WORKING-CLASS GENERATIONS: A GENDERED FAMILY HISTORY

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My intention in writing this essay is to demonstrate the relationship between gender and work in the working-class home. But in the course of my research, my encounters with the women in my family have taken unexpected detours. The women I interviewed in this essay spoke to me not only of work but also of their dreams, aspirations and their intimate relationship with their past. These diversions shed new light not only on my understanding of their personhood but also about the important social markers that connect their private selves to the larger social contexts within which they were placed. Because I intend to focus on the family and the domestic sphere, I have used the concept of the hearth to speak of the domestic and familial determinants of work.

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT: DOMESTICITY, MATRILINY, THE HEARTH AND GENDER

As a symbol of kinship structures within a Khasi household, the hearth points towards the family as the bedrock of social organization (Syiem 2013:193). The aphorism, *kamai ka hok* or to work and earn for righteousness, is symbolized by one of the three hearthstones, *ki mawbyrsiew*. Socially and symbolically, therefore, work is one of the central concerns in Khasi households linked to the moral well-being of the worker. One earns a living to cultivate self-respect and the ability to work is an outward sign of a self-respecting individual. Coming from a matrilineal society, however, this traditional understanding of work is ironic.

One of the popular misconceptions about matriliny is that it is matriarchal. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. For all the apparent 'benefits' it gives to Khasi women, the matrilineal system is designed to keep women, especially the youngest daughter, within the confines of the home. The youngest daughter inherits the family property if she is also willing to care for the aged, the children, and, if their marriages fail, her brothers and the bachelors in the family. More often than not, it is the daughter who is urged to look after the house while the other family members are away on social engagements. Not to mention the fact that should anything happen to or within the family, it is the uncle or *kñi,* the mother's oldest brother, who has the final say (Nongbri 2008:27–28). The domestic space, therefore, is one that is deeply politicized and undercut by gendered inequalities. If such is the case, then how does this same space become a site for female empowerment? Working-class women are interesting subjects in this regard. Because of the constraints (largely economic) placed in their way of achieving their desired social outcomes, these women are compelled to leave their homes and work.

Taking after the symbolic and sociological implications of the hearth, therefore, working women are gendered representatives

occupying both the domestic and public spheres. They have the advantage of exercising and observing gendered identities in spaces traditionally assigned to men (the public sphere) while having their experiences in these spaces influence gendered identities within the home.

Gendered identities within the home are typically manifested and maintained through the passing on of their narratives from the elders to their children and grandchildren. The stories remind succeeding generations of their working-class legacies and how these legacies shape their present. Hence, stories around the hearth become integral to the way gendered identities are nurtured from one generation to the next.

While the role of working-class Khasi women in the public sphere has received some attention—Tiplut Nongbri's *Gender, Matriliny, and Entrepreneurship: The Khasis of Northeast India* (2008)and Gertrude Lamare's 'from the streets: women hawkers in shillong' (2017) come to mind—the role of working-class Khasi women within the domestic sphere has largely been neglected. Some of the questions I hope to answer are: what values were imparted by working-class women to their progeny, especially girls, away from the public gaze? How are working-class legacies, especially the relationship between gender and work, passed on to succeeding generations? Are there narratives which exceed the boundaries of work-related spaces? As I considered these questions, it is not lost on me that it is my own journey that I am tracing through the stories that I present here. These are stories told by my mother and my maternal aunts about themselves and about their mothers and their mothers' mothers. In a nutshell, these are stories about how I also came to be who I am. My journey, therefore, takes me to familiar territory made unfamiliar by the way their subjects have, in recent times, been spoken of by those who claim to have a say about them.

In a letter to the editor of *The Shillong Times* dated June 24, 2016, a member of the public addressed what he believed to be a nuisance

caused by hawkers. While hawkers have previously been associated with dirt and the defilement of public spaces,[1] this particular piece does so by comparing hawkers to cow dung. The author writes:

> Cow dung is a valuable matter which a farmer would lovingly handle with his bare hands to fertilize. But the same matter would be menacing dirt if it happens to be in a Church yard's lawn or in the school compound (Lyngdoh 3).

To begin with, the letter has a patronizing tone. The author suggests that, in the right 'hands', hawkers could be of use to society. However, since they occupy footpaths and streets, this occupation is tantamount to their defiling churches and schools. The presence of hawkers in Shillong is, in this author's understanding, so profane that it inspires the same disgust that one would feel in getting a whiff of cow dung. The author goes on to say, in a later paragraph of the letter, that hawkers are greedy, ignorant and criminal. Although Lamare drew some attention to the debates surrounding hawkers in Shillong in her article, 'from the streets: women hawkers in shillong' (2017), my intention in raking up the issue again is to examine just how deep class prejudices—especially against the unorganized labour sector in Shillong—are embedded, and to provide to some extent, a *raison d'être* for writing this essay.

In comparing the working-class community to cow dung, the author of the letter strips them of their humanity and, in its place, assigns them bestiality or even worse—what bestial nature itself rejects. By comparing the hawkers to cow dung, the author implies that, unlike him, they lack culture and social etiquette; that they are to be treated no worse than excreta.[2] After reading the letter, I thought, 'These are not the women I know/knew.' As the great-granddaughter of a woman who sold moonshine and the granddaughter of a tea seller (both of whom belonged to the unorganized sector of the Shillong working-class community) I knew differently. The working-class women I knew possessed ethics, morals and they also possessed that most human of attributes, dreams. If mainstream society refused to see

them for who and what they are, then I had to do something about it. I had to write. Hence, apart from the obvious sociological implications this essay is also intended to unravel the human attributes of the women whose identities are, more often than not, concealed and made politically 'savvy' by their being working-class.

