

### IAWS North-Eastern Regional Seminar

#### Feminist Scholarship on North-East India: Retrieving and Reconstructing the Woman

Organized by the IAWS and the Departments of Political Science and History, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong  
15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> October 2007

The two day North-East seminar held on the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Oct. 2007 at the behest of the IAWS in collaboration with the Depts. of political Science and History of NEHU on the topic, **“Feminist Scholarship on North-East India: Retrieving and Reconstructing the Woman”** held at the NEHU guest house, Umshing, Shillong, was marked by a keen participation and presentation of papers by academics, NGO’S and women’s organizations from all the states of the North-East including Sikkim. The seminar was coordinated on behalf of the two departments by Prof. Manorama Sharma of the Department of History with Dr. Susmita Sen Gupta of the Political Science Department as the Co-Coordinator.

Dr. Zarina Bhatti former president of IAWS chaired the inaugural session. The Vice Chancellor of NEHU, Dr. Pramod Tandon, inaugurated the seminar and spoke at length on the phases of the women’s movement in India, and emphasizing the Indian dimensions of feminism. Prof. Manorama Sharma introduced the seminar, and this was followed by the keynote address delivered by Prof. Tilottama Misra, a nationally renowned Assamese litterateur and Professor of English, Dibrugarh University. Prof. Misra, addressed the issue of the “erasure” of the women of North East India not only in the context of writings on women produced from other parts of India, but also from their own record. It is because of this, she asserted, that seminars of the present kind were needed so that the North East could produce material on the women of the region. The inaugural programme concluded with a vote of thanks given by Dr. Susmita Sen Gupta.

The session chaired by Prof. Mignonette Momin saw the presentation of two papers, the first by Dr. Suparna Bhattacharjee on “The role of women in decision making in Arunachal Pradesh”, and the second paper was presented by Anju Borkotoky on “Women and decision making in North-East India”. In the discussions that followed various suggestions were put forth by the members who questioned the roles of women in Arunachal Pradesh asking whether they actually enjoyed decision making rights, any control over

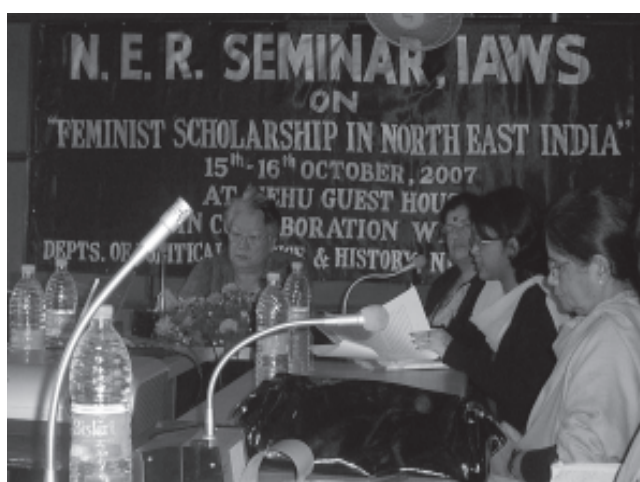
production, inspite of the rise in education. Indu Agnihotri suggested that communities must uphold the rights given by the constitution and work with the customary and traditional rights given to women. Prof. Manorama Sharma asserted the need for some changes in the customary laws that tend to suppress women and the need for women to be sensitized in this regard.

In the discussion that followed Junu Baruah and Anju Barkatoky’s paper on “Women and Decision Making in North-East India”, it was felt that the absence of strong women’s movements among the tribes such as the Tiwas and Mishings have prevented the women of these tribes from participating in political and decision making process. The plight of the Mishing women in the Majuli, the largest river island in Asia, was specially focused upon and highlighted by

the two activists, Ranjana Doley and Renumala Dutta. They felt that religious practices led to glaring discrimination among the Mishing tribes and only education can reform and improve the society as a whole.

In the Second Academic Session, chaired by Prof. A.K Baruah, Dr Salem Irene of the Department of History, Manipur University, made a presentation on “Women in Manipur- Problems and Prospects of Retrieval”, and Mrs T.Gangte Kipgen from G.P Women’s College, Imphal, Manipur, read a paper on “Kuki Women in Manipur-Women and Decision making in North East India”. It was largely felt that women were being used to start various movements, which were then being hijacked by men for political reasons, with women being pushed to the background. Another issue discussed was women’s lack of control over the market, despite their thorough participation in market activities.

The third academic session saw the presentation of three papers by Dr. Sukalpa Bhattarjee, Ms Mahua Bhattacharjee, and Ms Nizara Hazarika on the topics of “Gendered Construction of



Identity: An/other History, an/another subjectivity”, “The Silk Industry and Reconstructing the Women Weaver in Saulkuchi” and “Redefining Female Body and Female Experience” respectively. This session was chaired by Prof. T.Misra. In the discussion that followed, members highlighted the dichotomy that everything related to production is considered inferior even as it is acknowledged as the most powerful tool in Man’s hand. Several examples of women’s subjugation during the rites of ‘puberty celebration’ were discussed, and what this revealed about the cultures in question. Women’s own roles in perpetuating such rituals and practices were also discussed, and it was emphasized that women need to play an important role in their own reconstruction,

The second day began with the Fourth Academic Session, chaired by Prof. T.Ao. The first paper presented was by Anjali Daimari, lecturer in English at Guwahati University, on “Retrieving the Bodo Women”. Prof T.Misra and other participants too raised a discussion on the need for adequate protection for Bodo women when they are seduced, and whether they had the right to exercise any options in a context where the society or state took decisions on such matters. This concern was voiced by as well. Prof A.K Baruah observed that Bodo women had few options in such cases, as the village Panchayats are mostly manned by village elders who are men, leaving Bodo women little say either in matters concerning themselves, or in matters of society as a whole. Kavita Panjabi suggested that more in-depth research be conducted, based on analyses of narratives of the Bodo women, to foreground their standpoints..

