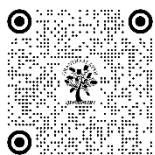


FEMINISM IN THE MUSICAL LANDSCAPE OF NORTH- EAST INDIA: AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the intricate interplay between feminism and the musical landscape of North-east India, focusing on the state of Assam, Sikkim, and Meghalaya, delving into both traditional and contemporary expressions. In the region known for its diverse cultures, the study aims to elucidate the place of women in traditional music, analyze the representation of women in contemporary genres, and the feminist that are prevalent in the North-east Indian music tradition and industry. Through ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and a comparative analysis of gender dynamics in the industry, the research seeks to uncover the ways in which music acts as a conduit for challenging and reshaping societal perceptions of gender roles. The findings aim to contribute to the global discourse on feminism in music while providing nuanced insights into the unique cultural context of North-east India. This research not only adds to academic knowledge but also holds practical implications for fostering gender equality and empowerment within the regional music scene.

Keywords: Feminism in Music, North-East Indian Music, Gender Representation

1. INTRODUCTION

The overlooking of women in music has been a pervasive issue globally and has historical roots. In many cultures, including India, traditional gender roles have often relegated women to the sidelines in various artistic fields, including music. In the context of Indian musical tradition, across genres, there has been a historical bias favoring male musicians. This bias is deeply ingrained in societal norms and perceptions about gender roles. Traditionally, it was considered unconventional for women to pursue careers as musicians, especially in classical genres. The stereotype that certain musical forms require a level of virtuosity that women supposedly lack

has contributed to the underrepresentation of female musicians. Women who did manage to break into the male-dominated realms of classical music often faced challenges and stereotypes. They encounter systemic issues of inequality, finding themselves relegated to secondary positions and facing subjugation in numerous aspects of life worldwide [Hughes \(2003\)](#). This inequality is deeply rooted in patriarchal structures, where societal norms perpetuate the oppression, marginalization, and exploitation of women [Campbell & Mannell \(2016\)](#). Whether in the workplace, within families, or in public spheres, women often navigate a complex web of gender-based discrimination [Esposito \(2021\)](#). This systemic disadvantage positions women as victims of circumstances beyond their control, demanding urgent attention to dismantle entrenched patterns and foster societal transformation [Parpart et al. \(2003\)](#).

The socio-economic status of women in North East India is complex within the diversity of culture, tradition, and contemporary challenges [Jamir \(2021\)](#). While the region boasts a rich cultural heritage that often emphasizes gender equity, the ground reality can be quite nuanced [Krishna \(2023\)](#). Historically, many communities in the North East have matrilineal societies where lineage and inheritance are traced through the female line [Saikia & Dasvarma \(2007\)](#). This has, in some cases, afforded women a higher status compared to other parts of India [Gogoi & Kikhi \(2023\)](#). However, the impact of modernity, globalization, and external influences has brought about changes in these traditional structures [Das \(2001\)](#). Economically, women in North East India are actively involved in various sectors. Agriculture, which is a significant part of the region's economy, sees substantial participation from women. Additionally, women engage in handicrafts, weaving, and traditional cottage industries, contributing both to their families and the local economy. On the flip side, challenges persist. Access to education, especially in rural areas, can be limited for girls. This hampers their ability to break into non-traditional sectors. Furthermore, issues like maternal healthcare and gender-based violence remain concerns that need concerted efforts for improvement. Urbanization and the influx of modern ideas have led to shifts in societal norms. While this has empowered some women, it has also brought about new challenges such as the pressure to conform to certain beauty standards and expectations. The patriarchal nature of many north-eastern societies contributes to the continued subjugation of women, who often find themselves marginalized in various spheres. The portrayal of women in tribal societies reveals deep-seated biases and stereotypes that contribute to their social exclusion [Choudhury & Kumar \(2022\)](#).

In the dynamic music landscape of North-east India, women play a pivotal role in preserving and shaping the region's diverse musical heritage. Serving as custodians of indigenous traditions, many women actively contribute to the continuity of folk and tribal music, embodying the cultural richness that defines the communities in the region. Beyond preservation, women musicians in North-east India are at the forefront of innovation, seamlessly blending traditional sounds with contemporary genres, thereby contributing to the evolving musical tapestry. Breaking through historical gender barriers, women take on roles as singers, instrumentalists, composers, and producers, challenging stereotypes, and reshaping perceptions within the industry. Moreover, music becomes a powerful tool for women to engage in socio-cultural movements, addressing issues of identity, cultural rights, and social justice. Despite these strides, challenges persist, and efforts are needed to provide equal opportunities, resources, and representation for women in the music profession. Recognizing and amplifying the voices of women is crucial for fostering a more inclusive and vibrant musical landscape in North-east India.

