



## WOMEN AND THE KHASI PRACTICE OF MEGHALAYA

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### Abstract

Women occupy a very important place in the world and their various issues are often discussed widely. The issues of women empowerment and rights is often the main area of discussion all over the world. However while the various issues of women are discussed, it is all done in a patriarchal set up within the framework of patriarchy. It is very rare that any alternative model of society is discussed or analyzed. In such a scenario this paper attempts to put forward the case of the Khasi practice which offers a unique case of the position of women in society. The purpose of this paper is to understand the status of Khasi women of Meghalaya and to present it as an alternative model of women centric society as against the prevalent patriarchal model of society.

**Keywords:** Khasis, Women – centric society, Patriarchal model. Alternative model of society.

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### Women and the Khasi Practice of Meghalaya

The Khasis are a tribal community inhabiting the state of Meghalaya in Northeast India. The word Khasi encompasses five sub – tribes or ethnic groups who are categorized as Khyntiam, War, Bhoi, Lymngam, Jaintia (also known as Synteng or Pnar). Though they share common physiological traits with many of the other tribes inhabiting the region, their non-patriarchal family and kinship arrangement and Austro-Asiatic language set the Khasis and the Garos apart from the rest of the population in the region. Many of the tribes of the region are speakers of Tibeto-Burman languages and subscribe to patrilineal tradition<sup>1</sup>. The Khasi society is considered to be matrilineal and not matriarchal. The idea of Matriarchy is always negated and looked at with suspicion. Negation means denying the existence of a concept, an idea or a social system. Any concept or idea is negated when it is considered to be against the established norms of the society. A social system is negated if it threatens an existing social order. It is also negated if it presents itself to be an alternative to, or a condition preceding the existing social system. Matriarchy was a social order which was negated for this very reason. Matriarchy was negated from various quarters and is still attacked for various reasons. Patriarchy is considered to be natural and universal, something that is responsible for the subordination of women all over the world.. Matriarchy is considered to be the exact opposite of patriarchy and often described as female domination or authoritative rule by women. It is evident that until and unless female centeredness in all forms is negated, dominance of men cannot be established. Therefore, matriarchy was sometimes considered to be a ‘primitive stage’ in the stages of social development, and sometimes it was considered to be a myth and hence non-existent. However this paper argues that the Khasi society has unique traits of a matriarchy and not just a matriliney. The term matriliney is not sufficient to describe such societies which are women centered. Women in such societies are powerful in their own unique ways which is very different from a patriarchal society. Therefore in order to understand such women centered societies we first have to look at them through a very different lens and not through the lens of a patriarchal society.

Etymologically the term Khasi means born of a mother. The term *Kha* means born of and *Si* refers to the ancient mother. There is the idea of common ancestries among the Khasis. The various clans among the Khasis also bear their

mother’s name. The clan Sawain for instance is derived from *Sa*, the ancestress. The clan Ngap Kynta derives its name from *Ngap* the ancient mother of the clan. The clan Kurkalang owes its name to *Ka lang*, the mother. Similar is the case of Synteng where *Teng* was the ancient mother and so Synteng means children of an ancient mother. Even the *Syiem* or male head of the state is often known as *U Kmie* which literally means the mother<sup>2</sup>. Many of the clans among the Khasis trace their descent from *Kiaw* (grandmother) or one common ancestress known as *Ki Iawbei-Tynrai* which means grandmothers of the root. The root here refers to the root of the tree of the clan. This tribal ancestress is greatly revered, worshipped and is almost deified. Then comes the division of the sub-clan or the *Kpoh* whose members are all descendants of one *Ka Iawbei Tymmen* or great grandmother who is called *Shi Kpoh*<sup>3</sup>.

The next division of the Khasi society is the *Iing* or the family. The Khasis believe that the clan grew out of the *Iing*. At the very beginning of this clan or family was a woman. The present day clans of the Khasi society are more or less overgrown families. They are bound together by the religious tie of ancestor worship in common and of a common sepulchre. All these clans were strictly exogamous and in no circumstances can a Khasi marry within the tribe. The *Iing* or family consists of a grandmother, her daughters, and her daughter’s children. Since the Khasis firmly believe that the clan sprang from women, hence lineage and descent is traced through the mother’s clan and all the children take the mother’s clan name<sup>4</sup>. The mother in the Khasi society organizes various household rites which are performed from time to time. Great importance is bestowed both on *Ka Iawbei*, the ancestral mother from the mother’s side and the *Ka Meikha* who is the mother from the father’s side. However, since the *Ka Iawbei* is the founder of the clan, she assumes much more importance than the *Ka Meikha*<sup>5</sup>.

