

Custodians of Culture and Change: A Systematic Review of the Life, Work, and Intergenerational Legacy of Indigenous Women in North East India

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The indigenous women of Northeast India, who occupy a distinct yet complex position within their societies. The women of this region are the custodians of culture, key economic contributors, ecological knowledge holders and agents of political resistance. Yet, despite their visible participation in social and economic spheres, they often remain underrepresented in formal political and institutional structures. This review paper synthesizes interdisciplinary scholarship, historical narratives, and contemporary case studies to examine the life-

worlds, activism, intellectual contributions and evolving challenges of indigenous women in the region. By situating women within matrilineal systems, subsistence economies, anti-colonial movements, peace-building initiatives and literary production, the study argues that their legacy represents not merely resilience but sustained leadership in shaping identity, justice, and regional transformation. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for structural reforms that translate symbolic recognition into political and economic inclusion.

Keywords: *Indigenous women, NorthEast India, Matriliney, Resistance Movements, Ecological Knowledge, Gender & Development*

Introduction:

North East India, comprising the eight states of Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Tripura, and Sikkim, represents one of the most culturally intricate and historically layered regions of India. Characterized by ethnic plurality, linguistic diversity, clan-based affiliations, and distinct customary governance systems, the region presents a socio-cultural landscape in which women's roles are shaped by indigenous traditions, kinship structures and community-based economies. Unlike many mainstream patriarchal contexts in other parts of India, several communities in North East India such as the matrilineal Khasi and Garo societies demonstrate alternative gender arrangements where lineage and inheritance pass through women. Yet, these structural distinctions do not uniformly translate into substantive gender equality.

Across both hill and valley regions, indigenous women actively sustain local economies through agriculture, weaving, handloom production, forest-based livelihoods, and informal trade networks. From managing household food security to participating in weekly markets and cross-border trade, women remain central to everyday economic resilience. Their labor is not merely supplementary but foundational to community survival. In states affected by political unrest and militarization, women have also emerged as moral anchors and collective voices of resistance. For instance, movements such as the Meira Paibi (Women Torch Bearers) in Manipur reflect how indigenous women transform domestic roles into public activism, negotiating peace, justice, and human rights within conflict affected contexts.

However, despite their visibility in economic and cultural domains, their representation in formal political institutions remains comparatively limited. The paradox between social centrality and political marginality highlights a critical analytical gap. As scholars like Bina Agarwal (1994) argue in her work on gender and land rights, access to productive resources does not automatically ensure decision-making power. Similarly, Sanjib Baruah (2005), in his examination of state formation and insurgency in Northeast India, underscores how conflict and transitional governance structures often reconfigure gender roles without dismantling deeper hierarchies. Women frequently shoulder economic and emotional burdens during crises while simultaneously serving as mediators, peace advocates, and custodians of community cohesion. This duality of visibility in practice yet marginality in formal authority forms the central tension explored in this review.

This paper therefore examines the life trajectories, socio-economic contributions, activism, and enduring legacy of indigenous women in North East India. It situates their experiences within broader theoretical frameworks of gender studies, indigenous knowledge systems, intersectionality, and postcolonial feminist discourse. By synthesizing existing scholarship and contextual analysis, this review seeks to illuminate how indigenous women negotiate tradition and modernity, agency and constraint, community leadership and institutional exclusion. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gendered power structures in peripheral regions of India and foreground indigenous women not merely as cultural symbols, but as historical actors, knowledge holders, and transformative agents of social change.

Objectives:

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To analyse the socio-cultural and economic roles of indigenous women in North East India.
2. To examine women-led historical and contemporary movements in the region.
3. To explore literary, intellectual, and educational contributions of prominent indigenous women.
4. To identify structural and institutional challenges affecting their empowerment.
5. To evaluate their continuing legacy within frameworks of identity, resistance, and sustainable development.

