or then to apocalyptic forecastings of social disintegration and catastrophe.

The ubiquity of this analytic modality (within civil society in Shillong particularly) is undeniable however, and unpacking the attendant anxieties is a challenging task. At heart is the vulnerability experienced by a historically subordinated and isolated 'tribal' community in its ongoing encounter with modernity and its vicissitudes. This is perhaps the sentiment that Bah David is trying to convey in saying "the influence from outside is too much." It is important to note that these external factors are disparate, not unitary in scope and value, and delving into them arguably disrupts the simplistic formulation presented above (of a marginalized 'tribe' floundering in modern times), without of course entirely discounting it.

Forces of modernity are constantly shape shifting, sometimes showing up as unwelcome outsiders – *dkhar* entrepreneurs, laborers recruited for state development projects, mining and other corporate endeavors – threatening both the matrilineal and tribal ethos of the city, or then materializing as newer, contemporary value systems, aspirations, priorities, dreams and activities that wrestle with more established and traditional ideas about what the Khasi moral code and worldview is about. In this section I endeavor to parse some of the elements that infuse Khasi matriliny with the political energy that it so feverishly contains, in order to consider how it come to be that a category like matriliny, which shows itself in such different ways and means such different things to different people, become the focus or the pivot upon which the identity, and indeed the very "future" of a community has come to rest.

Examining deployments of 'modernity' in Khasi society provides fresh insights into the formation of postcolonial subjectivity. These have been discussed in a rich and sophisticated body of literature on modernity, which has elaborated on identity formation of 'third world' populations, who in unique ways 'vernacularize' or 'indigenize' the precepts of civil society and strategically maneuver through local, national and global worldviews and discourses of modernity. It is certainly productive to take seriously Frederick Cooper's critique of these academic formulations of modernity, which have replicated the Eurocentric appropriation of the genealogy of modernity by linking it to a singular rise of capitalism, individualism and imperialism, and attempt to "listen to…how [modernity] is being used and why… [rather than] shoehorning a political discourse into modern, antimodern or postmodern, or into 'their' modernity or 'ours'" (2005:115). This task of engaging modernity is central, not only as it gets invoked in multiple and strategic ways in the social field of Shillong, but also because it intersects in interesting ways with tribal status, family, gender and so on, creating newer configurations of the 'tribe.'

Tracking the oscillation of matriliny along the tradition-modernity spectrum is a useful exercise in the study of its instability or put differently, its dynamism. For those critical of Khasi matriliny, it becomes construed, echoing the theories of Bachofen, Engels (1977) and others, as a vestige of the past. The edge of this line of argumentation is razor-sharp – nobody knows better than a 'tribal' group from the Northeast what it means to be accused of being 'stuck in the past' when, in the present, they continue to have to defend themselves against stereotypes of barbarism, 'head hunting,' being in a 'state of nature' and so forth. While specifics of the problems with matriliny (along with its relationship to modernity) will be elaborated in a subsequent chapter, here it is perhaps

sufficient to note that the question of whether matriliny is compatible with a "modern" Khasi identity has long been put on the table for debate. People might choose to answer this question in different ways, but the investment in locating oneself (favorably) on this scale seems shared, with critical voices being few and far between. The allure of European modernity is powerful for most postcolonial subjects (perhaps directly proportional to their eliteness), and the Khasis are no exception. The slippery alignment of their matrilineal identity against the tradition-modernity binary raises the stakes, making it a subject of serious political import. I posit that the unique relationship of the Khasis with their 'mainland' Indian counterparts (and also perhaps with some of the other Northeast tribes) shapes the ways that they understand, imagine and plot the nature/scope of their own modernity.

Contra anti-matriliny groups many urban Khasi, both men and women, expressly linked the matrilineal system with a more gender equitable society. Even feminist voices that have been tirelessly demonstrating the patriarchal nature of Khasi society (like the NGO activists from the previous chapter), concede the relative privilege of Khasi women over women from 'mainland' India, which is notorious for being ultra-conservative and crushed under patriarchal ills like female infanticide, dowry deaths, gang rapes, acid throwing, the stripping and parading of women and so forth. Commenting on why it is unsurprising that patrilineal outsiders (starting from the early British observers) misrepresented the Khasi as matriarchal, sociologist Tiplut Nongbri writes:

> Given the cultural importance shown to women's reproductive role, their rights over property and domestic space, the relative freedom they enjoy in mixing with the opposite sex before marriage, absence of arranged marriage, high divorce and remarriage rates, and their active involvement in

> the production process, Khasi society defies sociological criteria such as the invisibility thesis or women's oppression, which are generally used to define female subordination. [2000:368]

Nongbri's work over the years has attempted to systematically dismantle the longstanding notion that Khasi women are invested with more power than Khasi men. Another sensibility was much more popular however – that in comparison with mainland India, which had to struggle (through various social reform movements) to mitigate gendered violence and injustice, Khasi society was definitely better off. Many of my informants would argue that when it comes to gender equality it came a little more naturally to the Khasis, who were, in terms of gender and sexual politics, structurally more proximal to what would be considered contemporary Western attitudes and norms. When I asked an informant whether her son had had a love marriage (I had found out that a couple of high profile marriages that had recently happened in Shillong had been arranged), she replied indignantly: yeah, yeah, it's all love no? We don't have arranged marriages…Who? Where? No way, no way! Maybe one odd…very, very few and that too only amongst the elite, but extremely, extremely rare." The freedom given to young Khasis to fall in love and choose their own mates is an example of the (urban/educated) Khasi conceptualization of themselves as fundamentally more liberal than their contemporaries from the plains.

This example is interesting because the popularity of love marriages is not understood as merely being produced by the encounter with the West (either colonial or contemporary), but as in fact having roots in their own indigenous customs (thus perhaps even predating Western modernity), where marriage could be initiated either by couples in love, or by their parents upon request from the couple (Bareh 1967). Many referenced

the 'traditional' custom (noted by Gurdon and others) whereby an unmarried couple would be considered by society to be married simply by making an announcement that they had become sexually involved. As one woman put it:

> See our system of getting married is also very different no, compared to others. Like you know in the Hindu marriage, the marriage is arranged, and it's done in a big manner, or if you go to a Christian society also, you do it well, but our way of getting married is like you sleep with a guy and you can proclaim to the world that he's your husband.

While narratives of (relatively) progressive/modern values and practices circulate in popular discourse they nevertheless warrant critical scrutiny. Some might argue that the adoption of Christianity brought with it a gradual but systemic transmutation of the original moral outlook of the Khasis, but these accounts are possibly subject to critiques similar to those made against historical revisionists like Ruth Vanita (2001) who attempt to demonstrate an openness towards alternative sexualities within precolonial Indian/Hindu culture that then gets erased by puritanical Victorian values and laws. Gendered double-standards are not absent among the Khasis (irrespective of their religion) for instance, where men known to have sexual experience are lauded, while such women might be referred to by the macabre phrase "*kha ïap saw,*" invoking the staleness associated with a dead fish that floats up to the surface of the water.[25]

Through my fieldwork I was less preoccupied with ascertaining the veracity of claims that Khasi society was more or less modern, than with noting the discursive and imaginative tropes that people drew on in order to make such claims and the stakes being delineated in the process. What seemed to dominate (among most of the people I spoke

[25] Again refer here to Nongbri (2000, 2003, 2008, 2014) for detailed explanations and analyses of the predominantly patriarchal ethos within Khasi society.

to) was the idea that Khasi culture (via matriliny) jibed better with globally acceptable and progressive norms around gender than what was possible in 'mainland' India. The lack of any stigma attaching to divorced, remarried or widowed women is seen as another marker, and of course the fact that Khasi women have uncontestable claim to their children and access to property, protection and emotional stability (since they are never required to associate too closely with the husband's family/clan) within the family gives them a structural status that is simply not available to patrilineal women.

These were all distinguishing features that marked them as more liberal and Westernized, and fundamentally different from the people of the plains, who in turn, largely ignorant of these histories and dynamics that shape how they themselves are being perceived, persist in their blanket appraisals of the Northeast tribes as backward and inferior. Khasis in Shillong, however, tend to construct their identity in relation to larger, more global paradigms, where both their unique history within the region (discussed in prior chapters) and their tribal, matrilineal culture dovetail, allowing them to see themselves mirrored in and reflective of progressive and/or Western ideas about gender and sexual expression particularly. In my conversations I was often pointed to the alignment of matrilineal values (in opposition to wider patriarchal/patrilineal mores across South Asia) with contemporary women's movements, and the increasing international acceptance of models of gender equality and sexual autonomy which, many felt, propelled the Khasis into what is idealized as a much more modern domain, in line with (and perhaps even foreshadowing) progressive Western values, attitudes and conventions.

State Interpellations and the Engendering of Khasi Purity

While metropolitan Khasis might be successful in affiliating themselves more closely (and at will) with various supra-national paradigms, the Indian state is nevertheless insistent in its hailing of the Khasi subject into the national fold. From within its logic the Khasis are apprehended primarily as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) – indigenous groups identified by the state as socio-economically disadvantaged – the provisions of whose administration are outlined in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which deals exclusively with many of the hill-tribal groups within the Northeast. One of the key interventions of this Schedule is to divide states into tribal areas (on the basis of the concentration of the population of individual Scheduled Tribes), each of which is designated as an autonomous district. If multiple STs reside within a single autonomous district there is a provision by which the Governor of the state might divide each district into autonomous regions. Autonomous districts and regions are run by District Councils and Regional Councils respectively, which are responsible for various administrative activities and are empowered to make laws on diverse matters from land allotment, forest management, agriculture and irrigation, to appointments of headmen, social customs, property inheritance, marriage and divorce. Further, these bodies have the power to constitute village councils or courts to enforce its laws, and serve as the only permissible court of appeal, with no other courts apart from the High Court or the Supreme Court having jurisdiction over these cases. They receive separate funding and also have the power to levy taxes, issue licenses for mineral extraction, as well as regulate businesses operated by people who are not a resident ST.

During the meetings leading up to the drafting of the Sixth Schedule a familiar debate raged between the assimilationists and the integrationists. The former argued against the setting up of Autonomous District Councils, designed to protect the "traditional" values and practices of hill-tribal societies, by characterizing them as a continuation of the colonial separatist mentality that risked turning the region into a 'Tribalstan.' Their desire for tribals to eventually be assimilated into non-tribal society drew however on imperialist ideas of a mainstream culture within which such marginal communities would be subsumed, which in turn was premised on ideas about the civilizational superiority of the dominant Hindu culture. Rejecting the cultural loss associated with such assimilationist moves were integrationists (key figures here being Rev. Nichols Roy and Gopinath Bordoloi) who argued not only for the importance of safeguarding the traditional institutions of the tribal societies, but also suggesting that it is precisely in adopting this stance (rather than risking further alienating these communities by forcing them to assimilate) that the hill-tribes could be allured by the newly-formed nation, thus *choosing* to integrate themselves into its fold. This logic was accepted and Autonomous District Councils were approved. But Sujit K. Dutta (2002), whose work I'm drawing on, argues that the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC), which was meant to preserve the traditional way of life for the Khasis, ended up supplanting existing local politico-cultural institutions and in fact undermined the work already being done by the Syiems (chiefs) of the twenty-five Khasi states.

The decision of the postcolonial nation however (in keeping with established British policies) to permit the hill-tribes of the Northeast the right to govern themselves according to their own customary laws, thus theoretically enabling them to preserve their

cultural heritage and ethnic identity, has had an enormous, wide-ranging impact on the lives of tribal people in the Northeast. Since these laws tend to be customary and variegated, many debates around their codification have proliferated in Meghalaya (with no concrete outcomes arguably). Coupled with the fact that STs within their "exclusive ethnic homelands" (Baruah 2005) enjoy Constitutional safeguards like reservations in government jobs, educational institutions and elected office, exclusive rights to own land, establish businesses (not permitted to 'outsiders'), relief from paying taxes and so forth, this makes for a framework where the stakes upon which tribal identity hinges are extraordinarily high. The KHADC for instance is entrusted with the responsibility of issuing ST certificates, and they have been fully empowered to set the parameters that determine who will be considered Khasi and who is to be excluded.

Here too matriliny is crucial. Tightly knit into Khasi political identity, matriliny has come to be understood as one of the principal "customary" institutions thus most in need of safeguarding. By contrast, the idea that matriliny is the chink in the armor of Khasi society, making it more prone to exploitation by outsiders (read *dkhars)*, has been in circulation for several decades now, and one could argue that it is primarily in response to this perception that the Khasi Social Custom of Lineage Act (1997) was passed, which came into effect as "law" after it received the Governor's assent in 2005. This was a landmark legislation, whose most crucial intervention arguably, is the setting down of concrete parameters that serve as a means of ascertaining whether a person is to be legally considered Khasi or not. Deviation from 'traditional' social norms around descent, nomenclature, inheritance etc., both by people ideologically espousing an anti-matrilineal stance but also individual aberrant cases, can now theoretically be legally

disciplined. Section 3(1) of the Act states that a person who is born of two Khasi parents will be considered a Khasi of the *kur* or clan of his mother. If however, the mother is Khasi and the father non-Khasi, then the child will *only* be considered Khasi if – i) they speak Khasi, ii) follow the matrilineal system of lineage, inheritance and so forth, iii) have not at any time renounced their Khasi status, iv) not adopted any personal laws of the non-Khasi father that are "incompatible" with Khasi personal laws and customs and finally v) have not lost or been deprived of their Khasi status by any competent court or judgment.

It is interesting to note that these stipulations are first formulated in the context of a child born of a Khasi mother and non-Khasi father and then also applied to the case of a Khasi father and a non-Khasi mother. If this latter is the case, the Act states that in order for the child to be considered Khasi, the above-mentioned criteria must be fulfilled "by the Khasi father and every such person", but the wording of the Act is less explicit here. It is left up to the customary and/or religious practices of the father's clan/*kpoh* whether the child be incorporated into his clan (not conceivable traditionally from within the logic of Khasi matriliny since children cannot be a part of the father's clan) or if s/he must adopt his mother's clan name, after a ceremony called *tang jait* where a non-Khasi woman takes up the clan name *Dkhar, Khar* or a variation of that and is thus formally incorporated into the Khasi fold.

Even in this explicit attempt to reconfirm traditional principles within the Lineage Act, we find the quiet and selective incorporation of practices that have become common in the contemporary context, bestowing upon them the legitimacy and legality solely reserved for that which is traditional. Of course as should be apparent here, only certain

practices are allowed to become part of this assemblage, and it is not a coincidence that these overlap with the needs of Khasi males, many of whom are unwilling to undergo the *tang jait* ritual and would prefer to give their children their name (if their clan agrees which is fairly common).

This move is perhaps also an acknowledgement of forceful arguments made by groups like the SRT and the Khasi Students Union who claim that children of a Khasi father and a non-Khasi mother are automatically Khasi, therefore making the *tang jait* redundant. The rationale behind this differential attitude is at heart a patriarchal one, which assumes that a non-Khasi or patrilineal mother (who relies on her husband for her own identity) would have no power, interest or even ability to assert her laws/customs upon her child, whereas a patrilineal father would *naturally* want 'his' children to relinquish their matrilineal heritage, and would exert pressure upon his wife and children to do so in one shape or form. The only reason a non-Khasi father would restrain himself therefore, is for purely instrumental reasons, such as being able to accrue the benefits attached to the tribal status of his wife and children. Within this framework, women are stripped of all agency and not only become valued merely as reproductive engines for the community, but also perceived as less rational, myopic or even plain selfish. In marrying non-Khasis they are shamed for either wantonly or unwittingly compromising the interests of the community at large.

This way of thinking, premised upon both patriarchal and xenophobic biases (mostly towards the category of people called *dkhars),* might seem logical or commonsensical since these biases tend to underlie our very modes of thinking, but unfortunately erases the experiences of many real families with non-Khasi fathers, who

simply don't fit these stereotypes. One Nepali man for instance, spoke of his own loneliness after migrating to Shillong, orphaned at a young age, and the sense of acceptance and recognition he received from his Khasi wife's family. Saddened by the increasing intolerance towards non-Khasi fathers, he insisted - "we are not all like they say." Another Assamese man, raised in Shillong and married to a *khadduh* exclaimed – "why not my children take my wife's title…it is how it is done here, so why not?" My endeavor here is not to either romanticize such relationships, or generalize about them in a reactionary manner. As noted earlier, my research methods are not designed to make definitive statements about social reality. But I wish to point out that many such families in Shillong, some that I interacted closely with, defied the public rhetoric against non-Khasi men. With the exclusive focus in public discourse on miscreant non-Khasi husbands and fathers (even if they exist in large numbers) so as to consolidate discursively the identity of the tribe, these stories are rarely told, and such relationships become stigmatized, often retroactively.

Additionally, what is elided in this mode of thinking, which has led to numerous debates culminating in this Act (and continuing), is an acknowledgement of the historical role of non-Khasi men and women in the constitution of the contemporary "pure" or "*pukka*" (full or both parents) Khasi. Virtually every Khasi person I got to know well enough to ask details about their family histories spoke of at least one ancestor who would not have been considered Khasi at the time – a Muslim grandmother from Assam, a Pathan grandfather from Afghanistan, a Bengali great grandfather from Sylhet, a Scottish or Portuguese ancestor, a Mizo grandmother – the list is long and diverse. Also as mentioned above many Khasi clans are structurally recognized to have a non-Khasi

ancestress – most notably perhaps the Kharkongors, one of the most powerful, landowning clans in the Khasi Hills. The Khasi matrilineal structure has historically catered to the formal incorporation of outsiders (both men and women); these relationships were socially accepted, even if not formalized through marriage, bearing progeny who today consider themselves thoroughly Khasi and are in turn treated that way.

The rules formulated by the KHADC (authorized or one could perhaps say mandated by the Constitution) aim ostensibly to regulate alliances along 'traditional' lines, but this is a thoroughly modern conceptualization of 'tradition.' It creates a "public secret" of sorts (Taussig 1999), casting a shadow on what everyone knows to be true – that a public hunt much like the hunt for the legendary U Manik Raitong[26] would be necessary to come up with a certifiably 'pure' Khasi – yet this knowledge is strategically eclipsed creating a mythical notion of a once "pure" *jaitbynriew*, that is only now being polluted. Further, as we shall see, this idea of "tradition" is unfolding in relation to intense ideological and political debates that are very much a product of contemporary concerns and negotiations and need to be understood and analyzed as such. The Constitutional framework however, empowers the KHADC to legislate on contemporary Khasi citizenship, which then both crucially facilitates citizenship into the nation (in order to be a 'proper' Northeast tribal citizen-subject of the Indian nation-state you have to fit into the 'traditional' tribal mold), while also being a source of conflict toward that

[26] A famous tragic hero who, after seducing and impregnating the Syiem's beautiful wife with his exquisite music, is ordered to death by fire after a nationwide search. As the Syiem intuits, the baby happily recognizes U Manik Raitong as his father and offers him a banana.

end (in being a 'traditional' tribal you can hardly claim the position of an unmarked Indian citizen or alternatively you might be forced to give up your 'modern' rights).

A striking example of the complex political ramifications of this legislation was the KHADC ruling in February 2008 in response to an objection raised initially by then KHADC Chief Executive Member H.S. Shylla (who was vying for the same Congress ticket to stand for elections from Nongkrem, a constituency reserved for tribals) that politician Waibha Kyndiah had ceased to belong to the Khasi tribe. Kyndiah, son of the influential Union Minister of Tribal Affairs P.R. Kyndiah, was dismissed[27] for taking his father's last name, conforming with national-international naming conventions but in violation of rules laid out in the Khasi Lineage Act. Being banished from his tribe jeopardized his tribal status and consequently, his ability to contest elections from a tribal reserved seat. Here the irony becomes explicit – while for the 'modern' matrilineal tribal subject, assimilation and full/unmarked citizenship is (only/primarily) obtainable by the abdication of his/her 'traditional' tribal identity, this abdication undermines their very identity within the modern nation, which legislates on the parameters of being tribal – they now become unreadable even as 'modern' (non-tribal) subjects.

Indigeneity in (Post)colonial Ruins: The Materiality of Kinship

Laws like the Khasi Lineage Act, or the more recent Meghalaya Compulsory Registration of Marriages Act (2012), formulated to tackle problems encountered by contemporary Khasi citizen-subjects so as to better facilitate their move into/experience

[27] This decision was subsequently appealed and revoked, but it caused a fair amount of political controversy at the time, with Shylla claiming he was only following the letter of a law that preceded him (but being ousted from the KHADC by a no-confidence motion) and Kyndiah (backed by the Congress) challenging any interrogation of his tribal identity being the son of two 'full' Khasi parents, despite having taken his father's name.

of ‘modern’ realities, thus ironically end up formally legalizing norms that from a ‘modern’ perspective would be considered regressive. These laws then arguably dissolve the freedom of ‘modern’ Khasis to make very personal choices (such as what name to adopt, who to be in a relationship with, what contours that relationship should take, to name just a few), instead holding them at bay from many of their ‘modern’ rights as (non-tribal) Indian or even global citizens. We can see here how Khasi kinship is deeply imbricated in the project of postcolonial modernity, which has been recast into a critical locus of citizenship and identity.

This rerouting of Khasi subjects through ‘tradition’ in order to become more ‘modern’ produces strange scenarios – on the one hand bestowing the state and its various agencies with enormous influence over the private life of a Khasi citizen, which, because it is now heavily saturated with multiple political meanings, legitimately becomes a matter of public concern and scrutiny and on the other, posing thorny questions for social justice movements trying to combat inequities or violence stemming from traditional Khasi institutions and practices. Nongbri’s (2000, 2003) illuminating analysis of the debates leading up to the passing of the Khasi Lineage Act offers a compelling argument for how questions about Khasi identity, legitimacy and belonging are made to play out on the bodies of Khasi women who, much like their patrilineal counterparts around the world, become the repository of authentic Khasi traditions and cultural/ethnic purity, upon whom the future of the *jaitbynriew* exclusively rests. Women are doubly displaced from their own destinies – i) their traditional exclusion from all political spheres creates a predominantly masculine state that has historically neatly sidestepped the specific needs, demands and perspectives of women and ii) even as

members of civil society they are rendered impotent and unable to resist because "by projecting the lineage bill as a 'nationalist' agenda, directed at saving Khasi culture and tradition from the threat of extinction under the influence of the cultural 'other,' the state is able to stifle potential dissenting voices, who from fear of being branded as anti-national and/or unpatriotic, have resigned themselves to the regime of patriarchal control" (2000: 391).

