Chapter III

THE IDEOLOGY OF TRIBE: LAND AND EGALITARIANISM
(Some Methodological Issues)

The mere absence caste system and the accompanying hierarchy based on the principle of 'pollution-purity' (Louis Dumont, 1970) in the tribal societies have led many social scientists to define the tribe as the mirror opposite of caste and to the formulation of numerous characteristics based on this opposition which supposedly defines a tribal society, especially in the sub-continent. Some such common formulations are, for instance, that there is community ownership of property like land in the tribal society; that tribal women enjoy high positions in their society as compared to the low position of women in the caste based societies. At the more general level it is also assumed that because of the above factors, especially the absence of private ownership of property like land, the social structure of tribal societies is based on the principle of egalitarianism. Such claim about the basic feature of tribal society has dominated most of the existing discourses of tribe in India. Yet it needs to be noted that these representations of tribe in the dominant discourses presents numerous difficulties and anomalies vis-à-vis the empirical situation of tribes in India. It also presents methodological and theoretical difficulties in understanding the tribe. Consequently, tribal identity becomes reified, that is regarding or treating (an abstraction) as if it had concrete or material existence. In other words, the definition of tribe seldom reflects the social, political and economic reality in which they regularly eke out their lives.

Yet ironically the tribal discourse in the sub-continent continues to rely on such ideally conceptualized and developed theoretical and methodological frameworks and approaches resulting in empirically disjointed understanding of tribe. For instance, property ownership in the tribal society is approached from what could be termed as the non-tribal perspective characterized by a rigid understanding of private and public ownership - the dominant types of ownership in the non-tribal society or societies with 'Great Traditions'. Consequently by adopting such a perspective it missed out on the non-economic or non-materialistic aspect of
ownership which is equally important in determining and structuring the material relationships in the tribal society or societies with 'Little Traditions'. It, in turn, fails to account for the wider relationships and practices which inevitably have major bearing on something specific like the ownership of land. In the absence of legal documents and similar written proofs to show one's right over an area or physical space, as most of such rights in the tribal society are orally determined, there is the tendency to argue that land in the tribal society is communally owned. Consequently, the nuances underlying man-land relationship in the tribal society, their perception of land, attitude towards land, culture of land use patterns and so on which is largely shaped and developed out of their close proximity and dependence on the land etc. are either completely ignored or undermined. Therefore, in the attempt to portray tribal society as community oriented, that is to fit the existing social reality of tribe into a straight-jacket definition, the private and the individual is always arbitrarily subsumed by the former that is the community, in the existing discourses of tribe. This is not to argue that the private and the individual features are very pronounced in tribal societies as it is in the more modern and westernized societies. On the contrary, it is to point to the fact that these are also important aspects of the tribal societies that has been ignored in the sociological and anthropological accounts because of their pre-occupation with the communitarian aspect of the tribal societies. Thus, by paying attention to these long ignored aspects of the tribal societies it is hoped that a more empirically congruous representation of the tribal society would eventual emerged. Along with the development of a more empirically situated discourse of tribe there is also the need to change the approach to tribe by adopting new theoretical and methodological frameworks and developing and improvising the old ones. Most importantly many of the current attitudes and perceptions of tribe which are methodologically and theoretically barren need to be overhauled.

While undertaking such an exercise, especially regarding tribe, it further needs to be reiterated that it was with colonialism and the contingency to control its subjects that the initial ethnographical and anthropological interest towards the tribal society initially began. Generally, it was the administrative concerns related to maintenance of law and order and optimum extraction of resources which were the chief pre-occupations during the colonial period that profoundly shaped the understanding of tribe and the later evolution of the tribal discourse. The colonial rulers' mapping of its
subjects who are completely alien to them, culturally and linguistically, often led to bizarre situations. Nevertheless, the bizarre and the scientific both got accommodated into their official (and allegedly 'scientific') exercise of mapping which later played a vital role in the establishment of the identity of the tribe. In short, the growth and the development of the modern-western-industrial simultaneously led to the development of the primitive-archaic and non-civilized society tribal society characterized by communal ownership of property, promiscuous moral code and primordial sentiments and relationships. Such a development was further given fillip by the immense popularity and dominance of anthropology as a discipline during the colonial era. Its claim to scientific status further resulted in the crystallization of tribal identity as fixed and frozen in time and space. This crystallized identity of tribe was eventually inherited and adopted uncritically in the post-colonial India in an attempt to explain the relationship between caste and tribe further solidifying the fixed and idealized image of tribe. The uneasy and often ambiguous approach to tribe by the officials and their efforts to integrate the tribe into the so-called ‘mainstream’ society reinforce the reified image of tribe, at least in the sub-continent. It is because of this nature of heritage of the concept of tribe in India that some have advocated the need for immediately abandoning the term altogether. In fact some have labeled the concept of tribe as a ‘misnomer’ (Jaganath Pathy, 1995).

The present chapter attempts to write against the fixed and frozen representation of tribe by focusing on the dynamics as it is observed in a non-western and non-caste society. The present chapter proceeds from the analysis of the conception and significance of land to the people in Marou village, its implications on the social relationships within the village, the relationship between men and women and gradually moves onto the changes such relationships have undergone in the recent past and their ramifications upon the identity of tribe in the contemporary period. The central aim here is to interrogate the principle of egalitarianism which supposedly characterizes tribal society. The term ‘ideology’ of tribe is used here to highlight the incongruity between the established idealized image of tribe and the empirical situation within which the tribe is located, and still, the easy acceptance of such an image in the administrative and academic circles. It will be evident form the following pages that despite the absence of caste-like division in the tribal societies it is far from being what the notion of egalitarianism suggests. Tribal societies have
their own generic structures of differences and dynamics which are unique to their society. It is these differences and unique dynamics within the tribal societies that needs attention in order to generate specific methodological and theoretical tools to help us in understanding tribe and their structures more clearly. The present chapter in particular and the work here in general is a modest attempt towards this end. The chapter also focuses on the question of how the existing tribal discourse itself helps not only to conceal but also to perpetuate the internal structural inequalities, like patriarchy, by glossing over the finer nuances within the Tangkhul society. Thus, as pointed out in the beginning, the study here is a micro study that would enable social scientists and planners to approach the tribal issue from a new perspective which would be more reflective of the empirical situation and methodologically better positioned to capture the nuances within the tribal society.

