The Politics of Civil Society Beyond the State: gender, identity, and insecurity

ABSTRACT

The role of civil society is vital for conceptualising, framing, and addressing human insecurity. However there is a tendency to view civil society as an unequivocal good without subjecting it to critical analysis. This paper argues that the capacity of civil society is influenced not only by the state but also by civil society itself. Identity politics, power relations, and existing inequalities between and within communities affect the ability of formal and informal organisations to contest the causes of insecurity. This paper uses examples from the Khasi Hills Districts in the Indian state of Meghalaya to demonstrate the influence of these factors on civil society. By focusing on the role of civil society in addressing gender-based insecurity, this paper will conclude by arguing that civil society is a much more dynamic and contradictory sphere than is often recognised. In order for human security to be achieved the ability of the marginalised to voice their insecurity must be examined critically.
INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to come to a critical understanding of the links between civil society and human security by examining the constraints on civil society actors in local contexts. While this paper is the result of empirical research in Northeast India, the main thrust is to locate politics in the linkages between civil society and human security and urge for a deeper empirical analysis on the constraints on civil society, especially in the Third World. For human security to realise its potential as a challenge to conventional understandings of security and as means to achieve human development, the role of civil society is vital. Civil society actors need to be able to contest the causes of insecurity in order for these to be addressed by state and non-state actors with the capacity to change existing conditions. While many studies of civil society discuss the potential of civil society to challenge existing orders and achieve human security, there is very little discussion of the ability of civil society to do so. As authors such as Chandhoke (2003), Jenkins (2001), and Mosher (2002) have argued, there is a tendency to view civil society as an unequivocal good without subjecting it to critical analysis. Furthermore recent criticisms of civil society are largely restricted to global civil society with few analyses of civil society at the local level and the relationship between the local, the national, and the global (Bond, 2006; Katz, 2006; Munck, 2006). By using the example of gender-based civil society actors in the Indian state of Meghalaya, this paper argues that civil society is constrained by three main factors, the constructions of gender in local and national politics, the power of ethnic identity politics, and by material inequalities within local contexts. This paper argues that for these constraints to be transcended, the concepts of civil society and human security need to be critically re-examined.

This paper begins by discussing the relationship between civil society and human security and introduces Meghalaya as the site of empirical research. The second section discusses the extent of gender-based insecurity in Meghalaya. The third section analyses the constraints on civil society in contesting the causes of gender-based insecurity. The fourth section uses this case study to discuss the ways in which the concepts of civil
society and human security need to be critically re-examined. The paper will conclude by briefly discussing the conditions under which these constraints may be transcended.

**LOCALISING CIVIL SOCIETY AND INSECURITY**

Civil society has become one of the most popular concepts among academics, policy-makers, international organisations, NGOs, and activists over the last 20 years. Definitions of civil society vary greatly, though most analyses refer to a “third sphere” of political activity that is separate from the state and the market (Cohen and Arato, 1992, p. 18; see also Cohen, 1995; Hardenius and Uggla, 1998; Keane, 1988, 2003; Khilnani, 2001; Scholte, 2002; Seligman, 2002; Walzer, 1995, 2002). At an empirical level this can be extremely problematic as actually locating an autonomous “sphere” within a particular empirical context can be very difficult. Nevertheless the “three sphere” model forms the basis of contemporary understandings of the concept and thus serves as a useful starting point to critique and modify the concept.

Civil society is commonly used to refer to NGOs, social movements, community groups, religious organisations, and advocacy networks. They are theorised as inclusive, vigilant, and progressive social forces in cooperative and oppositional relationships with the state and the market. They also embody the transnational element that theorists are very eager to promote as the defining factor in contemporary understandings of civil society. Thus for these theorists civil society is a transnational ethical space; a culture for the 21st century (Kaldor, 2003). However, in the local context civil society is far more complex. Not all actors involved in civil society share a particular normative vision, nor do they all follow progressive ideologies or methods. Furthermore, the role of small, informal, and resource-poor organisations is often overlooked as their impact is only felt locally. Many of these organisations do not appear in analytical frameworks focussing on civil society at a global or even a national level. For obvious reasons, formal organisations with professional staff, resources and funding, charters, missions, websites, and visible campaigns will gain more attention, yet this focus often obscures the forms in which civil
society takes in local contexts and the ways in which large numbers of people interact with civil society. These organisations all have an impact on which issues are contested and politicised in civil society, and thus a more complex understanding of the aims and the types of organisations existing in civil society in local contexts is vital as without access to civil society at a local level accessing wider networks of global civil society is extremely difficult. The organisations investigated in this paper range from well-funded formal organisations, to part-time collectives, to ethno-nationalist organisations with close ties to insurgent groups.

There is a very limited discussion of the ways in which civil society develops in local contexts in the Third World. Advocates of civil society tend to focus on the global level, while critics point out that the global is not representative of the Third World as a bloc or of civil society in domestic contexts. Yet as Corry (2006) argues, both of these approaches are still centred on a statist approach to civil society. In order to move beyond this approach I argue that it is local political circumstances, rather than the global or the inter-state, which have a far greater impact on the formation of civil society and also reveal far more about the dynamics of civil society. Actors with a local orientation are often far more influential over local politics and activism. (James, 2005, p. 19) Most people in the world, especially the people whose lives are apparently enriched by the “rebirth” of civil society, will not have any influence on the policies, strategies, and programs formulated by civil society actors; not only actors from the other side of the world, but local actors as well. The only contact with civil society most people in the will have is with village level associations, kin and clan groups, peasant organisations, cooperatives in town markets, grassroots development groups, schools, and religious organisations. Many of these organisations will have few resources, no office, no telephone number, logo, or full-time staff. There are numerous studies of civil society in local contexts, focussing on both “national” civil societies and actors in sub-national contexts; often based on particular issue or campaign (Beckman, 1998; Carapico, 1996; He, 2004; James, 2005; Sassen, 2002; Vichit-Vadakan, 2003; Weiss, 2004). Yet the variation in the findings from these empirical studies seems to have had little impact on the conceptualisation of civil society overall. In effect, these empirical studies and
generalised theoretical studies are talking past each other. Thus a reflexive critical approach to civil society in empirical context is needed if a more practical understanding of civil society at the local, national, and global levels is to be developed.

