



Gender and Forests in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills: A Probe in History

Darisha Lyngdoh¹

¹Research Scholar, Department of History
North Eastern Hills University, Shillong

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Abstract

Meghalaya, nestled in North East India is known for its matrilineal society and sacred groves. Although, matrilineal in character, each gender has specific roles to play in their society, the norm follows that females are the custodians and caretakers of their ancestral lands and forests, whereas major decisions about the property is taken by the male members of the family or clan. Forests are part of the daily life of the Khasi-Jaintia tribes, and each gender has specific roles inside the forests; hunting, fishing, collecting firewood are male dominated, whereas gathering, maintaining gardens, preserving seeds are mostly dominated by women in the Khasi Jaintia Hills. The paper will be historical in approach and aims to present how gender and Forests relate in ways that determine different meanings and conservational practices of forests, explore the relationship of forests with women portrayed through the cultures, folk narrative and ritual practices of the tribes, and how forests are threatened by patriarchal colonial practices which shape and destroy ecologies in the past, present and future.

Keywords: Colonialism, Ecology, Gender, Sacred Groves

Introduction

Nations were covered in dense forests in the distant past, providing past humans with basic amenities. Our ancestors relied on forests for all their needs, their dependence on forests made them adapt, acquit, modify, augment and learn with the conditions of the forests, evolving and mutating for generations with their experiences inside the forests. These experiences shaped their perspectives on Nature and Science altering superficial and

¹Corresponding Author

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Superstition as reflected in their worldview which is embedded in their religion, culture, and totemic practices. The indigenous tribes of Khasi and Jaintia in Meghalaya have adapted their life with their forests which they called Khlaw. Their knowledge to utilize forests resources is commendable ranging from food, shelter, articles, commutes, weaponry, colors, medicines and poisons. Since they are forest dwellers and are very much dependent on forest and their life and culture are closely knit with it, instinctively they do not destroy the forest unnecessarily or for luxury. H. Bareh; B. Mawrie and H.O Mawrie have worked on themes of inter- relationship between the Khasi and the Natural environment in general and forest in particular. Shangpliang (2010) describes the importance of forests in Khasi society with a critical focus on the gender dimensions of this interaction.

Research on gendered relationship between humans and forests in the Khasi and Jaintia tribes is scanty. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the relationship between gender and forests, accentuating the roles each gender plays in shaping how forests are understood and utilized in the traditional Khasi and Jaintia Society and investigating into the Colonial and Capitalist thinking that views forests merely as a resource to be exploited, managed and governed by exploitative and developmental practices that shape and destroy forests in the past, present and future. These practices affect indigenous men and women; however, women face more oppression leaving them without any space to practice their rights and voice their opinion in decision making related to forest management. Identifying and addressing these gaps in understanding gender-forests relationship is crucial to foster gender rights and awareness among the indigenous women and for sustainable forest management in the future. It is in this background that this paper tries to analyse gender-forest relations in the traditional Khasi-Jaintia Society.

Gender Roles and Relationships with Forests in the Khasi-Pnar Community

Gender roles and relationships are important components of key emerging forest-related issues, such as climate change and the differential risks and opportunities faced by women and men in different contexts (Masika, 2002). Among the Khasi and Jaintia each gender has specific roles and duties to perform inside forests. In their social system the Khasis are matrilineal in practice. Women are the custodian of ancestral lands, groves and wealth but not the properties. The maternal uncle is the undisputed director of the ancestral wealth and property where the father is the provider, the master and guide to his family. There was a clear division of function between household and the world outside. The woman is the receiver and the custodian and therefore must not stray into the field of politics. She is not to take part in the affairs of the state, her domain is the home (Kharshiing, 1982). Women are the founders, caretakers and custodians of the forests and ancestral property and not the inheritor, whereas, men has decision making authority in the village durbars and clan meetings which women are not allowed to participate. Men collect firewood, build communication routes like the living room bridges, dominate the durbar, decision making and ritual practices, etc. Males play active role in hunting, cultivation and logging of timber,

bamboos, bee rearing, etc., whereas native Khasi and Jaintia women take charge like caring for the young, cooking, gardening, household tasks, collecting and gathering wild herbs, mushrooms and fruits inside the forests and selling these non-timber forests products in the markets. Women actively balance both the household and market domains. Women make use of forest resources for subsistence; they collect Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) and sell them in markets to generate modest incomes. Forest degradation affects a community as a whole, but it is particularly severe on women. The exclusion of women from the political process and decision making has skewed the balance in favour of men, despite the enormous contribution of women on several aspects of Khasi-Jaintia subsistence activities and economy (Mawlong, 2017).

