

## The Essence of Khasi Matriliney

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**ABSTRACT:** We must bear in mind that democratic principles are the pillars of the Khasi way of life in every sphere of activity. In other words, as members of the Khasi society are equal with no classification this way or that way. So are the members of the family. Authority is not an absolute identity as far as mother's brother and mother is concern. The mother cannot infringe upon the authority of the mother's brother and vice versa. At the same time, the authority is so interlink between that of the mother's brother and the mother in such a way that no authority can be exercise without the existence of either of the gender. In this way one is wondering as to how the day to day requirement of Khasi family are run and managed when there is no one to look after the interest of the family of equal members.

**Keywords:** Ing, Khadduh, Khasi, Kni, Kpa, Matriliney, Role.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The Khasis form one of the predominant tribes of North-East India. They are found in the eastern portion of the state of Meghalaya, in the present districts of East and West Khasi Hills, Ri Bhoi and Jaintia Hills... The Khasi and Jaintia Hills districts together occupy an area of 14,117 sq.km, that is about two thirds of the entire state of Meghalaya. To the North of Khasi and Jaintia Hills and in the South lies Bangladesh. To the East of Jaintia Hills lie Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills districts of Assam. This region is characterized by a wide variety of terrain. In the southern part, the hills are high and they form deep gorges which act as a natural boundary with Bangladesh. This region is usually referred to as the War area. In the central part is situated the Shillong plateau composed of the oldest Archean rock formation. This part is referred to as the Nongphlang (grassland) region. Towards the north, the hills ebb away into the plains of Assam. This region forms the so-called Bhoi region...The western region of the Khasi Hills is popularly known as the Maharam (Maram) and Lyngngam region. The Jaintia Hills district is situated in the eastern part and it is still the largest district...The Khasi population found in the four districts of East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, Ri Bhoi and Jaintia Hills districts, is approximately 1.5 million. The largest part of the population is found in East Khasi Hills district especially in the urban area of Shillong and its periphery...The Khasis as a tribe is composed of many sub-groups, divided principally on ground of geographical factors...It is the opinion of many scholars that the term Khasi is applicable to all sub-groups...The distinction is only territorial. The differences in dialects, economy, social usage and political organization are due to ecological and politico-historical conditions of the groups. However, they share the same origin, language, social structure and culture [1].

### II. BACKGROUND OF KHASI MATRILINY

The study of the Khasi society which exists in the hills of Khasi and Jaintia of the State of Meghalaya in India is one of the subjects of interest among scholars and those trying to understand the character of Khasi matriliney. "Matriliney is a combination of two Latin words: mater (mother), and linea (line, lineage). It only means that children belong to the mother and her clan" [2]. Malniang made a distinction between matriarchy and matriliney. The author pointed out that Matriliney is primarily concerned with the phenomenon of descent [3].

While trying to examine the concept of Khasi matriliney, it is important to understand certain social conditions prevalent in the Khasi society, the practices which is universally and traditionally followed or observed by the society. The Khasis followed the matrilineal principle of descent, residence and inheritance. This rule makes the child the birth right of the mother. The child takes its mother's social group. Uterine ties are based on descent from a common ancestress (*Jawbei*) who is the ancestral mother of the clan [4]. The clan or '*Kur*' is the largest divisions in the society on the basis of the matrilineal principle. A '*kur*' is an exogamous unit and every member is a kin of every other person of the same '*Kur*' thus every member belonging to the same '*Kur*' refer to each other collectively as '*Shi Kur*' or kin belonging to a single '*kur*'. The basis of this '*kur*' (kinship) is the belief that they have all descended from a common ancestress...Each married daughter of the Khasi women starts a '*kpoh*'. During the course of time the '*Kpoh*' develops into a number of lineages which