THE NARRATIVES: OF WOMEN, DREAMS AND WORKING-CLASS THINGS

Let us begin in the summer of 1972 or even 1975. It does not matter. The officials at the Shillong Sports Association have no record of the occasion. But it is etched in the memory of the runner as a momentous occurrence. As she crossed the finish line, the referee pressed the button on the timer: 13.5 seconds. My mother had just won the 100 metre dash with a record as yet unbeaten in Shillong's athletics history. It was a time when dreams were possible and my mother, Antina Warjri, wanted to run. Years later, as she slaved away in the offices of the Telecommunications Department—in 2000 re-christened the Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited—memories of her time on the track worked to shore up her lost pride. 'Ask about the time I won third place at the National Games,' she hastily tells me. These are memories worth having, she implies, because they show her for who she is and what she could have been.

Antina Warjri was born on February 13, 1954—at least according to official records.[3] She remembers a (largely) happy childhood and recollects a desire to explore the world beyond Shillong. Athletics, she tells me, gave her the opportunity to visit places as far away as Delhi, a chance that few young women from her economic background got. Agra, Jaipur and Delhi were some of the places that my mother visited because of her participation and interest in athletics. I recall instances from my life where my mother was stopped in the middle of the street and congratulated for being the athlete that she was. It is an

image, however, that did not correspond to the life she led behind the public eye. While in public my mother was hailed as one of Shillong's leading athletes, her main concern behind closed doors was to provide for the family—a concern that her engagement in sports did not ease, partly due to bureaucratic loopholes. In their lives as athletes, Antina Warjri and her sister Nah Santina Warjri were never given the sports scholarships that they had applied for and were eligible to receive. The need to provide for her family and systemic apathy put an end to my mother's dream of becoming an athlete.

Antina Warjri is one of many from among the working-class in Shillong who have had to endure loss because bureaucratic and economic circumstances deemed it unfavourable for them to pursue their desired professions. The story is a familiar one. Kong Synjup Warjri, *her* mother and my maternal grandmother, wanted to be a nurse. But again, economic hardship compelled her to be something else—a tea seller. The immediate necessity of earning a living led women like my maternal grandmother and my mother to forgo their dreams. At the heart of such decisions, however, is concern for the family.[4]

'We were poor. I needed to earn,' my mother tells me.

So, at barely 20, Antina Warjri applied for and got a job as a Class III clerk in the Telecommunications Department, Government of India. As a salaried worker, my mother 'improved' upon her condition. She became part of a generation of working-class women in the family to enter the organized sector. This entry meant that my mother's chances of becoming part of the middle-class in Shillong society increased, aided no less than by the fact that her job was 'respectable'. But does entry into mainstream society necessarily mean the erosion of work related values and are working-class identities necessarily forgotten when material prospects improve?

A recurrent story that my mother relates in her interactions with me concerns her working relationship with a customer of Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL). By the time of her retirement in

2014, Antina Warjri had shifted base as a clerk from operational services to being a clerk in the administrative wing of the office. Her job involved manning the call centre and preparing bills, especially for customers who have leased their lands to BSNL for installing cell phone towers. A certain Mr. B. was due to receive his payment from BSNL for a cell phone tower which the corporation had erected in his house. At least five years had elapsed since the last payment and Mr. B. was in for quite a bit of money.

'Please help me,' he begged my mother.

Sensing his desperation, Antina Warjri took it upon herself to hasten the process of preparing his bill and having it approved by a senior officer. Within a week's time, Mr. B. received his arrears. Grateful to my mother, Mr. B. returned to the BSNL office bearing a gift.

'Take it,' he said. 'It is my appreciation for what you have done for me.'

'I can't,' my mother replied. 'I was only doing my job and you bringing me such gifts defeats that purpose.'

'If you do not take it, I'll bring a hen.'

'Please do not do so. I will not accept it, even if it were a hen.'

This anecdote is intended to highlight the importance of honesty in the workplace and in our dealings with fellow men and women. In addition, the story passes on lessons in humility. One should be humble enough to do one's work without expectations of a reward. A faithful execution of one's work and duty is enough of a reward so that one can abstain from accepting bribes. These principles are encapsulated in the Khasi aphorism, *kamai ka hok* or to work for righteousness. Social and cultural markers symbolizing righteousness in work or *kamai ka hok* link the private, individual context (my mother telling me the story) to public, communitarian outcomes. In telling this story, my mother was providing a point of reference so that if I were caught in a similar situation, I would know how to act. Work related values taught within the home are, therefore, validated through their practice within public,

professional and social contexts. The implications of these values, however, reach beyond my mother's working-class background and identity.

Working-class identity is a tricky subject. On the one hand, we have members of the community identifying themselves as working-class based on shared cultural and social experiences. My mother, for instance, especially remembers going to the local school as evidence of her belonging to the working-class community of Malki, Shillong.

'The rich kids in the neighbourhood never went there,' she tells me.

On the other hand, working-class identity is also imposed from without, often with a tinge of bias by those who think they know what being 'working-class' means. My memory takes me back to 2002, when the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE) results were declared. I received a meagre 74 overall percentage. I was disappointed and particularly so when my paternal grandmother, my Meikha,[5] had a thing or two to say on the matter.

'Don't be disappointed,' she told me. 'You are, genetically speaking, not designed to do well in academics.'

