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CLASS FORMATION AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY GARO SOCIETY IN MEGHALAYA

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Abstract: Early colonial and post-independence ethnographers historically conceptualised the Garo (A·chik) people of Meghalaya as an egalitarian, casteless, matrilineal indigenous group, but they are now undergoing a profound socio-economic transformation. The rapid shift from communal jhum (slash-and-burn) agriculture to settled cash-crop cultivation, privatised landownership, market integration, urbanisation, and bureaucratic expansion has fundamentally reordered Garo social relations. This paper examines class formation and emerging social inequalities in contemporary Garo society, highlighting how traditional matrilineal frameworks interact with modern capitalist structures. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and contextual literature, this study demonstrates how state-mediated capital accumulation and land privatisation are generating a distinct four-tier class structure across the Garo Hills, unmasking the paradoxes of matrilineal property relations in an era of agrarian transition.

Keywords: Garo (*A·chik*), Meghalaya, Class Formation, Matriliny, Land Privatisation, Agrarian Transition, Social Stratification, Northeast India.

1. Introduction

The Garo (*A·chik*) represent one of the prominent indigenous communities inhabiting the state of Meghalaya in Northeast India, distinguished in anthropological and sociological literature by their traditional matrilineal system of kinship, descent, and inheritance (Burling, 1963; Nakane, 1967). Geographically anchored in the western region of the Meghalaya Plateau—spanning over 8,000 square kilometres characterised by undulating hill ranges, steep river valleys, and dense subtropical forests such as those around Nokrek Peak—the physical landscape has historically shaped Garo settlement patterns, land use, and subsistence strategies (De Maaker, 2024).

Within this socio-cultural framework, clan membership (*Ma·chong*) and property transmission are customarily traced through the female line, with the designated daughter (*nokna*) serving as the custodian of the ancestral household (*nok*) (Playfair, 1909). Garo society, traditionally structured around village-based customary institutions under the leadership of the *Nokma* (traditional village head/land custodian), has primarily been examined through the frameworks of matriliny, kinship alliances, customary law, and ethnic identity (Playfair, 1909; Burling, 1963).

For many years, ethnographic studies depicted the indigenous tribal community of Northeast India as egalitarian groups functioning outside the influence of class divisions (Burling, 1963). Early administrative and ethnographical document sources stressed the communal nature of landholding, referred to as A·king land, which was oversees by the clan or mahari along with the Nokma's guidance. In this traditional system, usufruct

rights prevented the permanent ownership of property and limited the emergence of lasting class distinctions in rural areas.

Although Garo society is not similar to Hindu-style caste hierarchy.

However, contemporary Garo society can no longer be considered absolutely egalitarian because of several factors. Infrastructure development, commercialisation of Western education, and state bureaucratic expansion are shaping structural inequalities in the community (Karlsson, 2011; Marak, 2012). Today, class position—defined by access to capital, privatised land, government employment, and political authority—plays an increasingly decisive role alongside traditional matrilineal affiliations.

2. Research Methodology

To examine the socio-economic transformations within Garo society, this study utilises a qualitative research design combining primary empirical fieldwork and qualitative content analysis.

1. **Fieldwork Locations:** Qualitative data was gathered across key nodes reflecting urban-rural socioeconomic gradients: urban centers (Tura and Shillong) representing bureaucratic and educational mobility, and rural clusters across West Garo Hills and South West Garo Hills characterised by cash-crop conversion (rubber, cashew, and areca nut plantations).

2. **Data Collection:** Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with traditional *Nokmas*, cash-crop smallholders, landless agricultural labourers, state civil servants, and local community leaders. In addition, key informant interviews were conducted with indigenous scholars and civil society representatives.

3. **Analytical Strategy:** Historical archival records, district gazetteers, and empirical field narratives were coded thematically to identify trends in land privatisation, gendered dynamics of asset control, and institutional mobility.

3. Key Drivers of Class Formation

3.1 Transition in Land Tenure: From Communal *A·king* to Private Holdings

The most significant material driver of class differentiation across the Garo Hills is the transition from shifting cultivation (*jhum*) across communal slopes to settled, capital-intensive cash-crop farming.

Historically, communal *A·king* land belonged to the clan (*mahari*), under the custodial stewardship of the village *Nokma*. Individual households were granted temporary usufruct rights to clear and cultivate plots under short-term *jhum* cycles. Land could not be permanently alienated, enclosed, or converted into private commercial real estate. However, the widespread adoption of rubber cashew tea and areca nut farming—pushed by state development agencies and market incentives—requires multi-year capital investment and permanent land modification. So affluent households have aggressively converted communal plots into individual private property through fencing, informal titling, and patta registration with the District Council.