As Nongbri powerfully demonstrates, two sparring groups with seemingly antagonistic ideologies – the KHADC (with its investment in mandating Khasi traditions) and the SRT (with its militantly anti-matrilineal stance) – both share in common this fundamental anti-woman stance, with the Act becoming a means of controlling women and pushing the agenda for masculine privilege and domination. She argues thus that, "sandwiched between the two, women have little choice but to comply with the dominant ideology, which means that they either have to curb their personal freedom and reproduce for the community, or run the risk of being dispossessed of their social, economic and ethnic rights" (382). The main problem – which is the manipulation by non-indigenous people of loopholes that allow them to take over resources exclusively allotted to the community – could be easily fixed, she points out, by a strict enforcement of existing anti-*benami* (fake transactions) laws, which would vitiate the very need for problematic laws like the Lineage Act. "It is a well-known fact," she writes, "that a large number of persons, many of whom hold important positions in the government, engage in illegal transactions with outsiders, allowing them to escape the arm of the law by lending their names to the latter's business." "Apparently the fact that it is primarily men who engage

in this illegal practice may be responsible for the state's inaction," she concludes scathingly (2000:390).

My fieldwork, conducted some years after this article by Nongbri was published, clearly validates her critique– persons in power (mostly men) have been successful in shepherding public discourse around concerns for the "future" of the tribe in very strategic ways that have now almost entirely taken over the imagination of civil society, including those critical of groups like the SRT. Of the scores of people I spoke to, I rarely (if ever) heard anyone highlight the serious role that proper enforcement of these anti-*benami* laws might have in combating economic exploitation by outsiders. This reshaping of the Khasi intellectual horizon is premised upon the normalization (over time) of the problem of corruption and the illegal appropriation of wealth by private individuals, thus justifying the patriarchal impulse of both state and non-state actors to steer consensus, discourse and decision-making towards an increased scrutiny and disciplining of Khasi women instead. An SRT member explicitly attributed the problem of corruption to the matrilineal system saying, "they [the men] don't get anything from the house, so when they have a chance to sit in a seat where they can make money, they make the most of it. They're not used to owning wealth, so when they get a chance, they make it and they make it good. Being corrupt."

More broadly though, the tendency of tacking through tradition in order to get at the problems faced by 'modern' Khasis (discussed above) means that a host of perceived contemporary social problems – from outsider incursion to environmental degradation – are now invariably traced back to intimate aspects of people's lives, legitimizing intrusion of the state and its agencies into this domain. While in theory this impacts both

men and women, the predominance of Khasi men across political, social and religious spheres ensures that masculine interests are safeguarded one way or another. As Ellie Shullai put it, "when it comes to it, men all stick together somehow." Even groups like the SRT or the MSM that are lobbying for a transformation of traditional kinship-related practices in order to better cater to contemporary social conditions do so ultimately in the name of safeguarding the 'traditional' or 'pure' character/ethos/values of Khasi society.

Further, laws like the Khasi Lineage Act become shrouded in a certain kind of mystery – even as they are passed, they are either not enforced consistently, or are challenged by opposing groups and amendments proposed – such that many of my informants were unclear as to the exact contours of the existing law. Such laws then become but potent tools designed to be invoked and ignored (like in the case of Waibha Kyndiah) selectively in order to consolidate and reproduce the power and resources of the indigenous elite. Transgressing Khasi women (and in some cases men), non-Khasi kin and children of inter-ethnic alliances are the ones most likely to find themselves on the chopping block. Their voices silenced and interests subordinated, they become a different breed of what Baruah (2005) calls "denizens," inhabiting precariously the grey zone between "authentic" Khasi citizens and non-Khasi interlopers. It falls upon them, many of who very much consider themselves (and have historically been considered) to be a part of the *jaitbynriew*, to keep proving their belongingness and loyalty to the community and are (depending on other factors like their family name, their social or political influence, their class background or even their 'racialized' appearance/skin color) differently able to navigate their social "othering" and stave off exploitation and/or social

exclusion. I end by returning to a story by David Pyngrope explicating powerfully and poignantly this differential dynamic that plays out in the Shillong context:

> I have four children. Three of my children, they take mother's title, and one child takes my title. So it's not that I tell her to do that. Willingly on her own she has done that. When she has come to her own understanding, then she changed. Even there was a time when I told her that look here your sister and your brothers they are of that title, now you're of this title, it will confuse. It will confuse in the family, it will confuse in the society. It will confuse everybody. That three children are of the same title, one is not of the same title, but they belong to same father and same mother…so please don't do this, it will confuse. But against that, on her own she even went for an affidavit that she is not of mother's title but father's title. But anyway, she remains a Khasi, she remains a Khasi, a Scheduled Tribe, because her father is a Khasi and her mother is a Khasi. So she becomes acceptable in the society. There are many who have adopted their father's title…they are acceptable to society. In their own clans, in their own kurs also they are accepted. Not that they are shunted out, no. Not that they are being disowned, no. It's not that…
>
> No, maybe one or two stray cases maybe like that [where taking the father's name is the rejection of matriliny in favor of patriliny], but those who change, its because of the affection they have for their father…by not keeping the title of their father they feel that they are disconnected by force from their father, as if their father is a non-entity in the house. You see, maybe that kind of feeling. But mostly it's the love, the attachment they have to their father. They want to give the equal share to their mother and their father as well. And in some cases they give both the titles, mother and father's. So matrilineal society in this case has not in any way affected the way of thinking of the present generation. I don't think they bother much about it – like look here I must stick to mother's title, father's title is not… because then one big issue comes into the picture. Its because of what we call the, this Schedule Tribe. To be classified as a ST… because see if you have a non-Khasi father and you give the father's title, then by looking at the name alone, then you are not a Khasi, you are not known as Khasi, you cannot identify yourself as Khasi. And then there are laws

> that if you apply for this Khasi ST certificate you may not be granted one because your title is not a Khasi. Then hence, *they say* [adopting mock theatrical tone and referring to children with a non-Khasi father] *we are matrilineal society, we have matrilineal society, I take mother's title*. But behind it, it is that Schedule Tribe certificate. Because being a ST then you have lots of facilities…we are a Scheduled Tribe, we like to enjoy all those facilities provided to us by the Constitution of India. These rights are Constitutional. We would like to make full use of those rights. Because we still need that protection. That's why we have the Sixth Schedule, that's why we have this District Council. For those kind of special protections. So then we stick to the matrilineal, I mean those who are of non-tribal fathers. *They are they ones who will vouch,* [mock grand voice again] *yah we are matrilineal society*. But if I have a Khasi father, like my daughter she is also Scheduled Tribe because I am a Khasi. She does not bother much about the matrilineal society. *Either ways she is a Scheduled Tribe*. That doesn't mean that my daughter loves her mother less than those who vouch for matrilineal society. Maybe she loves more. *Because with them maybe it is motivated, with her it's not motivated*. It's the originality that is attached to it. So that is about matrilineal society. It has its influence no doubt but not the way it has been thought about. Not that way.

Bah David's narrative here spins the claim to matriliny as an identity category in a wholly different way. Far from Ellie Shullai's contention that without matriliny "we may as well not call ourselves Khasi anymore," in this rendition being matrilineal is something that 'they' (i.e. those with a non-tribal father) have to keep harping on. In his account, however, the fact that 'they doth insist too much' is linked to an ulterior motive – to accrue all the benefits that come with being ST, and it is the high pitch of their avowal of matriliny that seems (to him) to give the game away. This line of thinking does not acknowledge or empathize with the subtle yet mounting stigma that *ki khun shiteng* (half-blood children) often contend with in Khasi society, particularly if their father is *dkhar*. In contrast his daughter (having two Khasi parents) can be so secure in the

"originality" of her matrilineal identity (despite going against the customary regulation and taking her father's name) that she "does not bother much about the matrilineal society." Her tribal status guaranteed she is free to shape her own matrilineal identity without really even needing to reference it too much or too loudly.

In this chapter I have begun to flesh out some of the complexities surrounding the socio-political domain of Khasi matriliny, showing how Khasi kinship and attendant understandings of gender are not merely a subject of academic inquiry but is instead bound up with larger relationships of indigenous identities within postcolonial nation-states and in dialogue with global imaginaries. Deconstructionist approaches that emphasize the reflective nature of kinship and critiques of them that argue that kinship is premised upon something concrete or discernible (whether it is the "mutuality of being" (Sahlins 2011a, 2011b) or the existence of a "universal genealogical or procreative grid" (Shapiro 2009:3)) both seem unable to account for the fact that 'whatever kinship is' is not so significant for the Khasis, for whom it is everything. This is to say that the materiality of kinship explored in this and the previous chapter (and that is by no means inconsequential) gets superseded in a sense by how kinship matters differentially for people within Khasi society and studying these interconnections arguably injects the question of ethics and politics into debates around knowledge economies of kinship.

Chapter 4

Khasi Men In-Sight: The Recursive Enactment of Emasculation

I was sitting next to the bed in Aiphang's room one evening, browsing through the movie collection on his laptop, when his mother walked in to say hi to me, and to ask him if he had received a response from the architecture college he had applied to for a Masters program. The letter had arrived indeed, reported Aiphang with a satisfied look, and he had to leave for Ahmedabad early next month for an interview. His mother flashed him a pleased smile, and told him to prepare appropriately, since of course he knew that the interviewers would likely be ruthless. Herself a well-known medical doctor, Aiphang's mother had groomed her son from a young age to excel in his studies and aim high; there was no point "being a big fish in a small pond when there is the whole ocean," she would often say to him. Her guidance was well received – Aiphang was a good student, and a good son. Overall, he subscribed to his mother's worldview and even his critiques of some of her parenting techniques were measured and kind.

On her way out Aiphang's mother remarked on what she called his "unkempt look." It was vacation time and since he was done with college he had let his hair grow out (it was covering his ears only just a little). She said, "soon you'll be gelling and spiking your hair and start looking like a ruffian, and people will think you've become a typical Khasi guy." Her comment was made in jest and we all chuckled but all the more

because the concern was premised on a few uncomfortably real things. While it was unlikely that an architecture school in Ahmedabad knew the first thing about what it meant to be a Khasi guy, typical or not, she was tapping into the idea that in mainland India, Aiphang as a Northeasterner would be marked as different.

As Nido Taniam's example (see Chapter 1) demonstrates, racist attitudes can lead to grisly outcomes for people from the Northeast living in mainland cities. Associated with an entire ensemble of negative steretotypes, their distinct appearance makes them easy targets. As Duncan McDuie-Ra documents in his ethnography of Northeast migrants in Delhi, even when people from the Northeast try to dress like the mainlanders they continue to be racially targeted, so instead they decide to own their difference and dress as they would back home in the Northeast (2014:169). He writes:

> For Northeast migrants in Delhi, dress matters. Many of the looks are styled on East Asian fashion, including Korea, and some Western subcultures…Respondents made the point that if they had spare income they would spend it on clothes. It has become an important part of Northeast identity to dress well and with a sense of style different from other people in Delhi (168).

Being acknowledged as different and fashionable both gets people from the Northeast jobs in the service and retail industry and also renders them a target of racial barbs, sexual harassment and gender stereotyping that often take on violent forms. The fact that many young men from the Northeast are equally invested in their appearance – clothes, shoes, accessories, hairstyles etc. – is confusing to most people from mainland India. The stereotype that 'real' or 'macho' men don't indulge in such things becomes compounded by pre-existing ideas about the effeminicy of tribal men from the Northeast. Their decision to wear their hair longer, spiky and in the style of Japanese or Korean youth, for instance, clashes with mainland Indian norms where short hair is associated with a

disciplined and proper masculinity. Further, the fact that they have access to reservations in the government and educational institutions feeds the prejudice of upper-caste mainlanders, for whom people from the reserved categories are perceived as usurping jobs and college seats from hard working, meritorious 'average' Indians like them. These negative assumptions become fused into the perception that there is something wrong or lacking in Northeast tribal masculinity, and this forms the backdrop against which Aiphang's mother is insisting on her son's visit to the hairdresser. Aiphang, on his part, is also well aware of these dynamics and would see the sporting of a unique Northeast aesthetic as potentially jeopardizing his future, a risk he would not personally elect to take.

This broader race-gender-sexuality matrix that frames mainland ideas about Northeast masculinity becomes in my reading, crystallized in the figure of the "typical Khasi guy." A section of educated Khasi men have been articulating concerns about the degradation of Khasi masculinity since the early 1960s. Their diagnosis lays the blame of these troubles, which begin with individual men but then impact society more broadly, on the matrilineal kinship system. In their analysis traditional Khasi matriliny has fallen out of joint in the contemporary context, making it an impediment to the optimal functioning of the community, which has seen massive transformations in its close interactions with non-indigenous groups, both colonial and postcolonial. Additionally they argue that Western modernity, Christianity, neoliberalism and globalization have also influenced both individual sensibilities and the larger social field to such an extent that the worldview endorsed by the traditional matrilineal system has been rendered largely superfluous. The disjunction that ensues is inextricably linked to the problems being

faced by matrilineal Khasi men in a world that is organized by the logic of patriarchy, but of the patrilineal kind.

Caught in between these two worlds Khasi men find themselves struggling, and the contention of the more recent anti-matriliny group *Synkhong Rympei Thymmai* (SRT) is that Khasi men will only be able to properly align themselves with globally endorsed ideas and enactments of masculinity by eschewing matriliny and embracing patriliny. Through SRT lobbying since the early 90s, which has and continues to receive much attention from the national and international media, the figure of a fundamentally flawed if not failed Khasi man has come to loom large in the Shillong context and it is around the trope of the "typical Khasi guy" that this chapter is framed. The rebellious but ultimately lazy/incapable tribal and his counterpart, the addicted or inebriated vagabond, both in fact common stereotypical depictions of Northeast masculinity, are pitched as the products of an outmoded, conservative matrilineal system fundamentally incapable of responding to the needs of contemporary, liberal Khasi citizens.

In the next chapter I will elaborate on the different manifestations of this 'typical Khasi guy' as well as on the multiple arguments and ideas being forwarded by the SRT, but here I wish to flag that the stereotype of the 'typical Khasi guy' was the other uncomfortable dynamic that Aiphang's mother was referencing in her comment. It was hard, however, to imagine Aiphang as an example of the supposedly typical Khasi man; neatly coiffed with short hair, regular t-shirts and jeans, disciplined, cultured, ambitious, high achieving, punctual, polite, helpful and very respectful, Aiphang was seen by many Khasi parents as a role model for their children. He bore no resemblance whatsoever to the stereotype of the broken Khasi man, but its power nevertheless seemed to inject a

sliver of fear in his mother that Aiphang might let his performance of the particular brand of masculinity that she had worked hard to inculcate in him, slip. And even more pressing was the concern that if people began to see him as a 'typical Khasi guy,' then Aiphang might become precisely that. All the years of her hard work would come to nothing if her son morphed into a cliché – that of the drunken, irresponsible Khasi man.

Here, in this incident, maternal anxieties seem to pick up intuitively on the performative aspect of gender, outlined by Judith Butler in her now canonical *Gender Trouble* (2006). Far from being the social expression of a pre-given or 'natural' sex (as posited by prior conceptualizations of the sex/gender matrix), gender comes to be through the everyday, repetition of multiple corporeal expressions that create tangible effects, and it is in the process of these variegated but highly regulated iterations that gendered ontologies are inaugurated. Aiphang's mother's fears further highlight the precarity of gendered existence in the face of robust stereotypes circulating in the social field. Even as Aiphang was religious in his presentation of a 'non-typical' Khasi masculinity, he had to be constantly vigilant to not falter or miss a single step in his unique performative sequence lest the potent discursive figure of the failed Khasi man sneak up on him. The failure to maintain his performative stance would run the risk of aligning him closer to this prototype of Khasi masculinity; loss of control over how he is being recognized might well amount to vulnerability or a loss of control over his own self. At least, this is what Aiphang's mother implicitly suggests.

In this chapter I suggest that Aiphang's mother is in fact not being overly paranoid or whimsical. The frailty experienced by many Khasi men in Shillong today, which is being attributed to a purported mismatch between matriliny and modernity, is in

large part a product of the ways in which matrilineal masculinity (and gender/sexuality relations in general) has been and continues to be viewed by non-matrilineal outsiders. In a previous chapter we have already seen the impact of colonial (and colonial style) anthropology on the development of the very lenses through which people (both outsiders and Khasis) have been encouraged to apprehend the terrain of matrilineal lives. More specifically, I have shown how the embeddedness of the outsider-anthropologist in patrilineo-patriarchy has shaped their concerns about, and even further, their sustained interest in and attention to the 'plight' of men in general but also men *qua* fathers within what was seen as the 'remarkable' or 'exotic' social institution of matriliny. While falling out of favor within academic scholarship, the shelf life of such ideas (both of the supposed emasculation of matrilineal men and the relative 'primitiveness' of matrilineal systems which must necessarily give way to patriliny, particularly in their encounter with modernity) continue to underlie the ideas and sensibilities of mainstream/non-matrilineal people.

Matrilineal Khasis are not immune to the pejorative concepts and perceptions that shape the way *they know* they are being read by hegemonic 'others.' In this chapter I draw attention to the prisms through which the 'outsider-other' views matrilineal society and more specifically, matrilineal masculinity. I will argue that not only is the infinite recursion of seeing, being seen, seeing that one is being seen, being what one is being seen as, and so forth a constitutive feature of gendered living, it is also shot through with the iterative and/or subversive possibilities of self-apprehension or identity formation that is co-constitutive with multiple modes of community forging and political struggle. Mobilizations by groups like the SRT (while not unconnected to internal Khasi social

dynamics) are fundamentally drawing on the ways in which non-matrilineal people's ethnocentric reading of their structural 'emasculation' has the effect of not only saturating the visual field, thus determining what can and cannot be seen by the outsider eye in the first place, but also in turn *producing* a depleted Khasi masculinity.

Outsider Looks, Insider Realities

Postcolonial, psychoanalytic, feminist and queer theory have made explicit how looks are exchanged not by fully-formed identities, but rather it is precisely in the exchange of looks and in the recognition of the self via the Other's gaze that racial, gendered and sexual subjectivities become ushered into existence. This might possibly explain then how, even as they strive to push against these constraints (and creations), the SRT has ended up breathing fresh life into the very monster it has supposedly been trying to restrain. The line between the rejection of stereotypes and their internalization becomes blurred in accounts of Khasi emasculation disseminated in the mass media by such groups, reinforcing ideas that were problematic to begin with. Such representations reproduce in a strangely circular manner the figure of the 'typical Khasi guy' as people from within the community (both men and women) behold anew through a fortified outsider's eye a heightening of their failed, circumscribed masculinity. A failure of Khasi masculinity, as the SRT is keen to highlight, has consequences for the larger well being of the community and Aiphang's mother (like other members of Shillong's civil society) is certainly aware of and working through these dynamics.

Given that Aiphang had often spoke of his mother's strictness not only in terms of her ambitions for her offspring, but also as being a strict upholder of traditional Khasi

values and ways of doing things, it struck me as odd that she actively discouraged her son from making friends with other Khasi boys and ushered him instead towards the company of *dkhar* boys. This was counterintuitive to me, since most of the Khasis that I had encountered kept social circles that were predominantly Khasi, barring a few from the more elite and/or cosmopolitan echelons of Shillong society and of course those families that had married outside the community. What would make a conservative Khasi woman point her sons toward 'outsider' boys? The answer lies in the fact that Khasi boys are seen by her to be a bad influence, at least potentially. They are visible as 'bad-boys'– very often with long/spiky hair, leather jackets and tattooed arms, loitering around by the roadside, sitting in their tinted-window cars, listening to loud heavy metal music, drinking, smoking, and generally being broody and/or anti-social. Keeping their company and being seen in their company would get any ambitious Khasi boy nowhere, and Aiphang's mother was hyper-aware of this. Contradictions notwithstanding, '*dkhar*' boys are perceived to be more studious, competitive, and also more plugged into realities that transcend the local context.

The veracity of these perceptions is not that important – what is interesting is that Khasis and non-Khasis alike share them. The names of examination toppers published in the local papers are often noticed to be non-Khasi and, according to Kong Iba, a Khasi mother of five, their own children 'take it easy because in the state they have everything handed to them on a plate.' *Dkhar* children really have to struggle, she said, since most of the college seats and government jobs are reserved for Khasis, Jaintias and Garos. Superior academic performance was closely connected to notions of responsibility, respectability, politeness, obedience and ambition, and somehow the lack of these too

was often transposed upon Khasi men, given how much the cliché of the irresponsible Khasi male was invoked in Shillong.

And this cliché was invoked repeatedly. It was brought up by men and women, Khasi and non-Khasi, elite and working class, urban and non-urban. This is of course not at all to suggest that people in and around Shillong are preoccupied with the question of Khasi masculinity. They spoke variously of this matter depending on context and to differing degrees and were in no small measure incited by my own explicitly stated interest in the subject. However, what I'm gesturing toward is that as I conducted my research it became increasingly apparent that discussions of Khasi masculinity were not limited to a small fringe of individuals or groups as I had believed initially. I encountered both disparaging comments and considered reflections from persons I little expected to hear anything from. In this section I elaborate the ways that non-Khasis spoke about their perceptions of Khasi gender roles and relationships, given how central these are to the framing of various critiques of matriliny and of certain aspects of Khasi tradition, critiques which are extended by some of the men's groups.

Shortly before I was scheduled to leave Shillong I happened to get into a conversation with a middle-aged non-Khasi woman, who was the wife of an Army officer; they were living on the military base until the next transfer order. When she asked about my research and I said something about being interested in gender issues, she immediately began nodding and mumbling something about Khasi men. I was fairly taken aback. My own experiences of life on military bases had familiarized me with how insular they tend to be, so the fact that these local stereotypes were powerful enough to infiltrate the military enclave was striking. Perhaps it shouldn't have been. Despite the

fact that this woman admitted that she didn't actually know any Khasi or that she rarely needed to leave the base by herself, she was still equipped enough with local tropes to tap into this commonplace notion of Khasi men as irresponsible and overly dominated by women. How was she familiar with these narratives? How loud were these voices and whence did they originate such that in her secluded domicile she still could hear their echoes?

From another standpoint it is hardly surprising that this woman was clued into the discussion about Khasi men and their alleged emasculation. Even back in the fifties when Chie Nakane (1976) conducted her research, these narratives were in active circulation, and she notes in her book, how outsiders visiting the Khasi Hills are struck by what they see as the lowly status of the Khasi husband and the high rates of divorce within the community. Of course the military isn't just any outsider passing through – much like their colonial predecessors, their ability to 'do their job' is also premised on 'knowing' the terrain and the people in some measure. The role of anthropological accounts is likely crucial here too, and as Chapter 2 outlines, outsiders generating scholarship on Khasi matriliny have often smuggled into their research a host of patrilineo-patriarchal values and assumptions that betray skewed understandings and representations of Khasi gender roles and relations. Backed by the authority of knowledge, these texts have had no small part to play in the creation and reification of popular outsider narratives of Khasi male subjugation and emasculation. Stories about this emasculation abound in local chatter that you hear from plenty of non-Khasi residents in the city.

I had a taste of this narrative even before I entered the state. This was during my preparatory research visit to Shillong when I had landed at the airport in Guwahati. The

largest city in Assam, wedged between the sumptuous Brahmaputra to the north and the Khasi Plateau to the south, Guwahati was smoldering by the end of May when I arrived, and like others heading to Shillong I could hardly wait to find a taxi and commence my escape up into the propitious hills of Meghalaya. From the airport it is roughly a four-hour drive to Shillong, but often securing a taxi can be more vexing than you'd expect. Much like in Shillong, where sharing taxis is the most popular mode of public transport, at the airport too there is an option of a shared taxi-ride into the city, if you're quick to get to the queue. Not knowing this I had dawdled at baggage claim, so when I got to the taxi stand I witnessed the last full share-taxi departing, leaving me at the mercy of several rather aggressive Assamese taxi drivers. I had no option but to hire my own taxi and feel grateful for the University grant that was paying for it.