share the same identifications name with other lineages with the 'Kpoh'. This name of a 'Kpoh' is called its 'Jait'. Members of different 'Kpoh' having different 'Jait' names develop a kinship affiliation on the belief that they all have descended from a common female ancestress i.e., 'Ka Iawbei Tynrai' [5]. The Khasi 'iing' (family) emerges as the most significant unit in Khasi kinship. Etymologically, the word 'iing' refers both to the dwelling unit and the members of the immediate family who are descended from a common ancestress. According to this conception, the 'iing' is not only a residential unit within which the mundane tasks of production, consumption and reproduction are affected, it is also the centre of family rituals from which non-kin members (i.e., non-consanguine) are excluded. Focused round the mother the 'iing' is premised on the principle of the ritual unity of the sibling group and rests on the cooperation between the youngest daughter/sister (*ka Khadduh*) who inherits the property and the elder brother who exercise control and authority over the affairs of the 'iing'. The in-marrying affine (*U Shongkha*) or more specifically the sister's husband occupies a peripheral position in the ritual life of the 'iing' as ritually he belongs to his own natal 'iing' along with his sister and her children. By associating religious function with the 'iing', Khasi matriliney not only lays special emphasis on the solidarity of the matrilineal descent group, but also ensures that brothers have a permanent place in the natal 'iing' [6].

### 2.1 Residential Pattern

Nongkynrih provide a detailed description of the Khasi 'iing'. He explains that all the descendant from the same grandmother in the matrilineage refer to each other as 'shi-iing shi-sem' (those living in the same house or under the same roof belonging to the same grandmother). The kinship relations of the 'shi-iing shi-sem' are the closest one where both the intensity and the frequency of interaction is highest and cooperation is maximum. All the persons claiming kinship as 'Shi-iing shi-sem' (i.e., who have descended from the same grandmother or who belong to the same lineage) use a particular word as a common surname. But in day-to-day routine affairs and at the time of life-cycle crises it is the 'iing' which is the most active and most affected. 'Iing' can be viewed commonly as a domestic group of three or four generations consisting of male and female consanguine and may or may not have any husbands in any generation residing with their wives and children and may also include married brothers living with their sisters but without their wives and children... The word 'iing' is used by different persons differently. When a woman after marriage sets up her own house she refers to it as 'Iing la jong', i.e., her own 'iing'. But her husband will not use the same expression for his wife's 'iing'. For him, it will be 'Iing-khun' i.e., the house of his children. For the children this will be 'Iing-kmie' i.e., the house of the mother. For the husband of the children, this will be 'Iing-kiaw' i.e., the house of the mother-in-law. For the children of the daughters this will be 'Iing Kmie-rad' i.e., the house of the grandmother. After the death of the woman who had first set up this 'iing-la-jong', her sons and elder daughters may either continue to refer to the 'iing' as 'iing kmie' or as 'iing khadduh' i.e., the house where the youngest sister lives. A woman would refer to the 'iing' of her husband's mother as 'iing Kiaw' and the children would refer to the 'iing' of their father's mother as 'Iing Meikha' i.e., the house of the father's mother. The point to be noted here is that whereas a woman other than the youngest daughter of her mother could have 'iing' of her own addressed as 'iing-la-jong', the youngest daughter cannot refer to the house of the mother where she continues to live even after her mother's death as her own house or 'iing-la-jong'. The males, of course, do not have their 'iing-la-jong'. They either have a house of their mother or the house of their children.

As a matter of practice in the society the elder daughters after marriage move out of their mother's 'iing' to set up an independent 'iing' of their own along with their husbands (neo-local residence) whereas the youngest daughter continues to live (as a matter of obligation) even after marriage with her husband in her mother's 'iing' (matri-local residence). Her elder daughters also moved out after marriage and only the youngest daughter continues to stay like her mother. The original 'iing' is perpetuated by the youngest daughters in every generation. Such a perpetual 'iing' is called the 'Iing-Seng'. 'Iing-Seng' is the place which signifies the unity of the lineage and is termed in that context as 'shi-iing'. It is interesting to note here that over a number of generations even the neo-local residence set up by an elder daughter may also become 'iing-seng' for the branch of the lineage perpetuated by her. Functionally the *iing* consists of the mother, the brother or mother's brother, and the father of the children [7]

