

# The Land Where Women Prevail: Khasi Matrilineality and Emergent Social Issues in Meghalaya

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## ABSTRACT

*Khasi society in Meghalaya follows matrilineality- a social system in which family line is traced through women. However, the society now happens to be passing through a transitional phase whereby a section of radical khasi men destines to displace the years-old tradition. Given such situation, this piece of work has attempted to understand the grounds and rationality of blooming of matrilineality among the khasi community through an ethnographic research and its survival over time despite being surrounded by the patrilineal societies across India. It has also sought to analyse the true status of both khasi male and female in terms of their involvement in social, economic and political affairs under the matrilineal system. The study, however, concludes that despite bestowing laudable respect towards women, today's khasi society happens to be vitriolic due to its 'customary code of conduct' which keeps the khasi women outside all political affairs and make them to be engaged only in domestic affairs.*

*Keywords: Matrilineality, khasi tribe, khatduh, dorbar, masculinity and Meghalaya etc.*

### Introduction:

The state of Meghalaya in north-eastern India is the homeland to three indigenous tribal communities: the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia who practice matrilineality by law. Matrilineality is a social system in which the family line, unlike patrilineal society, is traced through women. The children adopt the mother's surname and the property and wealth are inherited by the daughter from the mother, not by the son from the father. Among these three tribal communities, the khasi is the largest one contributing about half of the

state's total population. However, the khasis and jaintias have resemblance in religion, culture and social structure and form more or less a composite group (Lyngdoh, 2012). Before the arrival of the British in Undivided Assam<sup>1</sup>, the entire khasi community followed their traditional indigenous religion called *Ka Niam Tip Briew Niam Tip Blei* meaning thereby the 'Religion of Knowing Man, Knowing God' (Mawrie, 1981). With the establishment of Shillong as the headquarters of undivided Assam Province by the British Colonial Rule in 1874, the land of these indigenous tribal

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communities started facing a breeze of change, especially in religion, marriage<sup>2</sup> and education. Numerous British Christian Missionaries and their incessant attempt in dissemination of tenet, language and western education brought a surge in religious conversion from their indigenous religion to Christianity. Today, majority of the Khasis are Christians and only a little proportion follows the traditional indigenous religion. As per the Census of Meghalaya 2011, three-fourth (74.59 per cent) of the total population of Meghalaya now belongs to Christianity. Moreover, increasing migrants from the patriarchal societies of the neighbouring plains and media have been bringing about changes in social milieu in a once close-knit egalitarian khasi society with long-drawn-out traditions, values and strong community feelings (Nongbri, 2008 and 2014; Mukhim, 2014). Khasis are now caught up in a confluence of traditional and modern culture which is developing a perception of powerlessness among a section of khasi males under matrilineal system. The scenario is no longer same as it was several decades earlier.

Given the backdrop, this piece of work has attempted to understand and assess the social position of both khasi men and women through an ethnographic study in the context of changing social milieu under traditional khasi matrilineal system. With the underlying characteristics of matrilineality, it would be logical to assume that women are likely to play greater role in social, political and economic spheres. This paper has tried to identify the cogency of such hypothesis in the context of khasi society of Meghalaya with the prevailing folklore, existing literature and field observations (ethnographic study) which were

complemented by a discussion with a khasi leader and *Sordar* (Chief/Headman) of a village named Smit near Shillong, his associates in the village *Darbar* and some Shillong based NGO workers during the celebration of *Ka Pomblang Nongkrem* festival in November 2015. It has also aimed to bring forth the emergent socio-economic and political issues that have been glaring in khasi matrilineal system since last few decades. Smit village has purposively been chosen for this study (ethnographic) because it has been recognized as the 'Centre of Khasi Culture' in Meghalaya. This village has acclaimed ample recognition for *Ka Pomblang Nongkrem* festival celebrated in the month of November which commemorates the evolution of the 'Traditional State of the Khasi People in the Khasi Hills' of Meghalaya known as '*Hima*' (Nongkinrih, 2002). There are 947 households in Smit and all of them follow Christianity.