1.1. WHY THE FEMINISM PERSPECTIVE?

Feminism is a socio-political movement and ideology advocating for the equal rights, opportunities, and status of all genders, with a particular focus on addressing historical and present-day injustices faced by women. It seeks to challenge and dismantle systemic gender-based discrimination, stereotypes, and biases [Widya & Asnani \(2020\)](#). At its core, feminism strives for a world where individuals of all genders have the freedom to make choices about their lives, bodies, and careers without being hindered by societal expectations or unfair practices [McRobbie \(2008\)](#). Feminists work towards achieving gender equality in various realms, including legal, economic, educational, and cultural spheres. It's important to note that feminism is not a monolithic ideology; it encompasses a diverse range of perspectives and approaches. Some focus on legal reforms, others on cultural shifts, and some on economic equality [Thompson \(1994\)](#). Feminism recognizes that issues intersect with other aspects of identity such as race, class, sexual orientation, and more, making it an inclusive movement that seeks justice and equality for all.

The region of North-East India, encompassing the specific areas under scrutiny in this study, is often perceived as progressive, distinguishing itself from the more mainstream Indian societies [Mahanta & Nayak \(2013\)](#). Women in this context seemingly enjoy a greater degree of freedom, and the society is generally perceived as being open and supportive of women's rights in both socio-economic and cultural spheres. However, upon closer inspection, a more detailed analysis unveils a complex storyline. Despite the outward appearance of progressiveness, a substantial body of literature unveils an underexplored flipside to this story. There exist complexities and nuances that warrant a deeper exploration, challenging the simplistic notion of unwavering progressiveness in the gender dynamics of North-East Indian societies. Hence, the present study is undertaken with the overarching goal of delving into the real-life experiences of women within the music profession. With this aim, several key objectives guide the research. Firstly, the study seeks to scrutinize and analyze the existing gender dynamics in the music industry, offering insights into the challenges and opportunities encountered by women pursuing careers in this field. Additionally, the investigation aims to assess the scope of professional opportunities available to women, exploring their representation across diverse roles such as singers, instrumentalists, composers, and producers. The study also endeavors to uncover the socio-cultural influences shaping the experiences of women in music, considering the impact of societal norms, expectations, and perceptions on their careers. Furthermore, it aims to identify and address any gender disparities related to pay, recognition, and access to resources within the profession. Documenting success stories of women who have triumphed over obstacles and made substantial contributions to the music industry will be a focal point, providing inspirational narratives for aspiring female musicians. Ultimately, the study aspires to propose practical recommendations and strategies based on its findings, with the overarching goal of fostering inclusivity and creating supportive environments for women in the music profession.

1.2. STUDY AREA

The present study is based on the three major states of Assam, Sikkim and Meghalaya representing north-east India. The rationale behind selecting Sikkim, Assam, and Meghalaya as the study areas stems from the rich and diverse culture that characterizes these North-eastern states. Sikkim, with its amalgamation of Nepali, Bhutia, and Lepcha communities, serves as a microcosm of Himalayan and

Tibetan cultural influences, providing a unique vantage point to examine how these diverse traditions shape gender dynamics within the music landscape.

