

# Women at the Crossroads of Tradition and Change: Gendered Power and Agency in Biате Village Community of Northeast India

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**Abstract:** *This study investigates the mechanisms of gendered power and agency within the Biате society of Northeast India, positioning Biате women at the crossroads of tradition and social transformation. Although the community is frequently characterised as culturally unified and comparatively egalitarian, empirical realities disclose enduring gender hierarchies rooted in customary institutions, religious observances, and economic arrangements. Utilising historical analysis, ethnography, and feminist theory, this study emphasises routine social practices including subsistence labour, weaving, oral tradition, caregiving, and religious involvement as key arenas for the maintenance of cultural continuity. This paper reframes agency, not solely as open resistance, but as a strategy of negotiation and relational engagement enacted within patriarchal contexts. Additionally, it assesses the impact of Christianity, educational attainment, and participation in the modern economy on the evolution of gender roles, revealing both emergent opportunities and persistent systemic limitations. By privileging lived experiences, this study engages broader discourses on gender, power, and indigeneity in Northeast India and interrogates longstanding institutional biases that perpetuate the marginalisation of women's contributions in academic research and communal leadership.*

**Keywords:** Biате women, Gendered power, Negotiated agency, Invisible labour, Customary institutions, Cultural continuity, Northeast India.

## INTRODUCTION

Research concerning indigenous communities in Northeast India has traditionally emphasised subjects such as migration, political organisation, customary institutions, and clan structures. Within this body of literature, the daily experiences and significant roles of women have often been comparatively underrepresented (Sharma, 2017). Scholarship on the Biате community reflects similar tendencies, with primary attention given to narratives of origin, clan formation, and formal social institutions, while the roles and contributions of women are frequently overlooked or regarded as peripheral (Lalsim, 2012; Pakem, 1980). This omission is not indicative of women's disengagement from social processes; rather, it highlights research paradigms that prioritise formal authority and public institutions over domestic labour and cultural transmission. As Lerner (1986) observed, gender inequities are historically entrenched within social structures that influence both social interactions and knowledge production practices.

The Biates constitute part of the wider Chin–Kuki–Mizo cultural group and reside across multiple states in Northeast India, including Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, and Manipur (Ngamlai, 2014). Although Biате society is frequently portrayed as relatively egalitarian when compared to the caste-based societies of the plains, such representations may obscure the existence of gendered patterns that shape women's involvement in economic activities, family life, religious observance, and community decision-making (Mukhopadhyay, 2016). Biате women play a central role through their engagement in agricultural production, household organisation, and the safeguarding of oral traditions, such as folktales and lullabies, which serve to transmit communal values and collective memory across generations (Deka, 2013; Kharmawphlang, 2017; Nampui, 2022). These practices underline the crucial role that women play in ensuring cultural continuity and social cohesion.

Nonetheless, women's positions are subject to structural limitations that are rooted in customary and religious institutions. Normative practices concerning inheritance, resource access, and leadership persistently affect women's participation in public decision-making (Pakem, 1980; Ngamlai, 2014). Societal shifts, including the proliferation of Christianity, broader educational prospects, and increasing involvement in wage labour, have contributed to evolving social roles and expectations. Despite these changes, enduring gendered power structures continue to

shape social reality. Against this backdrop, this study explores the operation of gendered power in Biata society and examines the ways in which women negotiate these dynamics in daily life. By focusing on lived experiences, this research aims to contribute to wider debates on gender, power, and indigenous communities in Northeast India.

## METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative methodology to investigate the roles, authority, and daily social practices of women in Biata society, located in Northeast India, using both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were gathered through field observations, oral narratives, informal interviews, and visual documentation conducted during visits to selected Biata villages, such as Thingdol, Mualsei, Old Sangbar, Saipung, Fiangpui, Thuruk, and Lengpui. These visits focused on customary traditions, household structures, religious activities, everyday labour, and communal interactions. Additionally, the study incorporates documentary and archival materials, including the Biata Customary Law handbook acquired from the N.C. Hills Autonomous Council; archival images depicting Biata women's material culture, such as handcrafted ornaments like Bangle, sourced from the District Museum of Haflong; and historical documentation found at the Biateram Presbyterian Mission House in Fiangpui. The analysis is further substantiated by secondary sources consisting of scholarly publications, census data, missionary accounts, and academic literature pertaining to the Biata society, Northeast India, and gender dynamics.