#### **Meghalaya at a Glance**

The state of Meghalaya has an area of 22,429 square kilometres and a population size of 29,66,889 persons (Census of India, 2011). It is a hilly state that comprises Garo, Khasi and Jaintia hills. The state has seven districts: East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, East Garo Hills, West Garo Hills, South Garo Hills, Ri Bhoi, and Jaintia Hills. Among them, East Khasi Hills is the most developed and populated district with an area of 2,748 km<sup>2</sup> and a population density of 300 persons / km<sup>2</sup> (Census of India, 2011). The capital of the state, Shillong is situated in East Khasi Hills.

#### **Khasi Matrilineality: Understanding the Germination and Blooming**

Khasi people mostly reside in the Khasi and Jaintia

hills. A significant number of this indigenous people also live in Bangladesh. The mythology goes that khasis are the descendants of what they call the *Hynniewtrep* ('seven huts'). God put up the human race into seventeen huts in heaven. The residents of seven huts climbed down a ladder resting on the peak named Sohpetbneng in Meghalaya. These residents of seven huts from the heaven and their offspring on the earth are known as Khasi tribe. Historians, however, claim that the khasi tribe descended from an ancient Tibetan group who crossed the Himalayas southwards and settled in Meghalaya or migrated from the Khmer areas of Southeast Asia (Gurdon, 1914; Ehrenfels, 1955).

The fundamental point of matrilineality is that lineage comes from the mother's clan. The strength of matrilineality lies in the greatest respect that the society bestows on women, especially on mother and her clan (Mukhim, 2005; Subba, 2008; Nongbri, 2008 and 2014; Das and Bezbaruah, 2011; Narzary and Sharma, 2013; Dasgupta et al, 2013 etc). Family life is structured around mother's house, which is guided by the maternal grandmother. Maternal grandparents live with their youngest daughter called *Khatduh* and her husband and children. The youngest daughter never leaves the house and subsequently becomes the head of the family in absence of her mother. In khasi society, a man move out of his mother's house to join his wife's household after marriage. Older daughters make separate houses with their husbands around their mother's house (Headman, Smit Village, 2015). Children adopt their mother's surname. The youngest daughter acts as the custodian of ancestral property and is expected to

take care of the property for the longest possible time. Unlike the other patriarchal societies, the father has little authority in a khasi family. It is the maternal uncle, whether married or not, who acts as the children's mentor. Anyone in blood relation and in distress gets shelter at *khatduh's* home. *Khatduh* is virtually an institution constituted by the khasi society with a woman who is likely to have the strongest bondage for the entire family with great solitaire. Therefore, a man married to the *khatduh* is expected to be accommodating and open-hearted about including every member of her extended family under the same roof. The clan or *kur* is the strongest root on which Khasi society stands. The social and political interests of a clan are determined by the maternal uncle who draws his strength from his own maternal clan. Matrilineality safeguards women with children from social ostracism when they remarry. No matter who the father was, the children will always have the family name of women even after their remarriages. The fundamental integrity of matrilineality lies in the tenet that mother is the source of life and god has bestowed upon her this power.

Khasi society happens to be liberal towards the women who enjoy their social space and rights at greater extent. The khasi tradition prescribes the handover of ancestral property to the female line. Therefore, sons have legally no rights to it except for those families having no female child. Nonetheless, there are legal provisions over the disposal of self-acquired property<sup>3</sup>. In 1986, the government of Meghalaya passed 'Meghalaya Succession to Self Acquired Property Act (Khasi and Jaintia Special Provision) Act, 1986 to enable

the khasis and Jaintias to dispose of self-acquired properties by will (Government of Meghalaya, 1986). However, the provisions for disposal of self-acquired properties are different for khasi women and men. A married woman or a widow may pass on her self-acquired property anytime to her adult son and/or daughter. But on her demise without a will, it will be inherited by the youngest daughter. And if a woman having self-acquired property dies unmarried, her mother or sister will be the heir of the property. On the contrary, disposal of self-acquired property by a khasi man is little complex, especially if he passes away without making a will. Property earned or acquired by a man before his marriage would legally go to his mother or sister after his death. Such property is called '*ka kamai ing kur*' (earning of the clan). But property earned or acquired by a man after marriage would go to his wife and daughter after his death. Such property is called '*ka kamai ing khun*' (earning of the children). If a married man brings his self-acquired property from his mother's house to uxorial family and establish commercial enterprise, the profits generated thereby would be counted as his own property. And on his demise without a will, such property will be owned by his mother or sister. Nongbri (1988), however, argued that khasi men often merge their self-acquired properties with the properties of their wives; and when such amalgamations takes place, wives and children become the heir of the property. Consequently, his mother and sister end up with nothing.