Field Excerpt 1: On the Privatisation of *A·king* Land

During the interview, B. Sangma, a 57-year-old subsistence farmer from West Garo Hills, articulated that "When we cultivated jhum, no family owned the hill and plot of land in the village. The Nokma distributed the slopes every year for jhum cultivation, and every family had enough to eat, and everyone considered it the same because of daily livelihood from A.ba (jhum field). However, eighteen years ago wealthy families came to our village from town and started buying up contiguous plots to plant rubber, areca nut and cashew in our village. They brought fencing wire and secured documents from the District Council.

Now the population is growing; the common land is gone. If my daughter wants to farm today they have to work as wage labourers on areca nut and rubber plantations that used to be our clan's shared forest."

This transition has split rural communities into two distinct agrarian classes. An emerging group of plantation owners is accumulating land and capital, while a growing rural proletariat of landless or land-poor villagers depends on seasonal daily wage labour.

Case Study 1: The Commercial Conversion of *A·king* Land in Dadenggre

In a village near Gittinggre (South Garo Hills), the local *Nokma*, under pressure from rising commercial land values, granted long-term use permits for over 40 hectares of contiguous *A·king* land to a small group of educated, urban-based Garo contractors and civil servants. The land was immediately converted into an areca nut and rubber plantation. While the *Nokma* received informal compensation, non-elite village households lost access to their traditional *jhum* rotation grounds. Within a decade, six families who were formerly self-sufficient subsistence farmers were forced to become full-time agricultural day-labourers, tapping rubber trees on the very plots their ancestors had cleared communally.

Table 1: Traditional (*Jhum*) and Contemporary Privatised Agrarian Systems

Dimension	Traditional System (Jhum)	Contemporary System (Privatised)
Land Tenure	Communal (*A·king* / *Mahari*)	Individual / Private Titles & District Council Pattas
Economic Basis	Subsistence Agriculture	Cash Crops (Rubber, Areca Nut, Cashew)
Social Stratification	Low (Kinship-based egalitarianism)	High (Landowning Elite vs. Landless Wage Laborers)
Primary Capital	Communal Labor Exchange (*Rikka*)	Financial, Political, & Educational Capital

3.2 Bureaucratic Expansion and the Salaried Middle Class

Post-independence state-building, combined with the creation of Meghalaya in 1972, expanded public sector employment and administrative infrastructure across the Garo Hills. Affirmative action policies (tribal reservation quotas) enabled first- and second-generation educated Garos to enter state civil services, police departments, school administration, and public works contracting.

This institutional expansion produced a prominent urban middle and upper-middle class centred in regional nodes like Tura, and Williamnagar. Unlike traditional village elders whose authority rested on customary lineage ties and land guardianship, this urban class derives its material security and social status from fixed government salaries, formal educational credentials, state contracts, and political patronage networks.

Field Excerpt 2: The Urban-Rural Bureaucratic Divide

"In Tura, a government job is everything. If you are an MCS [Meghalaya Civil Service] officer, a PWD contractor, or a high school principal, you can build a concrete RCC house, buy vehicles, and send your children to boarding schools in Shillong or Guwahati. A village elder or Nokma might have traditional respect, but in terms of real influence and financial power, the salaried officer in town holds all the keys." —**J. Momin**, 42-year-old high school teacher, Tura

3.3 Educational Capital and Urban-Rural Divergence

Access to quality education—historically initiated by Christian missionary societies (American Baptist and Roman Catholic missions)—has evolved into a major engine of socio-economic class reproduction across the region.

1. **Urban Elites:** Affluent urban parents enroll their children in prestigious private institutions (such as St. Anthony's or St. Edmund's in Shillong, or top-tier private schools in Tura), securing competitive access to higher education, professional degrees, civil service exams, and corporate employment across India.

2. **Rural Households:** Rural youth remain dependent on poorly resourced government or aided primary schools with high teacher absenteeism and minimal infrastructure. Lacking competitive credentials, rural school leavers are largely trapped in low-yield agriculture or informal, low-wage employment.

This educational disparity reinforces a spatial class boundary across the Garo Hills, where geographic location directly conditions life chances and social mobility.

4. The Matrilineal Paradox: Gender, Power, and Capital

Garo customary law operates on a matrilineal lineage system where property—specifically the ancestral household (*nok*) and land rights—is inherited through the female line via the designated daughter (*nokna*), while clan identity (*Ma·chong*) passes exclusively from mother to child (Burling, 1963; Playfair, 1909). However, sociological analysis highlights a fundamental structural tension: matriliny does not equal matriarchy.

