

The Khasi Society Of Meghalaya: New Dimensions In Gender Paradigm

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Abstract

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 traditions. The Khasi society poses new examples in the gender paradigm by bestowing a unique status on women. The purpose of this paper is to understand the special and unique position of women in this society which is very different from that of the position of women in mainstream society of India. Being a tribal community the Khasi society is very different from the mainstream society of India and has to be analysed as such. The society is characterised by matrilineal customs which make it very different from the patriarchal mainstream society. Therefore this society offers a new lens through which the gender paradigm can be re – constructed and viewed.

Keywords: Khasis, Tribes, Matriliny, Patriarchy, Women

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 traditions¹.

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

¹ Sharmila Das Talukdar.2004. *Khasi Cultural Resistance to Colonialism*. Guwahati : Spectrum Publications. pp.8-10

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 mother². 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*³.

The next division of the Khasi society is the *ling* or the family. The Khasis believe that the clan grew out of the *ling*. 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 *ling* 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 name⁴. 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*⁵.

The *Ka Meikha* is revered a lot. After marriage the husband and the wife go to take her blessings. A new born baby is taken to her to take her blessings. At the time of burying the bones of the dead, her son's children come to her house and perform the ceremony amidst ceremonial dances and giving away of gifts⁶.

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*⁷. 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

² Hamlet Bareh.2016. *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*. Guwahati: Spectrum Publications. p.28.

³ P.R.T. Gurdon.2010. *The Khasis*. Delhi: Low Price Publications. p.63-65

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Bareh.2016. p.51.

⁶ Bareh.2016. p.319.

⁷ H. W Mawrie.2010. *The Khasi Milieu*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company (P) Ltd. p.17.

for unmarried daughters and sons and those in need. The *Khadduh* is the keeper of religion⁸. 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 place⁹. 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 duties¹⁰.

Property and Inheritance

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 goods¹¹. 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. If there is no biological daughter left, a female is nominated who acts as a housekeeper till a female child is born. She is known as *Ka Nongrapling*.

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 subscription is collected from all family members for these common occasions which is known as *Synniang*. Other brothers and sisters of a Khasi family are called *Nongmih Ling* or 'outgoing'. The reason for this is that they might get married and set up their own houses along with their partners or may move out due to other reasons. 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 mother¹².

Among the Khasis, laws of inheritance are not the same for all sub groups. The rules of inheritance vary among the various sub tribes of Meghalaya itself demonstrating the principle of fluidity. The *War* Khasis on the Southern hills of Meghalaya observe both

⁸ Talukdar.2004. pp.14-15.

⁹ Mawrie.2010. p.17.

¹⁰ Gurdon.2010. p.62.

¹¹ Bareh.2016. pp.326-327.

¹² Bareh.2016.pp.326-329

patrilineal and matrilineal customs. In the area of South War Khasi, if the father leaves behind any property, it is equally divided among his children. The mother is the manager of the property but she cannot dispose it without the permission of her children. In Khasi *Bhoi* areas on the other hand, only the daughter can inherit property left behind by the father. The mother again preserves it and keeps it. The elder sisters may dispose parts of the property they inherit from their mothers, but usually they leave it for their daughters for legacy. The traits of egalitarianism are visible in the Khasi society where the husband and wife both may make a partnership in earning.

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. This form of property is not inherited property but only property which is held in combined ownership. 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 wife¹³.

A very important aspect of the Khasi society and tradition is the institution of the *Syiem*. The *Syiem* acted as the executive head of the 'State'. Before the institution of the *Syiem* came into existence, the administration of the 'State' was carried out by *Basans* and *Lyngdohs* who were the heads of their respective units. The word *Basan* meant an elder of a tribe and the word *Lyngdoh* implies a sacrificer (*Lang* means collecting and *Doh* means meat). However, the *Basans* and *Lyngdohs* wanted to give up their individual positions so that a common court of the *Syiem* could be instituted in order to centralize the administration and also with the purpose of bringing together the different clans and develop a harmonious relation among them. It also aimed at consolidating tiny republics and bringing them under one umbrella of the confederation¹⁴. It was believed that the *Syiem* originated in a divine way which meant that the ancestress of the *Syiem* was supposed to have a mythical origin¹⁵. The son of the eldest daughter of a family was eligible to become the *Syiem*.