The Chief of Smit and his associates (2015) informed that there are two different propositions in khasi folklore about the evolution of matrilineal system in khasi community. The first one is that in

ancient period, men were traders and warriors. Men had to go to war for long period of time leaving the women at home. Consequently, the ancestral property passed down through the female line from mother to daughter. Returning home with safe lives was quite uncertain for the men and therefore, they decided to make women the keepers of the family. They entrusted the family name to women who would not only take care of it but also save its inheritance and culture. Second proposition is that the Khasi and Jaintia kings preferred to entrust households to their queens when they went to the battle ground. This act of giving responsibility to the queens by their kings in ancient khasi society appeared as a great pride and respect to the women and the custom continued to be followed by the khasis ever since.

#### **Literacy and the Status of Khasi Women**

Literacy rate has always been recognized as a key indicator of development. Female literacy reflects the position and status of women in the society to a greater extent. In several path breaking research papers, eminent scholars like Lucas (1988), Barro (1991), Mankiw et al (1992) and Basu and Foster (1998) etc have also identified the impingement of education in economic growth among different countries. Nevertheless, it was the pioneering work of Amartya Sen (1985) that brought the significance of literacy rate and education in determining the standard of living into limelight.

Although Census of India (1981 and 2011) has reported a substantial increase in literacy rate in Meghalaya from 34.08 per cent to 75.48 per cent in last three decades between 1981 and 2001, the female literacy rate has remained constantly lower than that of male. While female literacy rate has

increased from 30.08 per cent in 1981 to 73.80 per cent in 2011, male literacy rate has increased from 37.89 per cent to 77.20 per cent over the same time period. However, the noticeable fact is that the gender gap in terms of literacy in khasi community has been, although marginally, reduced over time. Despite having matrilineal system in practice among the tribal communities of Meghalaya, where higher priority to women is assumed, comparatively lower literacy rate among khasi female corroborates a sense of negligence towards women for education.

#### **Role of Women in Khasi Political Affairs**

Despite bestowing laudable respect towards women, the khasi society, however, seems to be vitriolic due to its customary code of conduct which keeps the khasi women away from all political affairs and make them to be engaged in domestic affairs. Hence, women have the least or no role to play in the Khasi political system called '*Dorbar*'. According to the Chief of Smit (2015), there are four stages of *Dorbar*: *Dorbar iing* (family *Dorbar*), *Dorbar Kur* (clan *Dorbar*), *Dorbar Shnong* (village *Dorbar*) and *Dorbar Raid* (*Dorbar* of a cluster of villages). In recent time, the first two seem to have lost their importance while the last two have survived their political existence. The women can articulate their problems and anxiousness only in family *dorbar*. And it is the men who carry forward those problems to the three other *dorbars*. Politics is surprisingly male-centric in Meghalaya and reflect a strong patriarchal biasness. Till date not more than 10 Khasi women have been elected to the State Assembly (Mukhim, 2012). Despite having ancestral property rights, family lineage and social

mobility, the women in the khasi society access less power outside their family. The traditional khasi institutions regulate the political affairs at village and local level and exclude the women from politics and decision-making positions. Consequently, *Dorbars* are always headed by men, not women. A section of educated khasi women and feminists, however, believe that they are deprived of rights to decision-making in political institutions. Interestingly, any debate or discussion on gender equity and inclusion of women in political affairs is recognized as acrimonious by the khasi males who argue that women are already empowered as they hold right to lineage and ancestral property. The traditionalists, on the other hand, assert that women are meant to be in hearth and home; and therefore, should not be involved in political affairs. Khasi society pejoratively calls a woman involved in politics as 'crowing hen' (Planning Department, Government of Meghalaya: Meghalaya Human Development Report, 2008).

