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Power Relations and Family Arrangements: A Study of Matrilineal Khasi Families of Meghalaya

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The Khasis, a matrilineal tribe in Meghalaya, in the northeast of India, are the adherents of a peculiar matriline social structure. However, it is going through a period of transformation from tradition to modernity that can help to favour the status of women. The basic purpose of the analysis is to understand the transition that has taken place in the Khasis of Meghalaya over a span of time. It is also important to examine the path in which the role and status of women are heading towards the advancement of society. As a result, the present paper aims to examine the complexities of the role and place of Khasi women in the growth of society indifference with the patriarchal society. And, to understand the working of the Meghalaya Succession to Self-Acquired Property Act, 1984 (referred to as the Succession Act). This paper is examined through the number of social, economic, political, cultural, psychological, and attitudinal indicators based on secondary data such as articles, books, journal articles, and online articles.

Keywords: *matrilineal society, Meghalaya, Khasi, succession act, women empowerment.*

INTRODUCTION

The word 'matriarchy' has been defined by numerous theorists in different ways. The ancient origins of the word 'matriarchy' can be traced back to the words 'matriarch' and 'patriarch'

used to describe the female or male head of the family or tribe. These terms often denoted older women or men who were dominant in a family or a community. Gradually, in the 19th century, the term 'matriarchy' came to mean the dominance of women over the home and the state in early human society. 'Matriarchy' has been explored in depth by cultural evolutionists such as Johan Jakob Bachofen, McLennan, and Morgan. According to the cultural evolutionists, owing to certain causes, civilization has progressed from the stage of 'matriarchy' to the stage of 'patriarchy.' The period of 'matriarchy' was a barbaric stage and the stage of patriarchy as an advanced stage of social progress. Cultural evolutionists have adopted the Darwinian genetic and natural selection theory in the study of social creation and the evolution of society over time. Khasi society is almost always seen as a matrilineal and not a matriarchal one. Matrilineal culture is one that traces the lineage and descent of the mother. Matriarchal society, on the other hand, is much broader in context and encompasses more aspects than mere descent and lineage. The aim of this paper is to re-interpret the idea of 'matriarchy' in the context of the Khasi society and to prove that the Khasi social system and its organisation of gender relations are more complex than what the 'prehistoric' matrilineal societies denote. The paper also attempts to prove that Khasi culture, if interpreted in a proper way, can be called matriarchal. Through this paper, we have tried to show how Khasi society is not the same as the mainstream patriarchal one. Feminist writers have explored their study of women's problems of naturalness/universality and the social/cultural construction of the patriarchy. For the purposes of our claim in this paper, we accept the thesis that patriarchy is neither normative nor natural.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The literature for the paper owes its origin diverse secondary sources like, books, various scholarly articles, along with several newspaper articles few of which have been used in this paper for the understanding the meaning of the term 'Matriarchy'. For the concept, idea, and working of democracies, the works of various enlightenment thinkers like Bachofen, Morgan McLennan, and Engels have been referred for the understanding of the concept, working, and essentials. The voluminous research material available on JSTOR was of great relevance in

terms of understanding the Khasi Society and changes that took place in the society with the span of time.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

1. To understand the societal implications and societal structure of the Matriarchal society in Meghalaya.
2. To understand how the Hindu personal law is different in a matriarchal society as is compared to the legal setting in a patriarchal society.
3. To understand the role and status of women in matriarchal society as in comparison with the patriarchal society.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

How different is the matriarchal society of the Khasi tribe is then the rest of the Indian patriarchal society and also how important the womenfolk are in the Khasi tribe?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper consists of doctrinal research and all its content is based on the readings and understanding secondary data such as newspaper, online articles, journal articles, etc.