My paternal grandmother, a teacher, was referring to my working-class lineage. In my Meikha's eyes, working-class legacies were distinctive because the community was/is by and large illiterate. My being middle-class, according to my Meikha, did not absolve me of my working-class antecedents. Meikha, like any other human being, however, was not infallible. Sixteen years on, the encounter impressed upon me the need to re-visit my working-class heritage, if only to prove Meikha wrong. I also realized that digging up my past is necessary in order for me to come to terms with a narrative that is deemed problematic and bound to fail.

The narrative begins with a plague in the village of Nongjri near Pynursla in East Khasi Hills District. San Klis Warjri, my mother's cousin, provides me with an account of what happened then.

Set among the rolling hills near Pynursla is the village of Nongjri. My ancestors lived there. Their economic and personal well-being

was taken care of by farming and their participation in trade. From what San Klis Warjri tells me, the Warjri clan must have been quite prosperous. This claim to prosperity is supported by the fact that Bah Kyrhai Warjri, my maternal grandmother's cousin, was able to obtain a large piece of land when he re-located from Nongjri to Malki, Shillong. At the turn of the 20th century, however, a plague overwhelmed the village. People died by the hundreds. According to family lore, there was only one old woman, seated beneath a rubber tree, who escaped the plague. It was at this time that my maternal great-grandmother, Kong Kyndir Warjri, decided to leave her place of birth. How she travelled the 30-odd kilometres to reach her destination in Shillong is a journey that is left to the imagination. Then, unlike now, the road to Shillong was barely a path cutting across dense forests filled with wild beasts and the occasional robber. The trek must have been dangerous as well as arduous. After a hiatus of a month or so at Nongkrem, Kong Kyndir Warjri made it to Malki. She settled in a three-room wooden hut where she promptly set up shop as a dealer in local alcohol or *kyiad.*

The hardships that my maternal great-grandmother faced must have hardened her to life. She is remembered as a woman with a caustic tongue, unforgivable in her reprimands both to her family and customers. ('She used her tongue like a two-edged sword,' my mother tells me). She was also engaged in a trade that, with the onset of Christianity in Khasi Hills, was deemed illegal and disrespectful. It is, perhaps, not a coincidence that the line of work she was engaged in should be dominated by females. In his monograph, *The Khasis* (1914), P. R. T. Gurdon remarks on the prevalence of Khasi females who were engaged in the manufacture and distribution of *kyiad* in Khasi Hills. He writes:

> The manufacture of country spirit gives employment to a considerable number of persons, most of whom are females. At a census of the country stills in the district, undertaken by the district officials, the number of stills was found to be 1,530. There must be at least one person employed at each still, so that the number of distillers would be probably not less than 2,000,

> possibly more. The spirit is distilled both for home consumption and for purposes of sale, in some villages almost entirely for sale (p. 27).

Until the 1960s, therefore, Kong Kyndir Warjri worked in a sector that many of her contemporaries, and women before her, had been working in for a long time. As a young girl, my mother remembers carrying empty bottles to be filled with *kyiad* by the main dealer in Malki market. The *kyiad* was taken to customers surreptitiously and Kong Kyndir Warjri would take care to hide the bottles behind the wooden planks of her home should the state authorities come by for a surprise check. From the very beginning of her working-class career, therefore, my maternal great-grandmother was placed on the fringes of Shillong society. Her profession, which was illegal, made her a criminal in the eyes of the law. Moralistically too, she was regarded as an outcast, tempting Khasi men to waste their time drinking when they should be looking after their wives and children. And yet, it was all she could do to support her children and grandchildren.

'Poverty. Extreme poverty compelled her to sell *kyiad,*' San Klis tells me.

Poverty, however, could not stand in the way of moral convictions dictated by the Presbyterian Church. Counselled by her children and community members, Kong Kyndir Warjri gave up her profession to become a member of the Presbyterian Church in the early 1970s. Her decision to do so coincided with a larger socio-religious diktat that viewed the selling of *kyiad* as an unrespectable profession. As early as 1914, Christian churches—most notably the Welsh Presbyterian Church—were actively involved in tempering the tide of alcoholism in the Khasi Hills. In *The Khasis* (1914), Gurdon comments on the widespread intake of *kyiad* in Khasi and Jaiñtia Hills:

> Drunkenness prevails on every market day at Cherrapunji, Jowai, and other large hats, and on occasions when there are gatherings of the people for various purposes. This cheap but strong spirit is demoralising the people, and more restriction of its use would be welcomed by many. In the Khasi Welsh Methodist

> Church abstention from liquor is made a condition of Church membership, but the vast number of stills and the facilities with which liquor can be obtained are a constant source of temptation to the Christian community, and cause many defections (p. 54).

Gurdon's observations reveal the popularity of *kyiad* as a social, communitarian drink. What is also interesting are the moral underpinnings associated with its consumption. The consumption of *kyiad* is seen as a 'demoralizing' influence on the Khasi community, a notion that is popularized through support from Christian religious institutions. But because its manufacture and distribution was primarily done by women, it is safe to assume that working-class women would have faced the brunt of religious and social ostracization as a result of their trade. Christianity has been, and still is, the moral watchdog of Khasi society. But to solely attribute moral correctness to the church would be myopic, overlooking the ethics that the working-class women themselves possessed irrespective of their religious affiliations. In my maternal great-grandmother's case, moral responsibility towards her family preceded any profession of religion. This is seen in her adoption of San Klis Warjri as a daughter long before she—Kong Kyndir Warjri—became a Christian.