Methodology:

This research adopts a systematic qualitative review approach grounded in secondary sources. The study draws upon peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books on gender and Indigenous studies, reports published by government and non-governmental organizations, as well as ethnographic and historical records to ensure a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of the subject. For data interpretation, a thematic analysis was employed to systematically classify and synthesize the literature into five core themes; matriliney and kinship systems, economic and ecological roles, women-led resistance movements, literary and intellectual contributions, and contemporary socio-political challenges, thereby enabling a structured and critical examination of the evolving life, works, and legacy of Indigenous women in the region.

Analysis & Discussion:

The lived realities of Indigenous women in North East India reveal a layered interplay between cultural authority, economic centrality, and structural marginalization. A systematic review of interdisciplinary

scholarship indicates that while women in several communities enjoy symbolic recognition and visible socio-economic participation, institutional power and formal governance often remain gendered in subtle yet persistent ways. This paradox between visibility and authority constitutes the central analytical concern of this study.

Matrilineal Systems and Gendered Authority: Among matrilineal communities such as the Khasi and Garo of Meghalaya, lineage and inheritance are traced through the female line, with property traditionally devolving upon the youngest daughter. At first glance, this kinship structure appears to subvert mainstream patriarchal norms prevalent in many parts of India. Women occupy the genealogical center of the household and act as custodians of ancestral property, clan continuity, and ritual obligations. However, as Nongbri(2003) critically observes, matriliney does not automatically translate into matriarchy. Decision-making institutions such as traditional village councils (Dorbar Shnong) often remain male-dominated, with maternal uncles or male elders exercising political authority. The symbolic centrality of women within the domestic and kinship sphere coexists with male predominance in public governance.

This divergence reveals that inheritance rights alone do not guarantee political agency. The review suggests that matriliney functions as a culturally empowering framework but remains institutionally circumscribed. Women may inherit property, yet control over community-level decisions, dispute resolution, and customary law often rests with male representatives. Therefore, matriliney must be understood not as a complete reversal of patriarchy but as a

distinctive gender arrangement where authority is negotiated rather than uniformly redistributed. Agricultural Leadership, Ecological Knowledge and Subsistence Economies: Indigenous women across hill and valley regions serve as primary actors in subsistence agriculture, particularly within shifting cultivation (jhum) systems. Their responsibilities encompass seed selection, crop rotation, soil fertility maintenance, water management, and preservation of indigenous crop varieties. This ecological knowledge, transmitted intergenerationally, reflects what Shiva(1988) conceptualizes as biodiversity stewardship rooted in women's embodied engagement with land and livelihood.

The review indicates that women's environmental expertise is neither incidental nor auxiliary; rather, it constitutes the backbone of household food security and community resilience. In conflict-affected or geographically remote areas, women often sustain agricultural productivity in the absence of men who migrate for wage labor or become involved in insurgency-related contexts. However, modernization and market integration have altered agrarian structures. Cash crop cultivation, commercialization of forest produce, and the monetization of land have intensified women's labor burdens while excluding them from formal land titles, credit systems, and agricultural extension services.

Thus, the shift from subsistence to market-oriented agriculture generates a paradox: women remain primary cultivators yet possess limited control over financial returns. The literature consistently underscores this structural imbalance between labour contribution and economic recognition.

Weaving, Textile Identity and Cultural Continuity: Weaving occupies a central place in the socio-cultural economy of North East India. Textiles such as the Manipuri Phanek, Naga shawls, and Assamese Gamusa are not merely

commodities but repositories of collective memory, clan identity, and ritual symbolism. Through intricate patterns, motifs, and dyeing techniques, women encode histories of migration, cosmology, and social status.

The review reveals that weaving functions simultaneously as economic labor and cultural pedagogy. Skills are transmitted from mothers to daughters, reinforcing gendered knowledge systems and intergenerational continuity. In recent decades, commercialization and global exposure have expanded market opportunities for indigenous textiles. Cooperative societies, self-help groups, and online platforms have enhanced visibility and income generation. However, market incorporation also introduces tensions. Sacred motifs risk commodification and mass production may dilute cultural authenticity. Furthermore, middlemen and export agencies frequently control pricing structures, limiting women's bargaining power. The transformation of weaving from subsistence craft to commercial enterprise therefore presents both empowerment possibilities and new vulnerabilities within neoliberal economic frameworks.