### Gendered Social Organization and the Architecture of Power

The social organisation of Biata society can be characterised as a structured system wherein authority is distributed spatially, symbolically, and relationally. Power is exercised not only through formal rules but also via daily practices that determine legitimate participation, representation, and voice in communal affairs. Institutional power is vested in village councils, clan gatherings, and customary adjudicatory bodies, where established norms regarding seniority, ritualised discourse, and regulated involvement guide governance processes. Historically, leadership within these forums has been linked to masculine status, encapsulating a broader cultural belief that associates public authority with male representation (Pakem, 1980; Lalsim, 2013). Consequently, formal decision-making entities are predominantly male, despite women's substantial contributions to community sustenance.

At the everyday level, gender norms shape women's visibility, movement, and engagement in the communal sphere. Female participation in agriculture, domestic management, and kinship maintenance remains critical to social continuity but is typically regarded as routine responsibility rather than a source of recognised authority (Ngamlai, 2014). Family decision making often involves consultation and negotiation; nevertheless, men are commonly seen as the official spokespersons of the household in public matters, thereby extending their symbolic authority from domestic settings to broader governance structures.

Despite these limitations, women exert influence through kinship networks, moral guidance, and daily

negotiations. These forms of relational agency enable them to affect social outcomes, even without formal authority (Lalsim, 2013). Thus, the gendered dynamics of Biata society illustrate a stratified power structure: institutional authority remains largely masculinised, while women's influence is enacted mainly through informal and relational mechanisms (Ngamlai, 2014).

### Women in Biata Folktales and Oral Traditions

Folktales and oral narratives serve as significant cultural repositories for understanding gender dynamics within Biata society. Primarily transmitted by women through lullabies, agricultural songs, and domestic storytelling, these oral traditions safeguard communal memory and convey moral values across generations, thus compensating for the limited availability of written documentation. These narratives often portray gender roles in patterned ways: women are generally depicted as nurturing, self-sacrificing, and morally steadfast, whereas men are typically associated with leadership and authority (Lalsim, 2012; Pakem, 1980). Such representational patterns are evident in well-known folktales such as Urnai Inikahei (The Two Sisters), Kulzopa neh Zolchongi, and Nunvangi neh Rangsun, wherein women's labour and emotional resilience ensure familial survival during adversity, while male authority remains largely unchallenged (Nampui, 2022). Agricultural myths involving Fapite (the paddy goddess) further establish symbolic connections between women and fertility, sustenance, and ecological harmony, thereby reinforcing their perceptions as nurturers and reproducers (Mukhopadhyay, 2016). A gender-sensitive analysis of these oral traditions reveals that while such narratives preserve cultural memory, they also perpetuate societal expectations regarding femininity. Moreover, the act of storytelling positions women not only as tradition-bearers but also as active agents in shaping and negotiating social meanings within Biata society (Nampui, 2025).

### Cultural Change, Religion, and the Politics of Respectability

Historically, traditional attire among the Biates has served as a tangible indicator of gender, age, marital status, and moral propriety. Women's garments, most notably handwoven fabrics, wrap-around skirts, and shawls, are intimately associated with domestic production, ritual activities, and the community's aesthetic values. Weaving was more than an economic pursuit; it functioned as a gendered cultural tradition through which women transmitted skills, clan affiliations, and symbolic meanings across generations (Lalsim, 2012). The introduction and expansion of Christianity, along with missionary influence and formal education, progressively transformed these customs. Missionaries advocated standards of modesty rooted in Victorian Christian morality, promoting stitched blouses, longer garments, and more regularised styles of dress befitting church attendance and institutional settings (Thiaite, 2005; Pakem, 1980). As Christian organisations proliferated, expectations regarding modesty, discipline, and public decorum began to shape women's appearances and behaviours. Educated Biata women, especially those engaged in professions such as teaching, church service, and salaried employment, were increasingly expected to exemplify these virtues, making attire a visible symbol of moral standing and social respectability (Mukhopadhyay,

2016; Lerner, 1986).

