

Men, Women, and Cultural Benchmarks: Gender Roles and Social Organization of The Khasi and Kerala Cultures

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In 2012, Jyoti Singh Pandey, a 23-year-old physiotherapy intern living in Munirka, Delhi, was brutally raped and beaten on a private bus. All six of the men present, one being the driver of the bus, participated in the assault. She died fifteen days later.¹ I found this story on the internet in approximately 30 seconds; I typed in the phrase “violence against women in India” and was instantly given 30,600,000 results to choose from. While stories of violence in any country are not uncommon, India experiences a particularly high rate of gender-based violence. But when studying the origins of this violence, it’s important to note that these stories don’t originate from every corner of the country; in fact, there are quite a few Indian cultures that are thought to be more egalitarian, and even gender equal, in nature.

Heide Goettner-Abendroth, a German philosopher and researcher, specializes in studying matriarchal societies across the globe. Her main claim lies in the idea that matriarchies are synonymous with egalitarian societies. Because women naturally lead with nurturing and harmonious characteristics in these cultures, everyone in the society is considered equal; violence projected from one gender onto another is unheard of.² The Khasi tribe of Northeast India and Kerala of South India are supposed matriarchies that, according to Goettner-Abendroth’s claim, are more egalitarian in nature. Some scholars even argue these societies could hold the answer to achieving gender equality in such an overwhelmingly patriarchal country. However, these apparently matriarchal societies don’t appear to be egalitarian in the way Goettner-Abendroth suggests. The matrilineality and matrifocality present in Kerala, while providing women with certain economic and

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cultural rights within the home, restrict women's freedom just as much as the Indian patriarchy. Furthermore, gender roles within the Khasi tribe appear to favor women over men and in turn limit men's rights. While the word "matriarchy" is disputed by scholars, these matrilineal, matrifocal, and matrilocal models of organization don't lend themselves to the upholding of egalitarian ideals. They can actually create as much gender inequity as the Indian patriarchy. To demonstrate this, I will present conflicting definitions of "matriarchy" to establish that that the words "matriarchy" and "equality" are not necessarily synonymous. I will then describe how characteristics of masculinity and femininity in patriarchal India lead to violence against women, comparing and contrasting these gender roles to those present in the Khasi and Kerala cultures. The analysis of these cultures will consist of anthropological and historical data that depict how their matrilineal, matrifocal, and matrilocal systems fail to promote gender equality.

Conflicting Definitions of "Matriarchy"

Calling the Khasi tribe and Kerala society "matriarchies" is a problem on its own. Unlike the word "patriarchy," which most dictionaries would define as a system of organization in which men hold a large majority of the political, economic, and social power, a matriarchy is more difficult to define. It could be defined as a parallel to patriarchy, simply replacing the word "men" with "women" in the above definition. But scholars don't agree on many pieces of this definition and have attempted to add and subtract features in order to apply it to different societies that aren't patriarchies, yet also aren't of the complete opposite extreme. Heide Goettner-Abendroth, in her book *Matriarchal Societies: Studies on Indigenous Cultures across the Globe* published in 2012, claims matriarchies are present when "mothers are at the center of society, as manifested by matrilineality and by mothers' power of economic distribution," essentially stating that inheritance passes through women and they hold most, if not all, economic power. But her definition isn't complete without the most essential part: "gender equality." If there is no presence of gender equality then, in her opinion, it can't be a matriarchy.³

On the other hand, Cynthia Eller, a professor of religion from Montclair State University, claims that there is no real evidence of a matriarchy having ever existed anywhere in the world. She argues that matriarchies should be considered a myth, and those who describe them as “story tellers.” Eller believes that telling “stories” of matriarchies as if they are real is detrimental to the modern feminist movement because they “are not capable of telling us whether or how we might put an end to sexism.” If women use historical matriarchies as a “profoundly empowering” foundation for eventually achieving equality, they are basing their hope for the future on a fake past.⁴ Eller’s idea is not uncommon; many scholars have claimed that matriarchies are nothing but a myth. It’s these scholars who criticize women like Goettner-Abendroth for using her feminist activism to cloud her research rather than create informed theses based on what the facts tell her. In fact, while she claims that the Khasi tribe is a matriarchy exhibiting gender equality, others argue the tribe is quite gender biased. But even Eller has collected criticism of her own. Max Dashu, a feminist historian with expertise in female iconography and archaeology, is among many scholars who claim that Eller built a “straw man” argument in which she conveniently ignored evidence of well-researched societies like the Khasi where women do hold a significant amount of power.⁵

Finally, Peggy Reeves Sanday, a professor of anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, attempts to broaden the definition of matriarchy rather than limit or eradicate it. She claims that a matriarchy has nothing to do with who is literally in charge, but rather with how the sexes are defined in religion and in gender roles. Matriarchies can be defined by social relationships in which women hold more influence than men, but not necessarily political or economic power.⁶ This definition tends to focus more on the social aspect of a society and, although scholars don’t criticize it heavily, is also much too vague to decide whether a society is or is not a matriarchy.