San Klis Warjri does not know her precise date of birth. At the time of the interview, on 7thJuly 2018, she surmises that she must be 87-years-old. Having suffered a fall in 2010, she has been mostly confined at home and, since that time, has been out for family gatherings only during weddings, births and deaths. As she hobbles on her walking stick, I was struck by how much age had transformed an otherwise healthy body. Her present physical state, however, belies a sharp, decisive mind. When I approached her with my proposal to write a family history from the perspective of women, she responded with enthusiasm. A cup of tea and half a story later, we were ready to begin. She led me to the living-room where she promptly shut the door on the rest of the house.

'We must not be disturbed,' she says, ignoring entreaties from the rest of her family to conduct the interview in their presence.

Clearly, this is a woman who is sure of herself and is used to having her way. The decisiveness with which she claims her space is also reflected in her telling of stories. With very little prompting on my part, San Klis Warjri tells me of my familial origins (narrated above), her entry into the narrative and her role as a member of the family.

San Klis Warjri recollects a troubled past. When she was about six or seven, her mother, my grandmother's eldest sister, ran off to join a cult. The leader of the cult, Bah Kyrhai Warjri, had thought it necessary to lead his followers into the woods at Nongkrem to await the end of the world and Jesus Christ's Second Coming. San Klis' mother was never heard from again. Her mother's disappearance caused San Klis to come to terms with the enduring realities of displacement; a reality that she observes to be at work till today.

'We are all spread out,' she tellsme. 'Your mother is in Laitkor, I'm here in Laitumkhrah. We've all moved out of home [Malki].'

Yet Malki remained the place where San Klis' sense of belonging would be restored following the loss of her mother. Until then, however, little Klis was brought up by her father, a carpenter. Whenever money was hard to come by, San Klis Warjri was taken to her paternal relatives' place where she was made to eat. After some time of wandering about from place to place, depending on the work her father found, San Klis Warjri was adopted by my maternal great-grandmother's eldest sister, Meirad Heh.

'She [Meirad Heh] would never beat me,' San Klis tells me. 'I was an orphan, you see.'

It was with the admonishment from Meirad Heh that San Klis should never be beaten that the little girl was eventually handed over to Kong Kyndir Warjri.

'If she [Kong Kyndir Warjri] so much as raises a hand against you, you're free to come home to me,' Meirad Heh told San Klis Warjri at the time of their parting.

Thus, with the reassurance that she could return anytime she wished, San Klis Warjri began her life in a new home. It must have been

hard for her initially especially since my maternal great-grandmother, Kong Kyndir Warjri, was never open in her affections.

'She [Kong Kyndir Warjri] was not a great talker. She never told stories,' San Klis Warjri tells me.

But this woman who was known only for heaping up curses against people gave San Klis Warjri the thing that she needed most of all—a family. The topic of San Klis' adoption is rarely discussed in the family. When I broached the subject with my mother, I was heavily reprimanded.

'Don't be stupid,' my mother scolds me. 'She [San Klis Warjri] is one of us.'

The assimilation of the adopted child into the family reflects a practice among the Khasi community where adopted children become indistinguishable from one's own biological children. Belonging to the same *kpoh* or womb, San Klis Warjri was readily integrated into the family. Later, when my maternal grandmother gave birth to her children, San Klis Warjri was looked upon as the eldest daughter. Oftentimes, she would play the role of a surrogate mother to her siblings. It is a role she takes seriously, especially in counselling her younger siblings on future marriage partners

What surprised me in my interactions with the women in my family is the near-absence of men from their narratives. When I asked San Klis Warjri about her marriage, she was reluctant to talk about it, revealing only her husband's name and the fact that she was probably 'married off' when she was 20. I also learned that my maternal ancestors, instead of being officially married in a church or the court, practised co-habitation. This is an important piece of information as it indicates personal agency between the women and their chosen partners where matters of love are concerned. Co-habitation does away with religious and state authority as social imperatives needed for the institution of marriage. Should a couple want to stay together, a meeting between their respective families is arranged where, barring social taboos, their status as a 'married' couple is decided. San Kils Warjri remembers

many instances when she acted as a mediator and facilitator between the families of couples who had decided to stay together.

'When your uncle wanted to stay with Ñia Rilin, I was the one who talked to her family,' she tells me. 'I also counselled him on various aspects of married life and starting a family.'

The roles that San Klis Warjri played as mediator and advisor, where conjugal relations within the family are concerned, are rather unusual. Usually, in Khasi society, such roles are given to the *kñi* or the uncle. Owing to their deaths, my maternal grandmother's brothers, Bah Jorshon Warjri, Bah Korshon Warjri and Bah Dorshon Warjri, were absent when my mother and her siblings wanted to start families of their own. The absence of the *kñi* enabled San Klis Warjri to come into her own as a primary negotiator and the go-to person where family affairs were concerned. It is a role that is hard earned and one that involved years of hard work and sacrifice on behalf of the family.

At about ten years of age, San Klis Warjri was compelled to leave school and was made to work as a help in a tea shop. The woman she worked for, Nah S, owned a tea shop near the Guwahati High Court in Shillong.

'Little one, wash my cup', 'Little one, bring me my tea' were words that would send San Klis Warjri scurrying around the shop to fulfil customers' demands. For her efforts, San Klis Warjri was given generous tips by the lawyers who visited the shop daily. She particularly remembers an incident when a man from Sohra[6] tipped her more than the usual fare.

'He gave me five rupees. In those days, five rupees was the equivalent of a hundred rupees today,' she tells me.

With the precious money in her hand, San Klis Warjri hurried over to her corner of the shop to stow away the prize.

'Meirad Kyndir will be happy today,' she thought. 'Imagine what five rupees would do. Maybe we could have a week's worth of that beef stew she always wanted.'