Figure 1

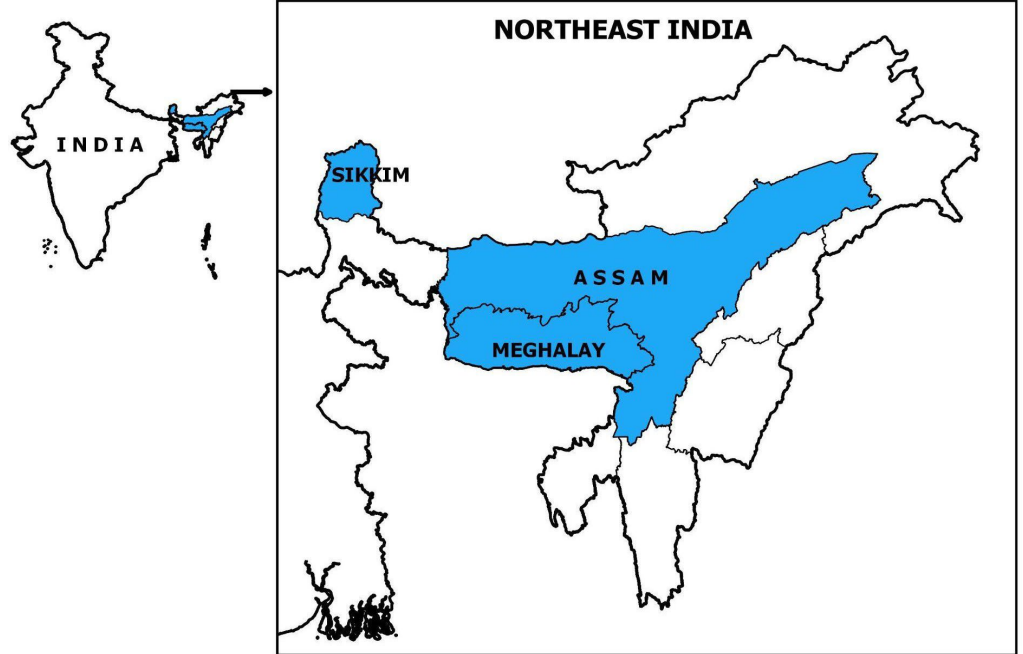


Figure 1 Study Area Map

In Assam, the juxtaposition of a larger and more mainstream state offers an opportunity to delve into societal practices that may differ from the more intimate settings of smaller states, shedding light on how regional identity interfaces with prevailing gender perceptions in the music sphere [Mishra \(2007\)](#). Meanwhile, Meghalaya's matrilineal societies and vibrant tribal cultures present an intriguing dynamic, allowing for an exploration of how traditional societal structures impact the roles and influence of women in the music industry. Conducting a comprehensive study across all states in the North-eastern region was resource-intensive in terms of time, finances, and personnel. By narrowing the scope, the research could effectively allocate resources to ensure a more thorough and detailed examination of the selected states. Narrowing down the study area allowed more direct engagement with the local communities, artists, and stakeholders, facilitating a deeper understanding of the intricacies involved. Together, these states offer a comprehensive lens to understand the complexities of feminism in the North-east Indian musical panorama, capturing variations in cultural influences, regional identities, and societal structures [Boungpui \(2014\)](#). In addition to their rich traditional musical forms, Sikkim, Assam, and Meghalaya have notably embraced Western and popular cultures [Samdarshi et al. \(2020\)](#). This amalgamation of diverse musical influences has sparked a curiosity to comprehend the feminist dynamics within this evolving musical landscape.

2. METHODS

For the study of feminism in the musical landscape of North-east India, a comprehensive qualitative methodology was employed to capture the richness and complexity of the subject. The research relied on ethnographic fieldwork as the backbone, involving immersive engagement with the local music scene in Sikkim,

Assam, and Meghalaya. In-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including musicians, scholars, and industry professionals, to gain nuanced insights into their experiences and perspectives on feminism in the music industry. The research incorporated a comparative analysis, examining historical records alongside contemporary data to trace shifts in gender dynamics. The data collected through the online questionnaire, interviews and focused group discussions underwent thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and themes that elucidated the manifestation of feminism in the musical landscape of North-east India.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Exploring the musical landscapes of Assam, Sikkim, and Meghalaya is like embarking on a captivating journey through a rich tradition of cultural diversity. The melodic tales of these northeastern states are steeped in the traditions of various ethnic communities, each contributing a unique hue to the overall musical palette. Delving into this intricate narrative, it unveils a story that goes beyond the harmonious tunes. It exposes the subtle yet impactful gender dynamics that permeate the cultural and musical fabric of the region. In the midst of the enchanting melodies, there lies a complex interplay of societal norms and expectations that significantly shape the experiences of women in the music profession. While the musical traditions emanate a vibrancy that reflects the fusion of cultures, the gender dynamics within this creative realm often reveal a different cadence. Women navigating the music industry in Assam, Sikkim, and Meghalaya find themselves contending with societal norms that may restrict their full participation.