MATRIARCHAL KHASI SOCIETY OF MEGHALAYA

This chapter is divided into three sub sections. First refers to the definition and analysis of the term 'matriarchy'. Second talks about the origin and the nature of the Khasi society. Lastly talks about the changes that took place in the Khasi society over the span of time. Sticking to our aim of the paper in the first chapter we will explain that how the Khasi Society is a matriarchal society while analysing the characteristics of the Matriarchal society. When attempting to explore the idea of Khasi matriarchy in the second part of this chapter, it is important to consider those social conditions existing in Khasi culture, traditions that are universally and historically practised or experienced by society. The Khasis adopted the matrilinear theory of descent, residency, and succession. This law makes the infant a mother's birthright. The infant is taking over the mother's social circle. Uterine relations are based on a

descent from a shared ancestor (Iawbei) who is the maternal mother of the clan. Whereas the last part of this chapter talks about how some men are protesting the system of Khasi society and want to change Meghalaya's Matriarchal Society.

MATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a matriarchy is a form of social organisation in which the mother or the oldest female is the head of the family, and a woman's line of descent and relationship is considered. It also means government or rule by a woman or a woman. There is a definition by James Peoples and Garrick Bailey that defines matriarchy as female dominance¹.

Johann Jakob Bachofen did one of the most detailed research on 'matriarchy' in his monumental work "Das Mutterrecht?". While Bachofen did not use the word 'matriarchy' per se, he called for a model of community that could be viewed as matriarchal. Bachofen conducted an analysis of numerous civilizations of the ancient world, such as Crete, Kycia, Greece, Egypt, India, and other areas. According to his study, mother right was a cultural stage in the creation of a culture from a lower to a higher stage. The stage below 'matriarchy' is referred to by Bachofen as 'hetaerism,' which was an unruly situation. Marriage was uncertain at that time, and sexuality was uncontrolled. 'Matriarchy' was a rebellion by women to bring an end to the tumultuous life of hetaerism, where their rights were subdued and relegated to the background in every domain. Women have begun to yearn for a healthier, cleaner, and more stable life. 'Matriarchy' has arrived as a higher level of human development in which women have been accorded rather high status. At this point of human development, the children took the names of their mothers, and the property was also conveyed through the female lines. Women have been influential in all aspects of life. Women have been profoundly interested in this situation in all facets of existence, whether within or outside the home. They controlled the household as well as waged war. They found weapons to be invaluable for safeguarding their role as heads of states or tribes. They also regularly take interest in state

¹ James Peoples & Garrick Alan Bailey, *Humanity: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* (9th edn, Wadsworth 2012)

affairs. Various changes have taken place in the family and culture, which have steadily limited and gradually diminished the status of women. Her political influence and the leverage of her kin have been swept away. Gradually, all remnants of matriarchy were washed out and the patriarchal period emerged, which again reduced women to the past. In the words of Bachofen. *“The progress from maternal to the parental conception of man forms the most important turning point in the history of the relations between the sexes.”*²

Since the blood relations between the mother and the infant were the most natural and undisputed, McLennan was of considerable significance. The debate on 'matriarchy' was further expanded and examined by Lewis Morgan³. Morgan had carried out an exhaustive study of many tribes, and he found that in nearly all tribes, the descent was along female lines. Morgan notes in the very first chapter of his novel that human culture has moved from savagery to civilisation through different phases. In Morgan's words, *“As it is undeniable that portions of the human family have existed in a state of savagery, other portions in a state of barbarism, and still other portions in a state of civilization, it seems equal so that these three distinct conditions are connected with each other in a natural as well as the necessary sequence of progress”*⁴

Further, the theory of Bachofen and Morgan was carried by Friedrich Engels. Engels also supported the thesis that ancient civilization was based on the system of female parenthood and inheritance. Children should not take the name nor the property of their families, as 'maternal rule' existed, whereby descent was traced only down the female line. The children did not belong to the father's family, but to the mother. However, with the rise in the accumulation of private land, this matriarchal structure was tried to be overthrown by men. When men gained more and more money, their place in the family became higher than that of women. As a result, the conventional way of upbringing and succession by females was to be scrapped. Engels observed *“The downfall of maternal law was the historic defeat of the female sex.*