What San Klis Warjri imagined the five rupees could bring her, however, was short-lived.

'Did that man give you that?' asked an angry man's voice.

'Yes.'

'Return it to him immediately otherwise he'll take you away to be his wife.'

'His wife! Anii7! What does that even mean? If he takes me away, who will look after Meirad and Parad?'

It cannot be. So, with a drooping heart, San Klis Warjri returned the money surrendering, along with it, the promise of succulent beef stew. The experience would leave her in no doubt over the ethics that a woman needs in dealing with men; in the cut-throat world of jacks and kings, innocence and concern for one's family save the day.

San Klis Warjri continued to work as a daily wage labourer, mostly as domestic help in people's houses, until the mid-1950s when she finally got a job as a housekeeper at the government-run Pinewood Hotel. By then, she had married Bah Alfred Wahlang and had started a family of her own. But the lessons she learned while she worked at the tea shop would stay with her till today.

'Honesty,' she tells me, 'is what matters.'

Up until the time when she had a family of her own, San Klis Warjri would hand over all her earnings to my maternal great-grandmother, ensuring that—in no small way—she was responsible for seeing her younger siblings through school, an opportunity that she was denied.

Education is a much talked about subject in a working-class home; often, with a sense of distrust as to what it might achieve for an individual. Superstition also played a role in discouraging parents from sending their children to school. My maternal great-grandmother, Kong Kyndir Warjri, for instance, refused to send my maternal grandmother to school, believing that doing so would make the child susceptible to kidnapping by 'dkhars'.[8] But more than superstitious belief, poverty is a major deterrent in keeping children away from

classrooms. With so many mouths to feed, one simply cannot afford to spend money on education. Often, as was the case with San Klis Warjri, the oldest sibling would have to forgo school so that the needs of the younger siblings are met. But education gave working-class women something else that living without it did not—aspirations to be something other than what current reality offered. Certainly, this was true of my maternal grandmother, Meieit[9] Synjup Warjri.

I always picture Meieit Synjup Warjri glued to a *mula*[10] in a corner of the kitchen, mouth blood-red from chewing *kwai.*[11] This is the memory I have of my maternal grandmother. That, and the fact that she never spoke much. When she did, it would be to enquire if we had eaten lunch and, if not, whether we would like to have some with her. Because Meieit Synjup Warjri mostly kept to herself, I have very little first-hand information about her life. The little that I know of her past has been gleaned from my conversations with my mother and my aunts.

Meieit Synjup Warjri was the second youngest of eight siblings. Owing to the early death of the *khatduh* or youngest daughter, the custody of the family property fell on her. When she was about 20-years-old, she fell in love and co-habited with Bah Bekin Rymbai, a tailor. At an early age, Meieit Synjup Warjri nurtured a desire to go to school. She knew that she had to go to school if she wanted to become a nurse. She saw her contemporaries running off to school and envied them for it. And so, with her youngest sibling on her back, she would steal out of the house and attend the local government school at Malki.

Little is known about Meieit Synjup Warjri's brief time at school. Perhaps she learnt to recite the multiplication table. Perhaps she was rewarded by the teacher for getting her sums right. In any case, her experience in school impressed upon her the need to have her children educated. Meieit Synjup Warjri wanted her children to lead better lives than what fate had handed down to her and education, she thought, would be their passport out of the crippling poverty she saw around her. From an early stage in her adult life, Meieit Synjup Warjri scraped and saved whatever money she could to pay for her children's education.

Of course, the schools and colleges they were sent to were not premier institutions but my mother and her siblings were encouraged to take their education seriously. When it so happened that my uncle, Mama Hughlet Warjri, played truant he was in for a surprise.

It must be mentioned that Meieit Synjup Warjri was never one for corporal punishment. When any of her children went astray, she would gently chide them about their behaviour.

'She never raised a hand against any of us,' my mother recalls. 'She was a gentle soul.'

Very few things angered my maternal grandmother and one of them was when her children took their education lightly. The story goes that one day, Mama Hughlet Warjri decided that he would much rather go to the cinema than go to school. He was discovered by a neighbour who took the news of his truancy to Meieit Synjup Warjri.

'I saw him [Mama Hughlet Warjri] at Kelvin,' the neighbour said. 'What was he doing there?'

Mama Hughlet Warjri arrived home that day to a scowl on Meieit Synjup Warjri's face.

'So, you prefer the cinema to school, do you?' she asked him, 'We shall see.'

The next morning Meieit Synjup Warjri pronounced Mama Hughlet Warjri's punishment. While his brother and sisters went to school, he was instructed to carry sand on his back for the construction of a relative's house. Dejectedly, he reached for the conical bamboo basket (*ka khoh*) and its appendage (*ustar*) and went to work. His muscles strained at the effort, but Meieit Synjup Warjri would not let up. She was determined that her son would learn his lesson. The only time Mama Hughlet Warjri was allowed to rest was when he had his lunch and dinner. A day turned into two and two days became a week. Still, Meieit Synjup Warjri kept prodding her son on. She even neglected her duties at the tea shop to keep a watchful eye on her son. Finally, on the eighth day, she relented.

'Enough,' she said.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Mama Hughlet Warjri returned the *ka khoh* and *u star* to the corner of the kitchen. He finally understood what his mother was trying to teach him. If he neglected school he would have to spend the rest of his life building other people's houses while not having one himself. The incident also reveals a certain truism: most daily wage labourers in the Khasi community do not exercise free choice in their line of work. They become daily wage labourers out of necessity because that is the only form of work available to them. The lesson that Mama Hughlet Warjri learned from his mother made a deep, personal impression and influenced his choice of work. He went on to become an author, writing novels and short stories in the Khasi language for a living. Having taken care of her domestic responsibilities, Meieit Synjup Warjri returned to her working life as a tea seller.