While women hold legal custody over property, public governance, political representation, and property management are predominantly exercised by male relatives—specifically the husband (*nokrom*) and the maternal uncles (*chra*). In the modern context of land privatization and market integration, this dynamic gives rise to what can be termed the Matrilineal Paradox.

4.1 Property Ownership vs. Managerial Control

As land transforms from a subsistence resource into commercial capital, financial transactions—such as applying for agricultural bank loans, securing District Council land titles, and negotiating plantation leases with external traders—are almost exclusively conducted by men. Consequently, female land custodians (*nokna*) often hold nominal ownership over real estate while exercising little operational control over capital allocation or revenue generation.

Field Excerpt 3: On Male Mediation of Female Property

"In custom, the land belongs to my wife and her mahari [clan]. But when we decided to clear 10 acres for a rubber plantation, it was I and my wife's chra [maternal uncle] who went to the District Council office in Tura to process the documents. It was I who negotiated with the non-tribal timber merchants and bank officers for the loan. My wife signed where we asked her to sign. That is how our custom works—the woman holds the name of the land, but the man manages the business." — **C. Marak**, 47-year-old plantation manager and Nokrom, South West Garo Hills

4.2 Class Intra-Gender Divergence Among Garo Women

The interplay between traditional matriliny and modern class formation has fragmented the experience of Garo womanhood along clear socio-economic lines. Rather than experiencing a uniform status as female property owners, Garo women are divided by class privileges:

- **Elite and Middle-Class Women:** Highly educated female professionals, state administrators, and wealthy *noknas* leverage their family capital to secure higher education, formal employment, and political leverage. They effectively navigate both formal state laws and traditional kinship structures to maintain financial autonomy.

- **Working-Class and Rural Women:** Landless rural women face compounding vulnerabilities. While theoretically protected by matrilineal inheritance, land poverty leaves them with no meaningful

assets to inherit. They bear a double burden: performing heavy, underpaid day labour on commercial plantations alongside uncompensated domestic duties.

Case Study 2: Intra-Gender Class Stratification in Tura Outskirts

A comparative examination of two Garo women in the urban periphery of Tura illustrates this class polarisation:

- **Subject A (Elite):** A 43-year-old educated *nokna* holding a Master's degree, employed as a senior officer in a government department. She inherited prime urban land from her mother, which she leased out for commercial shop rentals. She exercises direct control over her bank accounts, manages her tenants, and holds active leadership in local urban civil society organisations.

- **Subject B (Proletariat):** A 34-year-old non-*nokna* female living in a nearby informal settlement. Owning no land and lacking formal education, she works 8 hours a day as a daily wage labourer, earning ₹300 per day. Despite belonging to a matrilineal society, her daily reality is defined by severe material precarity and physical exhaustion, with no customary safety net available to support her family.

Field Excerpt 4: The Reality of the Landless Rural Woman

"Textbooks say Garo women are powerful because we inherit property. But what is there to inherit if your family has no land? I wake up at 4:00 AM, cook for my children, and go to work in someone else's areca nut bagan (garden) until sunset. My hands are cracked, my back aches, and if I fall sick for one day, my family goes hungry. Matriliny does not put food on our table when you own nothing."— **S. Sangma**, 34-year-old landless agricultural labourer, West Garo Hills

5. Emerging Social Stratification Matrix

Contemporary Garo society can be categorised into four distinct socio-economic tiers:

1. **The Political and Business Elite:** High-ranking government officials, political leaders, major civil contractors, and owners of extensive cash-crop plantation estates. They command substantial financial capital and political influence.

2. **The Salaried Middle Class:** Civil servants, school/college teachers, healthcare professionals, and small business operators residing primarily in urban centres such as Tura.

3. **Smallholder Farmers and Cash-Crop Growers:** Rural households owning modest permanent plots (rubber, cashew, pepper, areca nut) whose livelihoods remain sensitive to market price volatility and weather conditions.

4. **The Rural and Urban Proletariat:** Landless agricultural day-labourers, domestic workers, and informal wage earners who rely entirely on daily employment for subsistence.

6. Conclusion

Contemporary Garo society in Meghalaya demonstrates a complex articulation of traditional matrilineal social organisation and modern market-driven class stratification. While customary kinship bonds (*mahari*) continue to offer cultural identity and social safety networks, they coexist with expanding socio-economic inequality. The privatisation of communal land, urbanisation, unequal access to quality education, and state-mediated wealth accumulation have generated concrete class divisions. Scholars of Northeast India must look beyond static paradigms of tribal egalitarianism to engage with the dynamic material realities of class formation in the region.

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