These sartorial developments coincided with broader transformations in the religious structure of Biaste society. Preceding the spread of Christianity, ritual authority belonged mainly to male ritual specialists, clan elders, and heads of households; women primarily contributed through preparatory and supportive roles, such as brewing rice beer, preparing ritual foods, and observing domestic taboos (Lalsim, 1995; Ngamlai, 2023). Christianity's influence led to the replacement of clan-based ritual leadership with formal church institutions grounded in scripture, literacy, and organisational structures. While women accessed new participatory roles through fellowships, prayer groups, Sunday schools, and charitable work, formal positions of authority within church hierarchies remained largely under male control (Thiaite, 2005; Connell, 1995; Deka, 2013). As these changes progressed, traditional attire became increasingly reserved for festivals, cultural events, and ceremonial functions, whereas everyday clothing began to reflect wider regional and urban influences. This evolution does not signify the erosion of tradition; rather, it marks a shift in cultural meaning, with traditional textiles continuing to represent the Biaste identity and heritage (Mukhopadhyay, 2016; Lerner, 1986).

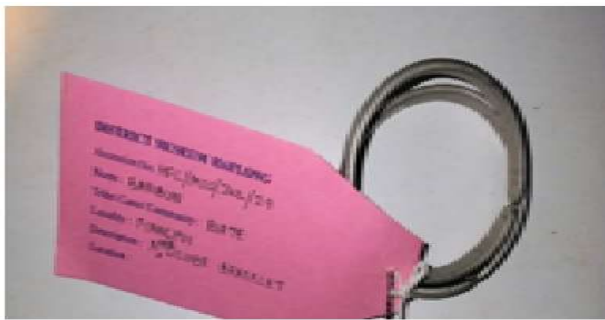


Figure 1: Left- Traditional Biaste bangle (Banbun) preserved in the District Museum, Haflong. Right: Biaste traditional attire (Vangsake) worn by contemporary Biaste women.

Source: Author's primary field data (2025).

### Education and Ambition in a Stratified Social Order

Education has broadened opportunities for Biaste women by equipping them with literacy, essential skills, and exposure to broader social and political perspectives beyond traditional life. Greater access to formal education has allowed numerous women to pursue salaried careers,

especially in teaching, healthcare, and administrative roles, thus fostering limited economic independence and enhanced social status (Agarwal, 1994). Nevertheless, these advancements are still heavily influenced by the enduring gender norms that principally cast women as caregivers and moral stewards for the family. Consequently, while educational achievements increase women's capabilities, they do not fundamentally shift societal expectations regarding domestic duties and social propriety. Many educated women are required to balance the competing demands of professional work and unpaid household labour, a phenomenon frequently referred to by feminist scholars as the "double burden", whereby women's active participation in the public sphere does not exempt them from private, domestic responsibilities (Menon, 2012). In addition, educational attainment has not led to proportional representation in community leadership, as positions of authority within customary councils, religious institutions, and local governance structures remain predominantly in the hands of men. Even within modern political bodies such as the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (MAC), women's representation is minimal, and no Biaste woman has thus far been elected to office within these frameworks. This persistent underrepresentation illustrates the resilience of gender inequality, underscoring that education alone is insufficient to dismantle hierarchies ingrained in customary law, religious traditions, and institutional practices (Lerner, 1986). Although education has raised the aspirations of younger Biaste women, their involvement in public leadership continues to be restricted by societal expectations that emphasise familial obligations and adherence to communal norms (Deka, 2013).

### Invisible Labour and the Structures of Customary Inequality

Women's work forms a critical yet often overlooked foundation for household survival and local economic systems in Biaste society. In subsistence agriculture, women are responsible for many of the most labour-intensive aspects of shifting cultivation, such as preparing seeds, sowing, weeding, harvesting, processing, and storing crops, tasks that are crucial for securing food supplies in hill regions characterised by fragile terrain and limited integration with markets (Deka, 2013). Their contributions span forest-based subsistence activities, including the collection of firewood, wild vegetables, medicinal plants, bamboo shoots, fruits, and other forest products, as well as fishing and gathering of crabs and shrimps. These activities highlight women's practical understanding of the local environment and their essential role in ensuring household subsistence and community food systems. Despite the importance of these forms of labour, they are rarely acknowledged as economic work, largely because they exist outside monetised measures of value. Textile production represents another major area of women's labour: through weaving, women create garments and textiles for daily use, ceremonial exchange, and limited local circulation, but this work is generally classified as domestic craft rather than recognised as a productive economic activity, thereby concealing women's contribution to household economies (Boserup, 1970).