3.1 *Land-Man Relationship in Marou Village*

In Chapter II I have briefly discussed about the different land ownership pattern, physical land use patterns in Marou village and the types of cultivation practice by the villagers. In this section, the cultural and symbolical significance of land and its relationship with the people would be explored. At the outset it needs to be made clear that the present pre-occupation with land in this chapter is seemingly unscientific and methodologically flawed to begin with. Nevertheless, it would be evident that most of the existing literatures on tribe endorse the argument that land is the basic and perhaps the single most important factor intrinsically tied to the definition of tribe. More than that tribal defines themselves strongly in terms of their association with land. One simple and obvious reason being that it is the most economically valuable asset from which they derive their livelihood besides the other material and symbolical importance that land entails for the members of tribal society. This would be evident from the observation that more than 70 per cent of the villagers in Marou village still depends on the land for their income and survival (See table 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 below).

The principle of egalitarianism, as it is commonly understood in the context of the tribal society, is based on the notion that there is community ownership of land in the tribal society. This further implies that every member of the tribal community has equal access to the resource pool, that is, land, thereby preventing the emergence of
the ‘haves’ versus ‘have-nots’ divide in the society. However, it becomes evident from the analysis of the local ways of land use patterns and ownership that land is far from being communally owned. There are ‘landless’ households as well in Marou village, in the sense that they do not own any land in their names while there are certain households with large landholding in term of entitlement, since time immemorial. Notwithstanding this unequal ownership of land in the village not a single household is denied or left wanting for cultivation. But then the reason for this fact lies in a different arrangement within the village with regard to land. Many have ignored this fact and continue to wrongly assert that land in the tribal society is owned by the community.

Thus to interrogate the principle of egalitarianism which is predicated upon the community ownership of land in the context the tribal society is to critically analyze the landholding structure or land ownership which in turn determines the accessibility of the members to the resource pool, that is the land use pattern within the tribal society like Marou village. But it should be kept in mind that the objective of interrogating the principle of egalitarianism in the context of the tribal society is not to discard or refute it. On the contrary, the objective here is to problematize the arbitrary privileging of one aspect of the tribal society to the extent of representing it as the determining feature without duly paying attention to other aspects of the tribal society. The present chapter would show how the dominant discourses on tribe have attempted to retained, reproduced and in the process crystallized the determining feature of the tribal society. Such an exercise is important because it needs to be seen how tribe as a social category and its characteristics thereof is rather constructed vis-à-vis caste in the Indian context, how selected characteristics are emphasized over others and finally how such an identity is sustained and perpetuated through the official discourse of tribe, both academically and administratively. To begin let us consider the following tables which has been drawn on the basis of data collected during the fieldwork in Marou village.
Table 3.1 Types of Occupations by Number of Household (Hh), Marou 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl.No</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Household Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Government Services</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Government Services/ Others</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Jhum</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Jhum/Farm</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Jhum/Others</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Jhum/Terrace</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Terrace</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Terrace/Farm</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Terrace/Farm/Government services</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Terrace/Government services</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Terrace/Government services/Others</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Terrace/Others</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey, Marou, Ukhrul district, Manipur, 2006

Table 3.1 shows the types of occupation by number of households in Marou village in 2006. As can be seen from the above table the dominant type of occupation in Marou village is agriculture related occupation. Indeed from the table above it can be argued that all the households are associated in one way or the other with land or claim to do so. But not all the households in the village derive their income directly from the agriculture related activities. The following Tables 3.2 and 3.3 depicts the percentage of households in Marou village who derive their income from non-agriculture and agriculture based activities respectively.

Table 3.2 Non-Agri. Based Occupation by Number of Household (Hh) Marou 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial No</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Household (Hh)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Agriculture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Govt. Employee</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Govt. Employee/Others</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey, Marou, Ukhrul district, Manipur, 2006
Table 3.3 Agri. Based Occupation by Number of Household (Hh), Marou 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial No</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Household (Hh)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>Hh No.</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Jhum</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Jhum/Farm</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Jhum/Others</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Jhum/Terrace</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Terrace</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Terrace/Farm</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Terrace/Farm/Govt.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Terrace/Govt.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Terrace/Govt./Others</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Terrace/Others</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>70.49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey. Marou, Ukhral district, Manipur, 2006

The numbers of households in Marou village included in Table 3.2 are those which derive their income singly from the non-agricultural activities. On the other hand, those households in Marou village included in the Table 3.3 are those households which derive their income either through owning cultivable land, mostly the terrace type, in the village though they do not physically cultivate it or those households who are simultaneously engage in two or more occupations, and one of which is agriculture based. In other words, Table 3.3 includes all the households in Marou village who derive part or whole of their income from the village land through their physical use of the land or mere ownership of the land. From the above observation it can be concluded that the village land, be it in terms of mere ownership or the actual use of land for agricultural purposes, remains an important factor in the lives of the majority of people in Marou village. The fact that even those group of villagers who do not depend directly on the village land for their livelihood continue to be equally pre-occupied with the village land and share the desire with the rest of the villagers who depend directly on the village land to either own or use it points to the centrality that the village land occupies. More than merely treating the village land as an economic resource which can be exploited for meeting their needs many see it
also as the defining criteria of defining belongingness to the group. This will become evident if we consider the non-economic and non-material dimension of the land–man relationship in the village.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of land-man relationship in Marou village is “populating” the village land with spirits and entities and the extension of human relationship to these beings. Human relationships and ties like kinship are symbolically extended to these forces and entities who they considered as the guardians and keepers of the land. In view of such a belief it is pertinent to argue that the concept of *terra nullis* is completely irrelevant in the tribal land–man relationship. Every inch of the land is considered populated and owned. The clearest exemplification of such a belief is the propitiation and placation preceding the use of the land which is akin to request for use of the land from the owner or signs of gratitude for having been generous with the yield from the land. Thus, every agricultural undertaking is preceded by some sacrifices, every change in the agricultural cycle equally propitiated and the first produce of the land are offered to the spirits and beings and so on. The centrality of the various festivals and celebrations which mark the life of the villagers in the recent past, especially the pre-Christian days, is a pointer to the belief of the villagers that the spirits and other similar beings populate inhabit the mountains and the forest and the streams and the rivers.

In the traditional or pre-Christian period such attitudes of the villagers were supplemented and reflected in their belief systems and practices, often referred to as ‘animism’ or the worship of the nature. Though changes have been introduced especially with the arrival of Christianity and its steadfast opposition to the traditional belief systems and practices there still exist many of the traditional aspects of the land–man relationship in Marou village. The most common evidence is observed in the act of mapping the village land. Every ridge, forest, river and stream is associated with one being or the other whose name and nature resembles the human world. In Marou some of these are like the *Shireishi, Gopiara-ku, Zatho-ku, Mahu-harikho* and so on. These names are usually associated with myths and forces or beings believed to populate the particular area. At other times the village land is named according to the incidents that happened in the past in that particular area due to failure of placating
the resident spirit, names of village chiefs, clan heads or brave warriors who
conquered or cultivated the land in the remote past. Concepts such as east, west, north
and south are hardly used.¹ Thus, in the belief and perception of the villagers land
was more than the geographical area which lies to the south or east or north and so on.
On the contrary, it is the abode of the spirits who constantly interferes in the affairs of
the human world. The local belief system and practices gives meaning and agency to
the land which differs from the scientific view of considering land as just a resource
for economic exploitation.