Gender roles in Forest Management

Forests are more inclined as feminine based on its nurturing aspect, birth and reproductive roles. However, destruction of forests is male dominated since times immemorial. Women are preservers of seeds and species passing down eco-sustainable knowledge to successive generations. Women have a close relationship with nature because of the direct connection between women's biology and women's relationship with the environment (Locke, 1999).

The Khasi Jaintia has a traditional practice of categorising land as well as forests for their management, administration and utilization. Land is usually divided into public and private. Forest patches are divided into private, public and sacred. The forests are managed accordingly, for privately owned forests the clan members and uncles are in charge, whereas, the curator and caretaker is the youngest daughter. There are Law shnong (village forests), Law kynti and Law sumar (privately owned forests), Law Adong (protected forests), Law Kyntang (sacred forests), Law Lyngdoh (priestly forests) and Law Niam (religious forests), etc.

Sacred Groves (Law Kyntang) are patches of forests preserved and they represent the ancestors, worship and sovereignty among the Khasi tribes. Sacred groves in a Khasi village are well demarcated and sanctified, it is used to perform rituals as a form of communication between man and God. It is believed that the sacred groves in Mawphlang have been founded by the ancestress called Meikmah. According to the ethnographic information 'Meikmah' is the biological mother of the first Lyngdohor priest of Mawphlang Village.

Law Adong is a reserved forest for the entire collective use of a village. Such type of forest for sustainable harvesting is used for certain purposes as decided by the Village Durbar which is male dominated. This practice regulates the villagers to not migrate elsewhere in search of a place to settle down and these forests act like a fortified area or a boundary line which demarcates the area of their village in which each villager would get a portion of the land in the place where they could call it a home and get the resources from the forests to sustain all their needs (Dkhar, 1999).

Clan forests (Law Kur) in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills protected and preserved by Clan members. Some Clan forests in the area under study are founded by the clan ancestress believed to be founded so that the generation to come would not fall short of land and resources. In the clan forests belonging to the clan Nongrang in Mairang, West Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya, it is believed to be founded by a woman who is the ancestral mother of the clan, on the course of her migration in search of a place to fulfil the needs like Water, land and resources that would sustain the future generations. Inside the clan forest one can find medicinal plants for the treatment of many ailments and snake bite. Presently, the clan forest in Nongrang Village provide the nearby villages of Thangmaw and Mawkohmit with clean water and other resources like mushrooms, firewood and fodder for animals. A unit of the clan forest (KhlawTemsnieh) has one small river, and 7 spring water, surrounding all over the forest named Mawkahsing, Mawap, KhlawTemsnieh and Dumkor which provides the nearby villages with drinking water throughout the year.

Colonial Intervention

The Khasi have their own culture since ancient times on how to protect forests from fires. There is the custom of Sain ding among the Khasi. In this practice only the males are allowed to take part (Khongsit, 2001). This practice is a way to curb forest fires resulting from fires caught in nearby areas to reach the village forest. This practice called the Sain ding Raid is done once in a year in the month of February. On the day of the practice the village headman selects the elders to lead the way, the elders who lit the fire walks in the front and instructs the young fellows to put the fire down once the fire burns everything in order to clean the grasses in the forest before the fire reaches the other edge of the forests. The young males follow behind the elders with handful of branches of trees in their hands to put down the fire. The elders who lit the fire also carries handful of tree branches in order to prevent the fire reaching the patches which are not supposed to be burned. The method is very systematic and all the members must follow the instructions with discipline in order to avoid any major forest fire (Susngi, 2015). This is a very sustainable practice which avoids forests fires as the dried bushes and leaves are burned and cleaned, it also allows proper growth of trees inside the forest, however, this practice has died down mainly because of the colonial intervention and Forests policy with the implementation of the Indian-Forest Act of 1878 which is a regulation Preventing forest fires.