The journey into the hills was exhilarating, not least because the driver was a very young man with a penchant for the accelerator under his foot. I decided to embrace the tingling sensation in my spine and chat with him even as blurs of brown and green whizzed past the corner of my eyes. We conversed in a wobbly sort of local Hindi, which I realized later was what you might call a language unto itself, with a distinctly irreverent and rather creative lexicon, popular in Shillong (and perhaps other parts of the Northeast). It turned out that the driver wasn't Assamese but a Nepali from Shillong, where he lived with his brother and sister-in-law near Garikhana. I had noticed at the airport that there weren't any Khasi taxi drivers waiting, and at some point I asked him if anything had happened, whether there was some trouble in Shillong. He gave me a naughty smile in the rearview. Khasi drivers leave early so that they can be back home before dark, he replied saucily.

I gave him a quizzical look, which he took as his cue to launch into an analysis of Khasi culture in general and Khasi masculinity in particular. He elaborated on his view (one I was to hear repeatedly, by a few Khasis too) that Khasis were relatively lazy, unambitious and lacking in business acumen. He and his brother drove their taxi, taking turns, as much as they could and if they got a ride at night from Shillong, they would stay in Guwahati overnight, with a distant uncle. They had a goal, he said, to make enough money to buy more taxis and start their own company. Khasi men are not like us, he added. They are complacent in the comfort of their city, he professed, and don't push themselves to do better. I wasn't expecting all these 'insights' and sat back to listen quietly. Khasi drivers are happy to make one trip in a day, he said, if they can manage it, and then by evening they want to be back at home. Even Assamese men will be at the taxi stand till late hours of the night, fighting for a customer, but you won't see any Khasi men. By this time Khasi men are either out drinking with their friends or at home watching television, he asserted.

Sensing my sustained interest (despite my best attempts at looking nonchalant), he launched into an anecdote – I was to hear many such 'true story' exemplifications of arguments being offered during my research –about a Khasi friend of his. Benedict, he said, had been driving his mother's taxi in the city since he was sixteen, even before he finished school. His mother was stern and very religious; he wasn't allowed to drive on Sundays or attend local events like the Autumn Festival with his friends. And moreover, my driver added, he was not even allowed to keep the money he earned from his circadian efforts, having to fork over his earnings to his mother every evening. He was nineteen now and in a recent argument with her he was told very explicitly that after he

got married he wouldn't have the taxi anymore, so he should start making other arrangements for his livelihood.

This was a tale of Khasi male helplessness and possibly even exploitation, an instantiation of the hapless plight of a Khasi man, recounted by a non-matrilineal male ally. Now Benedict doesn't care, he has nothing to gain, explained my companion. Still (the driver went on) he is very worried and in the evenings when we sit down with a beer, he tells me how he feels. At this point the story trailed off and my driver seemed to become lost in his thoughts. The pensiveness of my otherwise feisty driver released an inchoate wave of poignancy into our little taxi, induced by what I felt was sadness, even pity for the Khasi friend who was clearly being read as not only unfairly policed and financially disenfranchised but also perhaps as emotionally abused or neglected. For a patrilineo-patriarchal subject, the topsy-turvy world the Khasi male inhabits is set up, at the outset, to fail.

Against the backdrop of the perception of such anti-male sentiments that are seen as socially and structurally endorsed, the devolution of masculinity is seen as inevitable and thus the formation of the 'typical Khasi guy,' disturbed, drunk and sterilized, becomes readable to others outside the matrilineal framework. There was something striking about the unseen yet recurring bond that appeared to exist between many Khasi and non-Khasi men. Often it surfaced in conversations with non-Khasi men whose families had been living in Shillong for two or more generations, but it also emerged in conversations with more recent arrivals. On the one hand, there was an acknowledgement of bitterness and anger at being considered perpetual outsiders in Shillong, and these misgivings were directed mainly at Khasi men who are primarily entrusted with

management of the public sphere, and who are also seen as spearheading various anti-outsider movements that have had a history of being particularly violent. Yet simultaneously, discussions about Khasi men invariably transformed from expressions of frustration and ridicule into those of pity and even sadness. A local Bengali professional in his thirties talked about how "everyone here knows" that "Khasi women, *toh*, are mostly unfaithful" and how they had nothing to fear because even if their husband left, they would still have a place to go and take their children with them. "Now you tell me," he said, "which man can sit quietly and watch all this happen…*naturally* [said with disgust] he will feel disgraced, but what will he do, where should he go?" Two stereotypes are being welded into this one formulation; when the 'loose' Northeast tribal woman is additionally a matrilineal 'shrew' there is a heightening of shame, pity and even confusion generated in the Khasi man, from the perspective of the mainland outsider.

Tribal women in India (along with dalit women) have historically been perceived as sexually available to mainstream caste Hindu men. Falling outside the scope and strictures of religious and caste-based morality and often unprotected by class privileges, these women are not only routinely raped, assaulted and sexually violated, but this violence is erased in public discourse as they are seen to be "habituated to sex"[28] and thus inherently inviolable, or pitched as liars in the assumption that no upper-caste man would choose to defile himself by having sexual contact with such an impure entity. As discussed in the first chapter, tribal women from the Northeast bear the brunt of intensified misogyny since their ethnic, cultural and religious differences often intersect

[28] Language used in the landmark Supreme Court judgment in the 1972 Mathura rape case

in their tribal status to render them exceptionally sexualized and openly promiscuous. They are perceived to be racially distinct (thus exotic sexual objects), Christian (thus apparently more Westernized and sexually 'modern'),[29] and overall not culturally bound by the same mores of chastity and virtue into which mainstream Hindu (or what the ruling BJP would call "culturally Hindu")[30] women are theoretically conditioned. This perception is mobilized to justify routine yet aggravated violence against Northeast women by the non-tribal mainstream, both in the context of armed conflict within the region but also in the mainland where these women may seek education and/or employment.

Patrilineal Confusions and Patriarchal Continuums

Insights from scholarship over the past several decades have cautioned us against attempting to study concepts like gender, sexuality, race, and nation, in isolation without grappling scrupulously with the overlapping and 'intersectional' ways in which they play out in any social field. An interesting subset of postcolonial theory deals with the ways that colonial representations of gender inadvertently snuck into popular Orientalist understandings about inherent racial differences between the colonizer and the so-called natives. Focusing on the Indian subcontinent, Mrinalini Sinha's (1995) work examines colonially sponsored gendered dichotomizations between the "manly Englishman" and the "effeminate Bengali" that were crucial not only to the strategic consolidation of the project of British domination in India but also to the multiple political vocabularies and

[29] Of the seven states in the Northeast only three – Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram – are Christian dominated states, but this would be just another instance of the sheer ignorance that most mainland Indians suffer with respect to the Northeast coupled with racist ideas as well.
[30] The BJP view aligns with the remarks of the RSS chief who, in a recent public speech, insisted that all Indians are Hindus, where Hindu refers not to a religious but a cultural identity.

impulses being articulated from within the domain of Indian nationalism. Sinha shows us how nationalist thinkers internalized (to varying degrees) these colonial constructions of intricate typologies of gender, where some groups (like the Muslims, Marathas, Northeast tribals) were classified as more masculine, virile and warring, and others (like the babus and other upper-caste Hindus) more effete and enfeebled.

Arafaat Valiani (2014) points out an interesting tension in Gandhi's response to colonial schematizations of 'native' masculinity. Even as Gandhi endorsed the British theory that Bengali babus, traders and other educated, upper caste Hindu males were weak and cowardly (in comparison with their more athletic and assertive British counterparts) he simultaneously conceptually attributed their flaccidity to the ingress of western civilization and modernity. In *Hind Swaraj,* Valiani notes, Gandhi advanced the idea that while pre-colonial Indian men, particularly caste Hindus, constantly had to fight against the so-called dacoits who attempted to pillage their communities, with the ensuing protection guaranteed by the imperial Army these plains men lost their fearlessness and tenacity and subsequently their moral immaculacy (509). His regimen for the recuperation of these relinquished values prescribed participation in wars and rekindling intimacy with weapons (British laws had denied Indians ownership of arms), "not to engage in superficial displays of courage or to satiate base desires of bloodlust," (515) but instead to develop tolerance for (religiously marked) suffering and hardship, creating "masculine 'warriors' that were physically trained, morally anchored and fearless of their adversaries" (517).

This detour through Gandhi (facilitated by Valiani) brings to the fore multiple insights that merit pondering. Most broadly it reiterates the propensity of the powerful to

taint the racially sub-dominant masculine Other with unequivocal (either congenital or historically acquired) frailty and the inevitability of the internalization of this narrative by the subjugated peoples (theorized powerfully by writers like Fanon (1952), Sinha (1995) etc.). Here however we can see clearly how even liberatory struggles and nationalist leaders working within these spaces decidedly engage these discourses, making them their own by tweaking them and forwarding their own particular diagnostic theories and curative procedures, while being ultimately unable or unwilling to reject the fundamental terms of these dominant stagings, displaying instead a curious affinity to them. Gandhi's own specific formulation is wound awkwardly around a theory of European civilizational modernity (which itself relies on classic Orientalist framings), whose advances and comforts quickly render caste Hindu men lazy and fearful, while mysteriously never detracting from the purported alpha masculinity of the British themselves. Unlike certain political projects that reject the very grounds upon which inequalities are justified and become articulated, seeking instead to wholly reframe the existing terrain, counter-narratives, such as the above, that struggle against the violence of dominant and racialized framings of masculinity seem to be in equal measure beholden to them, marked by a simultaneous discomfort with and a peculiar penchant for retaining intimacy with them at all costs. Gandhi's own confusions and inconsistencies seem symptomatic of this tension.[31]

Gandhi's call for a reconstitution of the Indian/Hindu male, while differing in its emphasis on moral force and the ability to suffer hardship, dovetails with the promotion of a sinewy, gladiatorial Hindu masculinity by the right-wing saffron brigade that would

[31] We will see later how this plays out in the Khasi context as well.

counter forcefully the ongoing imagined emasculation of caste Hindus. While Indian masculinity was, on the one hand, stabilized and recuperated through the nationalist struggle culminating in the ejection of the British, the other thorn in its side – the red-blooded and procreative Muslims (heirs of the Mughal and other Islamic invaders/rulers) -- continues to be embedded within the Indian social fabric, a cause of grave concern for Hindu nationalists. It is this dominant avatar of Hindu masculinity (playing out as at once secure and also fraught) that people from the Northeast come up against, both because it is the normative national model that confronts them as citizens of India, but also because it is an implicit point of reference for the commonplace jibes and the intense violence they are subjected to on a regular basis as they move through the mainland

The internalization of Orientalist modes of thinking by mainstream Indians reaches a feverish pitch when it encounters the physical body of the Northeast tribal, marked distinctively as East Asian or 'Oriental.' In an interesting analysis of Henry Hwang's acclaimed 1988 drama *M. Butterfly,* David Eng refashions Freud's theory of fetishism in order to show how East Asian male bodies are castrated and effeminized. This dissertation takes seriously his suggestion to pay close attention to both how "articulations of national subjectivity depend intimately on racializing, gendering, and sexualizing strategies" and "the numerous ways in which subjects, both mainstream and minority, remain invested in the normative identifications, stereotypes, and fantasies that maintain the dominant social order" (2001:3-4). In the Northeast, racial othering harmonizes with notions of tribal 'primitivism' to produce a further diminished, beleaguered kind of masculinity against which both colonial and postcolonial mainstream/mainland masculinity (albeit in vastly different ways) set themselves up in

juxtaposition. Mirroring stereotypes of Khasi women, Khasi masculinity also finds itself doubly distanced from normative masculinity – first othered along racial/tribal grounds and then soon after, through its perceived emasculation for being matrilineal.

While it is certainly the case that in the Shillong context, all outsiders are not made equal, and allegiances between communities from the Northeast differently mediate discussions and perceptions of gender, it is also true that patrilineo-patriarchal communities from the region (including those identified and identifying as tribal) introduce their own unique patriarchal ideologies and expectations to the social field which, in no less measure, both bear upon and provide a foil to Khasi ideas, values and expectations around gender. Unlike the Bengalis or Nepalis, men from patrilineal tribes like the Mizos and Nagas are less likely to label Khasi women based upon mainland stereotypes of sexual impurity, but are as likely to agree with the former when it comes to the perception of Khasi men as relatively disempowered and lacking the authority that is their due.[32]

Women in the Northeast have historically enjoyed a somewhat more elevated position than their mainland counterparts and both men and women from the region often remarked upon this difference in conversations with me. McDuie-Ra examines some key indicators – tribal women have some of the highest literacy rates in the country, their employment rates are also much higher, women in the Northeast get married at a later age, and in all states barring Tripura the percentage of women making decisions within the household is much higher, with women in Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and

[32] Important here are the differences even between Khasi and Jaintia gender worldviews that will be discussed subsequently.

Nagaland being almost double the national average. However, McDuie-Ra argues, "Beneath these indicators are strong patriarchal relations, though these are formed through different traditions to those in other parts of India and are commonly regarded, perhaps misleadingly, as evidence of a 'softer' patriarchy" (2012:115). Writing about Northeast tribal masculinity he notes its appearance in two dominant social constructions – the historical and the contemporary. In both these modes we find that tribal masculinity has been moored in ideas about hunting, warfare, decision-making and political or armed struggle, with men taking on the role of shielding their communities – from the armed forces, migrant populations, and rival tribal groups. He writes:

> This is enacted through involvement in armed violence, involvement in ethno-nationalist politics, vigilante activity (such as intimidating migrant laborers and shopkeepers), enforcing strikes and boycotts and moral policing of women from the ethnic or tribal group. Tribal men are warriors and protectors in an ongoing multifaceted battle for territorial control and community survival (115).

I witnessed one aspect of this protectionist impulse during fieldwork. After dinner late one evening I was on the Laitumkhrah main road doing *lorni* (a unique word describing a particular kind of 'hanging out') with a group of young female friends, when one of them, a Naga undergraduate, suddenly got panicky, asking us to 'hide' her. We noticed a group of young men approaching on the other side and immediately everyone else in the group seemed to know what was going on. Giving this girl cover we ducked into a side street and walked up the hill to the shelter of someone's home. I was told subsequently that certain groups (consisting mostly of men) within the Naga Students Union had taken on the mantle of moral policing, and young Naga women studying in Shillong had to endure a lot of scrutiny and coercion, with some even being compelled to give up their studies and return home if deemed 'errant'. While it might be true that for many women

in the Northeast, particularly tribal women, problems like female infanticide and dowry death are not routine challenges (and the diversity within the region would likely belie all easy generalizations)[33], the ubiquitous ethos of male supremacy and female subservience is a commonly discussed theme, culturally enshrined and often religiously sanctioned.

Thus, for several people raised within patrilineo-patriarchal communities and living in Shillong, the Khasi gender/kinship system was ultimately confounding. There seemed to be a fundamental difficulty in understanding how society could be structured in a way that didn't exalt and venerate men at the expense of women, and many (men and women) interpreted the decentering of men necessarily as subjugation. A man's authority over his wife and his children, his right to make decisions about the household and larger property matters unilaterally, his status as the patriarch and so forth were assumed implicitly, such that any other mode of organizing gendered life was seen as violently infringing on some natural law that decrees men's status as supreme and legitimately imperious.

One of the questions I sought to answer through my research was whether matrilineal systems conferred gender identity differently than the normative patrilineal model, but for many of my interlocutors the possibility even that gender might mean different things to people raised within matrilineal societies did not even seem to arise; Khasi men are always already legible to non-Khasis. So despite the fact that for many Khasi men I spoke to, living with their wife in her ancestral home and meeting

[33] For instance, horrific witch-hunting incidents in Assam are being reported in the national media and unsurprisingly most of the people targeted in these incidents are women. Earlier in 2015, the Governor of the state was reported to have awarded a honorary doctorate to a tribal woman from rural Assam for battling this problem for over a decade: http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/witch-hunting-survivor-who-turned-activist-gets-honorary-doctorate/

responsibilities to her parents was not a source of grave emotional distress or an identity crisis, and was in fact often interlaced into their understanding of masculine existence, most non-matrilineal men would instinctively shudder at the thought of uxorilocality and automatically presume this to reference a lower status for Khasi men certainly but even perhaps a cruel social reality that must necessarily leave them feeling distressed and emasculated.

Both concerned and disparaging remarks about how Khasi men were indolent and enslaved and how Khasi women were overbearing and lacking virtue, were freely made in front of me (especially if I was recognized to be a non-Khasi), as though they were known and undisputed facts. Furthermore, my openly received status as a woman seemed to become eclipsed in these formulations. How was it that none of these people thought I might be sensitive to or upset by their blatantly misogynistic comments about Khasi women particularly, but also about the men? Especially when, wherever I went, my appearance, status, and research interests immediately made people assume, rather astutely I might add, that I was a feminist. I found that in these moments the solidity of gender seemed to splinter, where my being recognized as coming from a non-matrilineal world swiftly interpellated me into the mainstream, patrilineal discourse of patriarchy, cleanly extricating me from this obscurely gendered Khasi cosmos.

This was the steely face of patrilineo-patriarchy I found myself pushed up against. It was as though there existed an emotional/psychological continuum of masculinity and masculine identity that non-Khasis unthinkingly drew on, and the plight of Khasi men was always apprehended and discussed within this framework. This dominant version of patrilineo-patriarchy assumes that *both* men and women intuitively understand and

endorse a worldview where men are superior and/or enjoy a superior status; here men can consolidate their identity (their very humanity) *only* if they both feel superior and are seen and recognized as superior by all, particularly women, who must never challenge their authority, especially over their own bodies. Being a 'normal' woman, how could I but not be consumed by pity at the presumed plight of Khasi men, and in the face of their miserable reality how could I possibly be offended by misogynistic comments. On my part I did try to follow the logic of my non-Khasi interlocutors to see where it would lead, and if the comments weren't completely out of line, I'd try to engage them. Soon I realized that there were an array of intertwined ideas in circulation that were fairly solidified, and at any given point, colorful, sometimes poignant anecdotes could be summoned to bolster these notions and 'demonstrate' their validity.

One of the things I seek to explore here are the ways that this dialectic plays in the minds of many Khasi males, who have no option but to confront and engage with, on an everyday basis, the patrilineo-patriarchal model of masculinity, not simply in their interactions with non-matrilineal cohabitants of the city, but also in the media, in movies, in church, in their travels and so forth.[34] The dominant edifice of patrilineo-patriarchy from within which masculinity is scripted is inescapable and it is arguably its sheer pervasiveness that lends it its seductive and hegemonic quality. These images or markers of manhood abound and get juxtaposed precisely with non-corresponding markers within Khasi matriliny; not finding exact overlaps unnerves many Khasi men, shaping their own narratives of sorrow, shame and anger.

[34] One middle-aged Khasi father of two spoke about the awkwardness he felt when traveling in mainland India with his wife, having to confront odd looks from hotel receptionists who assumed that theirs was an 'ilicit' relationship because each partner had a different last name.

Put in other words, the notion of the 'typical Khasi guy' is internalized by some, and strategically deployed by others, but in my conversations with Khasi men there was a palpable consciousness of the way in which they were being received by others as well as a desire to take stock of multiple perceptions from various sections of Khasi society. Through my research I tried very hard to understand and unravel this cliché. I was meeting and interacting closely with a whole range of Khasi men and most of them seemed levelheaded, lucid and largely capable. In stories however, there were varying degrees of concern being expressed on behalf of Khasi men – from outright rejection of any problem whatsoever, to claims about the sheer collapse of Khasi manhood. So many comments, both carefully explained and casual, were being made about Khasi men/boys that I was soon forced to take stock of exactly what was being flagged by these claims as I will discuss further in the next chapter.

From Warriors to Breeding-Bulls: Reciting to Make Real

In the final section of this chapter I focus on the ways in which outsider views of matrilineality enter into and ricochet around within Khasi civil society, generating affective and material consequences for matrilineal life. Khasis in Shillong are more than conscious of the ways in which they are being read and represented by non-matrilineal outsiders. A Khasi woman narrated this story to me:

> There was this guy who has been brought up in Shillong and suddenly he says, "Yeah you know here the women rule the houses." You know he's telling this foreigner, a friend of mine from Belgium, and we were sitting there and he says "Yeah women rule." I said, "Mohan, you just shut up. You studied your whole life here in Shillong, at least learn about the society properly before you go and open your mouth to everyone yaa. Because it's not true, we don't rule the houses, it's

> our husbands and our uncles and everyone that rules, we give so much importance to our men. How can you go and tell everyone that you know we dictate terms? We don't dictate terms!

This person's frustration here is two-fold. The first stems from the false story being told about the autocratic Khasi woman, but bound up in it is another level of anger towards her companion Mohan (marked by name as a Hindu 'outsider'), who despite having lived and studied in Shillong his "whole life," was still spouting such fairy tales about Khasi society as could be expected from a veritable outsider. It is interesting that she does not try to change the terms of the discussion. She could have retorted by saying, "Even if that's true, so what?" or "Khasi women are not servile like 'your' women are, we have a more egalitarian society." Her Belgian friend might have even found it all fascinating. She recognizes however that this is serious business and there is no room for jokes or any kind of tomfoolery. Thus she attempts instead to falsify this claim by asserting that even among the Khasis it is the men who rule. We find in her statements both an expression of an internal Khasi patriarchy, which does bestow men with power, respect and status, and a simultaneous internalization/endorsement of the terms of mainstream patrilineo-patriarchy where men are expected (both by men and women) to unambigiously 'rule.' While she is clearly irritated at the hyperbole she is confronted with and is keen that her Belgian friend be properly informed, it also seems explicit to her that hegemonic orderings of gender across the world (that are very much mirrored by the Khasi gender worldview that she was raised within) have no place for a system where women dominate over men and the idea of such a society will likely be met with much hilarity if not outright horror just as it would in the Khasi context. The mismatch occurs here however because she is missing out on the reality (as we have just seen) that for an outsider raised

within a patrilineo-patriarchal world, 'dictating terms' is the sole prerogative of men and if women are not subject to these terms then they may as well be the 'rulers.' While the idea of a 'softer' or more 'egalitarian' patriarchy does exist within tribal communities within the Northeast, mirroring less hierarchical and more flexible gender relations in Southeast Asia (Andaya 2006, Karim 1995, Ong and Peletz 1995), the structural significance given to women in matrilineal communities seems to cross a line for most, especially the mainland outsiders and even Western audiences for whom, beyond a point, such a reality defies comprehension.