In Assam's multifaceted musical landscape, where genres span from folk to Bollywood to Indian classical music, the narratives of women in music reflect a dynamic interplay of tradition, passion, and the evolving concept of feminism. The stories told by uneducated women immersed in folk music convey a sense of empowerment and joy derived from their musical associations. In these narratives, music becomes a medium through which these women assert their agency, breaking away from traditional gender roles. However, as the focus shifts to the formalized realms of Indian classical and film music, the struggle for formal education introduces a dimension where feminist ideals intersect with the artistic journey. The challenges faced by women in pursuing formal music education in these genres highlight broader issues related to gender equality within the professional space. The narrative becomes a tale of resilience against systemic barriers, reflecting the broader feminist discourse that advocates for equal opportunities and recognition. The dichotomy between the uninhibited joy of uneducated women in folk music and the barriers faced by those aspiring to excel in classical and film music underscores the importance of feminist perspectives in reshaping the narrative. It prompts a critical examination of societal norms that may hinder women's access to formal education and equal opportunities in the professional music arena. The stories of women in Assam's music scene not only celebrate the rich cultural diversity and passion but also serve as a lens through which to view the ongoing evolution of feminist ideals within the context of artistic expression. Through these narratives, the music of Assam becomes a powerful medium not just for cultural preservation but also for challenging and reshaping societal norms, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable future for women in the diverse realms of the North-eastern region's musical heritage.

The statement made by a musician from Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, sheds light on the prevailing gender dynamics in the music performance sphere, particularly within the context of traditional music. According to this musician, there is a discernible gender difference, and it becomes more pronounced when considering traditional musical expressions where men are actively involved. The observation suggests that traditional music, with its deep-rooted cultural associations and historical practices, may still exhibit traditional gender roles and biases. This could manifest in various aspects of music performance, including opportunities extended to male musicians, the recognition and appreciation they receive, and the societal expectations influencing their roles within the musical landscape. The use of the term "prevalent" indicates that the musician perceives a widespread or commonly observed pattern of gender disparity, emphasizing the need to address and analyze these dynamics within the academic and musical spheres. By drawing attention to this issue, the statement prompts a reflection on the challenges faced by women in traditional music contexts and underscores the importance of fostering inclusivity and gender equality within the broader musical community. In all of these societies women generally hold a comparatively better position and are not systematically deprived of education and essential facilities. Interestingly, none of the respondents raised concerns about unequal payment; instead, they expressed the viewpoint that "Women get paid more than men." This perspective challenges conventional narratives surrounding gender-based pay disparities and suggests a unique dynamic in which women in the field are perceived to receive higher compensation than their male counterparts. However, many women in the profession shared their intricate challenges of life circumstances and motherhood, which pose significant hurdles impacting their aspirations in the music professions. Despite the relative advantages, women find themselves grappling with the demanding task of striking a delicate balance between their familial responsibilities and professional pursuits [Stone & O'shea \(2013\)](#). The struggle to harmonize family and work lives becomes a noteworthy aspect of their journey, underscoring the persistent challenges that women in these societies face as they navigate the intricate intersection of personal and professional spheres [D'Enbeau et al. \(2015\)](#). Recognizing that a successful career in the performing arts necessitates an ongoing connection with the arts and society, where earnings are intricately linked.

It is also noteworthy that there is a substantial dearth of government jobs in the field of performing arts [Kasbekar \(2006\)](#) in each state under consideration. The absence of such opportunities within the public sector adds an additional layer of challenge for individuals seeking stability and security in their careers within the performing arts domain [Kerman \(2009\)](#). The music setups, including private concerts and performances in restaurants, fall short in ensuring the safety of women performers. Despite the allure of these settings, women in the music profession often find themselves vulnerable to various safety concerns. The intimate nature of private concerts and the dynamic environment of restaurant performances create situations where women performers may face challenges ranging from unwanted advances to more serious safety threats [Kabeer \(2005\)](#). This underscores the pressing need for a heightened focus on establishing secure and supportive environments within these music setups, implementing measures to protect the well-being of women musicians. In doing so, the industry can cultivate a space that not only celebrates musical talent but also prioritizes the safety and dignity of its performers, fostering a more inclusive and secure platform for women in the music profession. From singers to instrumentalists and composers, it becomes evident that gender representation in these varied roles may pose challenges. The interplay

of tradition and modernity exposes some discord, with the fusion of traditional and contemporary music highlighting potential tensions faced by women musicians in these states. Socio-cultural influences emerge as powerful forces shaping the paths of women in the music profession, yet they also reveal systemic issues. The impact of societal norms and expectations becomes palpable, indicating deep-seated challenges such as unequal opportunities and limited access to resources. There also emerge narratives of physical abuse and harassment shared by a subset of respondents from each state. These distressing accounts underscore the persisting challenges that women in the music profession face, revealing that even within ostensibly supportive settings, gender-based issues such as harassment and abuse persist.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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