In local contexts, as in national and global contexts, some actors in civil society can be exclusive, repressive, and coercive in certain circumstances. In other words, civil society is not just a sphere inhabited by oppositional social forces pursuing progressive changes, rights, and equality, but civil society itself can constrain and marginalise certain actors and certain issues (Mosher, 2002). Racist organisations and fundamentalist organisations are obvious examples, yet civil society also contains organisations that support and spread the values of the dominant and powerful in society (Cox, 1999, p. 6; Simon, 1982 p. 37). This form of exclusion is less obvious and comes from the marginalisation of particular values that are contrary to dominant values, and the space of civil society becomes closed to actors making claims against the dominant order.

**Human Security**

Human security shifts the focus of security away from the state and from armed conflict to focus on other threats affecting human life and to treat these as security threats, placing the security of individuals, not states, at its centre (Axworthy, 2001; Booth, 1991; Ogata and Cels, 2003; Thomas, 2000; ul Haq, 1995). A human security approach aims to emancipate individuals and communities from security priorities imposed from the outside, whether by the state or non-state actors, by allowing local actors to identify the cause of insecurity and demand that they be addressed, empowering these actors and communities in the process. In examining the obstacles that different groups of people in various locations face it is the absence of human security, referred to simply as insecurity, that is the most effective way of conceptualising threats to everyday existence. Essentially, if the condition of insecurity is felt by a group, or by individuals, it “counts” as a problem or issue, provided it can be *seen*. In a very basic sense, civil society plays a vital role in making insecurities visible and part of the political agenda. The politics of civil society are the major determinant in making the causes of insecurity visible; due to
the power of certain civil society actors and certain issues only particular causes of insecurity are politicised. This does not make the causes of insecurity that are not politicised any less real or any less severe for those experiencing them, but it is this process of politicisation that reflects the complex dynamics of civil society in local settings.

This paper is concerned with the ability to politicise the causes of insecurity, specifically gender-based insecurity. Which individuals and organisations are empowered to politicise insecurities locally and as a consequence nationally or globally? Why are some causes of insecurity politicised while others are left unaddressed? An examination of the constraints on politicising gender-based insecurity in the Indian state of Meghalaya will follow as an attempt to form an understanding of the ability of civil society actors to frame insecurities. However, first a brief introduction to the state of Meghalaya will be given.

Meghalaya

Meghalaya is a federal state in the Union of India. It is one of the smallest states in India (22,489 square kilometres) and also one of the poorest. Unemployment, urban migration, poverty, and school dropout rates are high and access to health care, adequate housing, adequate sanitation, and adequate livelihoods are very low (Planning Commission, 2001, p.146). Meghalaya is a hill-state, the land a combination of high plateaus and steep valleys between the Brahmaputra valley to the north (in the Indian state of Assam) and the plains of Bangladesh to the south. Meghalaya forms part of the region known as Northeast India (Northeast hereafter). The Northeast is the land wedged between Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh on the far eastern edge of the Indian Union. The region comprises of seven states and the population can be divided into three broad groups; hill tribes, plains tribes, and non-tribal communities. The term “tribe” is a colonial category and has persisted in postcolonial India to describe communities living in hill areas and on the margins of the colonial political economy (Xaxa, 1999). Although these communities do not necessarily fit the anthropological definitions of “tribal”, the term is not only part

Scheduled Tribes, the category used to describe these ethnic groups in the Indian Constitution, make up 87% of Meghalaya’s population of 2.3 million (S. Baruah, 2003, p. 52). The two main tribal groups are the Khasi\textsuperscript{i} and the Garo\textsuperscript{ii}. The non-tribal communities in the region are made up of migrants from other parts of India, many of who have lived in the region for centuries, and recent migrants from neighbouring countries, particularly Nepal and Bangladesh. The Khasi and Garo tribes fall under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution that provides autonomous district councils to regulate customary law and the occupation and use of land, as well as provide reservations in parliament, educational institutions, and government employment (A. Baruah, 2003; 2004; S. Baruah, 2003). In addition the Sixth Schedule recognises village councils as the legitimate and legal brokers of authority at a local level, known as “dorbars” in the Khasi Hills (Nongkynrih, 2002, p. 79).

From the time of its inception in 1947 to the present, the Sixth Schedule has had an enormous bearing on the human security of the Northeast economically, politically, and socially. Those communities that were granted special privileges and rights have done their best to exclude others from accessing these advantages. Thus “otherness” is applied to communities of migrants from other countries and other parts of India, as well as other tribal communities with ethnic and linguistic differences from the dominant community in a particular location. Several federal states in the Northeast have been formed through violent insurgencies; especially Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur (see S.Baruah, 2005; Nag, 2003). In all states violence against migrants dominates civil society and parliamentary politics (Hazarika, 1995; Kimura, 2003; Weiner, 1978). Meghalaya has not yet experienced a full-blown insurgency, but large-scale anti-Bengali and anti-Nepali riots have occurred in the capital Shillong on several occasions, and tensions between ethnic groups remain high (A. Baruah, 2003; 2004). Anti-migrant politics forms the basis
of political life, and thus civil society actors seeking to contest the causes of insecurity must compete with the power of this discourse.