But patrilineal people continue to be enchanted by the idea of matrilineal societies. Most don't know exactly what they are, and following old scholarly traditions assume it refers to the socially sanctioned rule of matriarchs. However, when a class of people from within the matrilineal society confirms their assumptions, the tension generated certainly makes for high drama and media outfits are quick to capitalize on it. The SRT and its predecessor from the early 60s (see Chapter 5), which have been trying to publicize and garner support for their movement against matriliny, have intuitively picked up on both the sensational aspect of their ideology and the continuum of masculinity (discussed above) that makes their 'plight' instantly readable to the larger patrilineal audience. SRT's President Keith Pariat, with whom I interacted closely during my fieldwork, spoke of the numerous people who had preceded me in interviewing him. He chuckled over an anecdote about a time when he was stopped on the street in Khyndailad by a white man, who recognized him from a photo of an article he had read in the French daily *Le Monde*.

Magazines, newspapers, blogposts in India and around the world (spanning Australia, France, the UK, Poland, the Czech Republic, the UAE, Singapore and others) have featured stories about this group. A quick google search will throw up more recent articles like – "Reluctant Rulers: Matrilineal Tribe Tries to Shape Up Its Men" (Chicago Tribune 1996), "Where Women Rule the Roost and Men Demand Gender Equality" (Guardian 2011), "Meghalaya: Where Women Call the Shots" (AlJazeera 2013), "It's a Woman's World" (The Hindu 2013), "Men Under a State of Seige" (India Today 2013), "Men's Rights in Meghalaya: The Story of a Men's Liberation Movement" (The Open Magazine, 2013) and "Kingdom of Girls: Women Hold Power in this Remote Indian Village" (Washington Post 2015) – to name a few. The controversial politics of the SRT and perhaps the charisma of its leader, to whom many have flocked, have propelled the group and consequently the Khasis more broadly into international fame (or should we say infamy?) and recognition.

Sitting on the carpet and sifting through Peter's carefully compiled collection of clippings from newspapers and magazines that chronicled the outside world's interface with Khasi matriliny in blatantly pejorative ways, I listened to him talk about how he experiences each such article as a personal insult. "How do you think it makes us feel, to know that this is how the whole world is seeing us? We Khasis were long known for our courage as warriors… some researchers even claim that the reason we became a matrilineal society was because the men were always away, busy fighting wars… you know, I guess, that when a Khasi boy is born, he is given three arrows – protect his family, his clan and his people… this is our tradition, this is our history, but today what has it come to? People far away who didn't even know we exist, now they'll read this

article and laugh – Khasi men are mere breeding bulls?" He is referring to an article "Where Women Rule and Men Are Used As Breeding Bulls" in a yellowing Australian magazine that was open in front of me. "This has got to change, (he said) and we have got to do it."

Here it is forgotten, perhaps unimportant, that these para-trooping foreign journalists are not writing such pieces based on 'objective facts,' or even from any subjective experiences they have had of Khasi gender dynamics. Their research typically consists of brief interviews with select anti-matriliny ideologues (like Bah Keith and others) that are always recommended to them, sought out and cited. They typically say the same things, perhaps with more conviction each time, and what ensues is a battery of news clippings that stereotype Khasi men as being weak and servile. Over the years these have acquired truth-value and taken on a life of their own, so that now they perhaps form the bedrock upon which men narrate their own personal tales of harassment and hurt. Enacting and beholding are central to the game of gender as it is played out in practice, and this can be seen strikingly in Shillong. One way or the other people are compelled to participate in the interminable network of looks – and in doing so, one recognizes oneself as the one hailed or recognized, in that famous Althusserian moment where subjectivity congeals (Althusser 1971). To refuse this convoluted and crisscrossing circuit of visual vectors is tantamount to refuse to be interpellated within larger ideological frameworks of society, to refuse meaning itself.

Even as most would distance themselves from the radical position of the SRT, we will see in the next chapter that several Khasi men (especially from Christian families) find themselves in an awkward situation. Where earlier they had an important role to play

as maternal uncles, this figure is somewhat redundant in contemporary Shillong where there is a preponderance of nuclear families. They perform their duties as fathers but many find themselves sidelined by the wife, her family and her clan who are directly responsible for the children and stake claim to them. Dissevered from a right to property, many men I spoke to felt vulnerable to the mounting pressures of a globalized, capitalist world, and in their personal lives expressed alienation both in their relationships with the in-laws but also in their mother/sisters' home where they were no longer as warmly welcomed. High alcoholism rates were blamed on this state of social disrepair. Given these stories of frustration and sadness that circulate among Khasi men, it is not surprising that they struggle to cope with epithets connoting emasculation from non-matrilineal men, but also from the broader world out there.

It is within this context that we can perhaps understand the fine line that Aiphang's mother is treading; even as she desires her son to learn the traditional Khasi ways, she must simultaneously point him in the direction of a modern existence by showing him that his horizons extend beyond the Shillong skyline. She must teach him to be a good Khasi but in such an adroit way that he is not ensnared by the conundrums that several Khasi men are facing in their encounter with modernity. The (g)rumbling of discontent with matriliny coming from many elite, educated, well-traveled Khasi men needs to be read as expressions of the desire to become a part of a globally endorsed masculinity, which is based upon its ability to dominate women and to participate unhindered in global capitalist desires and practices, to transcend its roots as an indigenous society at the fringes of a larger nation-state, but even more powerfully perhaps to transcend the nation-state altogether and become a part of a larger patrilineal

world order where social structure, kinship, gender relations, religion, and economy all legitimate a male-oriented patriarchal worldview.

Anti-Matrilineal Men in colonial Kerala

In Chapter 2 I discussed the challenges posed by contemporary researchers – G. Arunima and K. Saradmoni – for critically engaging with matrilineal systems in Kerala especially in their intimate and foundational relationship with the classical anthropological studies conducted by Gough, Fuller and Moore. They show how anthropological research produced an 'ideal type' of Nayar matriliny that ends up invisibilizing the fact that matriliny was followed by a substantial portion of the population in the region, across caste, class and religious communities. In this section I focus on the dramatic changes that were on the cards for matrilineal communities in Kerala during the first half of the 20th century. These, as we will see, resonate strongly with the arguments being made by contemporary men's groups in Shillong. Saradamoni's analysis posits as the catalysts for these changes, a group of young, educated 'progressive' men in Kerala, for whom matriliny was highly undesirable as a system of organizing kinship, family and economic affairs in their society.

In a strange foreshadowing of the mobilizations of some of Khasi men's groups, which will be analyzed in the next chapter, Nayar men argued that their matrilineal customs relegated them to a position of pre-modernity and barbarism, with 'strange' practices that had been cast off by the rest of the civilized world – not only the colonizer but also the rest of what came to be known as India with which they aspired to integrate, especially as the anti-colonial Indian nationalist movement was unfolding. Sardamoni

situates these demands for change within a larger framework of land settlements and reforms by the modern state of Travancore, but argues that these changes cannot be attributed solely to the judicial system. These were the result of efforts garnered by men educated into 'modernity,' who sought to radically overhaul aspects of their matrilineal culture, including formalizing *sambandhams* (which were the conjugal relationships that Nayar women entered into with men of the same or higher castes) as legal marriages, delimiting the powers of the *karanavan* (maternal uncle), glorifying paternal love in order to legitimize nuclear families and the conjugal bond, enabling the dismantling of the *taravad* (ancestral home), and passing on a father's property to his own children instead of his sister's children.

The demands of these elite men gained a lot of traction leading to numerous legislative changes, which had a profound impact on families, social and economic relationships. For Saradamoni then, the movement away from matriliny is a painful rupture, a fall from the structural equalities built into her own past, that might have constituted the 'just' society that feminists today have to imagine and fight for, but were cast aside not so long ago by 'progressive' members of Kerala society.

Arunima is much more wary of the nostalgia for the matrilineal heritage that we glimpse in contemporary Kerala, a nostalgia that attributes all its virtues to this utopian society where women ruled the roost, such that, from one feminist vantage point, the changes come to be experienced as loss. Her ambivalence stems from an understanding of the *taravad* as being the locus of power, wealth and prestige – only affluent and landed Nayars owned *taravad* property – and she argues that upper-caste, wealthy Nayar concerns underlie the historical refashioning of the lost figure of the powerful matrilineal

foremother. In a sense her project carves a much more subtle analysis of the dismantling of the matrilineal system, which resists the anthropological ideal-type of anthropologists as well as a feminist reclaiming of the past based on a somewhat questionable nostalgia, and instead undertakes a social history of the Malabar province foregrounding the *taravad*, upon which complex relationships between class, caste, gender, age and kinship converge.

Arunima identifies the advent of colonial rule as the point of trauma for these societies. Colonial administration (with its patriarchal bias) appoints the oldest male as the legal representative of the property and the family, leading to (within a short span of five decades) a meteoric rise of the status of the *karanavan* as the 'headman' of the *taravad*. This elevation of position is accompanied by a putting into place of new and arbitrary hierarchies, where women and the younger members of the *taravad* are subordinated and made into legal dependents of the *karanavan*. Resistance to this autocracy of the *karanavan* is a feature of the late 19th century, with a plethora of strategies being mobilized by the younger members, such as moving away from the traditional *taravad*. These rebellions and changes were mostly undertaken by the younger men; the flurried activities of the men are accompanied by a concomitant passivity of women, who become increasingly relegated to the realm of the private, restricted from both education and employment.

The impulse to move toward urban locales and lifestyles is also an impetus for the disintegration of the agrarian based *taravad*. Arunima argues that the draw of wider identity attachments, like caste and nation, propelled the transcendence of the limited zone of the family for Nayars in Kerala. The hegemonic power of individualism,

capitalism, patriarchal values and customs (both colonial and nationalist) take on a strong hold in the imagination of these men (and women), and it is within this context that we can understand their desire to jettison an older identity that was shackled to a strong sense of tradition and community. Polyandry and hypergamy begin to be seen as barbaric due to a confluence of widely held patriarchal values as well as inter-caste rivalries. It is against this backdrop that she situates the Nayar men's demand for legal interventions by the colonial government that would endorse the patrilineal nuclear family, with its grounding in 'love' and shared access to property. These demands constituted, as she points out, not only a claim to a stake in property, but also a protest against a system that was too strongly associated with female authority or autonomy.

We see many of these ideas resurfacing but in differently calibrated ways among certain sections of Khasi men in Meghalaya. The SRT men for instance were aware that matrilineal systems in Kerala had 'disintegrated,' but were not aware of the role of their (elite, educated, well-traveled) Nayar counterparts in the creation of legislations that dismantled matriliny over decades. The history of matriliny in Kerala, both of the male mobilizations and the feminist nostalgia and longing for the (now castrated) virile foremother, serves as a useful counterpoint to the contemporary debates around kinship, community, gender and sexuality unfolding among the Khasis, which will be the subject matter of the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Matrilineal Anxieties: Gender Politics at an Impasse

> Don't give a woman too much freedom/For worldly wise she can never become/Her womanly grace will degenerate/For she'll unreasonably argue and castigate/She won't bother of consequences big and small/She won't realize what is right, what is wrong/Don't give her too much liberty/For she may lose her dignity – *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen* (The Teaching of Elders) Part II (1903)

> *Trra tak tak ngin ialeh ha ban da jop kumba phah I mei na ïing* (We will fight victoriously as instructed by our mother from home) – Lyrics from song accompanying customary dance.

Doing fieldwork in Shillong I spent a lot of time in taxis. I relied on them to get everywhere. The city has a fairly extensive and organized network of 'shared taxis,' and on a good day (when cops weren't anticipated) up to 5-6 passengers could be squeezed into the dinky black Maruti 800 painted yellow on top. On days I wasn't able to schedule an interview, or had no events to attend, and no place to be more generally speaking, I often found myself riding around in taxis. This was one of my favorite ways of *being* in the city; an inconspicuous way of traversing various localities, each slightly different than the other, to be in close proximity with people, which is of real physical comfort (especially on chilly winter days) when you're alone, and to listen to them talk among

themselves or then loudly on the phone, with no expectation of privacy[35]. After listening to church sermons in Khasi, this was the next best way for me to practice understanding spoken Khasi. Often I was lucky and struck up conversations, which would then lead to further interactions. But even (and especially) if you choose to sit in a taxi just to commute you could count on spending *a lot* of time in it. Traffic 'blocks' proliferate around school (start and finish) times and the journey from say Jaiaw to Laitumkhrah, which normally takes around fifteen minutes, could extend into an hour and a half. This also gave me ample time to stare out the window and watch people going about their business, enacting their public lives.

The volume of young people in the city often struck me; Shillong is considered an educational hub within the Northeast and many ambitious students from across the region move to Shillong for higher studies. From the variety of youth of various fashions visible on the streets of Shillong, the 'typical Khasi guy' was sharply contrasted. Across various localities they were typically seen behind tinted windows in cars parked by the roadside blaring heavy metal music smoking cigarettes and drinking with friends. When they emerged in their black t-shirts or leather jackets, sporting tattoos and greasy spiked hair, they seemed aloof and owned their difference from quotidian folk. Alternatively they could be seen riding through main streets on pulsating bikes. Like them their vehicles tend to have a flamboyant mien; a particular 'gang' from Laban picked a bright pink to have their cars stand out. I couldn't say if all these young men had critiques of matriliny or whether they were just going through a particularly dark or rebellious phase, but they

[35] An audio-visual installation art project by Shillong-based artists explores the relationship between people, cityscapes and memory as they play out in the confined yet unfettered space of the taxicab. For details see http://reddur.com/work/kali-kamai/

were certainly referenced constantly by those who did, pointing to them as the perfect instantiation of the decrepit state that Khasi masculinity had fallen into in contemporary times. They certainly were the most visible avatar of the 'typical Khasi guy;' the other important one was often less noticeable: stumbling around in the comfort of darkness was the inebriated Khasi man. Because of the shameful and furtive nature of this problem alcoholism often slips through official statistics, but high incidences were reported by so many of my interlocutors; most acknowledged the truth behind one man's assertion that "nowadays each and every family has at least one man, sometimes woman, who has died of drink. I know one family where four out of four brothers, all taken to the bottle and died of it."

In this chapter I analyze some of the concerns being raised by Khasi men's groups fighting against matriliny and male subordination, which starts to open up our understandings of a Khasi masculinity that, as I argued in the previous chapter, is being shaped by and against the ideological framework of patrilineo-patriarchy. I undertake an analysis of the organizing principles and logics of the anti-matrilineal ideology espoused by the SRT and some others. While elaborations of the problems with matriliny are directed on the twin axes of matriliny as 'traditional' and as 'contemporary' systems, my theorization outlines a critique of the compulsive framing of these struggles primarily as products of the matrilineal system.

Further I show how the remapping of the tribulations of Khasi men onto more pressing social concerns leads to the gendering and hierarchization of feelings. I examine the forms that these assertions of hardship take, the 'scientific' and evolutionary ideas they draw on, and the resulting framing of history and colonial relations, clan and gender

dynamics that occurs. These articulations pivot on two figures that are staged in an antagonistic struggle for power – the maternal uncle and the youngest daughter and I bring these up for analysis. Finally, I explore the status of 'truth stories' that described a fantastic, demonic world – a treacherous, bloodthirsty world with power gone awry, that can be restored only through the casting out of matrilineal principles.

Simultaneously, in this chapter I attend to voices that are countering these efforts, especially those from a feminist perspective. I detail this debate that is spectacularized in the figure of the youngest daughter threatening to undo patriarchal authority, not merely to analyze the problem of systemic power and much less to establish who has it more or in what forms, but to see how power is being taken up as a discursive device. I'm interested in the moments of rhetorical conflict and the kinds of narratives that they both throw up and shore up. I argue that in studying the staging of politics or politics in action rather than power itself we can be attentive to unexpected discursive alliances that get formed, which need to be thought through especially for how they might be pushing feminism to come up against some of its own limits.

Extinction as Event: Construction of a Community in Crisis

The atrophy of the human body, its slow but certain putrefaction, follows the unraveling of the mind, both engorged with drink and despair, impelled into this wretched state by potent forces outside their control. Dulled, distressed, this 'typical Khasi guy' was precisely the fallout of a bankrupt social system that, unable to keep up with changing times, has gone terribly awry. The group that has garnered the most attention for pitching this as the dismal backdrop against which it proffers its critique of

matriliny has been the Synkhong Rympei Thymmai (SRT). As discussed earlier, the SRT has perhaps been the most prominent face of anti-matriliny in Meghalaya with its proposal to switch to a patrilineal system instead, and has received enormous publicity from journalists across the world. To a western audience barely coming to terms with feminist movements and starting to acknowledge the concept of women's rights, this story immediately piques the curiosity of many. Academic audiences I have detailed my research to, have also reacted instinctively with fascination.

There is something rather quaint and anachronistic in the story of a group of men in what Anna Tsing has called an "out-of-the-way-place" in (an overly misogynistic) India agitating against a social system where women are perceived to be either dominant (due to the oft-repeated slippage between matriliny and matriarchy as discussed in previous chapters) or equal. In the media and popular discourse the debate tends to focus on the more radical demand for a complete overturn of matriliny being made by SRT. But there are other groups and individuals offering parallel critiques of social realities, based on problems they argue are inherent to the matrilineal traditions of the community. Most striking in this context is the Maitshaphrang Movement ("strive forward") (MSM), which has been advocating for the passing of an "Equitable Distribution of Ancestral and Self-Acquired Property Act" and the "Meghalaya Compulsory Registration of Marriages Act." In 2012 MSM succeeded in converting its latter demand into law. Since the passing of this Act in 2012 its convener – Michael Syiem (who was also a close collaborator) – has further been protesting the tardiness of the government in actually framing rules that can

be legally implemented.[36] On March 3rd 2015, the Meghalaya Cabinet announced its approval of amendments and rules for the Act to be introduced in the upcoming Assembly session, which in the absence of serious public opposition, will become signed into law.

Since it doesn't advocate explicitly for patriliny, the MSM was seen by many of my informants (especially those who agree that some things do need to change) as being less radical and more practical than the SRT and therefore relatively palatable but also more importantly perhaps less socially stigmatized and unacceptable. Nongbri (2014:57) notes that the tendency to be one-sided "led to the failure of the men's movement in Meghalaya, which despite the initial enthusiasm it generated not only ended in a whimper, but also failed to bring about the desired reforms in the system necessary to keep up with the changing times." While debates about the contemporary relevance of matriliny might have been very charged during the nineties, particularly with the rise of the SRT and the MSM, it would be premature to dismiss these movements as having failed or died out. The playing field may be uneven for these anti-matriliny groups but the larger terrain is also arguably lurching – increasingly people, mostly men but also women, find themselves gravitating towards the arguments being made by these groups, especially since (as Nongbri would argue) there is a veritable paucity of positions that are more balanced, thoughtful or nuanced.

Opposing these groups is ostensibly the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) that has been trying to consolidate (but in selective and strategic ways as we

[36] He was incidentally described by others as "eccentric," and "a loner," but also as being someone who believes strongly in his ideals and was willing to "sit alone outside the Secretariat doing *dharna* (protesting) for days without caring what others think."

have already seen) the matrilineal traditions of the Khasis. This underscoring of tradition is not merely a reaction to modern cosmologies and ways of life or a romantic idealization of past plenitude now under threat. As discussed previously, the Indian Constitutional emphasis on the key role of the Autonomous District Councils as bearer and enforcer of customary laws and practices for the hill-tribes of the Northeast creates a framework whereby tribal subjects are necessarily routed through 'tradition' in order to be legitimately interpellated as modern or contemporary Indian subjects. Set against these two opposing factions (the SRT and the KHADC) the relative success of the MSM is often seen precisely as a product of a somewhat more balanced, more acceptable position, even as it shares much of its theoretical arsenal with the SRT in terms of its understanding of multiple lines of social degradation (based on gendered disharmonies and the floundering of men) caused by contemporary problems emanating from within Khasi matriliny. Even though MSM was formed with eight people in 1990, the same year that the SRT comes together, it has been an independent group. Bah Mike distinguishes the MSM from the SRT saying, "It is a *very* [his emphasis in speech] informal organization, we do not have a Constitution. It's like a movement of ideas. We don't take up issues. It's all about ideas and propagating those ideas."[37]

The articulation of a crisis engulfing Khasi men has been discursively mapped onto a perceived crisis of the entire *jaitbynriew*; kinship, gender and nationalism have become tightly knit together making dissent (particularly from women) tantamount to disloyalty. The reassertion (and reorganization in the case of SRT/MSM) of national identity has historically been associated with peoples' struggles against colonial

[37] Bah Mike would for example endorse children taking their father's name if they choose to but isn't overtly prescribing that for the community.

dominance and hegemony. Scholars of the 'nation' have long called our attention to the unyielding nexus between racist ideologies/discourses and nationalism. Etienne Balibar demonstrates how within the ostensibly egalitarian nation-state, racism functions as a broad and heterogeneous system of crisscrossing lines of domination and marginalization such that "ethnic racism" and "sexual racism" cannot be isolated, thus arguing that "racism and sexism function together, and in particular racism always presupposes sexism" (1988:49). Feminists like Cynthia Enloe (1989) have further shown how within these struggles for a national identity gender has been a key mobilizing vector. On the one hand, the nation itself has been gendered feminine[38] (and thus in need of protection) and women turned into symbols of the nation (both for needing protection and for being child-bearers and child-rearers, thus responsible for the reproduction of the uniqueness of the nation along both physical and cultural/moral lines).[39] On the other hand, the voices and demands of actual women are most often suppressed; even as they contribute significantly to these struggles for self-determination they are asked to postpone their goals until after the nationalist dream has been realized.

It is within this context that Cynthia Enloe argues that rather than having anything to do with the experiences of women, nationalism springs "from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation, and masculinized hope" (1989:44). The overarching patriarchal ethos and the influence wielded by Khasi men in the public/political domain has, as Nongbri's work demonstrates, led to the crystallization of an anti-woman stance, with ideologically opposed groups (pro-matriliny and pro-reform) both pushing for

[38] In Khasi the word for nation/country 'Ri' has a 'Ka' (signifying female) prefix
[39] I was told by a non-converted informant that Khasis consider women to be the *Lukhimai* or the goddess of the house, and is made to wear a crown, symbolizing her position as queen or royalty, even as the "most important member of the clan is the uncle."

masculine primacy and the control of women. The exclusion of women's voices enables men to freely draw on multiple imaginaries in order to strategically consolidate their authority, which they argue has both been damaged and dissipated in the transition from 'tradition' to 'modernity.' The picture being painted is that of an enervated Khasi man, depleted of his *khadar bor* (twelve units of energy), thus unable to fulfill his traditional role of leader and protector of the community, particularly in the face of increased influx of non-tribals in the city.[40]

These groups of (mostly) men in Shillong have identified matriliny as the source of numerous problems that have come to plague contemporary Khasi society, upsetting the 'proper' orderings of gender (distilled from both 'traditional' and 'modern' narratives) and unleashing multiple waves of crises perceived to be a threat to the very existence and continuity of the tribe. Their account of the destabilization of gender roles, responsibilities, expectations, and hierarchies that follows from a purported dislocation of 'traditional' Khasi matriliny within the contemporary moment is the subject of this chapter. I will explore their rationales for challenging what the SRT calls the 'custom' of matriliny. Framing matriliny as a custom rather than a part of 'culture' is a theoretico-political move – while culture must be preserved at all costs, customs that become outmoded ought to be jettisoned, they argue. As one person put it, "Culture is a way of life; it's how you live. Customs are the practices that show the world how different you are from the world. These customs can be made away with but culture we should not lose sight of."