There are two notions which are basic in a Khasi society and those are of *Kur* and *Kha*. Those descending from the same ancestral mother belong to the same *Kur* and members of other *Kur* are *Kha*.<sup>6</sup> The family is the foundation of the Khasi clan and community. Khasis have been traditionally an agricultural people for whom all the relations emerge from the family and the clan. These are the binding forces of the Khasi society which regulates their entire way of life.

The Khasi society is unique by the special functions it bestows on the youngest daughter of the family or the *Ka Khadduh*. She occupies an important position in the Khasi household and is the locus of kinship and unity. In this sense, the house of the *Khadduh* is an institution in itself. It is open to all the members of the family. It is a very important institution because it is in this house that all family gatherings take place. This house also serves as the shelter for unmarried daughters and sons and those in need. The *Khadduh* is the keeper of religion<sup>7</sup>. She cremates her mother and puts the bones of all the dead members of her family in the clan cairn which is the *Maw Bah* or the final resting place<sup>8</sup>. It is the duty of the *Khadduh* to feed and shelter her brothers and sisters in case of any misfortune. If there is a divorce or unhappy relations in the family of her brothers or sisters, they go to her (*Khadduh*) for shelter. She offers her care to orphans or weak family members. Her maternal uncles too turn to her when they face difficulties and she has special duties towards them. If the *Khadduh* is unable to extend shelter, all her family members should come to help her to carry out her duties<sup>9</sup>.

Inheritance is mainly through the youngest daughter in the Khasi society. Property is of two types namely alienable and inalienable. Alienable property is ancestral property which a person inherits from ancestors. Alienable property is known as *Nongtymmen* or ancestral. It consists of movable as well as immovable goods. This property cannot be sold off either fully or in part without the consent of all the members of the family. The *Khadduh* is the custodian of this property and before disposing this property she has to take the consent of her family which comprises of her sisters and her uncles. Alienable property includes both movable and immovable goods<sup>10</sup>. If the *Khadduh* dies, her youngest daughter will get the ancestral property and if she has only one daughter then that daughter inherits everything. If the *Khadduh* does not have any children, her next elder sister gets the property which again goes to her youngest daughter. There is another kind of property which is inalienable property. It comprises of the earnings of the members of the community which may or may not be combined into the ancestral property. This property is known as *Nongkhynraw* which means personal. All common expenses of the family are shared by the family members. This includes expenses involved in marriage, other ceremonies, treatment of sickness etc. A part of their property which they get from their mother gets merged

with their separate earnings and is known as *Nongkhynraw*. This becomes the legacy which their children inherit. As long as the man in the Khasi society is a bachelor he has a control over *Kamai Nongkhynraw* or his earnings. He can transmit a part of it to his brothers or sisters. A part of this earning goes to his mother and he retains another part till he gets married. After his marriage this part of his earning may become part and parcel of his property to be inherited by his sons or daughters. In some areas if the earner dies without having any children all his personal earnings go back to his mother<sup>11</sup>.

The Khasi society displays the unique characteristics of a communal living where the interests of the community are given preference and priority as against individual priorities. If any property in the form of land is undivided because of any reason then it is managed by different families of the clan or sub clan. The representative of this property is the *Khadduh* who shares the income from this land with her sisters. She receives the largest share of the sale proceeds which is divided in the presence of her maternal uncles. Since the *Khadduh* is the keeper of the family house and the traditions, she is given the largest share. The *Khadduh* may be responsible for managing many aspects of the household but she does so in consultation with all the members of the family. If a property is acquired by the husband and the wife after marriage and if they die childless, then it is divided among the relatives of both the husband and the wife<sup>12</sup>.