Yet it is not just anti-migration politics that affects civil society. The Indian Government views the Northeast region through a national security framework and this has led to extensive restrictions being placed on participatory politics (S. Baruah, 2003). The Indian Government uses two main approaches to “secure” what they consider to be a sensitive and unruly border area. First, development funds are poured into the region through the centrally administered North East Council, the Border Roads Association, and the much more recent Ministry of Development of the North Eastern Region, in the hope of creating a more stable climate for investment and resource extraction (mostly oil and timber, but increasingly hydropower and uranium) and cultivating local elites (Sachdeva, 2000). Secondly, the Indian Army has been given extraordinary powers in counter-insurgency operations in the region, most notably through the Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958 (AFSPA). The AFSPA extends to all seven states in the Northeast and can be put into operation in any area declared “disturbed” by the Indian Government. The effects of the AFSPA have serious repercussions on the effective functioning and formation of civil society in the region, especially the provision to break up the assembly of more than five people (McDuie-Ra, 2005; SAHRDC, 1995).

In addition in Meghalaya civil society organisations must be registered with the government to gain funding and their autonomy is severely curtailed.iii The impact of the Indian Government’s approach has meant that insecurities outside the dominant framework of national security/ national development are poorly addressed or ignored by the state, and civil society actors critical of the government can be easily banned or harassed. Thus civil society is constrained by the national security approach of the Indian Government to the region and the powerful discourse of anti-migration politics emanating from within civil society, constraining civil society from above and below.
GENDER AND INSECURITY IN MEGHALAYA

This paper uses the case study of civil society and gender-based insecurity in the Khasi Hills districts of Meghalaya to demonstrate the complexities of civil society in local contexts. This case study is based on an extensive period of fieldwork in the Khasi Hills in 2005. During that time I interviewed formal and informal civil society actors involved in gender issues and in dominant modes of political activism in the Khasi Hills. These interviews form the basis of the following sections; however existing literature and government statistics are also used to support the claims being made. As Sonpar and Kapur argue, in order to analyse the complexities of gender relations both conventional quantitative indicators and non-conventional qualitative indicators need to be used, as many of the causes of insecurity affecting women cannot be easily measured using only one method (2003, p. 56). This chapter uses a similar approach, using quantitative and qualitative material to examine the causes of insecurity and the attempts to contest these causes.

A gender perspective on insecurity is concerned with the ways socially constructed gender roles create power inequalities between men and women in the public and private spheres. Thus a gendered perspective on insecurity recognises that women face different causes of insecurity and face different obstacles in contesting these causes. Gender-based insecurity has been used in this study for various reasons: respondents identified gender issues as one of the most significant causes of insecurity in the Khasi Hills, there is a large body of literature identifying gender-based insecurity as seriously affecting the quality of human life, and gender-based insecurity has been cast as “universal” and thus applying it to a particular location tests these claims of universality and may indicate how universal issues become localised. From this research it appears that the ability of civil society actors to contest the causes of gender-based insecurity will be influenced by three main factors, the constructions of gender in local and national politics, the power of ethnic identity politics, and by material inequalities within local contexts.
**Causes of Insecurity in the Khasi Hills**

This section gives a description of the main causes of gender-based insecurity in the Khasi Hills. These are: i) the impacts of changes to land usage and deforestation, ii) gendered poverty, and iii) domestic violence.

i) **The impacts of changes to land usage and deforestation.**

Land is a vital issue in the Khasi Hills as the majority of people in the state make their living from agriculture (Lahiri, 2000, p. 336). The present period is characterised by a transition from communal land (*ri raid*) to private land (*ri kythei*) administered through the village councils (Nathan, 2000; Nongbri, 2003, p. 128; Nongkynrih, 2002, p. 108). These changes to land ownership are having a major impact on women. There are three aspects to this and these are linked. First, the village councils determine the allocation and use of land, yet women are excluded from participating in the village councils at all levels, thus women have no input into how land, resources, and the environment are used and distributed at a village level. In addition, as the village councils have become increasingly powerful through land privatisations, logging concessions, and land leasing, the exclusion of women has led to their further marginalisation from political processes. Without political power or a presence in customary institutions, women cannot exercise rights over land (Agarwal, 1994, p. 151).

Secondly, women in the Khasi Hills face extreme hardships related to growing landlessness and the changes to the practices of shifting cultivation. As women undertake the majority of the labour in the cultivation of common land, the privatisation of land and the over-farming of poor quality land has been a major cause of insecurity. The reduced role of women in the production process has been accelerated by the increase in commercial agriculture which involves dealing with non-tribal merchants and traders, a practice usually undertaken by men (Barbora and Fernandes, 2002, p. 131).

Thirdly, the rise and fall of the timber industry in Meghalaya has also caused gender-based insecurity. Many authors argue that women from rural areas have felt the repercussions of this to a far greater extent than any other group (Nathan, 2000; Nongbri,
As unemployment has increased among the men working in the timber industry, the burden of income generation and food production has fallen on women. This has pushed women into other areas of the labour force, such as road construction, where they work for lower rates in order to undercut the surplus of male labour (Nongbri, 2001). In Meghalaya it is common to see small groups of women of various ages breaking piles of rocks by the side of the road to be used in road construction and repair.

This fairly abrupt poverty has led to a growing flow of people from former timber industry areas, such as the West Khasi Hills, to Shillong. Several respondents pointed out that a large proportion of these urban migrants are women and many of them come to the towns and work as hawkers and domestic workers and large numbers of teenagers, especially girls, come to Shillong to work as domestic maids. There has also been an increase in trafficking of young women from Meghalaya to other parts of India in the years since the ban, suggesting a link between the economic insecurity generated by the ban and the exploitation of that insecurity by organised crime.