[40] The Khasis have a saying: *U rangbah khadar bor, Ka kynthei shi bor* [A man has 12 units of energy, a woman has one] – often cited as an instance of the traditional Khasi conceptualization of men as physically (but also mentally) superior.

Opposition to these groups is strong, yet it is important to note that there are as many responses to these men's groups as there are Khasis (each person comes to this subject with their unique set of experiences and perspectives), and trying to catalog or typologize them is always already a fraught task. This is nothing special about Shillong or this topic particularly but is instead perhaps an enduring philosophical and methodological dilemma of anthropological (or more broadly humanities/social science) research – how might one contend most ethically with the scholarly 'impulse' to distill generalities about social existence without sacrificing at the altar (often violently) the quality of human distinctiveness or that which resists categorization? Rather than trying to map the various kinds of reactions then, I take up the voices of a few people (in the same fragmentary and idiosyncratic vein that runs through projects such as this) and analyze them in relation to each other, so as to draw out some of the theoretical complexities being raised by these unique conjunctions between matriliny and gender and explore what insights and challenges these throw up for the field of feminist theory and praxis.

The popularity of the SRT in the national and international media could suggest that lobbying against matriliny is a recent trend within Khasi society. However voices of dissent, mostly male, began emerging back in the early 60s, when the precursor to the SRT, called the Iktiar Longbriew Manbriew (ILM), translating figuratively to 'the powers/rights gifted to people to bring up life,' took cognizance of what they found to be a growing crisis within Khasi society.[41] Spurred by a book written by J. Darningstone Lyngdoh, which tabulated some of the problems emerging from within Khasi society and

[41] This group thus predates many of the men's rights groups that have burgeoned across the globe primarily in response to feminist battles within socio-political and legal arenas.

argued that the matrilineal system divested men of responsibilities, a group of around thirty men congregated to address these problems. Men found themselves in their wives' home after marriage and the pressures of that transition were exacerbated by impressions that they were being treated like an outsider or then a guest in their new home. The arrival of children on the scene did not assuage this disconnect but rather amplified it, as they were often reminded, particularly during times of conflict around issues like child-rearing strategies or decisions around children, that the children belonged to the wife's clan and were their primary responsibility.

Because of these feelings of not belonging and being unmoored from their children, men had no strong structural ties to their marital kin, the group observed. Bah Constant, himself a frail man in his eighties, commented on the fragility of marriages in those days, where men would 'run off…if anything happens, even a small quarrel…and take another wife.' The loss of the husband was never a serious one, according to him, because if one left, a woman could easily marry again, and her children could continue their lives within the *ïïng* (family home) with little interruption. Bah Constant pointed to the dispensability of married men and perhaps a fundamental lack of value associated with them by saying "…actually the males, they aren't anything. Sometimes when the wife doesn't like him she will push him away and he will go off to his mother's house."

Having identified problems such as these, the ILM held meetings within the community, organized debates in schools and so forth, but Bah Constant spoke of "great opposition from people," widespread anger, suspicion and threats. Women would show up to their meetings with betel nut knives under their sleeves to threaten these men. The group nevertheless met privately and tried to mobilize ideas and resources, but over the

years, ended up falling apart, mostly because their jobs took them in different directions away from Shillong. The SRT, which pitches itself as the reincarnation of this group, narrates their history like this:

> …gradually the group became defunct but the idea never died, it resurfaced years later, after a few young article writers, on this particular subject, decided to meet and this sparked the spirit of resurrection of this group and on the 14th of April, 1990, the "Syngkong Rympei Thymmai" was born at the YMCA Hall at Mawkhar, Shillong in the presence of a few of the surviving members like J. Darningstone Lyngdoh, Dr. A. Lyngwi, Shri. Kress Mohon Lyngdoh and others.[42]

Inter-generational familial bonds, shared stories and experiences seem to be at the heart of this resurrection, along with the recognition that many of the problems that were identified in the past still resonated with contemporary social realities. Some of the older ILM men staunchly supported and mentored the younger members of the SRT, affording them a sense of history, continuity and purpose. The son of a late ILM member remarked on his father's keen sense of observation and his perceptiveness. Likening him to a "social prophet," he said: "many things which he told me in an offhand manner, which I never realized to think deeply in those days, but now I see them happening day by day, day by day. I see changes happening in the way exactly he said it would." An older SRT member remembered that this gentleman used to wonder out loud – "sometimes I'm surprised, why do I worry about a race that's not worried about itself, why am I alone worried about it? But I can't help it. I worry. That's why I do all this."

Many of the SRT men construe themselves as both ordinary and exceptional – ordinary in that they are not elite or well-to-do but extraordinary in their ability to see the systemic problems unfolding around them, and in their struggle "to do something for the

[42] http://www.srtshillong.com/about-srt/

Khasi race," unlike the rest who are "only bothered to make money and live rich lives." A predominantly educated group, these men have taken on the responsibility of educating the rest of Khasi society about the ills of matriliny, conducting meetings in villages and traveling to different places like Smit, Jowai, Ribhoi, Mawlai, carrying pamphlets, and giving speeches. "Wherever we went we had a big audience, invariably people came to join. In the end we had a register of about 2000 people," Keith Pariat, the president of the SRT said to me.

Martial imagery is often invoked, the feeling of having to push hard against the tide of mainstream Khasi society. When some of the men come to him saying their wives are complaining, they're being asked to quit, Bah Keith would tell them, "You expect this please. Don't think this is going to be a rosy path, where you can just amble across. This is going to be war basically. You'll get sticks and stones, *chappals*. Don't think it is going to be easy. If you face brickbats and you back out, you are a coward. You face them proudly and lift your head high and try to make them understand that what you're throwing at me is not going to hurt me, its going to hurt you and the Khasi race." Another person spoke about the vulnerability of the Khasis as a group: "You see a foreign invader will invade us at any time of the day, because he knows that we are not the masters of our own. A Khasi male is not the master of his land, he's not the master of his clan, he's not the master of his family, he's not the master of his own self. He does not have even a title *re*!"

Several jokes were in circulation on the subject. "Khasi male is the third sex," I was told. I must have looked perplexed and I certainly wasn't chuckling – "females, males and males," they added to help me out. This feeling that Khasi men "had frankly

become not men anymore" was experienced painfully by many of my informants. Direct comparisons were made to the patrilineal outsiders whose aggression was linked structurally to their dominant role within the family. In contrast:

> Here the Khasi men cannot fight back, because we have been raised by this custom to become you know… being pushed here and there, from the house you leave empty handed, you go and live in your wife's house where you become quite useless frankly, you produce children, they're not yours. *Theek hai* (it's okay) I'm happy because I have no responsibility. So I play the guitar and I drink and I die by 35.

The degradation of the Khasi male is inextricably linked to the future of the Khasi *jaitbynriew*, which in turn fundamentally animates the SRT call for a change to patriliny. A study conducted by Kong Biloris Lyndem (an eminent educationist and former chairperson of the state Women's Commission),[43] which found that all of a hundred and seventy nine Khasi women interviewed reported a preference for a non-Khasi mate, was often cited as incontrovertible proof of the "sunk down" state that Khasi men find themselves in.[44] Concerned with the plight of these men, groups like the SRT and MSM are asking why it is that Khasi men have become or perceive themselves to be such pitiful characters and what are some of the measures that need to be taken to remedy the situation. Bah Keith puts it poignantly thus:

> Most Khasi women seem to want to marry non-Khasis…but nobody has ever been bothered to find out why the men have sunk down so low. They just say, ah, how can I marry that man – he's a drunkard, he's a drug addict, but has anybody worried, or spent some energy to find out why did

[43] A male friend jokingly calls the Women's Commission *Seng Ot Tiar* (roughly Women who cut up things)

[44] I was shown a clipping of this article. While Kong Biloris does cite this study she doesn't exactly link it to the "sunk down" state of Khasi men but rather to their cruelty and violence. "It is scary to even think of the types of abuses that are inflicted on women," she writes as an explanation for why Khasi women are choosing non-Khasi men.

> Khasi men sink so low? Nobody's ever bothered, there has to be some reason why he's sunk down so low for Khasi women to not want to marry him anymore.

The answer to this question is clear in his mind – Khasi men have "sunk down so low" because of matriliny. However it is important to note here that many of the issues being highlighted by the SRT as failures of masculinity that are *direct outcomes* of the continuation of the supposedly outmoded matrilineal system also end up surfacing in elaborations of the problems being faced by non-matrilineal Northeast tribal men more broadly. Duncan McDuie-Ra's (2012; 2013) nuanced work on Northeast tribal masculinity in migration is eye-opening, and reading through it you can immediately see the resonances between the Khasi male experience (as explicated by the men's groups) and those of other Northeast tribal men encountering a baffling range of challenges especially in their encounter with non-tribal mainlanders as they seek education and employment in Indian cities like Delhi. The framing of the future of the *jaitbynriew* as being on the verge of disintegration simply because Khasi men are supposedly being consumed by matriliny starts to seem paranoid and exaggerated against this larger backdrop.

Even though it was amply clear to him through our multiple interactions that I didn't share his "ideology" as he called it, Bah Keith seemed glad that I was genuinely interested in the questions he was asking, and wanted to know my diagnosis of the problems faced by Khasi men and what they were being triggered by. In part my work seeks to respond concretely and adequately to the many points that he made to me over extended discussions and time spent hanging out. Incidentally what I learned in Shillong was that many others (both men and women) were asking similar questions as he was but

did not necessarily support the solutions that his group has been proposing. We will return to some of these voices later in this chapter.

The Khasi male's purported undesirability as a mate is not a problem just for him however. If Khasi women don't want to marry Khasi men anymore, then where will you get Khasi children from, ask many of these men? Contrary to those who argue that even if a Khasi woman marries an outsider, her children (provided they are raised according to Khasi norms) will ensure the continuance of the Khasi race, these men subscribe to an understanding of lineage and race that is bound up with ideas about physical distinctiveness and the purity of blood. As one person put it, the race "will carry on, but with what blood strain? Not a Khasi blood strain." Many of my informants vaguely referenced scientific studies that 'prove' that it is the father's DNA that is more significant for the appearance of the child, thus also justifying why Khasi men marrying non-Khasis did not pose a problem for the sanctity of the race, as opposed to when Khasi women took non-Khasi husbands. "The seed comes from the man, the woman is the soil so to say, where the seed is put in so that another Khasi can come out," I was told. Another SRT person put it, "if things are going as they are, I'll give you 50 years. Khasis will live only in name, not in physical features, not in tradition, not in culture. They'll just make a few statutes there and keep you in the museum and say there once was a race like this, they dressed like this, they ate like this, they looked like this."

Being educated, having studied or worked outside the state, both in other parts of India and abroad, these men strategically draw on disparate tropes in order to bolster their case against matriliny. Science, seen as the bastion of modernity and reason, the engine of progress, is often juxtaposed with 'traditional' customs and beliefs. "You have to run a

society based on intelligence, on observation, what is good what is bad, not on sentiments that are redundant," I was told by Bah Keith early on while discussing the positive impact that the entry of women into the *Dorbars* (a sphere that women have traditionally been excluded from) has had.[45] Also the *Rangbah Shnong* (elected leader of the Dorbar) of his locality, Jaiaw Pdeng, he affirmed their role saying, "I think it's very, very good. Women are very balanced, they think from a women's point of view. But Khasi people are generally very emotional, they want to hang on to traditions…especially in rural places, they don't want women in the *Dorbar*. What's been set please don't touch they say." This then became a perfect segue into the ideological stance taken by the SRT, which too sees itself as battling against the supposedly traditional, superstitious and emotional nature of the unenlightened (or then self-seeking) Khasis, and recourse to science – theories, methods, an entire worldview – is a dominant and recurring theme in this narrative.

The withering away of the race as a physically discrete entity (most scholarly accounts of the Khasis refer to them as belonging to the Mon-Khmer group, distinct even from the other Northeast tribes who are seen as being Tibeto-Burman) is one axis along which the men argue that the tribe is under threat; the other is the very physical existence of the people and their land. One person outlined the impact of matriliny on border communities – Khasis have traditionally practiced village endogamy, such that both their consanguineal and affinal kin would be present in the same village, making it easier for men to not only move between their marital and natal homes, but also to protect the boundaries of their properties and villages. With time however, the complexity of interrelations compelled people to marry outside their village, leaving the borders to the

[45] Dorbars are the traditional administrative/judicial units that are protected by the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

oversight of men who were from a different village, who has – "no right, he doesn't feel he belongs there because why should I bother fighting for this boundary, its not my land." The problem of border encroachment ("now Meghalaya is being eaten up area wise, from Assam, from Block 1, Block 2, from Garo hills, Jaintia Hills, all over") is a matter of great public concern in Shillong and this connection being made by the SRT is designed to touch a nerve.

Absent Uncles, Abject Fathers: The Story of the "Sunk-down" Khasi Man

When men leave their villages after marriage the other outcome is that they're unable to fully participate in the everyday lives of their *ïing* members, and their role as brother and maternal uncle begins to diminish. Mass migration from villages to cities has also had the same effect. In the contemporary urban context, between work and their own nuclear families, men rarely have the time to attend to the needs of their lineage mates. The influence of religion is significant too, an informant explained – "majority of the Khasis now are Christians and we are taught that the family is the mainstay. Here it is the father, the mother and the children, whereas in the Khasi context, it is the *kñi* (uncle) and the *pyrsa* (niece and nephew)." Many claimed (including those who did not support the SRT in any way) that the *kñi*'s role these days is a severely circumscribed one – the parental unit was the primary source of authority for the children. As one person put it, "He's still the *kñi* in name, but he doesn't come and interfere, he's not there anymore. The *kñi* is there for show."

We have previously noted the strong influence of the British on the Khasi worldview given how their relationship unfolded in close proximity to each other, first in

Sohra and then with Shillong becoming the capital of colonial Assam. Even today, if forced to pick a ruler, many would state their preference for the British rather than the *dkhars*. Particularly for the majority Christian population, the British were the bearers of progress, development, modernity, and a better, more enlightened and spiritually sophisticated way of life. The indigenous religion is likewise perceived as being less modern. "The cutting of the roosters head and reading the entrails, breaking the egg and telling the future, and what's going to happen to the crop…In this modern world, can you, I don't know, I have no right to say all this, but I find it hard to still take out the entrails of the rooster and read my future from there. It's not acceptable anymore with the modern society, so I don't want to believe in that religion anymore, but that is culture, and culture and religion for the Khasis are entwined like this, you cannot separate them," said one interlocutor.

The wholehearted acceptance of Christianity by the majority (and the proximity that most Khasis feel toward the conventional markers of modernity and westernization) creates a somewhat disjointed relationship with what is understood as 'traditional' matrilineal customs and relationships, something that the SRT is trying hard to tap into. "We are sick of the funcles," a queer friend of mine said to me mysteriously one night we were returning from a fashion show. "Funcles?" I repeated a little confused. "You know…the f*ckin' uncles." Like most others she did not in any way support the SRT, but was nevertheless pointing to the relative insignificance of maternal uncles in contemporary Shillong, or the feelings of distaste they induced when they tried to interfere unnecessarily, particularly in those Christian households where the fathers are respected and loving figures. While this did not prompt people to reject matriliny, only to

see it as undergoing changes, the SRT would build on this sentiment in order to pitch for the adoption of patriliny. I was told of an older ILM member who would apparently joke with his detractors saying – "You people have all gone and become Christian. But God did not send his nephew, he sent his son. Your nephew will not come to save you."

The affinity between Christianity and patriliny is a recurring if fraught theme. According to an SRT member, "Christian religion teaches nothing but patriliny. Generation after generation they'll name only men. Its totally patrilineal or patriarchal you can say." However while religious leaders have molded people's behaviors in enormously significant ways, they have steered away from critiquing matrilineal practices that were seen as social (while expressly forbidding those related to the indigenous religion). "They don't preach that you should keep the husband as head of the house, wives should be a little lower in status in the family, the husband should be the head of the house. All that is stated clearly in the Bible. But do these pastors say that in church? If they say that then all the women will become some other religion, they'll leave Christianity, that's why they keep quiet. None of the pastors will preach this because why are they there, only to draw more people," he added.

Michael Syiem (of the Maitshaphrang Movement discussed above), a Christian but "not a church going" one, offered a different critique in his quiet witty manner. "The religion that we're teaching is also church-based. That's why Meghalaya is such a corrupt state. We're Christians only in church no?" While many of these educated Khasi men might have some critiques of religion or religious institutions, they nevertheless deploy Christianity (as the unmarked religion in the Khasi context) strategically in order to forward their ideology, playing in fact on the very emotional sentiments of people that

they simultaneously critique. The reference to God's choosing his son over his nephew playfully seeks to enjoin people as good Christians to embrace completely the message(s) of the Bible, especially those that pertain to the desirability and propriety of patrilineo-patriarchy.

At the same time since Christianity is not the only religion, and these men are also keen to reach out to people following the *Niam Khasi,* they try to keep religious references to a minimum. "If we go to a village where we know that all have converted then we talk about the Bible more, otherwise we are little careful," I was told. The SRT Constitution expressly requires members to avoid both religion and politics, so as to keep their ideology clear and untarnished. This principle led to a splintering of the SRT when the former General Secretary, a staunch Christian, started "Bible-thumping" too much. Another faction was formed subsequently, which draws on the Bible a great deal in order to push for patriliny. When I asked if I could have this person's contact information I was told that he would not be willing to talk to me since I am an outsider. What was being suggested to me implicitly is that the combination of Khasi chauvinism with excessive religiosity detracts from the 'progressive' or 'liberal' logics and sensibilities that the SRT is keen to identity itself with, even as it promotes a world where women are expected to play second-fiddle to men.

Thus while the explicit goal of the SRT policy to not rely too heavily on religion is ostensibly formulated to not alienate the non-Christian population, it was also a means for them to shroud their gender-conservatism by distancing themselves from potentially problematic discourses and instead aligning themselves with modern and globally popular discourses of indigenous rights, human rights, justice, dignity and gender

equality. It is important to note that Christianity is not being rejected here at all. In fact there is a clear reliance on the dominant Christian endorsement (implicit as it may be) of a patrilineal ethos through nuclear families, paternal authority and the not-too-uncommon adopting of the father's name (unproblematic for those with two Khasi parents as we have seen), but this Christianity is differently configured from the one being sold by the former General Secretary discussed above. Rather than 'rabid' or 'conservative' it is uniquely aligned with a constellation of ideas about Western modernity, renaissance, science, technology, rationality and so forth.[46] It is against this backdrop that we have to situate the SRT claims that matriliny is outmoded in the contemporary world where Khasis are aspiring to become like the advanced West. As one of my informants put it "we would like to be equal to them, but our society is being run by customs that are Stone Age. These rules and laws are bound to take us backwards not forwards."

No longer wielding the same kind of authority and influence in their own *ïing,* men (most of them Christian) seek to assert themselves as heads of their family of procreation. But according to Bah Mike these changes are not accepted by Khasis – "we still say that uhh… it's the uncle. So the father he's not really the head of the family."

[46] In the face of a spurt in violence against Christians since the Modi government has come into power, Christian intellectuals around the country are explicitly making the connection between Christianity and the countries of the modern West that India is keen to have strong ties with. As Mari Marcel Thekaekara writes, "The new war on Christianity is counterproductive, and strategically stupid. It will not only harm the image of India globally, it puts into jeopardy the millions of Hindus living peacefully and happily in the U.S., Britian, Europe, Canada and Australia…The NRIs who funded the Modi campaign will not be pleased about the damage of India's image just as they are beginning to be proud of the country's emerging global position. Nor will they appreciate the backlash that might affect them sooner or later, as news spreads to churches abroad about the vandalizing of Christian churches, the rape of nuns in Kolkatta and Orissa, and the burning down of a Delhi church." The association between Christianity and the modern (theoretically secular but affectively Christian) West is an intimate one and Christians in India draw on it both in terms of making sense of their own identity-as-Other within the Indian (read Hindu) nation-state but also in order to caution the mainstream to not take them as powerless, unseen, unrepresented minorties that can be violated with impunity. See: www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/being-christian-in-india/article7036448.ece

Tales of paternal disenfranchisement abound is conversation with men against matrilineage. Even though for the Khasis the father is a key figure in the nuclear unit[47] and his family/lineage (referred to as *kha)* shown a lot of respect, there is strong discomfort around the fact that structurally speaking, the husband (being of a different *kur)* is considered an outsider by the matrilineal *kur* of his wife and children. In a previous chapter we encountered the sense of alienation that men feel in their new homes after marriage, particularly around eating spaces. Even after children are born and men have adjusted a little in their new environment, they are periodically reminded of their outsider status. A passionate expression of this discontentment goes as follows:

> If they have a clan meeting, father is left out because he's not [of the same clan]. My children can go, my wife can go. Me, the father, I can't even peep from the window and see what they're talking. You're breaking the family into two. I have no right to go with my children and wife? What are you doing? Tearing the family apart, from the root! Family is the basic foundation of society, if your family is broken into two, don't talk about society, it's never going to stand up. And now because of this practice – the children belong to the wife – I have no authority over them when it comes to major decisions, because the clan will have more authority, because they belong to that clan, because here for the Khasis, its all *kur kur kur kur*. The *kur* will take the decision. The father becomes totally powerless.

Even as the father is rendered too abject and isolated to "even peep from the window" his condition is never isolable from larger social concerns. Here we encounter a reiteration of a key theme outlined above – the compulsory interlacing of the personal with the systemic. Problems are never significant enough solely at the level of individuals or even

[47] Despite stories about how historically Khasi husbands only visited at night and never had any role to play as husbands or fathers, Khasi fathers have for long been considered one of the key pillars in the Khasi kinship cosmology, as Bah Syntiew reminded us in the previous chapter. Alternatively some Khasis will entirely disavow this practice saying that this is a feature of Jaintia society, and in a cruel twist of fate end up likening Jaintia men to "breeding bulls."

families – they must necessarily be connected to the bigger picture of society and *jaitbynriew*. In this way they are similar to mainland India's men's rights groups described by Romit Chowdhury, who use the very discursive framework of men's rights to argue against a purely individualistic, rights-based women's movement that they perceive to be in conflict with traditional Indian family values. He writes:

> This apparent inconsistency is explained if we understand that the call for men's rights in its present form is hardly ever about the male individual. Rather its demands are couched in the larger moral project of saving the family and the nation. Any conflict between the demand for men's legal rights and family/community values is, therefore, mitigated not so much by a simple assertion of male supremacy but by the moral terms that structure the project of men's rights. [2014:41]

With the SRT men too we find a strategic use of rights-based language/logic that questions the fairness of the matrilineal system for men, but never purely for their own individual sake. Within such a framing, neither is it possible to conceive of fathers who are not very interested in being a part of their wives' clan meetings and do not consider them a threat to their families, nor can we take seriously the experiences of men dealing with frustration, anger, grief, ridicule, loss, isolation, angst, injustice etc. on their own terms. While feelings are a very important component of the dynamic being described by Khasi men, there is a simultaneous impulse to quickly remap them onto 'more important' social realities.