Informal Markets and Collective Economic Governance: Women-run markets represent one of the most visible expressions of female collective power in the region. The historic Ima Keithel (Mother's Market) in Manipur, entirely managed by women traders, exemplifies how informal economies can evolve into structured systems of self-regulation and solidarity. These marketplaces function not only as centers of commerce but also as arenas for social negotiation, information exchange, and political mobilization.

The review demonstrates that such markets challenge conventional assumptions about women's economic dependency. Women traders regulate pricing, manage dispute resolution internally, and mobilize collectively during

political unrest. Yet, despite their economic vibrancy, these markets often lack institutional support in terms of banking access, insurance coverage, infrastructural investment, and policy recognition. Informal status renders women economically visible but administratively marginalized. This gap highlights the broader issue of how state frameworks frequently overlook community-based female economic governance.

Invisible Labour and the Intensification of Gendered Burdens: Across the reviewed literature, a recurring theme concerns the invisibility of women's labour. Indigenous women navigate multiple roles: cultivators, weavers, traders, caregivers, ritual custodians, and community mediators. While their contributions sustain both household and regional economies, much of this work remains unaccounted for in formal economic metrics.

Agarwal's (1994) arguments regarding land rights and bargaining power resonate strongly within this regional context. Without formal ownership, institutional recognition, or decision-making authority, women's extensive labour does not necessarily translate into structural empowerment. Modernization has further intensified this "double burden," as educational aspirations, wage employment, and administrative engagement add new responsibilities without redistributing domestic work. The result is an expanded spectrum of expectations without proportional institutional support.

Women-Led Resistance and Transformative Political Agency: Historical and contemporary movements reveal indigenous women as active architects of political transformation. The Nupi Lan uprisings in Manipur (1904 & 1939) marked decisive moments of anti-colonial resistance led predominantly by women protesting exploitative

economic policies. These mobilizations disrupted colonial authority and redefined gendered participation in public protest.

Similarly, the Meira Paibis emerged during periods of militarization and insurgency, addressing human rights violations, substance abuse, and community insecurity. By extending maternal symbolism into civic activism, these women transformed socially ascribed domestic identities into moral-political authority. Their activism demonstrates how indigenous women strategically negotiate cultural legitimacy to intervene in state violence and social crises.

The Naga Mothers' Association further illustrates how women's collectives have engaged in peace-building initiatives, advocating dialogue and ceasefire during prolonged insurgencies. Their emphasis on reconciliation and restorative justice underscores gendered approaches to conflict resolution rooted in community preservation rather than militarized confrontation.

Intellectual Production and Narrative Authority: Beyond economic and political activism, indigenous women have contributed significantly to literary and intellectual discourse. Writers such as Easterine Kire and Mamang Dai articulate themes of memory, displacement, landscape, and spirituality, reclaiming narrative space within national and global literary arenas. Their works preserve oral histories while interrogating violence, modernity, and identity fragmentation.

Through literature, indigenous women challenge epistemic marginalization. They reposition indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate intellectual traditions rather than peripheral folklore. Creative expression thus becomes a form of resistance against both

cultural erasure and homogenizing national narratives.

Continuity, Change, and Contemporary Structural Constraints: Despite their extensive contributions, indigenous women continue to confront systemic constraints including political underrepresentation, unequal land rights in patriarchal tribes, digital exclusion, and vulnerabilities arising from market liberalization. Militarization in certain regions exacerbates gendered insecurity, while development projects sometimes displace communities without adequate gender-sensitive safeguards.

The review underscores that cultural recognition alone is insufficient. Structural reform encompassing land titling, political reservation, financial inclusion, and digital access is necessary to translate symbolic centrality into substantive empowerment. The intergenerational legacy of indigenous women lies not merely in cultural preservation but in their continuous negotiation of change. They are neither passive victims nor romanticized symbols of tradition; rather, they are dynamic agents shaping identity, justice, and sustainable development within a rapidly transforming socio-political landscape.