For instance, Shireishi², which lies at the periphery of the present settlement
area of Marou village, is an interesting case to note in the present context. It literally
refers to the settlement area of the guardian spirits of the first settlers of Marou – the
Shimray clan. There are innumerable myths and legends woven around this place. The
most striking legend which is of relevance for the work here being that every woman
married into the village from a different village is not supposed to cross or even come
near this particular area un-escorted by women from the Marou village. So senior
women from Marou would escort them/her and walked around the settlement area of
the spirit at the Shireishi for a week or so until it occurs to someone, in dreams or
other visions, that their/her membership have/has been acknowledge and accepted by
the spirit. Sacrifices were also made to the spirit introducing the new members. It was
only after being acknowledged by the spirit that they/she could be considered a full
member/s of the village and no harm would come to them/her from the spirit. The
spirit who resides in the place is believed to be so possessive and jealous about his
people (villagers of Marou) that any outsider is often a suspect and is visited with
sicknesses which at times proved fatal. Another similar story, this time of violating
the norm, is also quite popular in Marou village. This, I feel, is primarily stressed to
bring out the fatality of disobeying the spirit. One day when the whole village of
Marou was performing some sacrifices and placating the spirit of Shireishi one
villager of Shakok village happened to pass by. On seeing him the villagers of Marou
asked him not to cross the village the same day and spend the night in the village.
However, the stranger refused to pay heed to the warning and proceeded on his
journey. The story has it that as soon as the stranger crossed the village boundary a
storm came suddenly and knocked the man unconscious from which he never
recovered.
There is yet another similar tale which is very popular among the villagers. A certain man from the village died mysteriously one day. So his relatives invited a medicine man (Maiba) to determine the cause of the death. A big heifer was sacrificed and the spirit at the Shireishi was propitiated. Thereupon it was made known to the medicine man that the human (villager of Marou who had died) had been mistakenly slaughtered and his flesh distributed amongst the relatives of the spirit for feasting. But on being reminded that the dead man is an important member of the village the spirit relented and quickly went about retrieving the pieces of the human body from the relatives of the spirit. Unfortunately, one family (spirit) had just boiled its share of the human being's body and pleaded to let it have the share. However, the plea was rejected and the boiled piece was taken from the family. After having collected all the pieces the spirit breathed life into the dead man's mouth and brought him back to life. It is told that the man who was brought back to life had a big patch of discoloured skin around the groin - that portion of the body which was boiled. The man lived till a very ripe age and had many sons and daughters who now live in Marou. From such oral accounts and stories of the past it is indeed possible to infer that land-man relationship is beyond the purely exploiter-exploited equation. Land becomes extension of the habitat of human world into that realm of the spirits where similar human relationships, ties and obligations exist. This supernatural realm and their inhabitants therein demands extra caution and respect because of the powerful control it has over the lives of the human society in terms of sicknesses, pestilences, droughts, floods etc. These are two realms which are not exclusive of each other but are intimately connected. Man not only requires the benevolent blessings of the spirit but also yearns for their intervention to make life itself more meaningful and purposeful.

Therefore, land is more than the source of livelihood for the people. Indeed it is the source of life for the people. Being the abode of the spirits who regularly interfere in their existence the attitude of the people to the land range from fear to reverence depending on the nature of the spirit they believed in. It is this attitude of the people to the land that in turn determine their land use pattern. Every act of exploiting the land for economic purposes is preceded by some forms of sacrifice in order to propitiate the spirits believed to inhabit the particular area. It indirectly acts as sanction against wanton exploitation of the land for economic purposes. This
aspect of land-man relationship is manifested in the complex worldview and practices of the people which has come to be termed as the traditional or folk ways of natural conservation/preservation. That such a land-man relationship indirectly prevents the emergence and development of the marked division between those who owns land and those who do not in the village is rested upon the recognition by the people that man alone did not independently determines the right over the land. Just as membership in the village was also contingent upon the acceptance of the village spirits the right to ownership over a piece of the village depended on the approval of the resident spirit as well. Nevertheless such interference from the spirits did not altogether prevent the existence of those who own land and those who do not in the village though it mitigates the emergence of such division to a certain level.

A closer look at the relationship between land and the people of the village indicates a less egalitarian picture in the tribal society like the Tangkhuls as it is observed in Marou village. It is significant for the present study to note that besides the act of ‘populating’ the lands with certain forces and spirits, as mentioned above, there is also simultaneously a process of ‘gendering’ the land, that is to say, identifying the land with the masculine features and setting it apart from the feminine qualities. In this manner land is represented an undisputed domain of the men of the society. This ultimately leads to the re-imposition of the patriarchal values and principles thereby discriminating the other section of the population that is the women as most of the tribal societies are patriarchal except for quite a few known tribal societies like the Khasis and the Garos of Meghalaya in India. There are ample examples which points to the gendering of land in Marou. The myths of origin of the village which point to a male ancestor in the remote past who first conquered the land: land as a marker and repository of identity (always the patriarchal); and the existing sanction against women from inheriting the village/traditional land in Marou village point to the less egalitarian side of the land-man relationship in the tribal society. We shall come to this in detail when we discuss about the status of the tribal women below. Also the association of the village with a particular male ancestor, the first settler of the village land, inevitably implies that those outside his clan or people in Marou village who are ‘non-descendants’ of the ancestor would be landless which ultimately did not add up to the rosy picture that one has of the tribal society. It is significant to note that the latter group of people who are not the actual descendants of
the remote ancestor who founded the present Marou village comprises a majority of
the village population. By implication then it is possible to state that more than half of
the households in Marou village are ‘landless’. This aspect of the village is dealt with
below.