It’s clear from these definitions and their respective critiques that the definition of “matriarchy” is dependent on the eye of the beholder. Sanday’s definition differs greatly from Goettner-Abendroth’s, and

Eller attempts to discredit both. Because of this controversy, this paper will refrain from naming either the Khasi or Kerala societies “matriarchies.” Rather, it will focus on their actual social organization in relation to gender roles and gender equity without attaching either society to potentially contested vocabulary.

Although I will not label either society as a matriarchy, other vocabulary related to matriarchies can help us analyze these cultures. The word “matrifocal” implies a society in which women are the head of the family and household. “Matrilocal” refers to a system in which, after marriage, the husband moves in to his wife’s home with her family. “Matrilineal” describes a system of inheritance in which descent and kinship are traced through the female. Finally, “egalitarian” is the principle that all people are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities.

Violence and Masculinity

When exploring these societies, it’s essential to understand the culture that surrounds them. There are many factors that have contributed to gender-based violence in India, but a driving force lies in the hegemonic masculine and feminine stereotypes ingrained into both men and women at a young age. Hegemonic masculinity “demand[s] conformity to certain normative characteristics, for example toughness and violence.”⁷ In this way, in order for a man to truly be a “man,” he must subscribe to certain social norms to reach a “cultural benchmark against which all males implicitly measure their gender legitimacy.”⁸ For example, if a man isn’t able to exhibit toughness and violence in the same way as his peers, then he might not be accepted as a “man” because he doesn’t have characteristics associated with that specific “benchmark.”

In India, a historical benchmark lies in the image of the warrior, a cross-cultural symbol of strength and power, bearing weapons and fighting heroic battles for a greater cause. This heroic, warrior image is often inherent in young men who are particularly “drawn to the mythic ideal of the hero, or heroic band of brothers where there is triumph against the odds.” The warrior itself implies an attachment to wartime, where violence is necessary for survival.⁹ But what implications does

this “benchmark” have in modern society where, for most young men in India, fighting in wars isn’t relevant anymore?

The warrior, despite its literal irrelevance to modern day society, seems to have a direct correlation to values associated with nationalism and masculinity today. At its core, nationalism implies an “us vs. them” mindset that parallels how masculinity is constructed. The values of domination and competition that evolve from nationalism, rooted in the idea that one nation-state is superior and in competition with other nations, manifests into masculinity and allows men to associate their masculinity with superiority and power. Likewise, the warrior image implies “martial values” such as strength, prowess, and readiness to inflict pain.¹⁰ It’s quite possible this warrior image, coupled with nationalistic values, has translated into violence against women. But how does a supposedly heroic symbol lead to violence against women as opposed to other men, like in wartime? Hegemonic masculinity in India cannot be completely understood without associating its complement, femininity, with inferiority.

The main connection between women and inferiority lies in the idea of “purity.” Starting from a young age, women are seen as “pure” and “innocent,” therefore implying that in order to maintain this innocence, a certain measure of protection is required.¹¹ Once men are given the role to protect women, the warrior role, positions of inferiority and superiority follow. But this idea seems contradictory to previous statements; it makes little sense to be physically violent toward a person one is meant to protect. In order for this concept to make sense, it’s important to separate innocence of the woman and the woman herself. The man’s job, in this form of “heroic” masculinity, is to protect the woman’s *purity* until she is able to reproduce, not to protect her. In this sense she is more of a vessel to further the man’s legacy in his children.¹² Once the purity surrounding femininity causes women to be seen this way, violence becomes a tool to limit her freedom and objectify her further. The power imbalance between femininity and masculinity, as propelled by nationalism, warrior symbols, and values of purity and innocence, serves as a large cause for violence against women in India.