Conclusion:

Indigenous women in North East India occupy complex socio-historical positions that resist reduction to simplistic binaries of tradition versus modernity. This review demonstrates that while cultural frameworks such as matriliney confer symbolic centrality and social recognition, they do not automatically yield substantive political agency or structural equality. In matrilineal societies of Meghalaya including Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia community's lineage and inheritance through women embody deep historical traditions of cultural continuity and ecological stewardship; yet male authority often persists in formal governance institutions, reflecting wider patterns of hidden patriarchal power and

negotiated authority rather than unmediated female rule. Recent critical scholarship on Khasi matriliney underscores how socio-legal transformations and encroaching patriarchal customs increasingly recalibrate gender roles, suggesting that matrilineal legitimacy can be both empowering and contested in present-day contexts.

The economic fabric woven by indigenous women further exemplifies this duality. Women's central role in subsistence agriculture, biodiversity management, weaving, and informal markets functions as both a generator of community resilience and a site of structural inequity. Their ecological knowledge and control over food systems sustain household and community wellbeing but are frequently unrecognized in formal economic indices. Contemporary literature affirms the nutritional and agrobiodiversity contributions of Indigenous women while highlighting persistent disparities in health, market access, and decision-making (Nongrum et al., 2022). Economic engagement through artisanal weaving and informal trade linked to cultural identity and intergenerational knowledge transmission illustrates how Indigenous women's labour sustains both material and symbolic life. Yet market pressures and commercialization introduce new vulnerabilities that may undermine autonomy and cultural integrity.

Beyond economic and kinship domains, Indigenous women have historically served as pivotal agents of collective action, resistance, and peace building. Movements such as the Nupi Lan uprisings and the Meira Paibi exemplify how women mobilize cultural legitimacy to confront colonial exploitation, state violence, and social crises. Although these movements reflect extraordinary collective agency, they simultaneously reveal the limits of political inclusion: women frequently act as moral

guardians and civil society leaders without corresponding representation in institutional political structures. The scholarly and media record on Meira Paibi confirms their central role in human rights advocacy, even as their actions and legacies become contested within volatile socio-political landscapes (Times of India; Wikipedia).

Indigenous women's contributions to intellectual and cultural discourse further affirm their significance as knowledge producers and narrative agents. Writers such as Easterine Kire and Mamang Dai mediate between oral tradition and literary modernity, embedding Indigenous epistemologies within broader literary canons. Their creative works underscore how storytelling, memory, and cultural foodways are inseparable from wider struggles over identity, land, and belonging. Research on their writing situates women as cultural intermediaries whose narratives counter hegemonic representations and affirm localized worldviews.

Taken together, these intersections of matriliney, economic practice, activism, and cultural production point to a sustained legacy of Indigenous women as catalysts of social transformation rather than passive custodians of tradition. However, this legacy is not static or wholly triumphal. Contemporary challenges including political underrepresentation, unequal access to land rights, healthcare disparities, digital exclusion, and militarized insecurity reflect persistent structural constraints that limit full realization of agency. Addressing these requires not only symbolic recognition but targeted policy interventions that enhance access to formal power, financial capital, legal protections, and platforms for women's voices in governance and development planning. Empowerment initiatives grounded in culturally sensitive frameworks can bridge these gaps and strengthen Indigenous women's roles in shaping equitable futures

(Konwar, 2024).

Ultimately, Indigenous women in North East India embody a dynamic confluence of cultural continuity, resistance, and adaptive leadership. Their contributions to livelihoods, environmental stewardship, community cohesion, political protest, and intellectual production challenge conventional gendered assumptions and foreground an expansive understanding of agency. Recognizing them as decision-makers, knowledge holders, and architects of peace and sustainable development is both analytically necessary and ethically imperative. Addressing material inequalities and institutional barriers will not only honour their historical legacies but also enable more inclusive pathways for regional transformation and justice.

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