² JJ Bachofen, *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right* (Princeton University Press 1992)

³ John F McLennan, *Primitive Marriage* (The University of Chicago Press 1970)

⁴ *Ibid*

*The men seized the reins also in the house, the women were stripped of their dignity, enslaved, tools of men's lust and mere machines for the generation of children"*⁵

Matriarchy was also discussed in more detail later by feminists such as Peggy Reeves Sanday and Heide Goettner-Abendroth. Peggy Reeves Sanday believed the term 'matriarchy' had never been theoretical in and of itself. It has always been studied in comparison to the patriarchy⁶. It was also seen as the reverse of the patriarchy. Since the patriarchy underscored patriarchal dominance, 'matriarchy' as its inverse was theorised as a female rule. 'Matriarchy' is however a far wider term than merely being described as a female norm. Sanday carried out her studies in the village of Minangkabau in West Sumatra, Indonesia. The Minangkabau intellectuals state that Sanday uses the word "matriarcaat" which is the Dutch term for "matriarcaat" to describe their social structure. By using this term, they refer to the economic advantage gained by women due to matrilineal descent and matrilocality, not female political dominance. Sanday, too, finds Minangkabau to be a matriarchy and not just matrimony. Heide Goettner Abendroth believes matriarchies to be equal societies founded on equity. However, equality for her does not entail the equalisation of all inequalities, because the inherent differences between the sexes and the generations are respected.

As in the patriarchy, however, these disparities do not contribute to hierarchies in the 'matriarchy.' The partnership between men and women is complementary and not competitive. There is a gender balance and a mentality of peace making⁷. Consequently, the idea of matriarchy, as is clear from all the debates alluded to above, has no set borders or barriers. It may be viewed in many ways, and its meaning can vary from society to society. The definition must also be considered in relation to the context or culture in which it is being addressed.

⁵ Friedrich Engels & Alick West, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (Resistance Books 1884)

⁶ Peggy Reeves Sanday, 'Matriarchy as a Sociocultural Form: An Old Debate in a New Light' (*University of Penn*, 1998) <<https://web.sas.upenn.edu/psanday/articles/selected-articles/matriarchy-as-a-sociocultural-form-an-old-debate-in-a-new-light/>> accessed 29 June 2021

⁷ Heide Goettner-Abendroth, 'Matriarchal Studies: Past Debates and New Foundations' (2017) 23 *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*

ORIGIN OF THE KHASI SOCIETY

When attempting to explore the phenomenon of Khasi matriline, it is important to consider those social circumstances existing in Khasi culture, rituals that are universally and historically practised or witnessed by society. The Khasis adopted the matrilineal theory of descent, residency, and succession. This law makes the infant a mother's birthright. The infant is taking over the mother's social circle. Uterine relations are based on a descent from a shared ancestor (*Iawbei*) who is the maternal mother of the clan⁸. The clan or 'Kur' is the main division of culture based on the matrilineal concept. 'Kur' is an exogamous unit, and every member is a relative of every other individual of the same 'Kur,' so every member belonging to the same 'Kur' collectively refers to each other as 'Shi Kur' or a relative belonging to a single 'Kur.' The foundation of this '*kur*' (kinship) is the assumption that they are all descended from a single ancestor... every married daughter of the Khasi women begins a '*kpoh*.' In the course of time, '*Kpoh*' evolves into a variety of lines that share the same name of the identifications with other lines of '*Kpoh*.' This name of '*Kpoh*' is named '*Jait*.' Members of various '*Kpoh*' who have different '*Jait*' names establish a family association on the presumption that they have all come from a single female ancestor, i.e. '*Ka Iawbei Tynrai*'. The Khasi '*iing*' (family) emerges as the most important unit in the Khasi family. Etymologically, the term '*eing*' applies both to the dwelling unit and to the members of the extended family who are descended from a single ancestor. According to this conception, the '*iing*' is not only a residential unit in which the mundane activities of creation, use, and reproduction are influenced, it is also the focus of the family practises of which non-kin members (i.e. non-consanguine) are exempt. Based on the mother, the '*ling*' is based on the concept of the ceremonial solidarity of the sibling group and is based on harmony between the youngest daughter/sister (*ka Khadduh*) who inherits the property and the elder brother who maintains power and jurisdiction over the affairs of the '*ling*.' The in-marrying affine (*U Shongkha*) or more precisely, the sister's husband holds a peripheral role in the ceremonial life of the '*ling*,' as he belongs ritually to his own native '*ling*' along with that of the '*ling*.' By associating the religious role with the '*ling*,' Khasi Matriliney