Origins of Gender Roles

Unlike sex, gender isn't a universal truth. Although some argue that sex isn't binary either, gender is a more fluid concept. While sex is usually determined at birth, gender roles are carefully constructed, influenced, and defined by culture over the course of one's life. Nancy Bonvillian, a professor of anthropology and linguistics at Bard University, described the construction of gender elegantly: "Females and males are born, but women and men are products of enculturation."¹³

When a baby is born, the first step is to assign a biological marker: boy or girl? Following this marker is where forming a gender role begins. With the names "boy" and "girl" come many associations, such as colors, baby names, and clothing. The baby's room, for example, typically exemplifies a specific color palette that relates to a girl or a boy—in America the colors pink and blue pertain to girls and boys respectively. While colors on their own don't cause inequalities between genders, they do cause an initial separation that slowly increases.¹⁴ It's the specific definitions of "masculinity" and "femininity" in an institution that eventually defines inequality.

Childhood is an extremely important developmental stage in the creation of gender roles. How parents treat their children affects how children view themselves. Because "parenting is gendered, with different expectations for mothers and for fathers," children grow up understanding there is a difference between being a boy and being a girl. If mothers normally work in the home while fathers are paid as high-level bosses, children associate women with the home and men with leadership and power.¹⁵ These differences manifest in the toys children grow up with, such as dolls, which suggest motherly instincts, and action figures, which suggest strength and often violence.

The following studies will attempt to understand gender roles in the Kerala and Khasi societies by analyzing how gender is constructed within each system; gender roles provide an insight into how men and women view themselves and each other, which is a main indicator of where inequality originates within a society. When looking at the con-

struction of gender in a general context, a separation between men and women as they grow up is visible through almost any culture. But how could gender roles be different in a matrilineal, matrifocal, and matrilocal system? In order to analyze these two cultures from the lens of gender roles, I provide historical context of the Kerala and Khasi cultures coupled with specific characteristics of each gender found from anthropological studies, in addition to interviews I conducted with members of the Kerala society.

Kerala: Matrilineal to Patrilineal

Kerala, a state located on the Malabar Coast in southwest India, has historically been praised for its matrilineal and matrifocal system that has supposedly led to higher education rates and rights for women. In an article in *Hinduism Today*, Choodie Shivaram claims that in Kerala women were “educated, respected,” and were able to move “about without fear or censure, participated occupationally wherever they wished, and were the major force leading Kerala to become India’s first near-100% literate state.”¹⁶ But, as the case study of Kerala will demonstrate, women’s rights in the state are much more complicated than this; their matrilineality and matrifocality don’t necessarily give women the equal rights Shivaram suggests they have, yet at the same time their system of organization serves its own important purpose.

Kerala itself is not matrifocal or matrilineal as a whole; the state contains multiple cultures. The Nairs are the most well-known people who practice this type of organization. Their matrilineality and matrifocality influence how gender is viewed in the society. For one, because inheritance runs through women, they have economic ownership over all property.¹⁷ This gives women a certain amount of financial protection they aren’t afforded in a patrilineal system, which carries its own implications that will be explained later.

In addition, children belong to the mother and her family, and they inherit her last name over the father. In this way, daughters are more valued because they are the ones who continue the family legacy. Unlike gender roles in much of patrilineal India where women are meant

to reproduce to continue the man's legacy, women reproduce to continue their own legacy; birthing a girl is valuable for more than just her potential reproductive future. In fact, in the beginning of the Nairs' matrilineal system, women used their husbands for their biological functions like women were used in patrilineal India—"It was not unusual for a woman, once she had two or three daughters[...]to send her husband on his way."¹⁸ While it's unclear whether this statement implies informal or formal divorce, the act itself of a woman using a man solely for his reproductive abilities expresses not only a reversal of values present in patriarchal India, but also shows how daughters are essential for the system to continue and are therefore highly valued.

Furthermore, the Nairs are organized in a matrilineal system where, after marriage, the husband moves into his wife's house.¹⁹ This is not only rare in matrilineal systems, but it is important to understand when considering domestic violence. Because the man moves into the woman's house, typically with much of her extended family, her family affords her a certain amount of protection and familiarity. Although there are certainly superior masculine and inferior feminine roles at play, it's possible that literal living conditions affect this as well. With this logic, violence against a woman would be more difficult for the man to carry out even if he wanted to. Finally, the matrifocal system allows women to be center of the household. They care for children and make decisions for the family, which in early Nair society meant they also made many of the political decisions through their husbands.²⁰

All of these characteristics of the matrilineal, matrilineal, and matrifocal system have afforded women a certain amount of importance and financial protection that gives them a leg up from the rest of patriarchal India when looking at gender equality. They are given financial security through property rights, ownership of their legacy and therefore reproductive health, and physical protection from possible domestic violence.