**ii) Gendered poverty**

The human development indicators in the Khasi Hills are also heavily gendered. Meghalaya has a high level of female literacy at over 60.41% (Planning Commission, 2001, p. 186). However, female literacy is still lower than male literacy at 66% (Planning Commission, 2001, p. 186). Many other states have much higher rates of female literacy, including tribal majority states (Mizoram) and predominantly non-tribal states (Maharashtra and Punjab) (Planning Commission, 2001, p. 187). In Meghalaya’s rural areas only 54.2% of women are literate, compared to 84.3% of urban women (Planning Commission, 2001p. 188). Health indicators for women in Meghalaya are poor. The numbers of women with anaemia, used as a general measure of nutrition are very high, at 63.3% compared to the national average of 51% (Planning Commission, 2001, p. 246). Meghalaya has the lowest rate of births attended by health professionals in all of India at 20.8% (Planning Commission, 2001, p. 247). The percentage of births delivered in a medical centre is very low, and at 17.5% ranks among the bottom four states in India.
iii) Domestic violence

While official statistics of domestic violence are difficult to obtain, most of the civil society organisations and social activists interviewed for this research identified domestic violence as widespread in Khasi society. The National Family Health Survey published by the Government of India reveals that Meghalaya has the highest levels of domestic violence among Northeast states, 31% of women report being beaten or physically mistreated (2002, p. 79). Perhaps what is even more striking is that the rate of violence against women in Meghalaya is second overall in India, ahead of states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh where the position of women is perceived to be irreversibly dismal. The report does point out that comparisons between states are difficult due to the “cultural norms about revealing the experience of violence to strangers” and the extent to which women perceive the violence they may be experiencing as “beatings or physical mistreatment” (2002, p. 78). Thus some states may have a high incidence of underreporting. Even without the comparative component, the 31% figure is very high. This figure, and the revelation that Meghalaya had the highest percentage in the entire Northeast region, has been a catalyst for action among civil society organisations, as will be discussed below. One respondent pointed out that Khasi women see violence as being part of their lives that must be accepted and tolerated.

CONTESTING GENDER-BASED INSECURITY

If the causes of gender-based insecurity are so acute, why do they persist? Why do civil society actors in both Meghalaya and in other parts of India appear ineffective at addressing these causes? The answers to this question are complex but essentially they derive from the ways gender is politicised in Meghalaya. The following section identifies three main constraints that jeopardise the ability of civil society actors to contest the power relations at the root of gender-based insecurity and the structures and agents that perpetrate these relations: the constructions of gender in local and national politics, the
power of ethnic identity politics, and by material inequalities within local contexts. Thus an examination of these constraints reveals the ways power is manifested in civil society in Meghalaya, the power to politicise certain issues and set the political agenda, the lack of power to contest the way gender is politicised by influential actors, and the power embedded in particular institutions to control resources and access to political spaces. These three constraints will be discussed in turn below.

i) Constructing gender

Gender relations in the Khasi Hills need to be understood in the context of the matrilineal inheritance system. The prevalence of the matrilineal myth in discourses on gender both inside and outside the Khasi Hills has enabled a particular construction of gender relations to gain legitimacy. Matriliny has been framed as evidence that gender relations in Khasi society are egalitarian. It is argued that Khasi women are empowered and even that women have too much power. This framework has created a powerful construction that has a major impact on how gender-based insecurities are understood and contested in national and local spaces. In its most basic form, Khasi matriliny involves the passing of property and the continuation of clan lineage through female family members. When a family holds property the youngest daughter, *khaddu*, inherits customary rights over the house and land (Chacko, 1998, pp. 3-6; Nongkynrih, 2002, p. 95; War, 1998, p. 19). In these cases the youngest daughter lives in the family house and raises her family there taking care of her parents and any unmarried siblings (War, 1998, p. 19). In families with their own land the married daughters build their houses and raise their families on the same plot. The youngest daughter is the custodian of this property, but the actual management of the property is in the hands of the maternal uncles (War, 1998, p. 22).

The matrilineal system is important for the establishment of the *kur* or clan, as all Khasis descended from the same female ancestor are members of the same clan (Nongkynrih, 2002, p. 34). When a Khasi woman gives birth, whether the father is Khasi or non-Khasi, the children become part of the mother’s clan. Khasis take the name of their common female ancestor for their family name and marriage between members of the same clan is
forbidden. Clan affiliations still have a major role in Khasi society, especially in politics and business (Nongkynrih, 2002, p. 34).

Yet the actual experiences of matriliny are very different. The rights themselves, where they do still exist, are customary not authoritative (Nongbri, 2003, p. 204). Thus, as Nongkynrih stresses, despite inheriting customary control of the land, the youngest daughter does not inherit the right to sell all or part of the land or use it to generate profit-seeking business (2002, p. 97). Furthermore, the youngest daughter inherits property only if there is property to inherit and as landlessness increases there is often no property to give. Even if there is land passed on through the youngest daughter, control over the land rests with the male members of the family (Agarwal, 1994, p. 109). In addition, while the youngest daughter is less dependent on their husbands, all other daughters are heavily dependent on their husbands for material well-being (Agarwal, 1994, p. 147). Overall, the responsibilities far outweigh their privileges; men still make the decisions and women still bear the burden of caring for the extended family (Borgohain and Laitflang, 1995, p. 44).

Krishna argues that the visibility and involvement of women in economic life in tribal societies, as is the case in Khasi society, as compared to other parts of India, “have contributed to the myth of gender equality created by British ethnographers and reinforced by Indian administrators.” (2004, p. 385) Agarwal argues that there is a dramatic discord between the perceptions of matriliny and women’s actual experience of it (Agarwal, 1994, p. 146, 151). Most crucially, matriliny is still viewed as the empowerment of women and discrimination against men in the Khasi Hills (A. Baruah, 2004, p. 16). Several activists interviewed argued that this is because matriliny has been mistakenly framed as matriarchy. In other words, rather than being viewed as a form of inheritance, matriliny is framed as female dominance in all aspects of Khasi life. The mythology is a major part of Khasi identity. Yet for those facing gender-based insecurity it means that matriliny acts as a curtain behind which insecurity continues to spread. To question matriliny is to question the identity and traditions of the Khasi as an ethnic group at a time when identity politics is heightened over the issue of migration.
ii) Ethicising Gender: the “outsiders” discourse

The second aspect constraining the contestation of gender-based insecurity is the domination of identity politics in civil society. As discussed above, anti-migration politics, termed the “outsiders” discourse here, dominate social and political life in Meghalaya, empowering ethno-nationalist civil society actors and marginalising other actors. Civil society actors contesting gender-based insecurity face the double constraint that gender issues have no currency in the “outsiders” discourse and contesting gender relations challenges the constructions of ethnic identity that are central to this discourse.