3.2 Land Ownership and Land Use Pattern in Marou Village

Land ownership and land use are two distinct modes that are observed with regard to
the villagers’ relationship to the land in Marou village. There are certain aspects of
land ownership in a tribal society like Marou that needs to be kept in mind. Firstly,
theoretically or symbolically, land is owned by the village chief or the Awunga or
aho-a in Marou village by virtue of being the eldest surviving male descendant of the
ancestor who founded the present land. Secondly, records or deeds of land ownership
in Marou, as in any other non-literate society, resides in the oral accounts of the
village folks and for the most part did not exist in hard documents written in black and
white. It is embedded in the village folklores, beliefs and myths, especially those
folklores and myths associated with the arrival and settlement of the different clans in
the village and their subsequent exploitation of the land. Therefore the analysis and
understanding of the pattern of land ownership in the village is contingent upon the
consideration of such folklores and myths. For instance, the failure to take into
consideration such myths and legends with regard to the present land holding pattern
in Marou village would not explain why there is a unique way of land holding
arrangement in the village in which the descendants of the younger brother are
entitled to larger and more fertile land in the village whereas the village chief,
descendant of the elder brother, is not given similar a privilege. In other words, it is in
the understanding and analysis of the oral traditions of the Marou village that the
breaching of the rule of primogeniture can be explained. Finally, it also needs to be
noted that land ownership in the village needs to be understood at two levels for
practical purposes - the titular level and the actual land use level. Such a separation is
necessary for interrogating the commonly held observation that land in tribal society
is communally owned; that there is no concept of private ownership of land/property
which in the end gave birth to the formulation that tribal societies are characterized by
principles of egalitarianism.
Before going into the actual analysis of land ownership and land use pattern in Marou it is necessary to explain the concept of *Khisa*. Basically, it refers to the area of the village land over which a person, usually the eldest of a *shang*, has the right of ownership. *Khi* literally refers to ‘*dao*’ or the long knife particularly used to cut large trees during clearing the forest for jhum cultivation and ‘*sa*’ refers to ‘right’. In the past it must be noted that the discovery or claim to a new land was marked by cutting one or the other trees in the area where one seeks to stake his claim. The concept is thus supposedly derived from this practice. In Marou village the eldest living descendant of the younger brother who founded the village in the remote past is given this privilege. He belongs to the *A Shimray* clan. He has *Khisa* over seven areas of the village land. There are similarly others who have four and two or one. Yet there are others who do not have any at all. Therefore, it is seen that traditionally not all the groups, represented by the seven clans/shangs in Marou village, neither own land nor possesses land in the village. Thus there is definitely inequality in terms of *Khisa*. Within such a context it is difficult to maintain the claim that an egalitarian structure functions as the distinguishing feature of the socio-economic structure of Marou village.

The traditional arrangement of land ownership and land use pattern in Marou village was reportedly disturbed after the major fire in 1952 wrecked havoc to the village and its residents. It is reported that majority of the houses were burnt to ashes including the granaries. This was just one incident. There were more cases of fire burning down many houses in Marou village even in the early 1960s. Since in all these incidents the granaries were also burnt a near-starvation situation prevailed in the village. To escape the impending starvation many of the households migrated to other villages like Sharkaphung, Sitaphung, Ngarumphung, Riha – all Tangkhul villages. It was told that out of the nearly fifty households before the fire only nine households were left in the village after the last fire incident. Since it was too small a size to sustain the existence of the village the members of the nine households in Marou deliberated and mutually agreed to democratize the land holding system so that new members from bigger villages who do not own land could be enticed to come and settle in Marou village. Thus the lottery system was introduced for the allocation of land for jhum cultivation so as to allow more people to come and settle in the village. In the following year four families – three form Kasom Khullen village and one
family from Zingsao village – came and settled in Marou. Thereafter, some of those households that had left the village in the aftermath of the fire incident returned and established themselves in the village along with some other new families and groups.

Moreover, in the middle of the 1980s some portion of land, those presently lying to the eastern side of the village along the Tuyungbi River, was purchased from the Kuki tribe. However, when the land was purchased, since no individual household had the resources to pay for it, the village as a whole pooled in resources and bought it with the agreement that it will become a village public land whose use will also be determined by the lottery system. The introduction of the lottery system in proportioning out the village land for use is undoubtedly a recent trend which departs radically from the traditional land holding and land use system. Therefore, one can plausibly argue in the present context of the land use and ownership pattern as practice in Marou village that the broad trend noticed is rather the move from individual ownership of land to community ownership of land and not vice versa. Thus, at the actual land use level there is apparently an equitable distribution of land presently in Marou village.

However, such reorganization of the land use pattern did not altogether do away with the Khisa. It continues to exist even in the contemporary Marou society albeit in a different form. Today khisa is recognized and practiced by granting the owner to decide his choice of area for jhum cultivation outside of the lottery system when, and only when, the particular area of the village land to be cultivated that particular year happens to be a khisa land. In this way the rights and ownership of land in the village by some of the pipa, the eldest male head of the shang, are still maintained. Closely related to this endowment of khisa to the pipas is the concept of ‘kadonge’, the literal translation of which will be ‘small sons’. Kadonge refers to the younger siblings who are not entitled to any share in the inheritance, especially land under the rule of primogeniture. Normally that traditional practice use to be that if the pipa of the shang possesses large or many khisa then he in turn allocates certain portion of the land to his younger siblings for cultivation. Yet the kadonge are not given any entitlement to ownership of the land. Thus, there are quite a sizable number of individual households in Marou village who do not own land in this sense. The first generation of western educated villagers from Marou village belongs to this group.
What has so far been discussed above is in the context of the village land with regard to jhum cultivation in Marou village. A different picture of land ownership emerges when the terrace type of cultivation, another major type of land use in Marou, is considered. Unlike the jhum fields, terrace fields are carved out on the slopes of foot-hills at individual expenses, privately owned and handed down from one generation to another following the rule of primogeniture. Ownership or the rights over a particular stretch of the village land under the jhum remains only as long as the crops grown therein in a particular jhum season remains. Thereafter the individual households who had done the jhumming have not right over it. But ownership of the terrace fields is permanent until the owner decides to sell it to someone else. Presently approximately nineteen households out of the sixty one households in Marou village own terrace fields though a much lesser number of households does the actual cultivation. Ownership of terrace fields is not confined to the pipas alone. Kadonge households, especially the government employed and comparatively well to-do-households in the village also own terrace fields in the village. In fact now the latter outnumbers the former in terms of ownership of terrace fields in the village. As mentioned above most of them are the relatively well of households often with regular incomes to invest in the carving out of the terrace fields or buy it from others.