However, unlike what Goettner-Abendroth would suggest at this point, this system doesn't lend itself completely to egalitarian values. There are two possible reasons why gender inequity is increasing in

Kerala; first, the matrilineal and matrifocal system seems to limit women's freedom despite the protection the system provides; and second, as of the late 19th century, reforms dissolving the matrilineal system have pushed Kerala towards more patriarchal values that have led to increased violence.

For this paper, I conducted two interviews of women who grew up in Kerala under the Nairs' matrilineal system in order to properly understand how gender roles were defined starting from early childhood. As explained above, a large part of constructing gender revolves around the clothes, toys, coming of age rituals, and relationships engrained in childhood. Geetha Varma, my aunt, is a 48-year-old woman currently residing in California, but who grew up in Kerala from 1967 to 1990. She says that the matrilineal and matrifocal system gave women "a lot more importance in the system than actual power." She grew up in her mother's home, and although her mother's side was more important, "men still had more authority and decision making power." The matrifocality didn't seem to extend beyond raising children. However, the girls inherited land in order to be "financially protected." She explained further that even though women couldn't work due to the large role they played in maintaining the home, they were "protected" through the matrilineal system.²¹ It's here where suspicion about the true nature of Kerala's matrilineal system arose, because the word "protection" seems to be a common theme when describing the role of women in India. Hegemonic masculinity and its feminine correlate depended on men protecting the purity of women and therefore limited their freedom. In Kerala the matrilineal system protected women financially by allowing them to own property, slightly compensating for the fact that they couldn't earn salaries while also giving them an overwhelmingly large importance in the house. The matrifocal system might give women power in their home and give girls a certain value, but it also limited their freedom to pursue other professions. The matrilineal system seems to make up for this limitation by giving women financial protection through land ownership, but falls short of giving women true gender equality.

Likewise, while the matrilineal system restricted women from leaving the house due to economic ties, women were also limited to the home due to cultural values ingrained in them as young girls. “Girls couldn’t leave the house much,” Mrs. Varma claimed, “and there weren’t too many social events.” Growing up, there was one main coming of age ritual for girls when they hit puberty. The ceremony lasted a few days and, as Mrs. Varma recollects, it was probably originally intended to let people know that the girl was ready for marriage. “My grandmother got married at 15,” she stated. The coming of age ceremony for boys was much different, not focused on their reproductive future but rather on religious instruction. They had what was known as a thread ceremony, usually done between the ages of 10 and 15, which served as a spiritual transaction that allowed the young boy to eventually become a priest if he chose that particular path. While only boys of the Brahmin class could become priests, this ceremony wasn’t exclusive to them and served as a metaphorical passage into spiritual knowledge. Girls, on the other hand, were not afforded the same choice to pursue priesthood.²² The polarity between these rituals depicts an inequality between gender roles growing up that eventually stunts gender equality in the society; girls, despite their importance to the system, were still culturally favored for their reproductive abilities while boys were given leadership roles in religion and governing. Because girls were rarely let out in public, the home became a symbol of a woman’s place. Bhadramani Thampal, my 70-year-old great aunt currently residing in Kerala, stated that her mother was “only a house worker” and her father visited “once a month” to provide for the family.²³ While Kerala’s social organization lends itself to protect women financially and from abuse, their gender roles are far from allowing women to “[participate] occupationally wherever they wish” as *Hinduism Today* initially claimed.²⁴

However, while Kerala’s matrilineal, matrifocal, and matrilineal society has restricted women’s freedom, their system of social organization in the 21st century is not matrilineal. Kerala’s transition from a matrilineal to a patrilineal society has also been detrimental to women’s rights; the state has experienced domestic violence due to a heightened presence of Christian influence and nationalism initiated from British imperialism in the late 19th century. With the help of Christian missionaries and a nationalist movement, the matrilineal system was increasingly