Some *Syiems* were considered to be incarnations of God. The *Syiems* of places such as Mngiang, Sutnga and Shillong were considered to be incarnations of God. However, later on, there were *Syiems* who were known as '*Syiem Briew*' or 'man-made'- *Syiems* who were not considered to have divine origin. In places such as Khyriem, the *Syiem* was known as '*Ki Syiem Ki Blei*' which means 'the chief the God'. Therefore in these places, divine sanction is associated with the court of the *Syiem*. The *Syiem* in Cherrapunji on the other hand was supposed to embody attributes like caring, protecting etc. which are traditionally considered to be attributes of a mother. Here the *Syiem* is referred to as '*U Syiem U Kmie*' which means the chief, the mother.

Interestingly in the area of Mawiang, the *Syiem* was considered to be a lowly person equivalent to a slave. Here he is known as *U Syiem U Mraw* or the Chief, the Slave. In such place a non Khasi person used to be appointed as the *Syiem* since none of the Khasis were

¹³ Bareh.2016. pp.329-330.

¹⁴ Bareh.2016. pp.63-64

¹⁵ Ibid., p.65

ready to accept this position of *Syiem*. Here the *Syiem* was blamed for any wrongs which happened in the society and was often made a scapegoat.

Despite the differences in the position of the *Syiem* in different places, it is a accepted perception that the position of the *Syiem* was a very responsible one since he was the guardian of the Khasi law and also the dispenser of justice¹⁶. The court of the *Syiem* was built on the principles of democracy and the views of the people were always taken into account whenever the *Syiem* had to take any administrative decision. All measures were taken to prevent the institution of *Syiem* from becoming a dictatorship. The *Syiem* was considered to be a ceremonial head since the real powers rested with the people of the area¹⁷. According to the Khasi tradition, both men and women can assume the role of the *Syiem*. In some areas such as Iapngar, Maharam, Sutnga, Nongkhlaw, women assumed the role of the *Syiem*. In the Khasi society the people have the supreme authority and it is they who determine the power of the *Syiem*. The power of the *Syiem* is accordingly limited, so that he is just the nominal head of the state¹⁸.

Since the Khasi society is a non-patriarchal and a non-hierarchical one, therefore the way in which gender relations or the identities of a man and a woman are constructed, are totally different from those in patriarchal, hierarchical societies. The society is deeply influenced by its religion which plays an important part in the Khasi way of life and shapes the views and attitudes of the Khasis. The Khasi religion very clearly states that a Khasi man does not live in this world alone but with *Ka Blei* (God of the clan), *Ka Iawbei* (ancestress), the *U Thawlang* (ancestor) and the *U Suidnia* (uncle). The uncle, the ancestress all are an integral part of the clan and have equal importance and bearing in the social life of the Khasis. Whatever a man does, he has always to be aware that it will have consequences not only for himself but also for his family and his clan¹⁹.

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 excluded²⁰. 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 children²¹.

¹⁶ Talukdar.2004. p.52

¹⁷ Bareh.2016. p. 65

¹⁸ Mawrie.2010. p.93.