The recent emergence of the farm type of cultivation in Marou village has also made a lasting impact on the nature of land ownership. Most of the farm lands are located close to the village settlement area between the Mapithel Range and the settlement area on the western side of Marou village. Initially these lands were proportioned out for jhum purposes. However, the proximity to the settlement area and the main road, relatively less rainfall in the area and also the absence of thick vegetation in the area prompted the villagers to turn it into farm lands. Subsequently, households who have been allocated these areas improvised the land by building fences and digging trenches all around, planting trees like yongjak, banana, papaya etc. which takes more than one agricultural season for the trees to bear fruit. In this way the ownership over the use of the land was extended beyond the normal jhum period. Such individually cultivated farm land is exempted from the lottery/draw for proportioning out the village land for jhum cultivation at the beginning of every year. Till now though direct ownership of the land, as in terrace cultivation, is yet to be acknowledged it is common for the villagers of Marou to refer to the farmlands as
private lands owned by individual households working on it. At the moment there are four households which returned in the survey as practicing farming but the numbers of households going for farming is reportedly increasing with the increasing commercial demand for farm products and the development in the road connectivity and transportation. Many of them meanwhile continue to practice jhum and terrace type of cultivation as well. The implication of the introduction and gradual increase in the number of households in Marou village practicing farming upon the traditional land ownership and land use pattern is bound to be overwhelming. The scope of generating profit once the roads and other networks of commercial activity in farm products are improved will further add pressure upon the traditional land holding system in Marou village. While it is still too early to precisely assess the long term effects of farming on the traditional land ownership and land use pattern in the village one thing which is likely to happen is the emergence of capital on land. The rate of buying and selling of individually owned land is sure to pick up and new division in the society is likely to emerge based on this process.

From the Table 3.3 given above it is stated that 70.49 per cent of the households in the village derive their income from agriculture and only 29.51 per cent depends on non-agricultural activities mostly ranging from government services, small time businesses, private school teachers for income. Out of the majority 70.49 per cent depending on agricultural activities it is further evident that 18 households or 29.95 per cent of the households in the village depends purely on jhum; 9 households or 14.75 purely depend on terrace cultivation; the rest depends on more than one type of cultivations. Assuming that jhum fields are public or village land majority households in Marou do not own land – they are land-less cultivators! The question remains, however, that if majority of the household in Marou do not own land how is it possible that 70.49 per cent of the village population are into agriculture and related activities which are land intensive occupations. This paradox is observable almost in all the Tangkhul villages. Yet they differ in the arrangement which made possible the co-existence of large number of landless households in the village practicing agriculture and related occupations. Marou has a unique was of arrangement which is best reflected in the land distribution for jhum cultivation. The lottery system followed in Marou has been mentioned in the preceding pages. This system is hardly followed in the neighbouring villages like Shingkap or Shingta. It is indeed unique to
In this kind of arrangement of land distribution all the households in the village (even those households staying outside the village) are entitled to participate in the draw and chose a particular area of the village land for cultivation. So while not all the households in the village (Marou) own land they all have the opportunity to use the land for their livelihood.

What is significant in the present context of land use pattern in Marou village is the existence of contract labour and also wage labour. The two systems are different in the sense that in the former it is mainly the kin group who enters into such kind of contract. There are different variants of this contract system. The one found in Marou is the leasing out of the terrace field by the owners who stays outside the village to some households in the village for a share of the harvest on an annual basis. This has been discussed above. In the other variant, which is reportedly practiced in Shingkap village, the pipa who has a large khisa shared part of it with his landless younger siblings for jhum cultivation. The latter, that is the wage labour, is altogether a temporary arrangement and kinship ties and obligations do not have much role to play in it. It is said that in the past such kind of practice, wage labour, was done mostly by those households whose food stock could not last the whole year round due to landlessness, poor harvest or debt. The wage used to be paid mostly in kind. Even today wage labour is practiced in Marou village but the payment is now normally made in cash. At least in Marou village wage labour ensures that many households whose harvests are meager do not hungry. And since the agriculture activity is almost yearlong there is constant demand for labour. From the above observation the claim of community ownership of land in the tribal society as the underlining base for egalitarianism is no longer tenable. Therefore, egalitarianism in the tribal society is either a myth or it has to be found in a different context of the tribal society. What the present study intend to bring out from these observations is that it is not so much the literal community ownership of the village land but the community oriented land use pattern in the tribal society that underlines the democratic and egalitarian semblance that one notes in the tribal society. Having said this it needs to be noted that the study of problems, such as ownership of property, in the tribal society urgently demands new perspective that would consider the wider social and non-material aspects of land/property in order to present a dynamic image of the tribal society.
3.3 The Patriarchal Conception of Land and Status of Women in Marou Village

Furer-Haimendorf while commenting on the position of the women within the Naga society noted that ‘[m]any women in the more civilized parts of India may well envy the women of the Naga Hills, their high status and their free and happy life and if you measure the cultural level of the people by the social position and the personal freedom of its women you will think twice before looking down on the Nagas as savages’ (1933: 96). This sums up the prevalent perception of the tribal women in the sub-continent. In the absence of the practices such as purdah system or sati, also known as bride burning and so on tribal women are represented as much better off than the caste Hindu women. This section deals with the second common formulation closely related to the notion of land and egalitarianism which is another aspect of the ideology of tribe that the present chapter is concerned with. It seeks to determine the position of the women in terms of their rights, opportunities and privileges within a patriarchal structure in Marou village. In this context, it should be noted that besides the act of ‘populating’ the village there is also simultaneously the act of ‘gendering’ the village land; that is to say gendering the conception of man – land relationship in Marou village. How does such gendering of the village land affect women in the village? Does the patriarchal conception of land reflect itself in the gender relationships and roles that men and women play in their day-to-day existence? Do tribal women really enjoy a high position within the patriarchal structure of the village? These are some of the issues that are to be taken up in this section.

First and foremost the gendered conception of man – land relationship establishes the absolute and undisputed control of men over the land. The control is further enforced by the well entrenched belief that the identity of the group is firmly rooted in the land. Moreover, such a belief endows the right and legitimacy to men as the keepers and guardians of one’s identity. Thus, the gendering of man – land relationship in Marou village equates land with the identity of the group and repose men as the legitimate and rightful keepers of identity. Consequently man-land relation is woven around myths and legends which circulate around to reassert the established patriarchal belief structure in the village. Some of these are, for example, that land is the abode of the spirit of the ancestors and many other forms and powers that gives meaning to the everyday mundane existence of the people. Land is permanent. Land is the blood which nurtures and sustains every member of the society. In Marou it is
believed that any dispute over land will inevitably lead to an act where blood has to be shed either voluntarily or by accident. Stories about such incidents of shedding blood due to land dispute abound in the village folklore repository.

But now the question arise whose identity and whose blood? Surely without much probing it would be evident that it is the men’s identity and the men’s blood that the land symbolically represents. Thus, the village land becomes the place where his ancestors are buried, where his spirits resides and where he draws his living. He controls the land and thus the identity of the group. On the other hand, women are commonly referred to as ‘outsiders’ as implied in the term ‘khaminao’ in Tangkhul or ‘Khama’ in the local dialect. It also refers to the status of women as ‘guests’ whose residence or membership is temporary. That her position in the society and the family is so considered as temporary like an outsider or a guest is best reflected in the values surrounding marriage. Before marriage everything about her is perceived as being in a state of impermanence. But after marriage she is at least given a reference point (the man) through which she identifies herself to others and is identified with by others. This applies for the practice of adoption, discuss below regarding a couple of divorced women, into the village. 9 On her own even after marriage she remains more or less anonymous. Thus, marriage, besides being simply the socially accepted union of two sexually matured individuals, is also the decisive moment when the woman is given a man and more importantly an identity in the society. It is only by becoming attached to the man that a woman determines her membership in the society—where she belongs. She is invisible by herself.