critiqued for the inferior roles it gave to men over women's sexuality. The small, nuclear family began to win out as reformers worried that the large, joint family in the wife's name would prevent a man from following his "natural" instincts towards his wife and children."²⁵ These "natural" instincts, as evident in hegemonic masculinity in the rest of India, most likely refer to the "natural" dominance and strength a man has over his family—though this dominance isn't as "natural" as reformers claim, as seen by the complicated and careful construction of the masculine gender role described previously. This social reform had economic implications as the matrilineal system began to die out, giving a man economic as well as social dominance over his family. In 1921 the Cochin Christian Succession Law was passed that legally restricted daughters from inheriting property.²⁶ These reforms have a few important implications about the roles of men and women. First, remember that femininity in Kerala didn't differ much from the rest of India; women were still considered to be in need of constant protection and were therefore restricted to the home. The matrilineal and matrilocal system was used to protect women in this manner, allowing them to live with their extended family and inherit land. When the matrilineal system dissolved and nuclear families became more common, men seemed to adopt the role previously held by the system: protecting women and keeping them in their homes.

The matrifocal, matrilocal, and matrilineal system limits women's freedom to pursue other professions, and 19th century reforms integrated patriarchal values into the state. Neither the matrilineal system or the reforms to alter it have been able to successfully address gender inequity in India. But it's important to remember that Kerala's matrilineal, matrifocal, and matrilocal system isn't without a function. Within a patriarchal country, this local system is able to protect women of Kerala and keep them financially stable. Although they still have a long way to go before being able to truthfully own the word egalitarian, the Nairs' system of social organization has served a practical purpose that shouldn't be belittled or go unnoticed. As long as the system serves its purpose for the people of the society, there is no need for criticism just because the culture is slightly different than our own. The place for criticism lies in claiming the culture is egalitarian; while Kerala's

matrilineal, matrifocal, and matrilineal system seems to help women in certain ways, it assumes that women are in need of protection and it sets limitations on their freedom, which isn't that different from the rest of patriarchal India.

Khasi: Conflicting Depictions of Gender Roles

As with the case of Kerala, scholars studying the Khasi tribe of North-east India don't agree on the implications of their matrilineal system. Goettner-Abendroth created her own case study on the Khasi tribe under her claim that matriarchal societies were egalitarian; however, the following section will address the problematic nature of this claim. This controversy lies in the power imbalance between men and women; some scholars claim the Khasi's matrifocal system gives men an inferior status compared to women, while others claim that the harmonious nature of women's rule has led to increased gender equity. Understanding these claims is essential to understanding nature of gender roles in the Khasi tribe.

Goettner-Abendroth depicts Khasi women using masculine adjectives, which suggests they don't follow the feminine gender roles present in patriarchal India. She writes how "they are still described as being as strong and muscular as the men." Unlike Kerala where women are still seen as in need of protection, Khasi women were physically strong, almost like warriors.²⁷ With this warrior image, it's possible that women assumed the masculine image present in patrilineal India.

According to Goettner-Abendroth, Khasi women are "head of the clan" and lead without any army or police system, which also brings up questions about Khasi women's gender roles as compared to patrilineal India.²⁸ As discussed with Kerala, one major association of femininity in India is their need for protection. Goettner-Abendroth described the Khasi women as having authority over men much like mothers over their children.²⁹ Because a mother's main role is to protect her child, this idea seems to contain its own underlying theme of protection. Khasi women in Goettner-Abendroth's eyes are a toned down version of men in patrilineal India; they are apparently able to have authority without

exhibiting physical violence. With this in mind it would be reasonable to draw a conclusion that the Khasi tribe are almost egalitarian in nature, and the organization of women leading through peace and harmony would give both men and women rights. But controversies around the Khasi question the sustainability of this claim.

Many scholars have described men's role in the Khasi culture as inferior, as if they "hold roles that seem to mirror those of women in patriarchal societies." Husbands are thought to have "no social roles deemed important," which is very different from Goettner-Abendroth's claim that women rule society like a mother over a child.³⁰ But if women assume a power position in India, men could assume the inferior role and thus have limitations set on their freedom. This is especially evident in the recent "men's rights" movement that has swept Meghalaya, the state in which the Khasi tribe resides.