In addition to these tasks, women undertake considerable unpaid labour within households, such as childcare, caring for elders, meal preparation, fetching water,

and organising daily domestic routines. Feminist economists stress that reproductive labour is vital for the functioning of households and enables wider economic activity, yet it is largely unaccounted for in traditional economic frameworks (Folbre, 1994). Even when women participate in income-generating activities such as teaching, health services, small-scale trading, or church-related work, their earnings are frequently regarded as supplementary rather than central to household subsistence (Agarwal, 1994). The limited visibility of women's labour is compounded by customary institutions that govern inheritance, marriage, and access to resources, typically favouring male lineage and authority (Goody, 1976; Lerner, 1986; Ngamlai, 2023). Land and ancestral property are generally passed on to sons, and in the absence of male heirs, property is usually transferred to other male kin rather than to daughters (N.C. Hills Autonomous Council, 2006; Whitehead & Tsikata, 2003). Norms related to marriage and post-marital residence also affect women's access to family resources and long-term security (Goody 1976; Sharma 2017). Gender inequality in Biaste society thus persists not because women are excluded from economic and social life but because the very structures that support daily survival simultaneously mask the breadth and significance of women's contributions, presenting unequal arrangements as natural and culturally appropriate (Bourdieu, 2001; Kandiyoti, 1988; Waring, 1988; Elson, 1995).



Figure 2: Women's participation in subsistence agriculture in the biaste.

**Note.** Visual data were collected during the author's fieldwork (2025).

### Negotiated Agency in a Changing Biaste Society

Women's agency within Biaste society is most effectively interpreted through ongoing negotiation and adaptation within established social frameworks rather than through direct opposition to patriarchal authority. Feminist studies of indigenous and small-scale societies indicate that individuals typically exert influence via everyday interactions, thereby shaping social outcomes within pre-existing institutional structures (Kandiyoti, 1988; Scott, 1985). In the Biaste context, despite formal leadership and decision-making roles being largely male-dominated, women frequently contribute to informal mechanisms through which familial and communal affairs are managed. Their participation in kinship networks, moral guidance, and community activities enables them to affect social relations and household decisions, even without formal authority.

Within these relational spheres, women often serve as mediators of familial obligations and guardians of social cohesion, adeptly negotiating expectations within extended kinship ties and community institutions. Their influence is

seldom manifested through direct political authority but rather through everyday interactions that shape behavioural norms and interpersonal dynamics. Anthropological research has highlighted that such relational authority enables women to wield significant influence within patriarchal structures while preserving the outwards stability of social hierarchies (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Ortner, 1996).

Recent social developments have progressively broadened the arena in which women engage in community life. Enhanced mobility, wider access to social networks, and increased involvement with regional institutions have provided women with more frequent interactions beyond their villages. These changes have brought new perspectives on social expectations and personal ambitions, prompting women to reevaluate traditional roles and responsibilities within their communities. Consequently, these processes have fostered subtle changes in perceptions of gender roles and participation in public life.

Despite these shifts, societal expectations continue to shape how women pursue aspirations and engage socially. Many women navigate these expectations by integrating emerging opportunities with established cultural norms. Thus, transformation within Biaste society tends to be incremental, achieved through continuous negotiation rather than a sudden societal upheaval. This dynamic underscores how women's agency functions in evolving social contexts, where adaptation and dialogue empower individuals to respond to emerging circumstances while maintaining ties with communal traditions.

### CONCLUSION

This study aims to underscore the necessity for a more nuanced consideration of gendered experiences within indigenous societies, which are frequently depicted as socially cohesive and internally stable. An analysis of the daily realities faced by Biaste women demonstrates that the maintenance of cultural continuity, community structure, and household stability relies heavily on women's active engagement across various domains of social life. Nevertheless, many of these essential contributions remain inadequately recognised within formal systems of authority, economic assessment, and institutional governance. Integrating these perspectives into academic discourse affords a more thorough understanding of gender dynamics within indigenous social frameworks.

Looking ahead, increased acknowledgement of women's roles within community institutions has the potential to foster more inclusive models of collective decision-making. Supporting women's involvement in local governance, cultural associations, and educational leadership can ensure that community advancement reflects a broader array of perspectives and experiences. Additionally, younger women's wider access to higher education, professional development, and leadership opportunities may enhance their capacity to participate effectively in both local institutions and wider regional networks.

Concurrently, initiatives aimed at promoting gender inclusion should remain sensitive to the cultural underpinnings of Biaste's social life. Rather than treating tradition and change as contradictory, community dialogue can encourage the development of strategies that harmonise cultural values with evolving perceptions of participation

and leadership. Through such means, future societal progress may bolster both cultural resilience and gender equity, enabling a Biaste society to adapt to contemporary challenges while preserving the collective identity that has historically unified the community.

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