In understanding the “outsiders” discourse it is not the numbers of migrants that is important but the perception of migration. Perceptions of migration have evolved into a set of narratives reproduced in civil society. The most common aspects of these narratives are as follows: the fear of cultural domination by larger ethnic groups, religious difference- Khasi people are either Christian or practice traditional religions while migrants are usually Hindu or Muslim, economic domination by non-tribal business people, and the loss of land to landless migrants. The portrayal is fatalistic; it is inevitable, there is nothing that can be done to change the factors that push “outsiders” into the Khasi Hills, the only approach is to stop the influx by contesting policies, laws, development projects, investments, and anything else that may lead to further migration. The causes are of little consequence.

If a cause of human insecurity can be framed in the terms of the “outsiders” discourse it becomes contested, debated, and often addressed by the state and civil society actors with the capacity to provide alleviation (McDuie-Ra, 2006). If a cause of insecurity does not fit into the discourse or challenges understandings of identity, then it is marginalised, and even co-opted into the “outsiders” discourse. This has been seen in recent years, as several prominent civil society actors campaigning against “outsiders”, have argued that Khasi women who marry and/or produce offspring with non-Khasi men are jeopardising
the future of the Khasi people and encouraging the influx of migrants into the state (Krishna, 2004, p. 286; Nongbri, 2003, pp. 207-211, 236-257).

The issue was raised when the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council attempted to codify the matrilineal system into law, to heavy opposition from civil society actors, most notably the Ka Syngkong Rympei Thymmai (SRT) and the Khasi Students Union (KSU). The SRT argue that authority over children should be given to their father, that children be included into the clan of the father, that parents should be cared for and live with their sons, but most crucially; if a daughter marries a non-Khasi then she should lose her right to property and the children will be unable to benefit from the Sixth Schedule and the reservations for tribals (Nongbri, 2003, p. 210). The KSU and SRT argue that the matrilineal system allows too many people to be able to pass as Khasis, and if the matrilineal system is allowed to continue then the Khasi tribe will be extinct in 10 to 15 years (S. Baruah, 2003, p. 48). They have argued that allowing the children of a Khasi woman and non-Khasi man to be considered Khasi and part of the clan will encourage inter-ethnic marriages compromising the economy, land, and the identity of Khasis.

Matriliny has been politicised as a question of cultural survival. Relationships between Khasi women and non-Khasi men have been framed as a way for “outsiders” to gain access to land, jobs, and political positions. This campaign raises serious issues about the rights and position of women in Khasi society. It also shows the way in which civil society actors have drawn on identity and manipulated the conventional view of matriliny to legitimise their power and push their ethno-nationalist agenda. The debate questions the property, employment, and political rights of many people in Meghalaya who think of themselves as Khasi, and makes the situation even more difficult for non-Khasis who are not covered by the Sixth Schedule. Most significantly, the opposition to the bill jeopardises a Khasi woman’s right to choose her partner (Behal and Warjri, 2003, p. 13). In Khasi society women have generally had the freedom to choose their husbands, though the khadduh, youngest daughter, has had some constraints (Agarwal, 1994, p. 147). It is a strange proposition, the self-proclaimed protectors of Khasi values and traditions, seek to reconstruct one of the most durable aspects of the culture. As Nongbri argues, the Khasi
woman’s body has become a battleground for identity politics (2003, p. 257). Women are being claimed for the tribe, for the ethnic group. In reference to the opposition to the bill, a female Khasi student was quoted in a local magazine as saying “…they (pressure groups) are telling us not to wear this but to wear that, they are telling us not to marry ‘outsiders’, they are telling us that women who marry ‘outsiders’ are traitors, and so on.” (quoted in Chhakchhuak, 2003, p. 9) Chhakchhuak argues that this is not only the case in the Khasi Hills but in other parts of the Northeast as identity politics penetrates further into political and social spaces (2003, p. 9). As Chhakchhuak puts it, “women have no say in the process (of identity politics) except as some low down minions, as mere spectators supporting one side or the other.” (2003, p. 9)

iii) Access to political spaces

The third major issue constraining the contestation of gender relations is the limitations on the participation of women in political institutions. This has local and national dimensions. In the local context, women are prohibited from participating in the village councils on the grounds that it is against tradition. Nongbri argues that men prevent women from participating in the village councils to consolidate their position in political institutions and control over land and assets (2003, p. 204). She sites a popular saying in Khasi folklore: that “when the hen (a woman) starts to crow the world will come to an end” to demonstrate the belief that the demonstration of political participation by women “denotes an unnatural phenomenon, since according to the law of nature it is only the cock (male) that crows.” (2003, p. 204) In Meghalaya decisions over the nature of development, access to resources and land ownership have enormous implications for women and the majority of these decisions are made in institutions in which women have little or no representation and limited access. It is ironic that in a state where many claim that women are in a position of dominance they are not involved in village-level political structures and have a very low level of representation in both the district councils and the state parliament. At present only three seats out of 60 in the state legislature are held by women (Government of Meghalaya, 2006).
In contemporary Khasi society the village councils are difficult to challenge as they have evolved into powerful institutions, much removed from their original social functions (A. Baruah, 2003, pp. 9-11). Apurba Baruah argues that since the formation of Meghalaya, elites have been able to extend their influence and control over the village councils (2004, p. 13). Political parties nominate candidates for election as headman (*Rangbah Shnong*) in different village councils, extending their influence at the grassroots and curbing the autonomy of village councils to make decisions. In the conflict between tradition and modernity it appears that the modern political institutions have been able to co-opt and reconstitute the traditional, strengthening the power of the village councils and making the issue of wider participation or lack of it, even more crucial. The village councils continue to assume many of the functions formerly carried out by the state, from the issuing of trade licences to the distribution of land for cultivation. Yet tradition is still invoked to restrict the participation of women.