The Meghalaya Succession to Self Acquired Property Act was passed in 1984, giving both genders equal inheritance rights. The law was passed by an all-male legislation in the state of Meghalaya because women have no political power. While this might lead an outsider to assume that this male dominance over politics would represent a patriarchy, in the Khasi tribe men assumed political power under the guidance of women, once again alluding to the idea that women were equivalent to mothers "ruling" over their children. In this case, men lobbied for their rights and, unlike in Kerala when all inheritance rights were taken from women, this law gave equal rights to both genders.³¹ This move for equality was not due to matrilineality but rather in spite of it—change was prompted by inequalities set forth by the matrilineal system. Keith Pariat, leader of the movement, claims that "Khasi men have become so accustomed to a life of no responsibility that they have no drive left and feel 'useless' [...] they have been emasculated, stripped of all power, authority, status and function, save procreation." Pariat is claiming that men's main role in this society is procreation, and he implies that they deserve power and authority.³² It's unclear whether he believes men should have all power and authority, but those two traits are ones evident in characteristics of hegemonic masculinity present in the rest of patriarchal India. These protests ultimately ask two conflict-

ing questions about the nature of women's rule in the Khasi tribe: 1. Is the matrilineal and matrifocal system creating gender roles that are suppressing men? 2. Is the men's rights legislation influenced by trends entering in from patriarchal India rather a real problem of gender inequality among the Khasi?

These questions can't be definitively answered. While statistics show that gender disparity through an economic lens in Meghalaya is fairly minimal, the validity of the men's rights movement could make sense under the gender roles presented above in where women assume the protective role over men and men are used primarily used for reproductive purposes. Furthermore, the property act of 1984 suggests that males hold all political power because they were able to pass it with an all male legislative body. This begs the question: if they've had political power all along and have been suppressed, why wait to challenge the system until 1984? As evident in both Pariat's claims against women and Goettner-Abendroth's depiction of them, it's quite possible that the cultural power women had over men suppressed men's ability to protest for their rights until recently.

But it's also quite possible that the legislation was influenced heavily by patriarchal India. The surrounding cultures give men physical and cultural authority, which is what the Khasi men claim they want. This connection shouldn't go unnoticed. But it seems equally probable that the local Khasi system oppresses men. Goettner-Abendroth suggests the Khasi tribe is egalitarian, yet the way she depicts them in relation to claims brought out during the men's rights movement suggests that there could exist an equal and opposite inequality to that of patriarchal India.

Conclusion

Kerala and Khasi seem to share a common thread: patriarchal ideals are seeping into the matrilineal system. While the reasoning for the ideals differ, it's clear the matrilineal system isn't surviving in India. But the matrilineal system isn't a victim to the patriarchy; it isn't in need of saving by feminists looking for an answer to gender inequity. The Ker-

ala and Khasi models of organization shouldn't be preserved for the purpose of increasing gender equality, as they don't lend themselves to egalitarian ideals. In Kerala, the matrilineal system protected women yet also didn't lead to complete equality. Therefore, when the system dissolved, women's rights fell even further. In Khasi, the matrilineal system appeared to lead to increased gender equity yet recently the introduction of a men's rights movement and changed legislation reflects the possibility of men being suppressed by women. Kerala presents a system that attempts to improve life for women without changing their gender roles or offering them increased freedom, which means that when the system evolves, women lose more and more rights. The Khasi system seems to slightly reverse gender roles and continue to suppress in other ways. They don't appear to offer a solution to achieving gender equality that can be used in other cultures.

I should also like to point out that I am not a part of the Khasi or Kerala societies; in fact, I am not even an Indian citizen. As an American basing my feminist beliefs on American values, I am biased in my understanding of gender equality. Kerala's matrilineal and matrilocality systems do serve a purpose in their society: protecting women financially and physically. My judgments of this society remain originate in the Western view that in order for women to have equal rights they must be able to choose their own path and not be tied to their homes. In Kerala, until patriarchal systems disrupted the matrilineality and matrilocality, women were financially and physically safe. In an overwhelmingly patriarchal country, the existence of this matrilineal system served an important purpose and, compared to the rest of the country, did give women "equality" in the sense that they had just as much power over their home and children as their husbands.

Therefore, through the lens of an anthropologist, my bias shouldn't lead to a critique of the culture merely because it doesn't match up with Western feminist views of gender equality. But through the lens of an advocate of gender equality, criticism is necessary to grow closer to an egalitarian society. Cynthia Eller claimed that telling stories of "matriarchies" as if they were real is detrimental to the feminist movement because feminists could base their hopes for the future on a fake

model. As seen by these case studies, looking to Kerala and Khasi as a solution is equally detrimental. The matrilineal, matrifocal, and matri-local systems give women a certain amount of power in some ways; however, they fail to change the foundation of gender roles in order to give both men and women equality. Goettner-Abendroth believes egalitarian societies exist, but I would argue that gender equality worth striving for has yet to exist in a society. As long as one gender is seen as inferior to another, equality will remain a dream. ●

Notes

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22. Ibid.
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