If you ever make it to the Khasi Hills, you will find small shops made out of wood or, more recently, reinforced concrete on the roadsides. Usually, a sign hangs on the doors of these shops—'Hangne Die Sha bad Ja' or 'Here, We Sell Tea and Rice.' On any given day, one finds numerous people gulping down cups of tea and *jadoh*[12] within the confines of the shops. These are the famous tea shops of Khasi Hills, reflecting the community's ongoing, quotidian connection to the colonial past.[13] Mostly run by women, these shops testify to the working roles that Khasi women play and their contribution to the everyday running of the economy. It was in one of these shops near the office of the Accountant General that Meieit Synjup Warjri conducted her business. Due to dearth of research and information on women running these tea shops, I have relied on interviews with a couple of women who are engaged in these businesses to get a sense of what everyday life in a tea shop is like.

A tea seller's day begins at dawn when the dough that has been prepared the night before is fried and made into *namkees, samosas* and rice delicacies such as *putharo*[14] that the customers have with their tea. By 10 in the morning, business starts. It marks the beginning of

a busy day where, apart from money, news and local gossip are also exchanged by the customers. Spending time in the tea shops keeps one in the know of the goings-on in the neighbourhood and regional as well as national politics. Exposed to this world, the working-class woman knows herself to be part of a larger social and political milieu. It is a rare tea shop proprietor who does not have an opinion on social and political issues. What happens in the public sphere of the tea shop translates into other political activities such as the family's support for political parties and voting. Thus, apart from economic benefits, the working-class woman has some degree of influence over the nature of public and political outcomes. Because of this work, the private and public domains overlap. Since the daughters of the house are called upon to help with the preparation of the snacks, the tea shop also reflects a gendered space.

My maternal aunt, San Wantimon Warjri, remembers helping Meieit Synjup Warjri in preparing the food.

'We would make the dough for the *singaras* the previous day,' she says. 'This made it easier for my mother [Meieit Synjup Warjri] to fry them in the morning. The food was always fresh which attracted a lot of customers to her shop.'

Born on March 1, 1950, San Wantimon Warjri remembers a time before technological innovations in the form of computers made an appearance. She began her work as a typist, and by the time she retired in 2008, she had become a supervisor for typists at the BSNL office.

'Computers,' she says, 'have made such professions redundant.'

Together with ushering a new era in telecommunications, however, the age of computers also did away with the communitarian values that San Wantimon Warjri perceives to be central to her narrative.

'I remember a time when people were good. Not like today,' she tells me.

Her memory takes her back to her childhood.

'We went to school in the Mission Compound where all the poor children went. We didn't even have shoes,' she says.

One day, she tells me, as she and her friends were walking to school, a black car followed them.

'Go away! Go away!' yelled the frightened children.

Fifty metres and the car still kept following. By now, San Wantimon Warjri and her friends were terrified. Of late, they had been hearing rumours of *nongshohnoh*[15] kidnapping children in big, black cars with tinted windows just like the one following them. Fortunately for them, another car pulled over.

'That black car is owned by a *nongshohnoh,*' the driver of the second car told them. 'Do not worry. Walk along and I'll escort you to school.'

San Wantimon Warjri and her friends reached school safely that day. But the driver in the second car could have easily been the bus conductor who would give her a free ride everyday, the neighbour who looked after her when her mother was away or the man who owned a horse cart and gave my mother and her friends a bumpy ride to school. Whatever the situation one finds oneself in there are always people and family to count on. It was also concern for the family that influenced San Wantimon Warjri's decision to help her mother, Meieit Synjup Warjri.

'The tea shop was our bread-and-butter,' she tells me. 'It was important that I also pitched in to help in running the business.'

Meieit Synjup Warjri's duties were not confined to the shop alone. She also made it a point to visit the neighbouring offices to sell her wares. As the proprietor of a tea shop, she engaged a couple of girls to help her with the running of the shop. Washing dishes, cleaning and delivering tea to office workers—as is the case with tea shops today—were taken care of by these helpers. When one of them (or both) was absent, however, it fell on my mother's older sister, San Wantimon Warjri, to fulfil their duties. Often, especially when the time came to collect credit owed to Meieit Synjup Warjri from the office workers, San Wantimon Warjri would forgo a day at school to help collect the money. Like the running of tea shops today, the wages that Meieit Synjup Warjri earned from her business were not much. As Miss S, a present-day tea shop proprietor tells me, missing one day at work

could make a difference in whether the rent for the month is paid or not. The economics of the tea shop are tied as much to the size of the business[16] as to familial obligations. Owning a rather small business, Meieit Synjup Warjri could not afford to take time off work. When Mama Hughlet Warjri played truant, therefore, the matter was serious enough to warrant her presence at home for a week, at the very least. For Meieit Synjup Warjri, it was the family that sustained life outside of it; the tea shop being an establishment that extended her role as a mother and breadwinner for her family. Meieit Synjup Warjri's profession is also connected to her belonging to a place where most of the residents have working-class lineages.

Then, unlike now, Malki was a sparsely populated locality with most of its inhabitants belonging to the working-class community. As it turns out, most of the women from Malki were tea sellers. My mother, Antina Warjri, gives me a sense of how selling tea was indicative of one's belonging to the working-class community in Malki, Shillong.