In the national context, the construction of Meghalaya and the assumptions about gender relations contained within these constructions means that initiatives taken in other parts of India to redress the gender imbalance in political institutions have not been extended to Meghalaya. In other parts of India there has been a shift towards re-empowering village level governance with greater responsibilities and greater levels of representation (Mitra, 2001, p. 108). The 73rd Amendment formalises the Panchayati Raj institutions in a three-tier system of governance at the village level, the intermediate level (or cluster), and the district level (Das, 1998, p. 32). At all three levels the Panchayatis have reservations for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and at least one-third reservation for women, and all seats are contested through direct elections. This has been hailed as the portent of a more participatory democracy at a local level and recognition that other forms of governance, resource allocation, and development have excluded different groups based on caste, ethnicity, and most significantly gender.

However, the 73rd Amendment does not apply to areas covered by the Sixth Schedule including Meghalaya. The primary reason given is that these areas have traditional village level institutions provided by the Sixth Schedule. In 1996 the Bhuria Committee,
headed by Shri Dilip Singh Bhuria, a tribal member of parliament from the state of Madhya Pradesh, was set up to examine whether the 73rd Amendment should be applied to tribal areas in India. The committee recommended that the 73rd Amendment should not be applied to the Sixth Schedule areas of the Northeast as they have their own customary institutions and are largely free from gender discrimination (Nongbri, 2003, p. 217). A second commission formed in 2001 came to the same conclusion (National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution, 2001).

Nongbri has strongly critiqued the Bhuria Committee for completely ignoring gender issues (2003, p. 221). She points out that “not once in its 30-point summary of recommendations did the Bhuria Committee report touch on the issue of women’s representation.” (2003, p. 221) She argues that this reflects the continuing perception that women face no subordination in tribal societies. She extends this criticism to the Sixth Schedule itself, which she sees as being “completely silent on the question of empowerment and development for women.” (2003, p. 221) Despite its shortcomings the Sixth Schedule is a ground-breaking recognition of tribal rights and autonomy. It has played a crucial role in the survival of the minority tribal communities in the Northeast, and thus it has been difficult for civil society actors to criticise the Sixth Schedule without being accused of undermining tribal rights. Nongbri has been one of the few outspoken critics of the Sixth Schedule on gender grounds, “the valorisation of and so-called concern for the indigenous tribal institutions cannot be used as a scapegoat to deny women equal political rights.” (2003, p. 224). Darilyn Syiem from the women’s organisation the North East Network makes a similar point, arguing that to demand 33% reservations in the village councils invites the response that this is “against tradition”.

As Krishna argues, while the rest of India appears to be moving forward on gender empowerment, the Northeast appears to be moving backward (2004, p. 386). Contesting the cause of gender-based insecurity in civil society faces an enormous constraint in this regard.

The decision not to extend the 73rd Amendment to Meghalaya and other Sixth Schedule areas in the Northeast shows that the construction of Meghalaya in the national contexts
perpetuate certain assumptions about gender-relations, and these assumptions are used to deny changes to political structures that could empower women and increase their ability to contest the causes of insecurity discussed in the previous section. Yet as the assumptions about egalitarian gender relations and women’s empowerment in Meghalaya persist at a national level, the causes of insecurity perpetuate at a local level. As discussed above, the participation of women in local political institutions, both modern and traditional, is constrained, leaving the causes of gender-based insecurity largely unaddressed. Thus the ability of women to contest the causes of insecurity depends upon the ability of civil society actors to politicise gender issues and contest their causes outside of existing power structures; challenging these structures in the process.

CRITICAL CIVIL SOCIETY

There are three main findings from this research that are applicable to the study of civil society and human security in local contexts. First, the impact of identity politics has a major influence on the functioning of civil society, especially in locations where identity politics are heightened and constitutive of political, social, and economic relations. Secondly, the existence of power relations within civil society has a major impact on which actors can access civil society and thus which causes insecurities will be framed and contested. Thirdly existing inequalities based on ethnicity, class, and gender are not simply overcome by the mere existence of civil society. These will be discussed in turn below.

Civil Society and Identity

In locations where ethnic identity politics are heightened, such as the Khasi Hills, the agency of civil society actors will be affected by identity politics. Identity politics can influence whether or not individuals or groups will participate in civil society, yet it may also prevent individuals and groups from participating. Similarly identity politics may enable certain issues to be framed in civil society, yet may marginalise others. This is not to claim that identity will be the only reason why groups and individuals participate in civil society. In some locations it may have very little influence at all and other factors
may be far more influential. However in places where different ethnic groups, nationalities, “hosts”, and migrants have conflicting social and political relationships, identity will have a major influence. The locations where identity politics are heightened are not fixed and can emerge in various locations depending on economic, political, and social factors. Identity enables agency in many senses by creating a shared sense of insecurity that needs addressing, yet it also constrains agency. In other words identity can “get people involved” in civil society by appealing to a shared sense of purpose or responsibility. At the same time it can also deny involvement to those without a shared sense of identity, and to those seeking to address issues that contest identity.

When ethnic identity has a major influence on drawing people into participation in civil society, migrants, immigrants, and locals of different ethnicities are excluded because of their ethnicity; especially if they are part of communities designated as a threat to the majority community. An aspect frequently ignored in the Khasi Hills is the almost complete exclusion of non-Khasis from civil society. Though there are non-Khasi organisations, this doesn’t necessarily mean the existence of a political space or their inclusion into mainstream civil society in local or regional spaces. Similarly, identity politics can facilitate the entry of particular issue into civil society, yet it can also deny other issues a place in civil society, and has the potential to marginalise and discredit certain issues. Changing the matrilineal inheritance system was designated as important because it involved possible threats to identity insecurity. Other issues that may be important to human security, such as the privatisation of land, or domestic violence have largely been excluded from civil society as they contain very few identity elements, and threaten politically advantageous uses of identity.