The conception of the woman as temporary member of the society, unless attached to a man, is in sharp contrast to the patriarchal perception of the land. Thus, it becomes theoretically viable to see such a dichotomous conception of land and women in a tribal society like Marou as an act of construction or invention of the women’s identity by the patriarchal structure. Women are unequally pitted against land, the domain of the patriarchal structure. In order to prevent the women from challenging the absolute authority of the men in the society myths are invented and woven around man-land relationship deliberately keeping the women out of the relationship. Consequently, men by virtue of being associated with the land acquires the nature of permanence while women by being denied such a relationship is
represented as temporary and in constant need of a man to possess a sense of permanence. It needs to be noted that there is nothing inherently permanent or constant in the patriarchal social structure which sets men apart from the women other than the unequal relationship to the land. Therefore, the representation of women as temporary members of the society can be seen as the working of the patriarchal structure not so much to represent women as weaklings unable to possess and control land per se but to present itself as the legitimate controller of the land.

The temporary and guest-like nature of the women is further manifested in the nature of the inheritance and restriction in the decision making processes. While the men inherit the immovable properties like land women inherit the movable properties such as the shawls, the traditional necklaces (Kongshang) and couple of mithun. This, it is observed, is however not a rule but a privilege for the wealthy families. More recently the amount and kind of gifts gifted to daughters on their marriage have taken a new dimension among the affluent households in the village but the traditional right of the son in terms inheritance of the land is still widely prevalent. It needs mention here women in Marou are not barred from inheritance as such. Nevertheless the gifting of gifts (or inheritance) to the women in Marou should not be misconstrued to mean that the women in the village occupy a privileged position. One needs to go beyond the very act of giving and examine the nature and other symbolic meaning of the gifts gifted to the women. By doing so it will be observed that the nature of properties inherited by the men is secured and permanent whereas those that the women inherit are temporal with shorter life span and relatively unsecured in terms of depreciation values. Furthermore, it is an irony that even though if it is mostly the women’s labour that help produce from the land it is the man who controls the source. This observation becomes all the more important due to the fact that the Tangkhul still depends heavily on agriculture, and according to workforce participation rate in agricultural activities and related activities between the sexes the womenfolk still outnumber the men folk. Thus, a deeper analysis of the nature of property inherited would reveal the hidden agenda of perpetuating men’s dominance over the women.

Decision-making is an important indicator of position and authority in the society. Who controls and makes the decision significantly reveals the social position of an individual or a group in the society. But here again the women is strategically
left outside all the three major decision-making structures within the Tangkhul society; The hangva or the village council (it needs mention that women are not allowed to be its member) at the village level; the meiphung or the association of the pipas or the head of the shang at the clan level (being a patriarchal society the eldest living male member is the head of the shang) and the patriarch at the family level. What little she has to say is tied to the hearth, at times she do not even have this opportunity. The patriarchal control and subordination of the tribal women is best illustrated by the representation of the role of the pukhreila among the Tangkhuls that is discussed in the next section.

Consider the following tables, table no. 3.4 to 3.6 given below. It partially depicts the present position of the tribal women in Marou in terms of sex ratio, educational level and as household heads respectively. Table 3.4 below shows the distribution of sex ratio across various age-groups in Marou during 2006. The number of female for every 1000 male for the total population in the village is 803.

**Table 3.4 Population and sex ratio by age groups, Marou, 2006**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Sex Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>905</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-20</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>486</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;60</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Age</td>
<td>152</td>
<td><strong>803</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey, Marou, Ukhrul district, Manipur, 2006

The table below (Table 3.5) is a comparative analysis of the educational level of male-female in Marou village. The total illiteracy rate in the village is very high at 58.9 per cent. In the lower levels of education the female population in the village is comparatively performing better than the male. However, at the higher levels their performance steadily declines which points to the lack of opportunity for most them to pursue further education beyond the high schools.
Table 3.5. Education Classified by Sex, Marou 2006.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Non literate</th>
<th>Below X</th>
<th>X passed</th>
<th>XII passed</th>
<th>Graduate</th>
<th>Post Grad.*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nos.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Nos.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Nos.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>45.8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>54.8</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>47.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All*</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey, Marou, Ukhrul district, Manipur, 2006.

*Total divided by the population of Marou village (275 persons). Example, for the non-literate: total (275) divided by Population of Marou village (275) = 73/275 x 100 = 26.5

Further table no. 3.6 below shows the number of female headed households in the village. Out of the 61 households surveyed only 9 households or 14.8 per cent of the total households in Marou are female headed households. The rest that is 85.2 per cent or 52 households surveyed in the village returned in the survey as male headed households. In those households where the male head is absent 4 of them are due to divorce and the rest due to death of the male heads. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that 2 of these female household heads were married outside the village. They had returned to Marou after their marriages ended. The rest are married within the village.

Table 3.6 Numbers of household by Types, Marou 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No</th>
<th>Types</th>
<th>Hh No.</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female Headed Hh.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male Headed Hh.</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>85.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td></td>
<td>61</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey, Marou, Ukhrul district, Manipur, 2006

From the above tables it will be noted that women in Marou village are educationally lagging behind men. The sex ratio is alarming and furthermore the women household heads are not represented in the village council where the most important decisions of the village are taken. Moreover, the women in the village are denied inheritance right to the traditional property, especially land. They have no voice (representation) in the decision making body of the village besides the other prejudices of being women in a patriarchal society. In spite of focusing on the dominating patriarchal structure which subordinates women on both the sides of the
tribal – non-tribal divide the tribal women are considered as the alter ego of the Hindu caste women. The tribal women and the Hindu caste women are considered binary opposites. This resulted in the neglect of emphasizing on the more immediate and crucial aspects in the society. For instance, how patriarchy as a structure of the society promote or obstruct the development and empowerment of the women on both sides of the divide is yet to receive as much attention. The understanding of this connection will provide us with the context for analyzing the position of Tangkhul women in the society today. In fact it would also allows us to review the attempt to privilege one aspect of the tribal society as the determining aspect of tribe over other similar aspects of the tribal society – the principle of egalitarianism in the present context.