The woman has got a special and unique position in the Khasi society and this is the foundation of the traditional Khasi society. In a patriarchal society the woman is always constructed as the 'other' who is relegated to the background. It is the man who is at the centre and the woman is in the periphery. The man gets more importance since he is in the foreground. Therefore it is always the man who is the centre of all activities. The woman is always considered in relation to this centre or the man. She does not have any independent existence and is always excluded<sup>13</sup>.

In the Khasi society, the woman is not considered in relation to the man but as an independent entity. The traditional Khasi view of things does not consider that the man and the woman will become one flesh and blood after marriage. Rather to think of a married woman in this way may be considered as something profane and a sacrilege. Khasis believe in the unique status of

the woman as an entity in herself which does not get absorbed in the identity of her husband after marriage. Khasis believe that even after marriage a woman retains her independent identity which is not dependent on her husband. She must enjoy the special role of the mother which comes with marriage and also enjoy the elevated status which comes with this role. Marriage is a sacred institution for the Khasis, the aim of which is to establish a family and advance the clan by having children<sup>14</sup>.

The position of the woman or of the *Khadduh* can be understood when we understand the cultural construction of gender as revealed in the kinship system. While analysing the position of *Khadduh* she has to be understood not in the perspective of woman in a patriarchal society but as a custodian in an egalitarian structure based on kinship. The cultural ideal of the Khasi female is something absolutely different from a female in a patriarchal structure and has to be understood as such. Woman in general and *Khadduh* in particular is not typically moulded in the 'self-sacrificing and nurturing' mother but is in charge of the maintenance of the whole social structure. She embodies the ideal of being charitable since her house is open to all. It is open not only to her husband and her children but also to the whole clan. She has the attributes and the responsibility to communicate and keep the society together. Her image is not confined just to the 'caring' and 'nurturing' role but encompasses many more attributes of a leader.

The traditional Khasi society does not have any distinctions of class and caste. It is an egalitarian society where all members are considered equal and have a joint responsibility of running the society. They do not only live for themselves; and a Khasi who lives only by himself is considered to be an outcast. The Khasi practice considers true Khasis to be people who live for others too. They are an integral part of the tribe, as well as their relatives, neighbours and friends.

A Khasi society is therefore unique and special in respect of the special status it bestows on women. However in order to understand and appreciate the special position of the society, it has to be viewed from a lens which is very different from the mainstream. The unique features of the society and the new paradigm will not be comprehensible if the society is understood from a patriarchal mainstream view. Within non – patriarchal or egalitarian social structure, the way in which gender relations or identities of a man and a

woman are constructed, are substantially different from those in patriarchal or hierarchical society. In such society, the supremacy of man or the subordination of woman and vice versa is not emphasized. In egalitarian societies 'matricentric' principles coexist with 'patricentric' ones. There are no rigid set of uniform pattern of societal behaviour. For instance, the husband after marriage may move to the house of the wife or may even set up a residence on the land of the wife. However, his lineage or clan membership (surname) does not change after marriage. And, since sex role plans are culturally constructed, therefore each culture has got different ideas about the roles of males and females in their mutual interactions. Therefore, the norms and standards of hierarchical/patriarchal societies cannot adequately explain the gender relation and the power dynamics available to us in non – patriarchal settings such as the Khasi practice.

The relationship between the two sexes and the power relationship between them in any society therefore should not be studied in terms of simple domination and submissiveness. Rather, they should be analysed in the particular context in which they operate.

## Notes and References

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- <sup>3</sup> P.R.T. Gurdon.2010. *The Khasis*. Delhi: Low Price Publications. p.63-65
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid
- <sup>5</sup> Bareh.2016. p.51.
- <sup>6</sup> H. W Mawrie.2010. *The Khasi Milieu*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company (P) Ltd. p.17.
- <sup>7</sup> Talukdar.2004. pp.14-15.
- <sup>8</sup> Mawrie.2010. p.17.
- <sup>9</sup> Gurdon.2010. p.62.
- <sup>10</sup> Bareh.2016. pp.326-327.
- <sup>11</sup> Bareh.2016.pp.326-329.
- <sup>12</sup> Bareh.2016. pp.329-330.
- <sup>13</sup> Shefali Moitra.2002. *Feminist Thought: Androcentrism and Objectivity*. Kolkata: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd in association with Centre of Advanced Study in Philosophy. Jadavpur University. p.55.
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