The destruction of the forests in the Khasi and Jaintia hills including Law Adong, Sacred forests, village forests, etc., started after India got its independence in 1947. For example, the Lum shyllong forests located in East Khasi Hills, was subjected to logging in 1948, starting with the so called "Thinning" plan. The Mawdkhap forest in Mawkabor was destroyed in the 1950, The Nongbri forest on Lum Lyndet Leng was also destroyed in 1949-50, and when it comes to the sacred forests around Lum shyllong it was in the years 1948-49 (Khongsit, 2001). After British introduced their concept of governance, the Khasis began to look at forests and land as valuable assets and there was no stopping them from

converting by subterfuge the public land meant for the community welfare (Ri-Raid) into individually owned land (Ri-Kynti). However, it is also true that some free-hold land not owned by anyone have been claimed by particular clans through the process of Skut which actually means claiming as much land as a person could lay his eyes on, taking the hills and rivers as natural boundaries. Meghalaya is gradually inching towards a situation where the affluent are acquiring more land through dubious means but mainly by creating a situation where the poor have no way out but to sell whatever they have (Mukhim, 2006). The available sacred groves in the region are no longer in their original shape and the essence of reverence and protection to these forests are not being respected as man has become hungrier to destroy these forests for capital. Many aspects of decision making related to forests and lands are still taken by the male members who have influential customary decision-making rights. Decision making is entirely in the hands of the male members (Mukhim, 2006).

Research Discussion

The worldview of the Khasi and Jaintia tribes reflects the close association nature which they called Ka Mei Ramew meaning Mother. The idea of reserving forests was an age-old practise by the indigenous tribes even before the arrival of the colonial rulers which is sustainable conservational practice and totally opposite to what the colonial government introduced as scientific forestry and forest reservation which began only in 1864.

The colonial empire was driven with the quest for new geographical areas to outstrip India of its material wealth from all the sectors like land revenues, minerals and forest wealth. It brought forth, destruction, disparity and disorientation in the lives of the indigenous tribes. Women and men relationship with their forests were curbed, gathering, hunting, fishing were banned and collecting of firewood and grazing were imposed with taxes and fines. Women were severely impacted till date, their movements and liberty were restricted, they have accessed to limited forests and in the present scenario with urbanization, road planning, developmental schemes of the government, hundreds of acres of forests land are being destroyed across North East India, destroying the delicate balanced relationship between man-woman and biodiversity. Their access to forests resources which is done sustainably in the Hills is disturbed and some no longer practiced like the Sain ding. Many sacred groves in Meghalaya are being encroached and destroyed, in the present scenario there are many traditional healers in Meghalaya who are facing difficulties to collect herbs, fruits, barks and seeds from the forests to make herbal medicines, as plants are getting extinct due to deforestation and global warming. In the coming years, with deforestation the few patches of forests left would soon vanish under the banner of developmental schemes, thus affecting many on its way.

Conclusion

Forests were never seen as a singular object where basic needs of everyday life can be fulfilled, in fact, it was seen as a ground where tutelary deities reside, a place where spirits dwell, a sacred sacramental place for worship, a place for healing and a demarcation of

sovereignty. With capitalization and colonialism women were exploited, controlled as their rights have fallen. Deforestation and urbanization resulting from the developmental plans has limited man and woman rights inside the forests. The developmental schemes affect women severely, curbing their movements inside forests as well as the relationship they have with nature. The income which the Khasi women earn by selling foraged items from the forests has sustained their family, however, under the banner of development projects, forests patches are being cleared, thus affecting their source of livelihood. Thus, while gender subordination and patriarchy are the oldest oppressions, they have taken on new and more violent forms through the project of development (Shiva, 1988). The destruction of forests affects all genders and species, and the problems arising from it are many and varied. Learning from the past indigenous Knowledge system will enable us to give a voice to the oppressions faced by both the genders, which can help develop new modes of forest governance, sustainable resource management policies and projects.

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