**Power and access**

Power relationships within civil society in a particular context must be understood, and it needs to be recognised that power is constitutive of relations within civil society, not merely a peripheral consideration. There are three main ways in which power manifests itself in civil society in the Khasi Hills. The first is the role of power in determining
which issues come to dominate civil society in a given location, i.e. the dominant discourses of civil society. The second is the role of power in influencing which actors have access to civil society, in other words, determining which groups and individuals have a voice. The third is the power derived from those civil society actors with close relations to the state, the district councils, and the village councils. These actors have access to authorities and institutions that can bring about change in various ways. These three are constitutive: discourse determines access, and access enables particular actors to shape political discourse. If a particular issue is outside the dominant discourse(s) then it is difficult for groups and individuals to voice their insecurity. If individuals and groups are unable to speak the language of the dominant discourse(s) then it is difficult to gain access to civil society. This has a major impact on the internal dynamics of civil society in the Khasi Hills, as actors with access have a far greater influence in shaping which insecurities matter and which will be addressed, further marginalising those with limited access or without access altogether.

Power becomes increasingly important when we acknowledge the politics involved in framing the causes of insecurity. In a limited space, actors advocating different issues compete with each other for legitimacy and political recognition. When the space is limited, as in Meghalaya, some will be ignored and excluded, while others will be politicised and acted upon. Those that are framed may then become institutionalised making it more difficult for other insecurities to be addressed. Once resources are allocated, norms and practices made into routine, it becomes very difficult for civil society actors and individuals to pursue other forms of insecurity that do not have this level of recognition. However a limited space also means limited conceptions of what counts as “a problem”. In a limited space, certain insecurities may be more lucrative, less controversial, less complicated. Thus the space, the context, where human securities are being framed, and the size and capabilities of the actors in that space can determine which of the multiple insecurities is addressed, and which insecurities count as “real” problems.
Several authors have discussed the power imbalances between civil society actors in the “global North” and actors in the “global South” when part of transnational networks, though Katz argues that these hemispheric inequalities are decreasing (2006; see also Keck and Sikkink, 1998). While these studies make an important point which debunks many of the egalitarian assumptions about civil society at a global level, the scale of these studies and their use of registered and visible organisations from established databases limit their utility in investigating the impacts of inequalities within the “South”, within states, and within particular locations, and the ways these inequalities shape civil society at the local level. It is vital to understand the power inequalities between civil society actors in different nation-states in the South, for civil society actors in different regions within nation-states, for civil society actors within these regions, and for civil society actors within local spaces. Certain actors in the local context may be able to access wider networks of civil society actors due to their financial resources, the issues they address, the language abilities of their members, their location (urban/rural), their ethnicity, and/or their social connections. There are no clear boundaries between these different spatial zones, nor are linkages formed in a linear manner. In other words linkages do not need to progress by “steps” from local to regional to national to transnational. However it is very difficult for actors unable to access civil society at a local level to access wider civil society networks. Thus global civil society or national/domestic civil society is shaped by politics at a local level. Without understanding this relationship we are left with an incomplete understating of both the potential of civil society and its limitations at all levels.

Reproducing inequalities

The struggle for inclusion and exclusion in civil society takes place at a local level. National and global studies privilege particular types of organisations, especially those able to access networks through electronic communications and those able to form relationships with larger organisations. These actors are often accepted as legitimate representatives of an entire people, issue, or spectrum of opinion. Existing inequalities are not necessarily overcome by simply shifting focus to human security issues, nor do
we learn much about civil society from examining it at hemispherical, national, or regional levels. This glosses over inequalities and rests on existing fissures between different groups ignoring the inequalities within these groups that have a major impact upon the ability to contest the cause of insecurity. Thus both human security and civil society need to be critically re-examined in empirical contexts.

Despite the de-territorialising potential of transnational or global civil society, the local sphere is still the location where actors live, work, and organise. Protest, lobbying, and contestation, shape and reshape politics at different levels, but those affected and those participating live somewhere. They have a location with political, social, and economic conditions. Strictly delineating boundaries as to where the local begins and ends is empirically difficult and perhaps undesirable. Berry has argued that clearly defining the limits of the local in India is very difficult due to the processes of migration, trade, pilgrimage, military service, marriage, in conjunction with national education through schools, national and international themes through television, and the political influences of party politics and international agencies (2003, p. 76).

In the Khasi Hills, “the local” can mean different things to different groups and individuals, to different political and cultural institutions, different media, different civil society actors, and these meanings are fluid, taking on different forms at different times. In the case of the Khasi Hills, the Indian Government, the regional institutions in the Northeast (including the military), the Meghalaya Government, the District Councils, and the dorbars, all have different enabling and constraining relationships with civil society actors, and originate in local, regional, and national spheres. These layers of governance influence the agency of civil society actors themselves, which actors can access civil society, and the ability of certain actors to frame human security issues.

One difficulty derives from the tendency to think of human security as everything other than national security implying a unity or uniformity in the insecurities faced across an entire population. There are two main problems with this. First, insecurities manifest themselves within different nations, ethnic groups, communities, and even families.
Furthermore to speak of the “human security of the Khasi people” as a whole, for instance, leaves the shaping of the human security discourse to the powerful actors within civil society and thus perpetuates existing inequalities and divisions within the ethnic group and leaves the insecurities derived from these divisions unnoticed and unaddressed.

While an ethnic group or nationality as a whole may share a particular sense of insecurity derived from specific factors, there will be multiple forms of insecurity within a particular ethnic group. Different groups and individuals depending on their location, resources, and capabilities will experience the impacts of these insecurities differently. This is not to suggest that multiple insecurities are involved in a zero-sum relationship; insecurity for one group means security for another. However, existing divisions based on class, gender, and ethnicity, fragment the notion that a set of insecurities are applicable to a particular ethnic group or minority group as a whole. There may be insecurities that are felt by a particular group as a whole, but the various insecurities existing within these groups must also be recognised. Otherwise we risk missing the complexities and gravity of insecurities derived from social, political, and economic relationships and conflicts within various spatial locations.