⁸ Sohblei Sngi Lyngdoh, *The Khasi Matriliney: Its Past and its Future* (Regency Publication 1998)

not only puts particular importance on the unity of the matrilineal descent community but also ensures that the brothers have a permanent position in the birth 'ling'.

IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN IN THE KHASI COMMUNITY

Among the Hindus, the *Karta* of the family is usually the head of the family, and is they project women to be the passive recipient of the family. This concept has been there in the society of major part of the country since time immortal but in the matriarchal society of the Khasi tribe in Meghalaya, they have differed in the opinion for a long time. They acknowledge the work of the woman that she puts into bringing a child into this world and nurturing it making into a human being. The Khasi society has a decent system that works more in the favour of women as compared to men. The ancestral property is passed down from mother to daughter especially, the youngest one while in the patriarchal society, the daughter has no right over the property of her father and she was not even allowed to receive it until the Hindu succession law was amended and equal rights were given to both female and male child.

There is an old saying amongst the Khasis "*Iong jaid naka kynthei*", (From the woman sprang the clan). Although, opinion is not unanimous about its significance. Different legends are alluded to occasionally, for clarifying the significance of the lady in ancestral society. Before farming went ahead of the scene, everybody has probably been living in the wilderness. At the appointed time, farming expected more prominent significance, however during the temporary time frame when horticulture had lesser significance, men used to go out chasing, with the goal that agribusiness was left solely to the womenfolk. As agriculture picked up significance in the life of pre-notable men, the ones who had been answerable for development likewise picked up positions. Besides, the fruitfulness of ladies as compared to the richness of the Mother-Earth and subsequently, there was an additional fanciful preferred position in making the lady, instead of the man, liable for the development of land. It tends to be sensibly reasoned that when agribusiness supplanted chasing as a method for vocation, ladies had increased a high situation in the public eye and set up their incomparability over men in issues of legacy, the board of property, and ancestry. This appears to disclose the supremacy given to females especially, the standard that the girl prevails to the family property.' The motivation

behind why the most youthful girl acquires is that after the introduction of a youngster, different girls, alongside their family, set up their own home. It at that point turns into the obligation of the most youthful little girl to perform basic commitments. This is the reason for her goes the significant offer. Other than this, she incinerates her mom, and in the event that she is a ka-khadduh of the entire family, she places the bones of all individuals in their last resting place under the stone (mawbah) of the tribe. She is given a bigger offer to meet these costs which are significant. She is "the beneficiary and caretaker of property as the steward of family love and the watcher and pillar for the harmony and the government assistance of the Jiving and the tranquillity of the left spirits of the Khasi family (ka kur).

The importance of female heirs and the importance of the female in Khasi society can also be represented by a case named, *U Sharon Nongbri v. Ka Prisibon M. A.*⁹ This case decided by the High court displays the preference given to the females. The facts of the case were, Ka Suthi and Ka Jalie were two sisters, The offended party was the amazing little girl of Ka Suthi, while the respondents were relatives of Ka Jalie, The offended party guaranteed the property in the debate regarding the sole enduring female beneficiary to the family, while the litigants fought that the property was oneself obtained property of their folks and hence had a place with them. Both the courts beneath, after a scrutiny of the proof, arrived at the resolution that the property was familial and not oneself procured property of the litigant's folks and that the offended party was the sole enduring female beneficiary and was, all things considered, qualified for the property. The litigant was to stay as the administrator of the family property, with no privilege of offer or removal without the information on the offended party. The High Court insisted on the judgment and dismissed the appeal. From the above-mentioned case, we can clearly understand how much girls are preferred in the Khasi community.