3.4 The Pukhreila

The ‘pukhreila’ or the ‘neutral lady’ refers to married women who act as mediators and peace emissaries in the Tangkhul society. She is also referred to as the ‘Peace maker’, the ‘bearer of the torch of peace’ and the ‘Red Cross bearer’ of Naga inter village war (Shimray 1985:168). For instance, when feud or war broke out between her husband’s shang (Khel/clan) and their enemy she acted as the peace emissary. “When a party was pressed back very far killing a warrior or two, and the verdict was known, a neutral force come in. The pukhreila could not be harmed as a rule. She was highly respected for her neutrality, and they were called as the ambassadors of peace. In the bygone days when head hunting was practiced, these pukhreilas played vital roles saving lives of men” (Zehol 1977:23). Freepaothing is more elaborate while giving an account of the pukhreila. According to him “The neutral lady boldly entered the battle field and intervened in the fighting of warriors of the two enemy villages. When a party was pressed back and when enough heads had been slain, and the verdict was clear; the Neutral Lady or Ladies stepped in between the warring parties with a long ‘Y’ shaped stick and tried to prevent the winner side from chasing the defeated party. Her intervention meant stopping the war. Intervention by the Neutral Lady meant not only a truce but the end of the war” (Freepaothing 1994:67). He goes on to say that ‘Harming the Neutral Lady meant violation of the inter village laws which would have meant a war by all villages combined against the breaker of the law of the war. Thus, she could not be harmed as a rule. In that way a woman was like an ambassador and also a mediator if talented. She enjoyed full diplomatic immunity. Nobody could lay hands on her” (Ibid., 68).
The *pukhreila* undeniably played a very demanding role in the society. However, to determine the status of the *pukhreila* in the society it needs to be contextualized within the practice of 'head hunting' and its implication on the social structure of the Tangkhul. 'Head hunting' was practiced by the Tangkhul just like the other Naga tribes before the advent of the English colonizers. However, contrary to the common notion about the practice held by the outsiders as a barbaric and horrendous act, for the Naga it was a way of life, a philosophy deeply rooted in the belief systems and conducted with religiosity, such as observance of taboos and abstinence from certain relations and foods. Indeed, it was also a status enhancing because the more heads one possesses the higher is he in the social hierarchy in the society. More importantly, it acts as the *rite de passage* for the youth of the society. It is only after capturing head that a youth is accepted by the society as a mature member eligible for marriage and other adult prerogatives. Notwithstanding, all these symbolic benefits or merits accruing from taking heads the underlying rule is the observance of certain taboos prior to head hunting expeditions. One very important taboo is abstinence from all sexual relations. Furthermore, the women are forbidden to touch the weapons and tools to be used in the expedition, as it is feared that her touch would bring ill luck to the expedition. The woman becomes a taboo during such occasions. Thus, it becomes pertinent to ask if the refrain from causing harm to the *pukhreila* in the battlefield merely the fear of inviting retribution or is it an extension of the taboo that prohibits the men from physically touching the women?

Secondly, some are of the opinion that in spite of woman being considered as an object of taboo the Tangkhul woman is nonetheless treated highly and given an important position in the society. They often substantiate their argument by pointing to the higher value attached to a woman's head in the event of a head hunting raid. Those who advance such an argument have supposedly failed to recognize that during the days of head hunting the women were always protected and guarded by the able village warriors against possible attack from enemy hunting for heads. The need for the tight vigil around her points to her important role in the production and the continuation of the society, both physically and otherwise but surely not because she occupied a commanding position in the first place. It was only the brave and the daring that could possess the woman's head because without such qualities it would be unthinkable of coming close to the woman so as to own her head. Significantly, the
importance attached to the woman is a reflection of the respect and esteem that bravery and courage command in the Tangkhul society rather than reflecting the high position that the women supposedly occupy.

From the above discussion we can briefly conclude that the importance attached to the woman’s head instead of serving to enhance her position in the society could threaten her very existence. This is so because underneath the practice of ‘head hunting’ there is a certain urge for indulging in macho-sadism. And with the patriarchal values and principles governing the structure and culture of the Tangkhuls the urge could only be aggravated. Thus, the competition to out-do one’s rival in the ‘macho sadistic’ practice could have heightened the insecurity of the womenfolk in an attempt by the men to prove their masculinity. Secondly, the attitude of the men to look upon the women as objects of taboo suggest the perception of the women as an expendable commodity for satisfying the male ego and achieving honour and esteem in the society - at the expense of the women. If this is so, the fact that she literally walked between the fighting parties, thereby exposing her to imminent danger is a reflection of the woman being considered as an expendable item by the patriarchal society. Therefore, one can assume with certainty that beneath the apparently important role assigned to the pukhreila lay the male chauvinism that negates the notion that women enjoy high social position in the Tangkhul society in particular and the tribal society in general.

In conclusion, it needs to be reasserted that it becomes rhetorical to argue that the tribal women enjoy a high position in the society. In fact the misrepresentation comes from the misinterpretation and miscomprehension of the tribal situation by most social scientists. If the pukhreila is seen moving freely and without much ado in the Tangkhul society it is merely in relational term compared to her Hindu caste counterpart. Viewed from the pukhreila’s point of view her freedom becomes merely ‘anthropological freedom’ that exists only in academic texts and discourses that have no corresponding basis with the social reality outside it. Her supposed freedom and high social position then becomes a mask to conceal the discrimination and subjugation of the tribal women. And the continued insistence on the pukhreila’s high position only points to the patriarchal ideology at work. Such an ideology opiates the pukhreila from claiming equal position in the society. Loomba rightly notes this while
explaining the concept of ideology that "[t]his is so because the ideologies that most circulate or gain currency in any society reflect and reproduce the interests of the dominant social classes.... Thus ideology has the function of obscuring from the working (and other oppressed) classes the 'real' state of their own lives and exploitation" (Loomba 2001: 25).

3.5 Conclusion

From the preceding pages we observe that the definition of tribal society as an egalitarian society is methodologically and theoretically inadequate which fails to represent the empirical situation of the tribal society today. The continue insistence on the egalitarian character of the tribal society in most of the tribal discourses implies the synchronic treatment of the problem which need an urgent review. Thus, many of the existing studies on tribe and tribal situation just do not have the tools and theoretical frameworks to reflect the recent changes that have transformed the tribal milieu that it has become irrelevant for understanding the contemporary tribal situation. Significantly Nongbri echoed such an urgent need while commenting on the Khasi land tenure system. She noted that "It is interesting to note that most of the studies on the Khasi land tenure system tend to ignore the social conflict which the system generates among its members. While most of them give due attention to the classification of land they are silent about its social implications. This kind of study may be due to the fact that, in the past, most scholars who have studied tribal societies tend to consider them as egalitarian in nature free from the cleavage of class and class conflict. Of course, in contrast with caste and class based societies with their rigid stratification system, tribal present a relatively egalitarian status but this does not mean that there are no social differentiation within them or that they provide equal economic opportunities for all. An in-depth empirical study of the problem I am sure would reveal that egalitarianism is but a misconception between mechanical and statistical models, that is the ideals which people have about their social relations and the actual pattern of such relations as they exist in the society." (1987: 71-72).