In the stories of these men we can sense also how sentiments get gendered and hierarchized – anger, frustration, humiliation, injustice and rebellion become fronted and legitimized, while melancholia, paranoia, insecurity, grief, loss and others are quickly passed over. One the one hand I was asked repeatedly to weigh in on questions relating to

justice. Is it fair that there are so many expectations on the father ("feed your children, clothe your children, educate your children," "go running to the doctor for medicines") but "he has no rights" [when up against the clan]? I was told if a child's mother dies they are considered orphans even if the father is alive, and will be taken by the *kur*, "unless I force it, unless I challenge the customary law to take them with me." A young woman who is a member of the SRT argued, "In our system, the *khun khadduh* gets everything. I feel that's biasedness, because why should the last daughter get everything? In today's world all the siblings should have equal rights to the property."

Other kinds of feelings on the other hand became subjugated – when I commiserated with an interlocutor about how if it was true that Khasi men were suffering then something ought to be done about it, he replied promptly and emphatically: "I would not say that we have to change because men are suffering. Khasi men are too irresponsible to feel any pain, any suffering. I would say go for a change because we have to save the land. We have to save the land." The tendency to self-castigate is also frequent and perhaps part of the goal to provoke audiences (both Khasi and outsider) to pay closer attention to their message ("Khasi men are too lackadaisical and easygoing," "we Khasis don't know how to progress, we are like frogs in a well, always pulling others down to our level" and so forth). Saving the land, uplifting the tribe, preserving the race and so forth become far more elevated and compelling projects than attending to the everyday experiences of socially gendered men and women.

Further, we find here that the contemporariness of the nuclear family, its discursive glorification in the chaotic 'modern' world, becomes the yardstick against which the Khasi family, with its archaic insistence on "*kur kur kur kur,*" is measured. As

Chowdhury argues, for many of the men's rights groups that have proliferated across mainland India since the early 90s, the fact that "the holy institution of family is struggling today for its survival and suffering with dislocation in the era of globalization for India [sic],"[48] is attributed to the blossoming of the "new Indian woman," in turn associated with the rise of consumerism, neoliberal policies and logics, global media and most importantly to feminist legal and political interventions. Protection of the Indian joint family, which now flexibly includes the nuclear family where the father's aged parents may reside, becomes construed as an antidote to an individual-centric, materialistic, 'modern' Western culture under which the legitimacy of their masculine authority has been called into question.

For the SRT men in contrast, matrilineal 'customs' are experienced as a hindrance to the progress of the tribe; the nuclear family is pitted against it, in fact as a mark of and the vehicle to a more evolved, modern, progressive and westernized social system of organization that has freed itself from the regressive powers of the *kur*. Within this more modern, less matrilineal nuclear family the relationship between a father and child is understood to really flourish. Under matriliny, according to the SRT, this 'natural' relationship is described as being stymied; as the concept of the nuclear family took hold fathers had something of a 'coming to see' moment. As one person put it – "now they [fathers] understand, no, these are *my* children," as opposed to matrilineal fathers who supposedly didn't recognize the relevance of that bond. "So even in traditional households, Khasis who are still staunch supporters of the traditional belief, a father would nowadays spend more time with his children. It is just natural for him to do so than

[48] Cited from a circular shared at the 4th Annual National Men's Rights Meet (2014:38).

with his nephews and nieces," he added. The pitting of these two sets of relationships against each other assumes that individuals are incapable of forging deep and meaningful bonds with multiple sets of relations; since one must necessarily pick between *pyrsa* and *khun* (children), it becomes but 'natural' that the closer blood kin would be chosen.

Any potential of the dilution of the power of the father, the fact that it can potentially by contested by the wife, and through her structurally by her *kur* is a principal thorn in the side of men arguing for patriliny. Here too the SRT relies on evolutionary ideas about "matriarchates" or women-dominated societies being both outmoded and unnatural. "In the west women were shouting for their survival, here in Khasi society women were trampling men over their head," said one Khasi man mirthfully. Drawing on both Khasi and patrilineo-patriarchal gendered imaginaries around women being the "weaker sex," the SRT poses the question of how reasonable it is to give so much power to women. The young SRT member cited above (herself a bright, articulate and ambitious sounding person) spoke of how "a woman doesn't have as much thinking power" and is more suited to "support a man, like you know the saying 'Behind every successful man is a woman'." Khasi women are "too projected" and even though "they are the weaker sex, they keep them right at the head," she added. This "traditional" domination of women, who she believes "are on top of the men" leads to Khasi men "lacking exposure" and confidence and thus "lagging far behind."

Not only are women seen to be the weaker sex, they are also considered the "weaker link." Land is being ceded not only at the borders as the informant above emphasizes, but also in the very heart of Meghalaya. As discussed in the previous chapter, the problem of "infiltration" by outsiders is placed squarely at the feet of Khasi

women with little consideration to how men might be complicit in facilitating *benami* transactions for their personal gain. Outsider men are said to charm naïve Khasi women and through them are able to buy land, acquire business and "capture the economy." "What is the use of the Land Transfer Act?" asked one person, "if my sister marries a non-Khasi he can easily buy land in her name or her children's name." Many pointed out how most of the shops in Police Bazaar and Laitumkhrah are owned by outsiders now, and "these days outsiders are trying to enter into government too," I was told. The fact that most outsiders seeking their fortune in Meghalaya today are men (which of course stems from the greater mobility of men) means that there is a visible increase in alliances between Khasi women and non-Khasi men. The fact that women have historically been seen as symbols of the nation, and literal bearers of the community fosters the potent feeling that Khasi women are not producing 'Khasi' children in marriages with non-Khasis. Citing the example of the children of a prominent business family with a Khasi mother and non-Khasi father, an SRT leader explained:

> Now they've [the children] become Passah because of their mother. When we were in school together, we never knew they were Passah. It was only when they had to go to college, they had to get scholarships, then they had to become Passah, taking their mother's title. Now all that while they've been living as high class Hindus, with their father Roy – but when they applied for Scheduled Tribe certificate, they gave their title as Passah which they've never given ever in their school life, and they've become Khasis now. Now that's happened before that decision of the Supreme Court but there are hundreds of thousands of other families living in the same kind of situation with their forward class non-tribal fathers, having a tribal mother, they become Khasis. How is that possible after the Supreme Court decision? I want to find out the reason why a Supreme Court ruling is not being followed here.

Implicit in this is another complaint about how Khasi women who marry non-Khasis easily allow their children to give the father's title, and might even change theirs. "If they get married to a Khasi and you say the children should give their father's title, they'll say 'Oh My God, tradition doesn't allow us,' but if they marry a non-tribal they'll say '*theek hai* no problem.' Why? That's crazy," this person puzzled irritably. This seems to underscore their observation that "Khasi men have sunk so low," that they "bring out the true nature of Khasi women…bossiness."

However, the manipulation of the system by non-Khasi men and "their children," is the key point being emphasized here. Even though many of these children that I spoke to described being raised in the "proper Khasi way," they are looked down upon both for being half *dkhars* or *ki khun shiteng* (half bloods) and for supposedly "misusing" the system and selectively adopting Khasi lineage and customs when it suits them despite also enjoying the (patrilineo-patriarchal) privileges of their possibly elite, upper caste, non-tribal fathers. Thus one of the objectives cited in the SRT Constitution is to compel a Khasi woman (but not a man) married outside the community to forfeit her share of the property even as "family assets/properties shall be apportioned off equally among sons and daughters alike."

Here the SRT is also referencing a 2006 Supreme Court decision by Justice H.K Sema and Justice A.R. Lakshmanan in the case of Anjan Kumar v. Union of India & Others that adjudicated that the petitioner (born of a Scheduled Tribe mother and Kayastha ie. Forward caste father) could not apply for a Scheduled Tribe certificate since he was raised in his father's caste and did not suffer any disadvantages associated with having a tribal status. The tendency of similar cases previously has been to presume that,

since India is a patriarchal and patrilineal society, children acquire the caste of the father. Such judgments were "significant for us who are fighting against the matrilineal system," supporting their ideology by rendering children of non-Khasi Hindu fathers into non-tribals. However the then Chief Minister D.D. Lapang made a public announcement that this rule would not apply in Meghalaya but did not apparently give a reason for it, causing frustration among the SRT ranks, since a judgment of the highest court of the land should legally take precedence over a KHADC law.

A more recent decision by the Supreme Court could be seen as further thwarting the SRT's hopes of gaining legitimacy through the judicial machinery. In 2012 Justice Aftab Alam and Justice Ranjana Prakash Desai (in the case of Rameshbhai Dabhai Naika v. State of Gujarat & Others) observed that the status of children born of inter-caste or tribal and non-tribal parents is to "be decided on the basis of the facts adduced in each case." While there might be a presumption that the child adopts the caste of the father, this presumption is "by no means conclusive or irrebuttable and it is open to the child of such marriage to lead evidence to show that he/she was brought up by the mother who belonged to the scheduled caste or scheduled tribe…[and]…that he was always treated as a member of the community to which her mother belonged not only by that community but by people outside the community as well."

Reading this judgment in conjunction with the KHADC Lineage Act is likely to lead to an intensification of the sense of injustice SRT members feel; the Act, which in its purported project of ossifying traditions, ends up granting *'ki khun shiteng'* full Khasi citizenship (as long as they meet the listed criteria), while denying it to the *pukka* Khasi children (both parents Khasi), much to the chagrin of the SRT. However, as we saw in

the case of the politician Waibha Kyndiah, it is very difficult for the KHADC to really penalize children born of two Khasi parents even if they take their father's name. When he took his case to the courts, they decided that he was in fact eligible to contest for elections from the tribal seat; since both his parents are tribal he has to be tribal. Similarly, when I asked a Khasi father whose children (with a Khasi woman) all took his last name whether the KHADC created any trouble for him he replied, "Yeah, they tried to create a problem but I argued no? I said you give me in writing that my children are not Khasis. They couldn't give in writing so they had to give me the certificates." Even though this man didn't actually apply for scholarships to educate his children it was clearly important for him to insist (successfully) on being issued those certificates.

Khasi women are also seen to be marrying outside the community much more frequently than Khasi men when they leave Shillong for higher education. "When they go out to study they don't come back. They get married there, they don't come back. The percentage is frightening, that's why my wife and her family decided not to send my [only] daughter out, because they want her to marry a Khasi," explained one person. In my interactions I did notice a tendency for families to be more hesitant to allow their *khun khadduh* to pursue an education elsewhere or leave Shillong for employment opportunities. This is of course part of the larger set of restrictions that fall upon the youngest daughter, who traditionally speaking can be disinherited for a number of transgressions. Being the custodian of the family religion the expectations upon her are far greater than those on her other siblings, and this tends to continue even among the Christian Khasis.

Anxious Reflections: Spectacle of the Monstrous Female

I will return to some of these narratives about the pressures that fall upon youngest daughters, but it's sufficient to note here that such stories do not appear on the radar of the SRT men, for whom the youngest daughter is a darker, much more potent and manipulative figure. With the waning power of the maternal uncle and the circumscribed authority of the father the *khadduh* has taken control of the household affairs and decisions, they argue. "They [matriliny apologists] say youngest daughter is only the custodian but now that the maternal uncle has run off she is acting like she is the heiress," I was told bitterly. Colonial policies around land administration ignited the process of mapping land in terms of individual ownership rights, and with the British emphasis on customary laws, we find that land deeds or *pattas* began to be written in the name of the *khadduh*, or much more rarely in the name of the maternal uncle.

Disputes over property have historically led to court cases, with the courts ruling in favor of the *khun khadduh.* A 2011 decision by Gauhati High Court Justice Anima Hazarika (in the case of U Bernard Kurbah and Smti. Joan Krissilda Rani v. Ka Bernadette Mary Kurbah and Ka Resetta Mary Kurbah) also upheld Khasi traditional laws. She observed that the plaintiff is the only daughter "and therefore according to custom the Khadduh (youngest of the womb)…Under Khasi customary law no male member can inherit the ancestral properties left behind by his mother when there is a youngest daughter surviving in the family, who would automatically be the heir and successor of ancestral property left behind by her mother." The power that customary laws carry forward with them into the mainstream judicial system is what the SRT men find themselves reacting strongly to. "The laws have emancipated youngest daughters to

such an extent that they are no longer custodians," asserted one person. While the proportion of youngest daughters seeking legal redress are few, and most who wish to continue to live and maintain ties with their kin try in fact to live up to the expectations upon them, the SRT feels that ultimately the legal powers lie with the *khadduh* and so she is not really just a custodian.

Also, she isn't a custodian they argue, because nowadays youngest daughters couldn't be bothered to care for their siblings, particularly their brothers. A sad 'true story' of an unfortunate man went like this: Bah Hep (a carpenter) and his wife lived with his mother in a nice Assam style house while she was alive (like U Bernard Kurbah above), but upon her death the daughter (married to a British man) returned from England and after all the ceremonies were completed, locked the main house and sent her brother to live in a small single room outhouse. Lacking any means of his own the brother had to comply, and led a pitiful existence "eating potatoes, salt and this 'white stuff' (local brew) for dinner." I heard numerous stories like this during my fieldwork. "It may not appear in some good families, but it is happening rampantly in all the other rural areas. The *khadduh*s are usurping everything, brothers are being thrown out of the house," I was told.

This was connected to an allied "weakness" attributed to by the SRT woman cited above – "women feel insecure all the time and want to sell off things, because they don't have a sense of owning, a sense of belonging," she observed. In a context of a heightened threat experienced by many Khasis in the face of outsider influx, the importance of ownership and community is what she felt needed to be emphasized more. "So what I want to do is I want to own something. I will start a business and I will be an example to

others. I will own something and not sell it off and not allow any outsiders to come and control it," she added with great clarity. Youngest daughters who didn't have a right to own property in the old days and were expected to undertake the responsibility of their siblings, particularly those unmarried or divorced, had now become proprietors. Unable to really manage the responsibilities that come with all this power women were crumbling and letting the community down at multiple levels was the fairly explicit position being staked by the SRT. "Name one family where the youngest daughter is taking care of her drunk brother," I was challenged.

This description of a strain visited upon the somewhat 'marvelous' sibling bond (that has been described as a foundational premise of matrilineal societies) becomes soldered onto another more garden-variety tale of the battle between sexes. Freed from oversight of the uncle, not obligated to submit to the authority of the father and with the full force of law behind them, Khasi sisters (with the youngest often as the mascot) are described as strategically coming together to wrest complete control over resources and decision-making within the lineage. In this conspiracy, not only are men in their role as fathers sidelined, but as brothers too they are described as being neglected at best or else expressly crushed or cast out:

> There is a family in Nongthymmai, I can give you the name, the son is a drunk and the sisters keep telling their mother give him money, give him. He gets money, he doesn't trouble the house. They'd rather give him money, go drink some more so you die fast, go drink. These things happen but people don't really realize. Or they don't want to see.

This story is rendered especially horrific given how it plays alongside another more commonly narrated story – that of structural alienation and discrimination against boys in the family. In traditional Khasi society (the story goes) people would openly lament about

their son – that he will go off to live with others/become a part of someone else's home (*u ban leit sha ïing ki briew)*. Of course in places like Shillong you are unlikely to hear such a thing anymore since people are supposedly more 'gender sensitive,' though lingering traces of this sentiment were still palpable to people as they recounted stories from their families to me. A middle-aged professional woman from a well-to-do family, eldest of four daughters and mother of two, spoke about how her family was not conservative and didn't follow customary practices:

> Yeah, my mom like when we were young… her belongings, her assets, which she got from my grandmother you know, she had like crockery, very old crockery, jewelry, gold chains and all you know which were again very old, handed down from my great grandmother, so that was her share, she always divided it equally amongst us, she never said that the youngest will get all. Like we all got this Khasi bracelet she gave each one of us one, and gold chain (showing it to me) she gave each of us one, and it was the same size, not one gets smaller and the youngest sister gets bigger, not like that. So my mom, that was already there, instilled in us, equality. Maybe because we were all girls, so it was easier. But then my mom, she would make these statements – if you had a brother I wouldn't have given it to him, because he's going to go to another woman's family, and he's going to carry this property or whatever I'm giving him to another woman, so what's the point giving him. She had that mentality.

This "mentality" (particularly in the older generations and more conservative households) that sons will leave (traditionally after marriage they are supposed to leave with nothing but the shirt on their back) and become a part of someone else's family is supposed to explain why lineage resources (particularly ancestral property) are not handed down to them. Then there is also the cultural stereotype that Khasis, particularly those originating from Sohra, are *khap nap* (stingy or petty with money). Further, part of this story is the oft-repeated refrain of how Khasi society has become individualistic, money-minded,

cutthroat and so forth. Set against all this is the image of sisters conspiring amongst themselves and intentionally handing out money to drunken brothers to induce their early death.

These macabre tales intentionally overturn two founding (and possibly universally held) stereotypes about humans – a) that the female-sex [49] is inherently emotional/empathetic and hard-wired to be nurturers and b) that basic bonds between closely related individuals within the family are inherently strong and immune to such a systemic level of breakdown. In doing so, the tales alert the audience to the gravity of the problem being discussed, enjoining them to 'see' what is happening right around them and intervene quickly. The abnormal figure here is most certainly the Khasi woman, who in this singular conjunction of matriliny with modernity, seems to have become reshaped into some kind of freakish abomination. The image of Khasi sisters wresting control and killing off the men both overtly hides/inverts and inadvertently reveals the normalization of the killing off of women within patriarchy – the monster female overshadows the monster male gesturing to the nascent violence at the heart of kinship relations.

The monstrosity of this female spectacle draws on genuine discomforts around what a world 'ruled' by women would look like. What happens when 'female power' goes awry, destroying everything in its wake, including clan and blood? What do these anxieties open up for us? They seem to push against basic ideas of society/kinship, where fundamental 'roles' that dictate transfers of power and inheritance etc. are being subtly undercut. According to the SRT it is only with an extreme intervention (a switch to patriliny or a two pronged attempt to severely curtain female power and simultaneously

[49] In Shillong many of my informants referred to women as females, using the two interchangeably.

empower men) that the natural harmony of gender hierarchy can be restored, which is necessary for Khasi society to become 'uplifted.' I have tried thus far to critically unpack the complex and often convoluted claims being made by the SRT that draws strategically from feminism the language of gender equality even as it explicitly posits a worldview where women become the supporting cast. It is against this background that the SRT Constitution lists as its first aim/objective – "to give full authority to the father to be the master and protector of his wife and children; that the wife shall be the principal source of support for the family."

Troubled Engagements: Countering Anti-Matriliny Voices

Having come in such close proximity with the "much maligned monster" (Mitter 1992) that the SRT paints the *khadduh* to be, it is perhaps apposite that we begin a section on some of the responses to anti-matriliny movements by encountering alternate accounts of this figure. I looked hard, in my admittedly limited range of experiences in Shillong, for a villainous, self-serving, or even 'alpha' *khadduh*, but my search was mostly in vain. Most youngest daughters in fact spoke of their status with fatigue, worry and sometimes, even distress. I once teased my Khasi language tutor, an energetic middle school teacher who happened to be a *khun khadduh*, about why she took on so many jobs (she tutored others too) when she could just relax and live comfortably on her ancestral property. She looked at me like I was insane, launching into a lengthy explanation about how her life was *so* much more complicated because she was the youngest daughter. A big source of her anxiety was that if she wasn't doing well financially her husband was more likely to leave her (especially since she came with the added baggage of her household), and then

doing well financially became doubly important since she had to shoulder the responsibility of her children and her parents once they retired). Incidentally Khasi husbands relying on their wives' income was not an uncommon story, even among some of the working class *Kongs*[50] I would talk to in snack shops or *jadoh* stalls.

Even as youngest daughters tended to be loved and pampered, they also felt unfairly scrutinized and policed for gender appropriate behavior, rules of *akor-burom,* who they went out with, how they dressed, how long they could stay out at night, whom they could get into a relationship with and so forth. Most of them were not allowed to leave Shillong for fear that they would become "too exposed" and might decide to not return. This was a story by a friend of her friend:

> Poor Bari, she's going to be 40, she's still being ruled by her parents and by her brothers. She's the only daughter, and she's got a daughter already but she's still being treated as a16, 18-year-old kid. That's not fair. I mean it's very difficult, whatever steps she makes in life, none of them, they're not willing to let her be you know. And she's like 'Okay then I'll move out, I'll take my daughter and move out'. 'Why are you emotionally blackmailing us,' they say. And then at the same time the two brothers will be discussing with the parents. She married a guy and he left her, just imagine, that becomes a shame for them. There's too much emphasis on this *burom* and everything you know. At the end of the day it's like you don't want your daughter to be ditched by a guy, or marry outside. So much responsibility on her no? Then you have to go through all that emotional thing no, you can't even have a boyfriend, just because your husband has left you you can't have a boyfriend? And they want to choose who you date, why can't you just be happy with your daughter…

The locus of her family's honor (and in non-convert families the bearer of the family religion), a youngest daughter is traditionally expected to adhere most strongly to

[50] 'Kong' is the formal/respectful term of address for an older Khasi woman.

customary rules and gendered expectations. Here we see clearly how the very power that she has over her parents (as the person who will be looking after them when they are old and enfeebled) is turned around to disempower her (in reading her needs as attempted "emotional blackmail"). Nobody who was not a *khun khadduh* wished to be one, but many expressed relief about not being the youngest, or not being married to the youngest. Several men I interviewed ended up admitting to the differing standards their youngest sisters were held to, that sometimes they themselves enforced. When I asked a male friend about whether his parents would have been upset about him marrying a non-Khasi he said that growing up they never said any such thing to him or his brother, but with their sister they would drop hints from time to time about how it would be best if she married a Khasi man.

My point in drawing on these narratives is not simply to reject the formulations of the men's group by arguing that youngest daughters do not 'actually' have the agency and privilege being attributed to them, or that their lives are far more complicated than being portrayed given the numerous *embodied* responsibilities and negotiations they constantly have to undertake. This is a position that has already been staked by many – primarily those that are invested in maintaining the matrilineal system. These include a wide range of people from conservative voices upholding 'traditional' culture in the face of external changes to Khasi feminists[51] opposed to the masculinist framing of matriliny as matriarchy that forms the terrain upon which the bid for change is being made.

[51] I use the term 'Khasi feminists' to refer to a particular subject-position of Khasis expressing investment in gender-based human rights and empowerment with the recognition that they might not use that term to describe themselves. In fact it is precisely these slippages that I am interested in.