THE MEGHALAYA SUCCESSION ACT, 1984

The Meghalaya Succession Act had received consent from the President in the year of 1986. The Meghalaya Succession Act had not affected a very large group of people in our country. It was made for a particular tribe and thus was not talked about much nor analysed and

⁹ *U Sharon Nongbri v Ka Prisibon MA* (5) 5 (H) of 1956

commented on by a lot of observers. We must understand why this Act is widely welcomed and accepted in Meghalaya. And to understand that we must know why the special provision act was introduced in the first place. The social setting of the tribes of Meghalaya is very different from the social setting of the rest of the country. A major part of our country is a patriarchal society while the tribes of Meghalaya i.e. Khasi and Jaintia are among those few tribes of our country that has a matriarchal society that differs their rules and societal settings different from the rest of the country.

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

The Succession Act was specifically developed and introduced for the Khasi and Jaintia tribes of Meghalaya. Primarily, the Act is just seen to be a mere extension of a legal right that is already enjoyed by the Indian citizens in other states. But a special Act was made because in the Khasi community there has never existed a tradition of making a will. There was only a practise of *pynkam*, in which a person during his or her lifetime makes known or reveals who he wishes to pass the possession of his or her particular property.¹⁰ In the Khasi community, the devolution of the Khasi property only occurs in the female line and if by any chance there is no female in the family then the son receives it. But unlike the rest of the Indian society, sons have no born right over the property. There are certain rules that are followed for the disposition of the property and if a woman dies without telling who she is giving her property to, the property automatically goes to the youngest daughter of the family. When talking about a man, when he is living in his mother's house before marriage, the earning earned by him is called the "earning of the clan" (*ka kamai ing kur*) and that goes to his mother and sister and when he lives with his wife in her house, the earning is called "earning of the children" (*ka kamai ing khun*) and that goes to his wife and children. Now unlike other societies, the man comes and lives with his wife in her house leaving her mother's house. When he comes to her house, if he has some property acquired from her mother that money if he uses in some kind of business or occupation, that money that he earns will be treated as his own property but there often a man is forced to merge his property with that of his wife's. When this event takes

¹⁰ Tiplut Nongbri, 'Gender and the Khasi Family Structure: Some Implications of the Meghalaya Succession to Self-Acquired Property Act, 1984' (1988) 37 Sociological Bulletin

place, the right of his sister and mother tends to lose its place because then the property is transmitted to his wife and children.

Keeping all the above stated patterns of inheritance in mind, we can see how the preference is given directly or indirectly to the maternal relations contrary to the paternal relation and females against males which is quite different of a phenomenon that takes place comparing to the rest of India. Among the educated Khasi members of the community, this practise of their kinship and inheritance was rather seen to be an injustice against men and they claimed it to be very biased towards women and too restrictive against men. The introduction was thus seeming an attempt to remove such restrictions and biasness amongst the society of Khasi and bring about equality.

SOCIETAL CHANGES DUE TO THE MEGHALAYA SUCCESSION ACT, 1984

With the changing times and ages, even the Khasi society and tradition did not remain untouched. At present, the stigma applied to the extinct family is not as ancient. People's views are shifting. They are more compassionate and realistic today. The male members of the extinct family are no longer burdened by shame and are rejected by the neighbours. This can be due to several causes, such as widespread conversion to Christianity, evolving economy, education, and modernisation. In the traditional religion, women played an important role in the rites of passage, particularly the naming ceremony (by the mother of the father, the *veikha*) and the rites of death (by the youngest daughter or sister *Ka Khadduh*). The rites of death are no longer followed by the youngest sibling, but the Churchmen and the naming ceremony (*Jerkhun*) have been replaced by the baptism of Christians. As a result, the youngest daughter and father's mother no longer have a part to play in these practises.

