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The children also take their mother's name. In case of separation of parents, the children stay with mothers in both Garo and Khasi societies.

The land issue among the Khasi is far more complex. In explaining the disputes over land, Gidison Pradhan Shuchiang, a *myntri* (head of *punji*) argues, "There are 15 Khasi *punjis* (villages) in the tea garden areas and we have disputes with the management in three of these gardens (Aslam and Kailin in Sreemangal upazila and Jhemaichhara in Kulaura upazila)."

Shuchiang further elaborates on the bigger land conflict between the Khasi and the forest department. "Eleven of 85 Khasi *punjis* in the Northeastern districts are well-established with land titles in the names of the Khasis," reports Shuchiang. "In all but 15 *punjis* in the tea garden areas and 11 established ones, the Khasis have tension and disputes with the forest department. The Khasis claim they have been living on the land from time immemorial and the forest department gazetted that at a later stage."

It is the *myntri* in a *punji* who is responsible for oversight of the land—a community property—that is distributed among the families. Right now, there are report-

as reflected in the words of Subhas Jengcham—"In the Garo society, we want *nokna* and *nokrom* traditions changed so that women and men get equal share in their parents' property."

The other Adivasi communities around the country—be it in the plains or in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT)—are all patriarchal and patrilineal. The ownership and inheritance of land among the Santal, Oraon, Munda, Koch and dozens of other ethnic communities in the Northwest, North-center and northeast (outside the tea gardens) are strongly influenced by Hindu law and customs. A woman in these communities does not own or inherit land unless her father or brother has willed it to her. It is only men in these societies who inherit land and property. A woman can use land and property after her father's death if she does not have brother(s), but even then, it will revert to her uncle(s) or their sons, if any. But one thing about the women in these ethnic communities—from numerous Santal to tiny Kadar in Dinajpur—is that they are seen as hard working, engaged in wage labour and other menial work to grow crops and feed their families.

In the tea gardens, there are as many as 80 non-Bengali ethnic communities with

Reform and Development (ALRD). "But in Bangladesh Hindu laws have not changed to award right to land and property to women."

The Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Bawm, Mro, Khyang, Chak, Tanchangya, Khumi, Lushai and Pangkhua in three hill districts in the Southeast and Rakhine in Cox's Bazar are also patriarchal. According to customary laws, women in these communities do not generally own or inherit land. But unlike the plains, some variations are reported from the hill districts.

There are also initiatives to reform the customary laws and practices in these communities. "We, the Bawms, have recently reformed our customary laws and are attempting to give a fair share of our land and property to our women," reports ZuamLian Amlai, former president of Bawm Social Council. "Other indigenous communities in Bandarban are also following our footsteps and attempting to reform customary laws to award rights to the women to land and property."

Marma women in Bohmong circle (Bandarban) get some share in property. "Sons, daughters and the wife of a deceased person all attain absolute rights over property, which is divided following the Digest of the Burmese Buddhist Law (also known as Shamuhada Law)," says Han Han, a Marma researcher. "However, the wife and daughters of a deceased person (husband or father) in Marma community living in Mong circle (Khagrachhari District) and Chakma circle (Rangamati), do not attain any property right, unless the deceased have gifted or willed it prior to death."

According to customary law in Bandarban, sons are entitled to get three-fourths of the property while wife and daughters get one-fourth. Sometimes the ratio is modified as ten-sixteenth for the son and six-sixteenth for the daughters. Also, there are examples of Marma households where mutual agreements had superseded the law.

Han Han also reports that in Chakma, Tanchangya and Mro inheritance laws, women have no right to landed property. "Deceased's son(s) attain the absolute right over his or their father's property," explains Han Han. "Deceased's wife (if remained unmarried) and unmarried daughters receive maintenance from the property. In absence (death) of son, deceased's son's wife (widow), son's son and unmarried daughters receive maintenance until marriage from deceased's property or directly inherit the property."

One thing about women and land in the three hill districts is that they are visible everywhere. Their hard work and constant attention are crucial for the maintenance of *jum* (slash and burn cultivation) in the hills. They are the ones who do most of the harvest and manage the sale of crops from *jum* and fields. In other agricultural works, sale of labour, and every economic activity they participate along with the men. Their connection with land is symbiotic, which is true of other Adivasi women in the plains and tea gardens. Sadly enough, justice is not done to Adivasi women when it comes to the right to land and inheritance.

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Jumia women in a market in Bandarban.

PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN



Santal women working in agricultural field.

PHOTO: PROSAD SARKER



Garo women of Modhupur in a culture gathering.

PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

edly five women Khasi *myntri*. Women inherit land and participate in betel leaf cultivation—the key economic activity of the Khasi, sort out betel leaf, handle its sale, keep account books and do all other household chores—but they are perhaps not as vocal as the Garo women. In dealing with land issues with the forest department and the tea garden owners, it is mainly the *myntri* and males who are seen in the front line.

While Garo women move freely between their homes and cities in search of work and income, the Khasi women stay largely restricted to their *punjis* and betel leaf cultivation, their key economic activity. The Khasi women are also not seen working in the tea gardens that may be next to their *punjis*. Both Garo and the Khasi are matrilineal but the contrast between the Garo women and the Khasi women is very dramatic.

However, what is common about both Garo and Khasi is that the overwhelming majority of them are Christians, educated and exposed to the modern world. The men in these two matrilineal societies are also increasingly claiming their rights over property in various forms. Men from these matrilineal societies who have employment and earnings can hold property they have earned in their own names. They can also distribute their earned property equally among children. Many want their inheritance traditions changed,

a population of half million. Women constitute more than 50 percent of the workforce in 160 tea gardens in the Sylhet Division and Rangamati; and more than 90 percent of the tea leaf pickers are women. They live in the labour lines in tea gardens. An appalling truth is that they own no land. Of 113,663.87 ha of public land granted for production of tea, 12,291.88 ha are *khet* or paddy land that the tea workers can only cultivate under restrictions. They do not have titles for these pieces of land. Attempts to take away *khet* land by the tea garden owners or government have always been a deep concern for the tea workers.

Women in the tea gardens adhere to the patriarchal and predominantly Hindu community and are absolutely landless. Belonging to the lowest rung in the Hindu casteism, they were uprooted from their homes in Bihar, Madras, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and other places in India and had been brought to their current location to work in the tea gardens. Women workers do the most painstaking work in the field picking tea leaf all day. But they are completely bereft of land and property rights including their homesteads and the houses they live in. "In India, Hindu laws have changed significantly and Hindu women have been given right to land," says Shamsul Huda, executive director of Association for Land