Dr. Bolin Hazarika from the Department of Political Science, J.B College, Jorhat, presented a paper entitled “Parity in wage, Disparity In Opportunity: The Case of the Female Tea Garden Workers in Assam”. In the lengthy discourse that followed after the presentation Prof Zarina Bhatti wanted to firstly know if any classifications have been made on the basis of region or tribe. It was then clarified by other members present that tea garden workers come from many tribes and not known by any particular tribe alone; that these workers now call themselves the “Tea tribes” and are collectively seeking scheduled tribe status. Prof M.Sharma also stated that one needs to distinguish between responsibility and power as in a survey made in Shillong it was found that bigger purchases are still made by men and only domestic purchases are left to the women. Dr Anjali Borkotoky also observed that the head of a family in the tea communities is usually a man, and men enjoy family rations, but in the event of a man’s death, the woman loses access to the family rations for her dependents. Even the trade unions of the tea community workers are dominated by men and there are no women in these unions.

The third paper was presented by Prof. Manorama Sharma from the Department of History, NEHU, Shillong, on the topic “Expressed Realities And Embedded Truths: Where Did She Lose Herself?”. A member also wanted to know who the ‘real

woman’ is and how she can be retrieved, and if women’s stand points can be analyzed through other songs and texts as well.

In the fifth academic session Prof.T.B Subba of the Department of Anthropology, NEHU, was the chairperson and presentations were made on three topics. The first one was by Lalruatpuii on “Reconstructing The Women- A Historical Study Of Mizo Women And Rights”, another paper presented by Audry Laldinpuii on “Women and Decision Making and Representation- A Study of Two Villages in Mizoram” and the third by Dr Lucy Zehal on the topic “Anthropology- Gender and Naga Society: An Appraisal”. In the discussion that followed members suggested the importance of referring to other works done in this field and suggested the importance of reviewing the existing knowledge on the subject. Suggestions were also made on the necessity of developing a critique of the existing historiography on Mizo women, and also on the need to question why we continue to define ourselves in terms of community even today. Opinions were also expressed that one should not generalize for the larger Mizo community based on a single Mizo study, because it is the educated Christian Mizo elite women created with the coming of Christianity who are now asserting themselves, but this may not be the case for all the Mizo women.

For the third paper presented by Lucy Zelol suggestions were made on the importance of looking into the belief patterns of a society, as also on the necessity to make a comparative study between societies. Doubts were also raised on whether methods of generalization are useful in drawing up a specific picture of a particular society.

The sixth academic session, chaired by Prof. D.R.Syiemlieh, had three paper presentations. The first was by Prof. A.K Baruah, Prof. Manorama Sharma and Joplin Hek on the topic “Matriliney in Khasi Society”. A.K Baruah first explained the structures and hierarchies of matrilineal society as they exists in Khasi society, and with data he explained the near total lack of womens participation in the practical and public space. He also explained the Khasi traditional land system, and there was now a slowly emerging demand for a patriarchal system as an alternative to the matrilineal system prevalent in the Khasi society. There is therefore a challenge to matriliney and it needs to be seen now if women also have rights under matriliney, or only responsibilities without rights.

Prof. M. Momim’s presentation on the “Lived Reality of Garo Women”, was framed by her as a “preliminary note”, while the third paper presented by Dr Amana Passah was on “Khasi - Jaintia Women In Meghalaya – Roles In Decision Making: Some Insight”. In the discussions that followed, doubts on matriliney were discussed and clarified. Dr Streamlet Dkhar also suggested that questions of inheritance and lineage must not be confused in the Khasi Matrilineal Society, and stated that we must also take note of the poor ‘Khaduh’ (the youngest daughter who inherits the largest share of the property and all the familial

responsibilities) not just the rich 'Khaduh' in the urban areas. In his clarification Prof. Baruah stated that educated 'Khaduhs' are now asserting their rights as owners of property and not merely as custodians of society. Aparna Mahanta appreciated M.Momin's approach assessment of the status of Garo woman in terms of their relation to land, and also highlighted that the need to address the range of perceptions of women in their variance across the plains Garos, the Garos living in the hills, and the urban educated Garos.

The sixth session ended with the chairperson Prof. David Syiemlieh commenting on the presentation by making a few comments on the Land Reforms Commission of 1970 which he said needs to be updated as in its present form may not give a proper and realistic position of the present Khasi society of 2007.

The last session held after the tea break, was an Open Season chaired by Prof.Indu Agnihotri. Prof. T.B Subba spoke on society in Sikkim in relation to its people, customs, traditions and culture. A short paper was also presented by Suryasikha Pathak on "Weavers and Witches- Reconstruction of the Bodo

Women". The session was later thrown open for all the members to interact. A participant raised the issue of the necessity of more work on Muslim women in the North East Region, which he felt was not reflected in the Seminar. Members responded pointing out that women were not being studied as belonging to different religious communities, as in the North-East this divide was not yet a very significant divide.

The two day seminar ended with the Valedictory session which was chaired by Aparna Mahanta, Vice -President , IAWS. After the Rapporteur - in - Chief, Ms. Moushumi Dey presented a full report of the two day proceedings. Aparna Mahanta appreciated the organizers' efforts and co-operation in making it possible for the IAWS to hold its very first regional seminar in the North-East. She concluded asserting that the strong participation of both men and women in the two day seminar was a remarkable achievement for Women's Studies.

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