'Malki tea was very famous,' my mother tells me. 'How could Meieit Synjup Warjri be anything else but a tea seller given the popularity of tea in the Malki community?'

Although my mother's observations are innocently articulated there is a gendered component to her words. Why is it that a majority of tea sellers from Malki were women? Is it possible that gendered identities within the domestic sphere also influenced one's chosen profession? Domestic duties were, according to my mother, divided on the basis of gender. While the men in the house were required to do physically demanding chores such as carrying water from the local pump, women were expected to do 'soft' chores such as preparing meals and washing utensils and clothes. The tea shop, which entailed that women should serve customers tea and food, make polite conversation with their 'guests' and wash dishes (the latter evidenced in highly scrubbed utensils), was a public extension of domestic duties nurtured within the confines of the home. While such duties did not yield monetary rewards when performed within the confines of the home, the same duties in the tea shop were a means of livelihood. The

performance of gendered identities, therefore, is held in place by their nurturing in the domestic sphere and by the system of reward that accompanied such a performance in the public sphere.

CONCLUSION: THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

The three-room hut that was home to my maternal great-grandmother, Kong Kyndir Warjri, and after her, my maternal grandmother, Meieit Synjup Warjri, has been dismantled. In its stead is a three-storeyed house where my cousins now live. There is a frost-free refrigerator in the corner of the kitchen but the past, it seems, refuses to die down. On chilly days, a *chulha* is brought out and we gather around the fire. The stories are told once more and we, the fourth generation, are transported back to the past. They are stories of dreams and losses; but more importantly, of hope. Because my maternal ancestors survived displacement, poverty and hardship, it is implied that I will do the same.

Several features of these narratives in a working-class home stand out. In the absence of history to testify to the existence and achievements of working-class women in Khasi Hills, memory plays an important role in shoring up narratives that historical records have left out. This memory which places the working-class subject within the matrix of social, political and cultural forces, seeks to dismantle the same by creating subjects whose peripheral presence constantly challenges the dominant narrative. Stories told around the hearth stem from working-class women's needs and desires to be remembered in ways that are especially subversive. On the other hand, the performance of normative gendered roles need not be indicative of oppression. Resourcefulness on the part of the gendered subject enables a woman to transcend patriarchal barriers and question the social status quo. Often, as is seen in their narratives, working-class women step into societal roles traditionally assigned to men as workers, disciplinarians

or familial mediators. The working-class woman, therefore, shows that gender is, essentially, a fluid identity both at home and in the public sphere. She occupies an in-between place, balancing societal expectations on the one hand and simultaneously questioning what society expects of her on the other. Hence, the act of remembrance is characterized by liminal gendered variables.

While the notion and character of work changes with each succeeding generation (my cousins and I lead fairly middle-class lives now), working-class legacies still form the bedrock against which identity and belonging are measured. Household chores such as cooking, cleaning and washing dishes still form part of our daily, quotidian commitments to our working-class past. The ethics related to work are especially noteworthy in this regard. By telling their stories, the women interviewed in this essay impart values of honesty and perseverance to succeeding generations.These values of underlying work remain in place even when the subject—as in the case of my mother, Antina Warjri—enjoys middle-class amenities. Apart from surnames, therefore, what are passed down in matrilineal societies are ethical values associated, in this instance, with belonging to a certain class. Working-class memory itself, however, stretches back to historical, geographical and gendered narratives of identity formation.

One of the key components dealt with in this essay is the role that community plays in nurturing gendered identities. Belonging to the working-class community in Shillong connects the women to places and histories that are revisited each time their stories are told. As mentioned earlier, Meieit Synjup Warjri's decision to become a tea seller was aided by the fact that her female contemporaries from Malki were tea sellers too. It is from them that Meieit Synjup Warjri learned the tricks of the trade—how to serve customers, how to make her snacks and how to sell her wares—all the while maintaining the gendered roles that she learnt within the confines of the home. Working-class and gendered identities in the domestic sphere, therefore, have material and community related outcomes in the public sphere.