A further aspect to note is that geographic realities also place more than one ethnic group in a particular location; often facing insecurities from the same structural, social, and institutional factors. Different ethnic groups may experience these insecurities differently, and certain structures, norms, and institutions may privilege some ethnic groups over others. Yet they may also privilege some groups on class or gender lines. Human insecurities may affect groups of different ethnicities differently, but some forms of insecurity may affect groups of different ethnicities similarly. Gender-based violence affects women in the Khasi Hills from a range of different ethnic groups, religious groups, and class groups. Thus insecurity conceived along ethnic lines, while an improvement on statist understandings of security, can be limiting.
CONCLUSION: TRANSCENDING CONSTRAINTS

As discussed above there are major constraints on the agency of civil society actors pursuing human security in particular contexts. The mere existence of civil society organisations does not guarantee the causes of insecurity will be made visible, let alone be addressed. Furthermore, while the state can have a major impact on the functioning of civil society, agency is also constrained by the domination of particular actors and discourses in civil society itself. However, agency must not be ignored or discounted. Agency may be extremely but to ignore agency is to ignore the emancipatory potential of civil society actors. For instance in late 2003 thousands of women marched through the streets of Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya protesting against the levels of domestic violence and the inaction of the state government. They demanded that the state set up a women’s commission to investigate the causes of domestic violence. The Government eventually set up a hand-picked commission in late 2004, yet a core group of civil society actors continued to protest against what it saw as the cooption of this nascent movement. The march was significant as it took place in the main streets of the Shillong, usually the territory of anti-outsider protests by the pressure groups. The protestors marched through downtown Shillong with drums banging, placards and signs were held up challenging the perpetrators, the society that tolerates violence, and the inaction of all three tiers of government to do anything to address violence against women. The participants were from all of the different ethnic groups inhabiting the state. Khasis and Garos marched together, joined by Bengalis, Nepalis, Tibetans, Mizos, Karbis, and others. The participants were both tribal and non-tribal. The rally was a symbolic rejection of the “outsiders” discourse.

The eventual dissipation of the movement and the cooption and attempted cooption of key members into government appointed bodies is a lengthy and complex adjunct to the protests. The important point to note is that certain civil society actors have been able to challenge the constraints discussed above. Agency may be severely limited, but this does not mean that agency does not exist. The importance is to locate the constraints on agency and contest assumptions that a simple causal relationship exists between civil society and human security. Contesting issues marginalised by dominant discourses is a
struggle rooted in local politics. In the Khasi Hills transcendence occurred when civil society actors contested the structures, myths, and discourses by creating networks of women from various ethnic backgrounds and acting on insecurities that challenge dominant discourses and dominant political structures. By universalising the causes of insecurity, these actors have focused on gender-based insecurities across Meghalaya and the region, regardless of ethnicity or tribal/non-tribal status.

Civil society is often ignored where transcendence is slow or non-existent. It is important to note that civil society actors do not all aim at transformative change, or the overthrow of particular systems or structures. Often the mere existence of organisations and actors outside the realm of the state and dominant structures needs to be recognised and nurtured. In addition to this, inequality and access needs to be examined in locations where transcendence has occurred and structural transformations have taken place (James, 2005, p. 19). In other words, even when agency results in transcendence, we should not cease examining identity, power, and access as they take new forms in particular contexts.

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i The Khasi tribe includes the Khasi, Jaintia/Pnar, Bhoi, War, Lyngngam (Megam), Khynriam.

ii The Garo are also known as the A’Chik and the term includes both the highland and lowland clans in the Garo Hills.

iii Meghalaya Societies Registration Act 1976; The Central Cooperatives Societies Act 1904, The Indian Trusts Act 1882; The Trade Union Act 1926; and Section 25 of the Indian Companies Act 1956.

iv Vincent Darlong, NERCMP Project Coordinator, International Foundation for Agricultural Development, Personal Interview, 4 April 2005, Shillong, Meghalaya, India.

v Darilyn Syiem, Coordinator: North East Network, Personal Interview, 15 March 2005, Shillong, Meghalaya, India.

vi Ibid.

vii Hasina Kharbhiih, President; Impulse NGO Network, Personal Interview, 15 March 2005, Shillong, Meghalaya, India.

viii Due to the state-wise categorisation of statistics by both the Planning Commission and the National Family Health Survey it is not possible to gain separate statistics for the Khasi Hills Districts alone.
Furthermore due to the almost complete absence of human development statistics correlated or made available by the Meghalaya Government, the national statistics are the only substitute. This is problematic because the causes of insecurity vary between different districts in the Khasi Hills and even within districts, clusters, and villages. However there are some key indicators that may help the present study.

ix Tarun Bhartiya, Social Activist; The Freedom Project, Personal Interview, 19 April 2005, Shillong, Meghalaya, India; Hasina Kharbhih, President; Impulse NGO Network, Personal Interview, 15 March 2005, Shillong, Meghalaya, India; Sister Judith Shadap, President and Founder; WISE, Personal Interview, 10 March, 2005, Shillong, Meghalaya, India; Darilyn Syiem, Coordinator: North East Network, Personal Interview, 15 March 2005, Shillong, Meghalaya, India.

x Darilyn Syiem, Coordinator: North East Network, Personal Interview, 15 March 2005, Shillong, Meghalaya, India.

xi Tarun Bhartiya, Social Activist; The Freedom Project, Personal Interview, 19 April 2005, Shillong, Meghalaya, India; Patricia Mukhim, Journalist and Social Activist, Personal Interview, 23 April 2005, Shillong, Meghalaya, India; Darilyn Syiem, Coordinator: North East Network, Personal Interview, 15 March 2005, Shillong, Meghalaya, India.

xii Darilyn Syiem, Coordinator: North East Network, Personal Interview, 15 March 2005, Shillong, Meghalaya, India.

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