¹⁹ Mawrie.2010. p.15.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ Mawrie.2010. p.63

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 Khasi tradition accords an important place to women as far as religious practices are concerned. The Khasis do not have a priest to perform religious ceremonies like many other popular religions. The religious duties are the responsibility of the head of the family who takes the help of the *kni* or the maternal uncle to carry them out. Certain sacrifices are performed which may be family and clan sacrifices, or sacrifices for the good of the state or community at large. The *Lyngdoh* performs these sacrifices. The *Lyngdoh* is the Khasi priest who is always appointed from the *Lyngdoh* clan. Etymologically the word *Lyngdoh* or *Langdoh* is the person who is assigned the task of collecting sacrificial victims, i.e. flesh for the purpose of sacrificing. Other persons as *Soh-blei* or *Soh-sla* are also said to be priests apart from the *Lyngdoh*. In some Khasi areas, the place of the *Syiem* is taken over totally by the *Lyngdoh* and he rules the community apart from performing the usual spiritual offices. There are various differences in different areas regarding the duties of *Lyngdoh*, their methods of sacrifice and also the Gods to whom they sacrifice. However one thing is common and constant in all these areas and that is that while performing the sacrifices, the *Lyngdoh* must be guided by a female priestess who is known as the *ka soh-blei*, *ka-soh-sla* or *ka lyngdoh*.

The female priestess collects all the articles of worship and keeps them ready for the *Lyngdoh* to perform the sacrifice. The *Lyngdoh* merely acts as the deputy of the priestess while sacrificing. According to Gurdon, 'the female *soh-blei* is without doubt a survival of the time when, under the matriarchate, the priestess was the agent for the performance of all religious ceremonies'. Another instance of such a survival is the High Priestess of Nongkrem, who is the actual head of the state in the *Syiemship*. She still has many religious duties to perform. However she delegates her temporal powers to her sons or nephew who therefore become the *Syiem*. It is evident therefore that it is not that she is devoid of any powers, she chooses to delegate them. At Mawsynram there is the *Syiem sad* or the priestess who has to assist the new *Syiem* or chief in certain sacrifices²².

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.

If anyone in the village falls sick, the entire community comes together to take care of the sick person and all young men attend to that person all throughout the situation. If someone

²² Gurdon.2010. p.120-121.

in the village dies, it is the duty of the whole village to take care of the funeral responsibilities involved in the funeral process. There is community work at the time of harvest in the fields. The youth of the village come together and work in the fields. This community often jointly sows and harvests the crop. The entire village sets aside a day to help the widows or any self-supporting females in the society. This community work is done with a view to make sure that there is no starvation in the Khasi society. If someone is constructing a new house then the entire village comes together to help the person²³. God for a Khasi is formless and beyond gender. Since religion is extremely important for the Khasis, it guides their entire existence. There are three tenets or commandments of the Khasis which form the base of their societal organization. These are: *Tip Briew Tip Blei*, *Tip Kur Tip Kha* and *Kamai ia ka hok*. In the first tenet the word *Tip* means to know. *Briew* means man and *Blei* means God. In this tenet the interrelationship between God and man is very evident. It suggests that through religion a person comes to know not only about God but also about fellow human beings. A person has to be fair, just kind and helpful to all fellow beings. There is a concept of humanhood in Khasi society or *Ka Rngiew*. This concept of humanhood encourages a person to be fair, just, loving to all fellow human beings and therefore to know God. The second tenet is the base of social structure of the Khasis. This tenet means to know one's *kur* or maternal relations and also one's *kha* that is paternal relations²⁴. Egalitarianism in a Khasi society also implies that equal importance is given to both maternal and paternal relations. Though inheritance and lineage is through the mother it does not mean that paternal relations are ignored. It is an equally important part of the Khasi social structure. The rule of family organization, marriage, descent, inheritance all emanate from this tenet. Roles and status of members of the society also emerge from this tenet²⁵. The third tenet of the Khasi society means as Sharmila Das Talukdar interprets it, 'earn righteousness by one's own labour'. This tenet envisages man's interaction with the economic activity²⁶.

A Khasi according to Mawrie, 'lives with nature and nature lives with him'²⁷. Khasis are aware of the beautiful things nature has in store for them as the birds, animals, flora and fauna around them and consider themselves to be one with nature.

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.

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²³ Mawrie.2010. p.87.

²⁴ Talukdar.2004. p.74.

²⁵ Talukdar.2004. p.90.

²⁶ Ibid., p.75.

²⁷ Ibid., p.97.

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