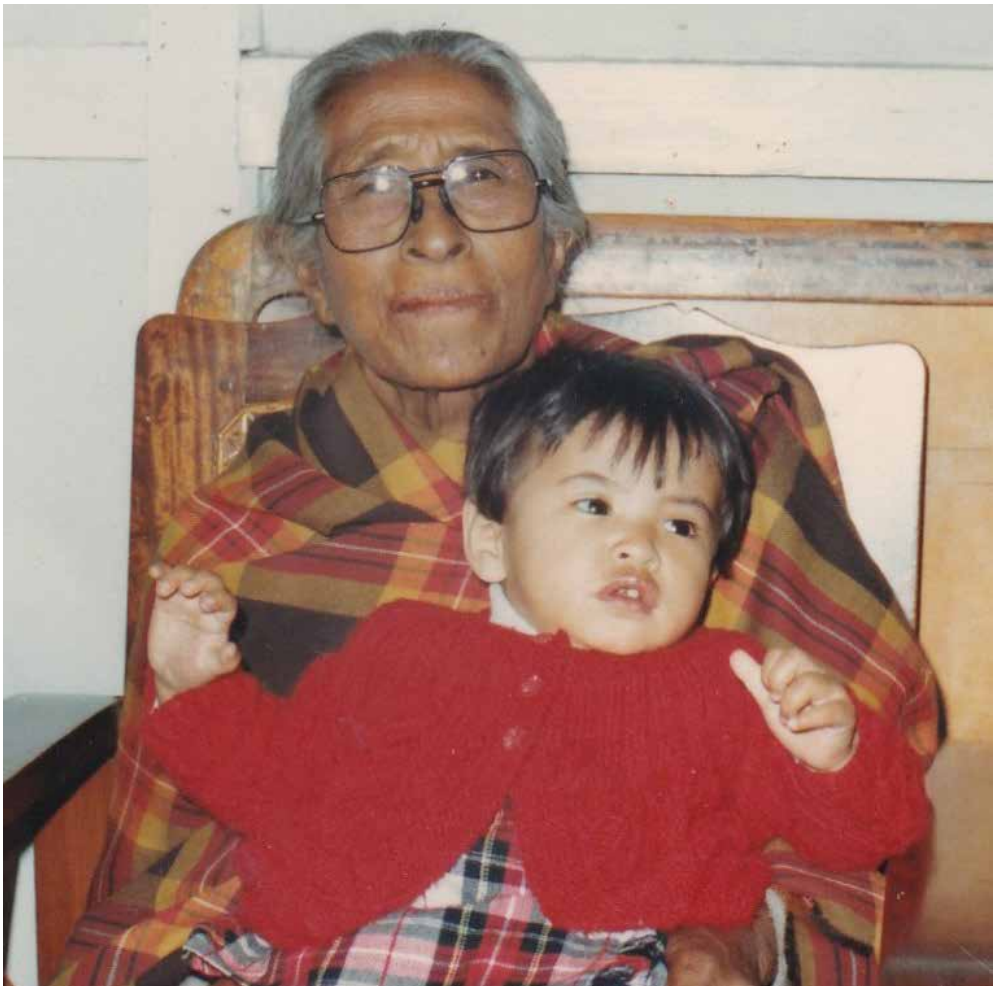
In his work, *Time and Narrative Vol. 1*(1984) Paul Ricoeur observes that narratives are human experiences of time:

> The world unfolded by every narrative is always a temporal world. Or, as will often be repeated in this study: time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized in the manner of narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal existence (Ricoeur 3).

We know an event to have passed through the telling of a tale and we understand our own relationship to this past through our experience of the present. Narratives, particularly historical ones, tell us where we come from, who we are and what we are meant to be. In narrating the stories of my maternal ancestors and their progeny I hope, that in a small way, the humanity of the working-class women, interviewed here, has been restored and that the myths associated with them are called to question. In a climate of historical and cultural erasures, it becomes all the more important to reconnect with undisclosed and misrepresented pasts.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Display No. 1: The People



Meieit Synjup Warjri with the author

Three generations of Warjri women (from left to right): San Klis Warjri, her daughter Kong Christina Rebecca Warjri and Meieit Synjup Warjri

San Klis Warjri

San Wantimon Warjri

From left to right: My mother's youngest sister (Late) Santina Warjri and my motherAntina Warjri

From left to right: Meieit Synjup Warjri and her youngest daughter (khatduh) (Late) Santina Warjri

Display No. 2: The Objects

Conical bamboo basket (ka khoh) and its appendage (u star)

A water carrier (bhar) being carried by a man at the local village pump

Top: Tea kettles being put to warm on the hearth (dpei) of a local Khasi tea shop

NOTES

1. See http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2016/06/17/hawkers-may-have-rights-but-what-about-responsibilities/
2. This letter is by no means the only response to hawking in the summer of 2016. Positive responses on behalf of the hawkers have been made by people like Bhogtoram Mawroh, Rev. N. B. Diengdoh and Phrangsngi Pyrtuh. This letter, however, represents the predominant feelings of those belonging to the elite circles in Shillong and who, by controlling social and state machinery, constitute 'mainstream' Shillong society.
3. My mother's birth date was given to her by a teacher in school. Being semi-literate, her own parents had not thought it important to record her actual date of birth.
4. What Tiplut Nongbri in the book *Gender, Matriliny and Entrepreneurship: The Khasis of Northeast India* (2008), observes of Khasi women who are entrepreneurs is true in the case of my family as well. In her book, Nongbri argues that the Khasi women's engagement in trade and other economic activities is a 'natural extension' of their familial duties. Thus, apart from economic constraints, domestic concerns impel Khasi women to work (See Nongbri, 2008: 55).
5. Term of endearment used to refer to one's paternal grandmother. The word literally translates as, 'mother from whom I was born.'
6 Khasi name for Cherrapunjee.
7. An expression of astonishment.
8. A Khasi nomenclature referring to people from outside of the community, usually from 'mainland' India.
9. A term of endearment used to refer to one's maternal grandmother. The literal translation of the word is 'mother who is loved.'
10. A low stool made of bamboo weave.
11. The Khasi name for the areca nut had with betel leaf, lime and tobacco.
12. A local rice delicacy in Khasi Hills which is made from pig's or chicken's blood.
13. In the book, *A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World* (2017), Erika Rappaport writes that tea was a pre-colonial wild plant found in the British controlled area of Assam of which Meghalaya was also a part (p. 88). As a beverage, however, tea was introduced to Khasi Hills by the British.
14. Rice pancake made from ground rice and water.
15. Kidnappers believed to be in league with people who practiced black magic.

16. In recent times, bigger tea shops have been established catering to the middle and upper middle classes in Shillong society. These tea shops differ from the smaller tea shops in terms of location, space and the prices of the food they sell. The bigger tea shops are located in posh localities such as Laitumkhrah and Police Bazaar, and the prices of their food and beverages are at least three times more than the smaller tea shops. The existence of these bigger tea shops reflects the extent to which Khasi culture, including its cuisine, has been capitalized for the sake of tourism and other allied industries.

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