The prevailing difficulty to present and receive the Succession Act can be gotten a handle on if the approach of Christianity and the powers of modernization in the Khasi economy and society are considered. Transformation to Christianity has debilitated the matrilineal framework. Huge numbers of the conventional ceremonies focused on the matrilineal family have now lost their significance. In Christian families, the authority of the mother's sibling is

offering a path to the father's position. Other than Christianity, powers of modernization likewise favour patriline. Men have been the first to profit from present-day instruction. Salaried work and the soul of independence and levelheadedness have influenced even the individuals who have not changed themselves over to Christianity. Henceforth even the non-Christian Khasi men consider their matrilineal framework as being hindered by pointless limitations. The Succession Act represents this new desire concerning Khasi men to liberate themselves from conventional limitations. It gives scope for them to bypass a portion of the antiquated limitations that Khasi matrilineal forces on them. However, it likewise debilitates the ladies' position because the spouse has no case over her significant other's self-gained property and is delivered monetarily unreliable if her better half decides to disregard her or separate her.

The cycle of progress, notwithstanding, brings its own inconsistencies. Custom is excessively profoundly imbued in individuals to permit quick change from matriline to patriline. The disintegration of the mother's sibling's control over the sister's family unit has made impressive pressure between the two male experts in the family. This issue is felt especially in those families where the sister is a beneficiary to a genealogical property. The spouse here is frequently observed as a usurper of the genuine privileges of the mother's sibling. This advancement has prompted a fascinating turn with regards to the general public, that is, the development of the mother as a predominant character who has now obtained a portion of the mother's sibling's capacity and goes about as a middle person between the last mentioned and her better half. This improvement favours ladies, yet it must be seen against the overall pattern towards patrimony in Khasi society. Whatever advantage ladies may have consequently determined, in any case, may end up being brief since current political foundations have upgraded men's capacity to alter customary organizations to suit their requirements.

CONCLUSION

The tribes of Meghalaya are among the rare societies in India that follow the matriarchal society. The majority part of our country follows a patriarchal society leaving women the passive ones. In this paper, we have attempted to try and understand the working of the

matriarchal society of the Khasi Tribe in Meghalaya. We have read the nature and working of the tribe and see how the women are the head of the family has the power over the ancestral property. The female of the Khasi tribe has a major role to play in the household of the Khasi tribe. They have undoubtedly the major tasks and control the family in the most possible way. The income is usually transferred to the wives and children of the husband, the property going to the youngest daughter of the family are some events that take place only in the hills of Meghalaya.

Even though the Khasi people group is a matrilineal society, the womenfolk are not as enabled as one might think them to be. Ladies were never permitted to take an interest in a neighbourhood overseeing establishment (the Dorbar Shnong), restricted by the Head Man, otherwise called the Rangbah Shnong. Till date, most of the grave family choices are taken by the dad who practices a ton of command over the family. The divergence between the number of ladies who are at the bleeding edge of legislative issues inside the state versus that of men is a somewhat enormous hole that is very likely the equivalent in different conditions of India. Khasi women are somewhat avoided from legislative issues. The current political framework that is male ruled absolutely plays no such kindnesses to the part of the populace that is women.

Another important thing to notice is that with the times changing the culture of the tribes also changing. With the influence of western education more and more people especially the males of the society, the educated males they are taking the advantage of the education and not following their traditions and customs. They are marrying the girls from different castes so that the inherited property stays with them and they do not have to give it up. Modernization patterns are continuously presenting patrilineal standards in Khasi society. Inquisitively, these inclinations have likewise offered to ascend to circumstances in which a few ladies have picked up experts in the homegrown circle, yet its potential for extending sex disparity ought to likewise be considered. Consequently, it very well may be aid that powers of modernization don't advance sex uniformity.