The above observation cause one to re-examine the problem of locating the mechanism or factor/s maintaining the balance between the rich and poor or the principle of egalitarianism which supposedly characterized the tribal society thereby differentiating it from the caste-based hierarchy Hindu society. Should the absence of
private ownership of land be the basis for the egalitarian structure of the tribal society? On the one hand, we have seen in the above pages that not all the clans or households in Marou village own land. In fact majority of them do not own land. At the same time private ownership of land—pipa owning land like the khisa based on traditional claim of being the eldest male descendant of the first person to conquer the present village—is noted. Yet on the other hand, the fact that there is uneven ownership of land does not give rise marked divisions in the society which is manifested in terms of the pollution-purity division of the Hindu society or the haves and the have-nots of the Marxist theory. How is this possible? Where should one look for the answer to explain the supposedly egalitarian structure which defines the tribal society?

Perhaps more than solely focusing on the absence of ownership private property to explain the egalitarian character of the tribal society it would be more fruitful to comprehensively look at the traditional values and principles which the tribal society uphold. These values and principles are largely community oriented and are also the repository of the codes, mores and laws by which the society regulates and aids in smoothly running the affairs of the village. For instance, consider the cultural value that defines wealth in the tribal society. The wealth of a person or household in the past used to be measured by the degree of generosity and lavishness shown to the villagers. Therefore, wealthy individuals or households used to throw feast for the whole village to declare one’s wealth and richness. In return the individual or household gained recognition and status in the society. Such an arrangement was functional for the society in many ways. For one, the notion of wealth and riches, determine by distribution rather accumulation, prevented the emergence of rich-poor divide in the society. It also enhances and cements many of the village ties and networks which contribute to the village solidarity through the regular gathering and celebration at the village level. The collective sentiments are reinstated during such moments and the wanton emergence of individualism in the society is discouraged through such practices and traditions.

The need for overhauling the methodological and theoretical frameworks to explain and understand the tribal society has become all the more necessary today because of the rapid changes that have occurred. Many aspects of the traditional tribal society have yielded to the changes. But apparently these aspects of the changing
tribal society is yet to receive due attention in the works of the academics. More importantly tribe needs to be approached cautiously rather than the treating it as the simple mechanical opposite of caste and thereby clouding our understanding of tribe by ‘what caste is not’. The identity of tribe and its characteristics presently found in most of the literatures needs reviewing and situating it to the empirical context. The continue treatment of tribe far removed from the context within which it exists would lead to further reification and ideological representation of tribal identity. Therefore, tribe needs to be conceptualized anew through empirically grounded methods and theoretical frameworks.
References:


Pathy, Jaganath, 1995, "What is Tribe? What is Indigenous?" VIKALP, IV.


End Notes

1 Curiously there is no corresponding concept in the local dialect of Marou to what is generally referred to as east, west, north or south. There is just *jomi-kasuho* (‘sun-rising side) and *jomi-kazoho* (‘sun setting side’)and ‘*adu*’ or ‘*ayju*’ which refers to ‘up’ or ‘down’ respectively. A particular area is known or referred to as the abode of such and such spirit or a place where such and such incident occurred. In this sense the whole village land is ‘mapped’ and nothing is unfamiliar or foreign to the villagers. Sometimes it is amazing to notice the minute details of a particular area being narrated referring to the kind of trees growing in a particular place, the stream, flowers or the stone formation etc. These accounts are more popular with the villagers who regularly go on hunting. Nevertheless such detail reference to a particular place is observed in the folktales as well.

2 *Shireishi* literally means the first or the eldest of the family (of the first settlers of the place).

3 *Maiba* is a Meitei word whose equivalent would be ‘shaman’- those who practice ritualistic magic.

4 I was told of a particular household in the village who cultivates a particular area near the *Tuyunghi* River. It so happened that every year whenever the household cultivates the area one family member met with an accident. In one such accident one member lost his life. So the household abandon the area and gave it some other household. This time nothing happened to the new household.
The Kuki village was situated at a place called hengyo which is about eight kilometers from Marou village. The Kuki migrated from the place in 1984.

Yongjak literally means ‘monkey-rice’ in the Meitei dialect. It is a green vegetable grown on trees. Marou is very popular among the neighbouring villages for this vegetable.

In Shingkap, land is owned privately, especially the cultivable ones. What is considered as the community land is the dense forested area with thick vegetation, uneven surfaces and mostly rocky as well. These areas lie close to the Mapithel Range and are used as hunting grounds. Not everyone in the village (Shingkap) owns land. These landless groups either cultivate land on lease or sometimes piece of land are set side by the rich households in the village for the landless. At other times the landless households provide the agricultural labour throughout the season for a return of certain agricultural produce at the end of the season. Still sometimes clans who own large tracts of land would adopt particular family or household into its fold and provide land to the latter for cultivation.

During the fieldwork it was reported that the present boundary of the village is not as it used to be in the past. It was smaller and there was less population in the village. Significantly, there were clusters of Kuki village in the area. In the late 1970s and 1980s the Kukis abandon their villages and migrated to other parts, mostly to Saikul and Churanchanpur. When the Kukis left their old settlement their land were sold. Since it was not possible to buy it by an individual Marou, as a village, bought their terrace fields and jhum lands. This is how the village land expanded. During this period when substantial area of land was added it was decided in the village council that the traditionally determined private ownership of the pipa would remained but the actual land use would be decided by a draw of lot. Thus, the lottery system came to stay in Marou.

The way in which one of the women headed households was adopted presents an interesting example of how patriarchy operates in the village. The woman who was adopted belongs to a different village. She was married to an outsider. She has an older sister who was married to one of the villagers from Marou village. After the younger sister’s marriage ended in a divorce she decided to settle down in Marou besides her older sister. The village chief’s permission was sought for the purpose and the matter was taken up in the village council meeting. Thereafter the permission was granted only after the male head of her sister’s household agreed to adopt her by giving his clan name to the younger sister and her children.

Pukhreilas basically refers to married women, especially of a different village than her husband’s. It is still unsure if their role, as presented and transmitted in the radio in the early 1990s by some Tangkhul scholars, is an all Tangkhul phenomenon. Strangely none of the people interviewed in Marou during the survey knew of such women’s role.