Here again Tiplut Nongbri's work is the most significant, as she systematically demonstrates how the traditional system in fact endorses the domestication of women rather than bestowing unlimited authority and agency upon them. With regard to property the argument emphasized is often that the youngest daughter is the *custodian*, not the heir or the owner of the property and as one informant (a non-convert from a prominent family) put it, has to seek the "green signal of the *mama* for even the smallest decision in the house," let alone before buying and selling property. According to him the youngest daughter is given the 'lions share' because she is the caretaker of the old parents and any one who falls upon hardship, while all the other siblings leave the home. If the family happens to be wealthy and has property to distribute, the group next in line that is entitled to property are the women since:

> A Khasi says a female has got one power a male has got twelve powers, *khadar bor* you see[52]. Because a male is supposed to work, he's not supposed to stay idle at home. He's supposed to work and bring income to the family. It is the male not the woman who should work. Why we call the women goddess of the house, because they are caretakers of the house, they are the ones who are supposed to take care of the daily needs of a man. So the second group that are entitled to share the property are the women folk, because they belong them to a weaker class as the Khasis class them. After that group, then comes the men *padei*. See in our family we all get, of course the youngest gets the lions share but even then it is distributed equally amongst us. I proclaim that what these young men are saying, that they have been ignored, they're being left out - they're a bunch of lazy lot, who don't want to do anything, who don't understand actually what the power that God as given them. They are supposed to work hard.

[52] This fact is often pointed out but it is perhaps worthwhile to note that a precise scale (12:1 no less) of the difference in power is imagined within Khasi gendered cosmology rather than a more vague understanding that women are the 'weaker sex.'

What we find here is an arguably awkward alliance between people who endorse the traditionally sanctioned gendered worldview (where women are "supposed to take care of the daily needs of a man" while men are "supposed to work and bring income") and Khasi feminists who are forced to cite this in order to counter the Amazonian women narrative of the men's groups. The battle then becomes about whether the *khadduh* is 'merely' a custodian or then an overbearing heir, and in this clash of ideological stances everyday realities (that of course rarely fall on either end of political spectrums) become invisibilized and ignored.

Dianghunmon Rynjah provides an account of the transformations in the roles, expectations and standing of Khasi-Jaintia women where she pits the *khadduh* against the *karta* of the Hindu joint family (the father or the eldest son) in order to show how despite resemblances (both have special rights over the ancestral property and are entrusted with the role of parental/familial caregiving) there are some crucial differences between the two. As she puts it, "*Ka khadduh* obtains her important position as the family priestess, the *karta* as the person most suitable by age, experience and natural respect due from the family" (2009:40). Much of the actual management and decision-making regarding the household (that is the task of the *karta*) does not fall upon the *khadduh* (being the youngest and most inexperienced female), instead being carried out by the *kñi,* thus making it a big mistake to think of the *khadduh* as the heir or the owner (as the *karta* often is). Rynjah also outlines the various restrictions that fall upon the *khadduh* that if she were to disregard could lead to her being disinherited.

In explicating how within the 'traditional' Khasi kinship-religion system women are "passive custodians" whose power is not real but symbolic, Rynjah can then tackle

the influence of Christianity. "A tendency has been observed among Christians," she writes, "to regard *ka khadduh* as having the unrestricted rights of an heir under other systems of laws" (42). Here we find an acknowledgement that the customary practices are not being followed in each instance, even as that difference is being bracketed and attributed to the distortions of the new religion/culture. This of course does not account both for the fact that changes are unfolding in both Christian and *Niam Khasi* households because of what one of my interlocutors called "the advancement of time" and also that majority of Khasis are Christian, thus dismissing them as the exception or aberration is not very practical or productive. "There would be a great injustice to other members of a family if the Courts in any way favour this new idea [that the khadduh is the heir]," she adds (42) with no discussion however about how the Courts are weighing in on these conflicts, a lacuna within Nongbri's work too. In emphasizing women's political marginalization and their subservience to male authority Khasi feminism arguably propagates a deafening silence around the multiple (and strategic) ways that Khasi women have both consolidated their existing powers and sought to wrest power for themselves with the shifting terrain of gender relations in Meghalaya.

I will return to this point after making a detour through my conversation with Ellie Shullai whom we encountered in the previous chapter. For Ellie matriliny is such a defining aspect of the community's identity that without it, as she put it, "we might as well not call ourselves Khasi anymore." This is a powerful statement to make, and Ellie is a strong woman, the oldest daughter of a successful businesswoman in Shillong. I would call her a friend, but I didn't actually spend much time with her even though I met her frequently. Compassionate and down to earth, she would always stop to ask how I

was; I found that I could have a meaningful exchange with her during a quick conversation in a bookshop, or outside a crowded party with a group of smokers. She agreed to meet me one afternoon for an interview that lasted a couple of hours. We convened over Mai Tais and momos at Cloud 9, a fancy rooftop restaurant-cum-nightclub at Hotel Centre Point, affording verdant mountain views even as it overlooks the bustling Police Bazaar – what might well be considered the heart of Shillong, its 'downtown,' to try and express it in American cityscape terms. I asked her how her male friends/relatives would respond to this position she had just staked. This was the exchange that ensued:

> **Ellie:** I have an argument with everyone about this. Their argument is like oooh we have *aiu*…the same thing they say [not sharing the father's title leads to a weakened bond with children]. But okay fine, your kids know you yaa. They know you're the father. It's not like the olden days when you're a part-time father most of the time. Everyone knows and nowadays if you're a doctor and you have a wife, people will say this is Dr. Freddy's wife, whatever right? It doesn't mean you have to share the same surname right? You're in your own identity, she's in her own identity. The kids, everyone knows they're your kids. It's just the system is that the surname goes from the ladies, that's the one thing they have.
>
> **Me:** So what are they saying?
>
> **Ellie:** God only knows – half the time they say it should be patriarchal, and then next is that you get all the property and all, so I say make up your mind, you either want the property or [laughing] you want the surname or what is it? If you feel like you're being dealt wrongly… but why can't you just come above it all and say okay…like the older generation, like I told you about this grand uncle of mine, he must be 90 now, and this lecture he gave me when he was saying it's our tradition, it's our custom, we have to uphold it. When an old man can say such things, what is wrong with the younger generations that they feel that they are not who they are if their kids don't take their titles? I don't understand what makes them think they'll be more responsible if the kids

> have their title. It's like kiddish you know, whatever they say. You're arguing with someone who has not looked into it thoroughly.

The emphasis on the value of traditional customs and practices for the "younger generations" – what Ellie's report of her granduncle's speech illuminates – was something I repeatedly encountered in Shillong. But as we have seen, 'tradition' and 'modernity' are inordinately flexible concepts that get deployed in numerous ways to push for a diverse and complex range of arguments and political stances. In a few short statements by Ellie too she maneuvers this dynamic – even as she chastises these men's groups (and her individual male friends/family) for not rising above these seemingly petty problems and sticking up for the traditions and customs that make them unique, she is simultaneously appreciative of transformations to tradition that enable fathers to play a much more significant role in their children's lives ("it's not like the olden days when you're a part-time father most of the time") and from whom children and wives too are *seen* to derive their identity.

Contra patrilineal systems where women lose their birth identity upon marriage, taking the husband's name and entering symbolically into their lineage, here she is highlighting the resonances between the Khasi system and a more egalitarian vision of heterosexual alliances forming from a union of distinct yet equal entities. Mainstream feminism has long connected Euro-American norms enjoining women to change their surname upon marriage to coverture laws, which legally enshrined the patriarchal ideology that denied married women independent rights since they were seen merely as extensions of the husband's property. This has made the decision to keep their maiden name after marriage a form of political expression for many feminists around the world.

For them a world where a woman's identity is always already distinct from her husband's is a utopic one where, as Ellie put it, a shared last name is unnecessary since "you're in your own identity, she is in her own identity." But Ellie's world is not utopic; implicit in her statement "it's just the system…that's the one thing they have," is the recognition that Khasi women are by no means emancipated from patriarchy and within that context it seems almost cruel to take away from her the "one" source of her agency – her ability to pass on her name to her children. Her response to SRT's second objective as per its Constitution – "The lineage will go down from father to sons through all encoming [sic] generations" – is fairly straightforward: she calls it kiddish and not properly thought through.[53] Demanding that they not be "dealt wrongly" is one thing she suggests but what makes these men think that becoming patrilineal will remedy all social wrongs?

This is one overwhelming reaction of most Khasis to the anti-matriliny groups however – one of confusion that you can find echoed in Ellie's remarks. Not only is she struggling to understand this impulse to counter the group's matrilineal identity ("what is wrong with the younger generations") but she also sounds baffled by the confusion she encounters in the stance(s) taken by those advocating for change ("so I say make up your mind…"). This confusion – "God only knows" – and the intermingling laughter is not incidental to the discussion. As indicated previously, for many of my interlocutors the call for a change to patriliny was simply too ludicrous to engage with. Those (like Ellie) who choose to engage these voices occupy an advantageous position stemming from the knowledge that backing them is the majority of the community (even as they represent vastly different stances) that is in support (by and large) of the status quo. From this

[53] Interestingly no one that I spoke to (including the detractors of the men's groups) argued that the quest of family solidarity could be achieved if men took their wives' title after marriage.

position of authority/legitimacy, these respondents have the power (even as they participate in the discussion) to ultimately dismiss and laugh off the concerns they encounter. The playing field is, in one way, very uneven for these anti-matriliny groups; their minority position makes them an easy target of plenty of different kinds of jokes within the community. A favorite one (after personal "brickbats and name calling") hinges on the intent of these groups – which is mired in a certain kind of confusion – "half the time they say it should be patriarchal [patrilineal], and the next is that you get all the property and all, so I say make up your mind, you either want the property or you want the surname, or what is it?"

In this instance, underlying the accusation that these groups lack conceptual clarity in their demands is a slightly more subtle suggestion that they are being somewhat duplicitous: what they truly want is for men to be given a share of the property, but since they don't wish to come across as scheming they have to couch it in broader, more philosophical terms. We laugh then because we see through the ruse, is the critical consensus. Being conscious of these taunts the anti-matriliny groups work not only at deflecting them, but also preemptively account for them in their proposals and strategies of argumentation. As we have seen these groups are at pains to eschew this explicitly money-oriented motivation, providing broader, more cerebral explanations for the need to either dismantle the matrilineal system or then seriously reform it.

But money is a key piece of this puzzle and intellectual gymnastics apart a lot does come down to it. It seems to me ironic that money was precisely the subject that many anti-anti-matriliny Khasis were willing to engage these groups about. In her article (discussed above) Kong Biloris Lyndem Laso writes about the emerging popularity of the

idea of gender equality in Meghalaya saying, "The present generation is not very keen on the system of matrilineal hierarchy." In her analysis, what she calls the "*nongkynraw* syndrome" (Khasi men not being allowed to carry self-acquired property with them after marriage) causes men to feel victimized leading to "social strife" between the sexes that ultimately leads to violence against women and the breakdown of marriages. Khasi feminists are also at pains to point out how in the case of abandonment, women often have to deal with the entire burden of raising children from that union, both caregiving and monetary since such fathers rarely extend child support. Bah Mike was also vocal about this problem – and in his view making marriage registration compulsory was important precisely because it gives a woman legal recourse to demand some form of alimony from such a husband. The slippage between 'husband' and 'father of the child' is clear here. Within this context, Bah Mike and others are referring to the high incidence of alliances that produce offspring, but that are not legally recognized as marriage, causing 'problems' like illegitimate children. The question remains whether women and their clan members regard such offspring as 'problems' for being 'unclaimed' or whether educated and 'modern' Khasi men construe this as a problem having internalized a very different set of attitudes about family (discussed above).

Further, while Kong Biloris does not advocate for a switch to patriliny and her article is in fact about the need for empowering women in the state (literacy, political representation and so forth), she simultaneously seems critical of "a system that leaves everything to the youngest daughter (*khatduh*) of the family," making note of reports about youth unable to secure bank loans since they don't own "permanent assets." Many that I spoke to reiterated the continued significance of this problem, particularly in a city

with a relative paucity of vibrant employment opportunities. Government jobs (the most coveted kind) are hard to come by and many from more humble families talked about how you either have to know someone important, or be able to pay a lot of money to be considered for them. To start any business you need collateral, and to qualify for a loan these young men had to rely on their mothers or sisters to stand in as guarantors.

Stories about the exclusion of men as brothers, fathers, husbands and uncles from important decision-making processes as well as from the protections that are their birthright within the family system were not only being told to me by the men against matriliny. A feminist, Catholic friend for instance told me about her maternal uncle, who was married to a youngest daughter from a family that practices the indigenous religion. It was a sad story of disputes and despair, with the youngest daughter being held responsible for much of the troubles. The thing that stuck out to me was my friend's quiet emphasis on how the uncle was forbidden by his wife to even keep a Bible or a cross in the house and how he had to keep hiding them in different places.

Again many would perhaps like to know what exactly is the prevalence of women denying their sons and brothers such financial support (if they have any to give), or actually how common is it for *khadduhs* to "kick out their brothers" and so forth. Is there really a crisis or is this narrative being concocted for some ulterior purpose (e.g. reconfirming patriarchal power and male authority)? Rather than answering these questions I would like us to consider where they come from, or put differently, what are the desires underlying these questions?

There is a comfort that attaches itself to statistics, and we tend to cling to percentages and proportions to make sense of the world around us, but what value

accrues upon the experience of a minority, or the playing out of a single instance? While many spoke about how things are changing, and those who have wealth tend to distribute it among all siblings ("It's not that they don't give *yaar*," said one person in frustration), how do we think meaningfully about the inner world of a solitary young professional, who causes a rift in his family because his youngest sister stops speaking to his mother who decided to finance a business in his name? Or the silent insecurity experienced by young men (educated within a human rights and social justice paradigm) who are not legally entitled to property within the 'modern' unfoldings of the matrilineal system even if eventually they are given something? What about the teenage boy who realizes that his mother is fighting his father harder for his sister to take her title, giving him up to the father ostensibly in the name of fairness ("one for your clan, one for mine") but actually because she knows that him taking her title is less important since it will never be passed on through him to the next generation?

While the solutions being proposed by the SRT were outlandish, extreme and undesirable to many, what I realized in many months of interacting with people in Shillong was that people felt that the problems they were pointing to were not concocted out of thin air. Many Khasis (both men and women) expressed a concern for what they felt were problems arising within the gender-kinship matrix in the contemporary context. I was leaving my friend Iamon's house one evening where I ended up conducting an impromptu interview with a male friend of hers who had stopped by to say hello to her. She listened in on our conversation without saying much, but at the gate while saying goodbye she whispered loudly and emphatically: "We mothers, we're sucking the life out of our sons." As I fumbled around for my voice recorder in shock she continued, "I am

not a feminist. I don't believe in fighting for women's rights out here. What makes women so special? Men are being trampled upon too, but no one bothers about that."

There are a whole set of affective relations that are being subsumed here along with those of Khasi women struggling to fulfill their responsibilities, 'keep their husbands,' negotiate lack of control over their lives and so forth. In a way the politics of these men's groups don't exactly coincide with those of men's rights groups in other places – possibly because there are more 'internal' to the problems they are outlining, they aren't 'merely' refusing to acknowledge their privilege. Certain lines of questions being raised by the SRT (although subterranean in their own narratives) are uncannily similar to those that feminism has been invested in highlighting, particularly in their theorization of why "the personal is political." Why for Khasi feminism is it *so* important to reject *in toto* the claims by these groups that Khasi men are experiencing gender-based inequality or violence? It is in Nongbri's latest work that we find some acknowledgement of Khasi men's problems. Apart from the 'age-set' system because of which jural authority escapes men who are not the oldest in their families, she (following Kong Biloris) identifies the inheritance system that denies sons property as a problem for men. "Discussions carried out with cross-sections of Khasi men reveal that *more than* the issue of *lineage* and *authority,* the main grouse against the system is the *absence of property rights for sons* [emphasis in original]," she writes arguing that the SRT's "anti-woman stance," even as it notes the problem of inheritance rights, ends up obscuring it and in calling for a change to patriliny succeeds in "failing to recognize the real crux of the problem" (2014:58).

How do we understand Khasi feminism's failure though to engage deeply enough with the problems being experienced by both men and women in Shillong? Khasi feminism, in its tendency to borrow its tools from patrilineal feminism has tended to respond to groups like the SRT by flatly rejecting their claims. For patrilineal feminists interested in the relationship between social structures and gendered realities, matrilineal societies are immediately intriguing. They both offer fascinating prototypes of utopian worlds, whose alternative configurations of gender, kinship, property ownership and so forth spark fresh imaginings of an equitable society, and belie the notion that patriarchy has been the only structuring principle of society. But the patriarchy being discussed here is one grounded in a patrilineal social system, so it becomes essential to ask whether it might be violent in some measure to impose this understanding of patriarchy upon matrilineal communities. As Khasi feminists point out, matrilineal systems also tend to be patriarchal, but I suggest that we be cautious about conflating these two patriarchies.

How does feminism (with its epistemological grounding in "women's rights are human rights" framework) navigate the demand for Khasi men's rights? While ideas about women's rights might not have much currency within more critical feminist theory, which is seen instead as an analytic to study the consolidation of power through multiple categories and axes, I suggest nevertheless that there hasn't been a complete unpairing of feminism from the politics of gendered bodies and identities. What does gender equality in matrilineal Shillong look like? What does feminism have to say about a minority society where women (if even just in theory) truly have more power? ? Can feminism find a way to take seriously the fact that a Khasi son might be less welcome than a daughter despite the larger global imbalance of power that it is contending with? We

come up here against a possible fracturing of the feminist horizon – is there a secret desire within it that transcends the parameters of gender equality? Fatigued by its battles against patrilineo-patriarchy the egalitarian impulse within feminism seems to hit up against its limits when faced with Khasi men claiming injustice along similar nodes. It's what makes us smile instinctively when we hear about the political agenda of the SRT – when the rest of the world is struggling to counter the violence of normative patriarchy here are a group of men fighting for their 'so-called' rights, seems to be the source of our amusement. This uncomfortable amusement suggests an impasse – between an interrogated move towards 'equality' that seems contingent on historical amnesia and devoid of organic roots, and the impossibility of articulating the rights of the 'oppressed' in kinship structures without the haunting specter of power gone awry, the same awry power that the very rights-invoking feminism seeks to contest in patriarchal societies. Whether this can be unpacked depends on whether kinship itself can be reconceptualized. At the very least, an interrogation of this seemingly topsy-turvy world of matriliny holds up a troubling mirror to studies of feminism, power and kinship.

Conclusion

I opened the discussion in this dissertation by examining the exceptional status of the Northeast and of the Northeast tribal more specifically in relation to the nation and the normative, or unmarked Indian citizen. In this examination I rely heavily on Etienne Balibar's finessing of Benedict Anderson's highly influential thesis in *Imagined Communities* (1983). Anderson describes the nation not as a pre-given reality but as a community that has to be imagined into existence by its citizens who, despite not knowing each other personally, still share a deep, horizontal feeling of fraternity for which they are willing to make sacrifices or even lay down their lives. Balibar instead contends that bonds of comradeship do not connect all citizens of the nation equally; central to the production of a sense of the shared legacies, cultures or concerns that bind a nation are processes of racialization or a "historical system of complementary exclusions and dominations that are mutually interconnected" (1988:49). Thus he argues that racism, which can be both external (directed against a group outside the nation) and internal (against those within national boundaries), is not an expression of nationalism but rather "a supplement internal to nationalism, always in excess of it, but always indispensible to its constitution and yet always still insufficient to achieve its project…" (54).

Balibar's insights are crucial to an understanding of the postcolonial Indian nation, which relies as heavily upon the idea that all citizens are equal by law as it is based on an idea of the 'quintessential' or invisible Indian – the upper-caste, Aryo-Dravidian looking Hindu – whose Indianness can and will never be called into question. We can see here how fictive ideas about racial or ethnic differences do not completely

encompass Indian nationalism, yet they are extremely central to nationalistic imaginings of who is a 'true' Indian. In the context of an increasing saffronization of the nation I argue that it becomes all the more important to highlight the theoretical bankruptcy of popular beliefs in inherent Indian (read Hindu) 'tolerance' and slogans like 'unity in diversity.' Benedict Anderson's point that nationalism requires a conceptualization of the nation as eternal, as having existed since the proverbial beginning of time, seems to apply equally well to a recently formed nation like India as well. That multiple and diverse communities have lived and thrived in the Northeast for thousands of years is forgotten by the mainstream Indian unwilling to acknowledge both the newness of India (as we know it) and the violence/negotiations that went into its making.

This forgetting leads to the ease with which the Northeast gets 'seen' primarily as topography or space and its people invisibilized or rendered into dispensable itinerants. This 'us-them' paradigm is central to the mindset of the mainstream – at the least sign of conflict the fault lines in the idea of who is 'truly' Indian appear clearly. "If *they* have a problem, *they* can leave," is what you will often hear from 'patriotic' Indians. This strategic conceptualization of the Northeast as the nation's frontier zone allows it to be coopted as an integral belonging of India, even as the people who live there are cast as extraneous, anti-national, non-normative, backward and inherently different. Contemporary 'Indians' inherit their ideological assumptions from their British masters and I underscore the importance of recognizing and tracing the historical contiguities between colonial and post or, as I have argued elsewhere, 'quasi' colonial understandings, attitudes and policies towards the region (Gaikwad 2009). In Chapter 1, through an extended analysis of a debate on national television, I attempted to open up

the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which mainland Indians indulge in a nationalistic appropriation of the Northeast – its land, resources, symbols, and people/talents – even as they continue to participate in the erasure of their realities and the denial of their equal humanity.

It seems to me therefore that deciphering and diagnosing the multiple nodes along which the Northeast and its subjects are rendered exceptional or Other is not merely an ethico-political move (to acknowledge and redress their historical and ongoing marginalization) but a theoretico-philosophical one that challenges us to both disassemble/analyze the dominant discourses around which the popular Indian imagination is organized and push at the limits of our understandings of postcolonial nationalism, modernity, citizenship and so forth. This can be seen then as an ethnography of ideas about and expressions of national subjectivity that are organized around complex and variegated modalities of understanding differences along the lines of race, tribe, gender, sexuality and kinship. Since nationalistic identities, imaginaries and affects are not the sole prerogative of the Indian nation and its citizens what we have at hand consequently is the complex interplay between multiple competing and/or coexisting (sub)/nationalisms that warrant scrutiny.

The preponderance of nationalisms in the Northeast has two distinct genealogies – 1) the internalization of the idea of inherent difference that has historically been imposed upon people in the Northeast, particularly those belonging to hill-tribal communities, and 2) the postcolonial Indian state's adoption of what Baruah (2005:184) calls the British "protective discrimination regime," that used isolation within a delimited zone (outside the jurisdiction of the rest of the country) as a technique for the 'pacification' and

effective 'management' of what were considered the 'savage' groups. Within this protected enclave, tribal communities were allowed to continue practicing their customary laws, kinship systems and clan-based rules for land, property, inheritance and so on.