#### **Matrilineality vis-a-vis Masculinity: Attempt to for Reconstructing a New Horizon**

Women in Meghalaya are believed to be better placed than their counterparts in the rest of the country. In various parts of India where women are usually crying out for rights, equality, respect, protection and relief from violence, Meghalaya is a state where men are asking for their rights in the society. Before independence and the arrival of modern transport, Meghalaya used to be one of the most isolated states in the country. Hence, the khasi had the least opportunity to mingle with the people of the progressive societies from the neighbouring plains. However, there has been a substantial change in this pattern in recent time. In

last two decades, the state had witnessed a huge influx of legal and illegal migrants from both India and Bangladesh. Subsequently, the social contact of the khasi with the in-migrants from patriarchal societies has changed the perceptions of many khasi males of Meghalaya about traditional societal values, norms and customs to a significant extent. A section of radical khasi men and women believes that their traditional matrilineal society is backward and hindering the community development. Interestingly, in 1990 these radical men and women formed a social group called '*Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai*' (SRT) in order to mobilise local people against the matrilineal society. The literal meaning of *Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai* is 'a new hearth'. The goal of this movement is to achieve equal rights and social status for men and is to convert the centuries' old matrilineal system of Khasi succession into a patrilineal one. Many of the protagonists of SRT are actually silent supporters as they are too afraid to support this rebellious ideology openly. The followers of this group strongly believe and contend that the progress and survival of the khasi community lies with the patriarchal society.

Many cases, khasi kinship imposes dual loyalty upon men (especially eldest son) in the sense that on the one hand, they protect their wives and children residing at wives' households; on the other hand, they spend much of their time in mothers' or sisters' households (Nakane 1967 and Van Ham 2000) to look after family's property and guide sister's children in upbringing and social welfare (Planning Department, Government of Meghalaya: Meghalaya Human Development Report, 2008). Under the matrilineality, a Khasi husband lives in

a household which virtually recognizes no authority and social role to him and expects him to work for its gain. Ahmad (1994) and Van Ham (2000) contended that such peanut status of men in khasi society has led to the formation radical SRT. Although the SRT is taking forward the campaign of patrilineal society today, the idea has, however, been resisted by the khasi traditionalists and feminist scholars. Nongbri (2008 and 2014) argues that the matrilineal system is not diminishing the status of men. Although women are custodians of immovable property and the family line is traced through them, it is the male who actually possess power. Matrilineal does not mean matriarchal. In khasi society, women do not dominate men. Men have power but it is inherited from the women. Power at home is in the hand of women, in public it is in the men's hand. During the course of discussion with the Chief of Smit, his associates, local school teachers, NGO workers and some villagers including both men and women, the point that came into light is that despite having persuaded a section of radical khasi males (called 'communists' by the traditionalists) against the matrilineality, majority of the khasi community still heartily support matrilineage system. They strongly believe that it is not only the old tradition but also the unselfish love and care of a mother towards her every child with equity and generosity has led the khasi society to sustain matrilineage over years.

#### **Conclusion**

There is a well say: the culture, traditions and customs of a society have to change over time, else the society will perish. Tradition should never be the pretence for avoiding social change. In the era of globalisation and dissemination, no society can

hold on to tradition merely as a means to make it 'distinct' or 'unlike'. In the process of achieving development and prosperity, every community and society at some point of time requires quality skills and statesmanship, which women are as equally endowed with as men. Despite being liberal to greater extent, the abnegation of khasi women from taking part in political institutions reflects an injustice to them and does not recognize their rights of being responsible citizenry. The roles of women beyond household chores are substantially limited. Although property rights are passed on through women line, it is the men who play lead roles in political affairs. In the contemporary phase of modernity and development, the khasi matrilineality has indeed begun to feel the breeze of these changes in their long-drawn-out traditional matrilineal system which is now being contested by a section of khasi men wishing to replace it with patrilineal system. However, majority of the khasis still consider matrilineality as the true foundation and symbol of Khasi identity.

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