National leaders replicated these ideologies and tactics with the drawing up of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which delineates special provisions for the administration of Assam's 'Tribal Areas.' In the Northeast, already under erasure by the mainstream/land, the Indian government's policies have promulgated a system/ethos where marginalized communities, particularly the hill-tribes, fall back on colonially produced knowledge (that consolidates them as a 'tribe' or 'race') in order to express their vulnerability and demand rights that are deeply fashioned by ideas about nationalism and patriotism, which draw freely on rhetorics of community *qua* identity, belonging and difference. The successful mobilization of these hill-tribes for independence from Assamese hegemony resulted in the designation of specific territories or 'homelands' to majority tribal groups. The long and intimate association between tribes and land in the Northeast has contributed to the continuation of inextricable connections between tribal/ethnic identity and figurations of nationalism.

In the Khasi context we can note two different articulations of nationalism – the first, a subnationalism that peaked in the 1972 approval of a separate state, Meghalaya, deemed the exclusive home of the Khasis (including Jaintias) and Garos, and the second, a more secessionist Khasi nationalism, that had its heyday in the 1980s and 90s with the proliferation of several anti-India groups, some of which were subsequently proscribed but that continue to make their presence felt in fits and bursts. The overwhelming

majority of Khasis that I interacted with did not subscribe to anti-India ideologies *but* there is a distinctly palpable investment (that draws its lineage from the first mode of nationalism) in a Khasi sub/nationalism that could be a part of the larger Indian framework but *only* if it can retain its own unique identity. This is most often expressed in concerns about the future of the Khasi *jaitbynriew* (a principal concern of this dissertation) in the face of instability and change. That concern for the *jaitbynriew* gets articulated along the lines of race is not coincidental, and goes back to a strong internalization of colonial discourses by formerly colonized people.

English-speaking Khasis often use the word 'outsider,' a broader concept denoting non-Khasis, even when what they wish to connote is non-hill-tribal/non-foreigner. I recognized this as a slippage when I realized that linguistically *dkhar* was never used for other hill-tribal people or white people (*saheps*) or foreigners in general (*farengs*). What I was alerted to here is that the idea of the Khasi *jaitbynriew* (not coincidentally translated as Khasi 'race') is at heart a racially inflected one, which rests on fundamental, inherent oppositions with non-tribal people from the plains of South Asia. Any non-recognition of the interchangeable ways in which 'outsider' is used to stand in for *dkhar* has the effect of glossing over the complex interplay between highly mobile ideas about race and ethnicity as they become manifested in various (often high-pitched) nationalistic discussions about the *jaitbynriew.*

There is a palpable difference in attitudes towards outsiders qua *dkhars* that is based on counter-articulations of irreconcilable racial, ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic differences from plains people as well as varying degrees of antipathy towards them. This research shows how ideas about Khasi uniqueness can often hinge on highly

problematic/stereotypical perceptions of 'racialized' appearance and concerns for the survival of a Khasi identity tend to smuggle in endorsements and replications of broader, hegemonic racial and gender hierarchies as well as perpetuate silences around intra-group differences and structural inequalities in the name of a singular, united 'Khasi' identity. My dissertation grapples with the significance of these divergent anxieties about the well being of a historically marginalized minority community even as it pushes for a reconsideration of uncritical formulations of Khasi nationalism that replicate the violences of the mainstream or dominant nationalism that it is constantly in (an often critical) dialog with.

This conceptual framework of a parallel and crisscrossing network of nationalistic fields, sensibilities and politics in their imbrications with allied ideas about race, kinship, gender and sexuality undergirds all the main themes that come up for discussion in this dissertation, which is invested in analyzing the complexities produced through these conversations and conflicts. Taking the figure of the enervated 'typical' Khasi male as its starting point, my research analyzes both the assertions of crisis being made by men's groups lobbying against the matrilineal system, identified as the cause of the unraveling of the Khasi male (and consequently the community), and also of some responses that they generate from different sections of Khasi civil society.

Given that kinship inhabits the intimate space of the personal, it is at one level baffling that it becomes the subject of such energetic and public debate in Shillong. It is also not surprising (or unique to Shillong) however, that discussions about national sanctity and sovereignty turn on the question of women's bodies and their reproductive capabilities in paranoid fashion. In the case of Shillong and Khasi identity, for

historically curious reasons, matriliny becomes *the* defining and unique feature. To track the way in which a category like matriliny becomes the centerpoint of a community's very existence and future, I analyze those aspects of Khasi kinship that surface most strongly in the sphere of the political, in Chapters 2 and 3.

My discussion develops from a significant insight I stumbled across, in passing conversation with an interlocutor in Shillong, that it was the advent of colonial anthropologists that led to the invention of the category 'matriliny'. It was in the anthropological mode that the origins of this 'key feature' of Khasi identity lie – this I chart as the first axis on which Khasi matriliny can be analyzed. Here, I critically evaluate the complex relationship between ideas of what constitutes Khasi matriliny even today, and the fundamental role that classical anthropology has played in those imaginings. From the time of anthropologists Gurdon and Nakane, who on the surface appeared to simply register for posterity the elements of Khasi life, I show how those subjective narratives (at times veering on the speculative, and often hinging on the problematic) have created imprints in the histories, memories, and thereby, inhabitings of contemporary Khasis. Classical anthropological accounts have provided nothing less than an infusion of a framework through which Khasis self-evaluate their lived realities and interactions.

Going back to study these classical anthropological texts is not merely an esoteric academic activity. I posit that the close relationship between colonial knowledge production and tribal identity makes reading these texts against the grain a crucial, political move. In order to critically think about the concepts we are working with today, it is important to trace their legacies, to understand how this knowledge was put together,

what assumptions they relied on and how they came to be understood as having truth value. I further assert that challenging some of these taken-for-granted truths might enable us to better contend with the 'problems' being highlighted by multiple groups in the present moment, grounded as many of them are in these powerful colonial discourses. Thus, even as I elaborate a sustained critique of colonial anthropology's engagement with Khasi matriliny I highlight the significance of taking this anthropology's governing concepts seriously since they have left a deep imprint and continue to have purchase on contemporary Khasi life.

The overwhelming emphasis on the structure of Khasi matriliny that I kept encountering both in academic accounts and popular discourse gave me pause. To counter this tendency I have prompted us to think about the unfolding of Khasi matriliny along a second axis of attention to the unfolding of people's everyday lives. I argue that along this axis of the everyday moment, matriliny as a substantively laden category begins to dissipate. It is in fact, in the everyday moments, that there is an unravelling of the overarching presence of the framing categories of kinship or identity, an unravelling that allows for different inscriptions of the day-to-day lives of the Khasis. My focus in Chapter 3 is to construct a different framing of kinship, beyond the structural, which is attentive to the elusive afterthought, the half-remembered routine of the everyday, habitual behaviors and interactions occurring almost without conscious consideration. Within this framing, I explore the skeletal patterns of the social, patterns that shape and reshape, repeat and enact in myriad forms, sometimes arbitrarily, and sometimes quite consciously, the changes and alterations brought into the frame by individuals and individual families.

The association of matriliny with the political identity of the group is I argue a third axis upon which Khasi matriliny comes alive. In Chapter 3 I also delve into the various aspects of this conflation and the complexities emerging from them. The decision of the Indian state to permit the Northeast tribes to govern themselves according to their own customary laws and preserve their cultural traditions and ethnic identity has had an enormous, wide-ranging impact. The Constitutional framework empowers the KHADC to legislate on Khasi citizenship (the stakes of which are very high given the benefits bestowed on members of Scheduled Tribes) through which citizenship into the nation is then necessarily facilitated. I show how this creates an odd sort of contradiction where in order to be a 'proper' Northeast citizen-subject of the Indian nation-state you have to fit into the 'traditional' tribal mold but in being a 'traditional' tribal you can hardly claim the position of the unmarked Indian citizen and the associated 'modern' rights become harder for you to access.

Through an analysis of the Khasi Social Custom of Lineage Act (1997) I argue that even though the KHADC aims ostensibly to regulate alliances along 'traditional' lines, this is an entirely modern conceptualization of 'tradition.' Formulated to tackle problems encountered by Khasis in the contemporary moment, such laws (with their selective incorporation of practices) end up formally legalizing norms that end up being regressive. These laws then arguably dissolve the freedom of 'modern' Khasis to make very personal choices, instead holding them at bay from many of their 'modern' rights as (non-tribal) Indian or even global citizens.

Building on Tiplut Nongbri's analysis of the anti-woman stance shared by ideologically opposed groups like the KHADC and the SRT (a stance that ultimately

preserves masculine interests) I show how a sense of confusion becomes attached to laws like the Lineage Act. I argue that there is a complex relationship between the passing of the laws and their effect: the very process of enforcement lends itself to a different order of claim and choice. That is, there is ample room for inconsistent enforcement, significant modifications or repeal through the efforts of opposing groups, and the final implementation of the law lays bare the moment that allows the status quo to selectively invoke or ignore the law. In this case, it is the indigenous elite that is able to powerfully use these laws to solidify and reproduce their own status and resources. The notion of matriliny that men's groups like SRT have propagated propels it to the status of a critical flaw or chink in the armor of Khasi society. The idea, which has become commonplace over the decades, suggests that this is the one vulnerability of Khasi society that the outsiders (*dkhars*) seek to exploit. It is arguably this notion that ultimately led to the Lineage Act being passed.

The debates around which this Act has come into existence have been successful in fundamentally reshaping the Khasi intellectual horizon over time, relying on patriarchal attitudes and logics in combination with problematic racialized figurations of the 'outsider,' steering consensus, discourse and decision-making towards an increased scrutiny and disciplining of Khasi women. In this scenario, certain figures necessarily find themselves at the fringes—Khasi women (and men) crossing the frenzied line of family and clan duty that surrounds them, non-Khasis in relationships with Khasi women, and, the children of such inter-ethnic heterosexual alliances. I argue that these awkwardly positioned figures become a different kind of what Baruah (2000) calls "denizens" – neither outside, nor inside; neither 'authentically' Khasi, nor fully non-Khasi. To ward

off the ever looming threat of exclusion and exploitation, these figures, who identify as a part of the *jaitbynriew*, and have historically been accepted as such, must now constantly perform their loyalty, (a border inside a border, an overscrutinized performance of belonging)—each with a different set of resources and ability to negotiate, depending on their family status, their financial standing and their 'racial appearance.' Understandings of Khasi identity and gender are in fact enmeshed in broader indigenous identities, which are in constant negotiation and dialogue with postcolonial nation-states and global imaginaries.

Being matrilineal was not merely a thing that rendered Khasis in Shillong different. It also allowed many of them to identify themselves in terms of a more 'authentic' modern reality that emerged from their own traditional customs that were often seen as predating (Western) modernity. As against the way that the people of the plains (ignorant of the histories of this self-definition) might see them—backward, stuck in the past, and inferior, these Khasis would situate themselves in terms of a far more liberal and Westernized context. Locating themselves in terms of global paradigms allows for a radically different terrain where their unique history in the region, and their tribal, matrilineal culture become aligned to form a mirror that reflects to them progressive and/or Western notions of gender and sexual expression.

But not everyone is proud of their unique lineage system – being matrilineal is a source of anxiety for several Khasi men who see it as an antiquated set of 'customs' that have (or ought to have) little to do with Khasi culture and should be jettisoned instead in the broader interests of the community. For men's groups like the SRT traditional matriliny is not only incapable of dealing with the newer realities that contemporary

Khasis have to face, but it is also at odds with a modern Khasi identity. This has for various reasons (that they are keen to highlight) led to a 'crisis' of Khasi masculinity.

In Chapter 4 I engage with the discursive figure of the 'typical Khasi guy' and show how it has been produced through the interplay between non-matrilineal outsider perceptions and Khasi self-understandings of gender dynamics emerging out of kinship systems and practices. I trace the different modes through which Khasi masculinity has come to be easily readable to patrilineal outsiders as 'lack' or 'failure' and argue that Khasi men are effeminized and doubly displaced from hegemonic masculinity – first, through a combination of their 'racialization' as East/Southeast Asian and their tribal status and second, through their matrilineal culture. Simultaneously Khasi women have to contend with two layers of misogyny – a racialized reading of them as the 'loose' tribal woman as well as perceptions of them as Amazonian women intent on humbling 'their' men.

As was the case with colonial anthropology, contemporary ethnocentric understandings of Khasi emasculation continue to powerfully shape the prisms through which outsiders are able to even 'see' much less understand what is happening in Khasi society. The recognition of this distorted version of the 'self' in the eyes of the other has had no small role to play in the production of ideas and feelings about a depleted Khasi masculinity. Behind these processes is an underlying system – what I am calling patrilineo-patriarchy – which is founded upon the twin ideals of male supremacy and female subservience. Here authority over his wife and children (even if not exercised violently but given 'freely') is what bestows on a man his rightful status; a different ordering of gender where men and women have more equitable relations (especially

when sanctioned by structural norms) becomes seen as a fundamental infringement on the 'natural' rights of men.

Patrilineo-patriarchy institutes what I call an emotional and psychological continuum of masculinity and masculine identity that non-Khasis (and through them some Khasis too) draw on so as to read the 'plight' of Khasi men as pitiful. Through my interactions with people I picked up on the circular manner in which Khasi men's mobilizations against matriliny have in turn ended up putting the Khasis on the national and international map, but for unfavorable reasons, *creating* in fact feelings of confusion if not failure and lack for Khasi men who are forced now to contend with the negative ways in which they have been represented over the years across various media. This is a classic example of 'naming as making true' and the battery of stereotypes about Khasi men have become for some the basis upon which they understand and narrate their own gendered experiences as pathetic or shameful.

I suggest that while a chasm exists between pro and anti-matriliny Khasis, they both share the desire to find a niche for themselves as a small minority community within a larger globalizing world. For some matriliny enables them to bypass the problems associated with mainland Indian attitudes and lifestyles and become a part of a more liberal, international system, but for others (like the SRT men) matriliny distances them from the powerful, hegemonic model of masculinity that is produced within patrlineo-patriarchy and around which their idea of a vibrant modernity is organized. Eschewing matriliny thus enables them to become a part of a globally endorsed and seductive kind of masculinity, based upon its ability (implicit or explicit) to dominate over women and participate freely in the neoliberal world economy. By rejecting matriliny they feel they

can best transcend both their traditional, indigenous roots and possibly also the regressive Indian setup they are tethered to by virtue of citizenship.

In Chapter 5 I undertake a detailed explication and analysis of the organizing principles and logics of the anti-matrilineal ideology espoused by the SRT. Tracing their genealogy back to the politics of another men's group in the early 60s, I highlight the significance of masculine bonds spanning generations through which stories, experiences and insights are shared, bestowing the contemporary members with a sense of history and purpose in a social milieu where their propositions have not found much favor. Articulations of problems with matriliny are directed both at aspects inherent to the 'traditional' system and its practices and also at the kinds of complications generated by the influence of modernity on contemporary Khasi life. These generate immense strife for individual men as the SRT (and also groups like the MSM) tries to convey to multiple audiences. I suggest, however, that the simultaneous move to compulsively reframe these individual or familial struggles as primarily systemic problems (about society and *jaitbynriew*) has the effect of both making assumptions about the whole community based on individual stories while simultaneously not accounting seriously for the experiences of those individual men dealing with varying degrees of emotional distress.

The propensity to constantly remap the tribulations of Khasi men onto more pressing social concerns also leads to the gendering and hierarchization of feelings – some like sadness, melancholia, paranoia, insecurity and loss find themselves subjugated at the expense of others like anger, frustration, humiliation, injustice and rebellion that are glorified and legitimated. Martial imagery is often invoked, with the narrative being that of a battle being fought both within the community (for acceptance) and against the

usurping alpha (mainland) 'outsider' male whose shadow upon the state is perceived as being the ultimate threat to the survival of the Khasi *jaitbynriew*.

Using the matrilineal structure to their benefit, outsiders in the form of *dkhars* are seen as both invading at the borders and infecting the community from within. These men's groups then both draw on and in turn perpetuate understandings of the *jaitbynriew* along the lines of racial distinctiveness and purity, quoting fantastic 'scientific' theories (much like Subramanium Swamy discussed in the first chapter) to argue that non-Khasi men marrying into the community causes a 'dilution' of Khasi blood since it is the father's DNA that determines the appearance of the child. Consequently despite there being a long history of an acceptance of inter-ethnic marriages and alliances within Khasi matriliny, there is an increasing scrutiny that Khasi women are falling under, where their personal choice to marry outside the community is being framed as selfish and disloyal. Of course, as many of informants pointed out, there are discrepancies here with Khasi women marrying *saheps* or *farengs* being considered lucky, while those marrying dark-skinned South Asians or Africans are openly looked down upon.

Relying on evolutionary ideas about the primitivism and unnaturalness of the matrilineal system these men are indirectly questioning whether it is at all reasonable to allow women access to 'unfettered' power, given that in both Khasi and patrilineo-patriarchal gendered worldviews they are construed as the 'weaker sex.' This, according to them, is a particular problem arising from the shape Khasi matriliny has more recently taken, with the legal standing of property ownership given to youngest daughters who were customarily supposed to have been 'custodians' of the family wealth and religion. This conversion of customary norms and practices into the domain of enforceable law is a

product of colonial and postcolonial state policies and attitudes towards the Northeast tribes, and it is this power of 'traditional' practices that the men's groups are selectively and strategically objecting to.

While traditionally the maternal uncle was supposed to be the figure of authority for his clan members, in the contemporary moment he has more of a symbolic status rather than playing an active role in his natal family. Here the importance of the influence of Christianity (and the patrilineal bias built into it) is very explicit; its emphasis on nuclear, father-headed families has shaped Khasi sensibilities to a large extent, corroding over time the dominant position held by the mother's oldest brother. With the maternal uncle having "run off," as one SRT member put it, and the father displaced from absolute and legally endorsed authority, power unmitigated by masculine control or supervision falls into the hands of Khasi women, particularly the youngest daughter, seen as wresting control over resources and decision-making within the lineage while conspiring to sideline men both as fathers and as brothers.

The excessive, demonic overtones of the female extravaganza being described in the numerous 'true stories' being offered by SRT men draws on deeply felt (and internalized) concerns about the nature of a society 'ruled' by women – an entirely treacherous, bacchanalian world. I suggest that the image of power-hungry, bloodthirsty Khasi sisters both conceals and renders explicit the normalization of violence against women in patriarchy; to restore the 'natural' harmony of gender relations requires according to SRT men, a decisive intervention – the casting out of matrilineal principles so as to curtail this female-power-gone-awry while simultaneously empowering Khasi men.

Along with framing and problematizing the conceptual armor and rhetoric of the anti-matriliny men's groups Chapter 5 also advances a discussion of a few responses emerging from other sections of Khasi society. I bring up for analysis the other face of the youngest daughter – frustration over constantly being under the watchful eye of the family and the clan who often dictated where she could go and who she could become friendly with, being held to higher standards of decency and decorum, not being able to assert free will, not being allowed to study or work outside Shillong, and being expected to marry within and reproduce for the clan and community. In countering the narrative of the SRT, I don't simply wish to push back against one of the bases of their ideology. In fact I argue that this is a position taken up by many divergent groups opposed to the SRT's diagnoses and propositions and tends to suffer from similar kinds of pitfalls. In the battle between whether the *khadduh* is 'merely' a custodian or then an overbearing heir, ideological positions become hardened and everyday realities that are rarely clear-cut get ignored and invisibilized.

For Khasi feminism, adopting a stance against the men's groups has not been unproblematic. In opposing anti-matriliny arguments, feminism often ends up in an awkward alliance with more conservative 'traditionalists' and has consequently been unable to grapple with the strategic and creative ways that Khasi women have navigated the mobile field of gender relations in Meghalaya over the years. Further, in its efforts to contend appropriately with the forceful mainstream view (inspired by theories of cultural evolution) that has understood matriliny to be coterminous with matriarchy, Khasi feminism has tended to not only ignore arenas of marginalization or disprivilege experienced by Khasi men but also to outright deny them. Through these fraught

engagements (or the lack of them) we can trace the lineage of Khasi feminism to its patrilineal counterpart, which has offered us many complex tools and concepts to analyze patriarchy, which were, however, primarily developed within and to address patrilineal gender orderings. I have tried to argue that not only might it be ineffective to use patrilineo-patriarchical lenses and analytics to engage with matrilineal societies, but it might also be violent in some measure, or have dangerous consequences that we need to be vigilant about. While it is certainly true, as Khasi feminists point out, that matrilineal systems also tend to be patriarchal, I suggest that we be cautious about conflating these two patriarchies.

I ask then finally, what lies behind Khasi feminism's failure to take seriously the problems experienced by men in Shillong? Through Khasi feminism's grounding in patrilineal feminism I contend that we come up against some fundamental limits of mainstream feminism. Mainstream feminism appears to have reached a limit-point when confronted with Khasi men's protest against injustice along the lines of egalitarianism. The framing of this limit-point is neither rational-theoretical, nor ethical-political—it is in fact, a non-politics of fatigue, almost as if exhausted by the constant confrontation with the patrilineo-patriarchy, mainstream feminism cannot uphold its own egalitarian impulse in this differently gendered context.

There is an impasse then, subliminal and overt at the same time, and I return to Balibar in framing this as the divide between the deep, horizontal feeling of 'equality,' that is contingent on historical amnesia, and the formative history of mainstream feminism that has taken so particular a path, that it can only bond in an irrational (half-amused, half-dismissive) feeling of 'difference' with the rights of the 'oppressed' in these

kinship structures. It is the 'sense' of difference that is at once the result of what Balibar above calls the "historical systems of complementary exclusions and dominations," as well as the fictive ideas about racial or ethnic differences. It is the *feeling* of fraternity that gave breath to the fiction of India – both, the liberal, egalitarian nation by law as well as the violent idea of 'true' Indians (saffronized, tolerant). And it is the *feeling* of sorority within which the 'sense' of difference of the Khasi men against matrilineage surfaces. And thereby forms the mirror, against which the imagined community of mainstream feminism erases its own inhabitings – in the non-indigenous, the patriarchal, the 'solidarity' space of non-difference.

What then can be a ground to articulate: 1) the politics of community and, 2) the politics of gender? In my analysis, two kinds of powerful feelings have surfaced, both enshrined in wholeness, modernity, legitimacy, and truth—the feeling for 'community' (nation, clan, race) and the feeling for 'equality' (rights, justice, oppressed). In contrast are the messy feelings that cannot be 'placed' easily: racially problematic, ethnocentric, some might argue communal sentiments, or then the 'rights' of men against matriliny. In these 'awkward' assertions one finds a different kind of voice, and a different kind of dismissal, than in hegemonic or unchallenged nationalism, or patrilineo-patriarchy, and through them it is possible arguably to glimpse through the looking glass of both mainstream nationalism and feminism. Intersectional interventions have raised a powerful (horizontal) critique of the liberal-utopic impulses of feminism. Here, along the axes of postcolonial indigeneity, I have elaborated a temporal critique of the inside out of liberal feminist utopias-to-come, to only arrive at the beginning of a profound rethinking of gender relations, kinship, the dominant discourses that shape postcolonial modernity,

and mainstream feminism. In doing so, I hope to have also taken a small step in moving beyond the binaries of tribal and mainland, the liberal humanist feminist and traditional matriliny, and instead, gesturing towards a third space from which indigeneity can be thought.

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