### 2.2 Inheritance

Besides describing Khasi 'iing', inheritance is included among other things because the 'iing' is also a unit of economic production. "The Khasis used an expression 'Ka Hiar Pateng' for inheritance (the word 'pateng' means generation)" [8]. Tiplut Nongbri explain that in order to understand the Khasi rules of inheritance we have to distinguish between two types of property. The Khasi conception of property falls under two major categories 1). The ancestral property (*Ka nongtymmen*) that which has been passed down in the family for generations. 2) Self-acquired property (*Ka nongkhyrrow*) that which is earned during a person's life time. Inheritance of ancestral property takes place strictly in the female line. It passes from mother to youngest

daughter, failing which by death or social taboo it goes to her next youngest daughter. If the youngest daughter, who inherits the ancestral property happens to be childless or has only sons, then after her death, her next youngest sister inherits the property and then passes on to her youngest daughter after her. Thus the Khasi contribute to the ultimo geniture pattern of inheritance, where ancestral property passes on from mother to youngest daughter for generations [9]. Nongkynrih clearly pointed out that property generated by a woman (even though self-acquired) became ancestral for the generation of her grand-children. When a woman during her life time gave parts of ancestral property to her elder daughters it was not called a case of inheritance because the elder daughters could not customarily lay a rightful claim over the ancestral property [10].

Nongbri further added that inheritance of the ancestral property is, however, coupled with certain social obligations. While the elder daughter set up separate household a few years after their marriage, the youngest daughter continues to stay in the mother's house. She not only has to look after the aged parents, but if any member of the family is widowed, divorced or falls into any misfortune, it is the duty of the youngest daughter to look after them and to give them shelter if the need arises. The house of the youngest daughter is looked up by the members of the matrikin as a refuge in the midst of any contingency. The youngest daughter, although inherits the ancestral property, is not free to deal it as she pleases. Each and every move that she makes should be with the knowledge and consent of her brothers or the mothers. She is merely the custodian of the property while real control over them is vested in the hands of her male matrikin... Further, in lieu of the inheritance, the youngest daughter has to see to the execution of the family rites and bear all the expenses incurred. Above all, to maintain the dignity and honour of the 'Khadduh's iing' she should be free from all social contaminations. It is for this reason that committance of incest, adultery, crime, lunacy or change of religion deprives the youngest daughter of her right to the ancestral property...As far as the self-acquired property is concerned it can be disposed-off according to the will of the beholder. Self-acquired property is considered to be the private monopoly of the owner and he can give it to whoever he likes. Inheritance of a person's self-acquired property need not necessarily follow from mother to youngest daughter. Indeed, sons too can inherit self-acquired property if the owner of such property wills it [11].

### III. ROLE CONFIGURATION AND DISCUSSION

The kinship system which forms an integral part in Khasi society involves different sets of obligations and duties relating to paternal kin (*Kha*) and maternal kin (*Kur*). Syiem maintained that 'One of the functional prerequisite of society is to make sure that not only new members are reproduced in society but are protected if that society is to survive. This involves role differentiation and role assignment' [12].

A major concern in the description of family systems is to document which members of the family, in their several roles are actually or potentially responsible for the performance of a number of vital domestic functions. Since many rights and duties may be held by more than one person, each area of functioning needs to be examined separately to see which member may serve as potential substitutes for, or act in consort with, each other, in the holding of particular rights and duties and performance of specified tasks. The present paper examined separately the traditional role of Khasi men as '*U Kni*' (mother's brother) and as '*U Kpa*' (husband/father) and that of women as wife or mother.

#### 3.1 The Role of a Khasi man

In the structure of Khasi matriliney the role of men has been separated into two parts, that is, as '*U Kni*' (mother's brother) and as '*U Kpa*' (husband/father). Dr Helen Giri maintained that 'a Khasi man stands in two worlds, the world of his clan and that of his children. He is the pivot round which the whole family revolves. He is the connecting link between his mother's clan and his wife's clan'. In his *kur*'s (mother's clan) family he has the position of '*U Kni*', at his wife's house; he is '*U Kpa*' [13].

In his mother's clan, he 'play a very important role...and act as the councillor and guardian of his nieces and nephews' [14]. In the marriage negotiations he is the main spokesman between the two families concerned, and is also the major decision-maker [15]. He acted as '*U Ksiang*' (go-between) who represented the bride's as well as the groom's side. He was the one who conducted the marriage ceremony and showered blessings on the newly married couples [16]. Mawrie highlighted the role and authority of *U Kni* (maternal uncle) in the Khasi family. The author explains that traditionally 'the role of *u kni* was sacred and respectable in the Khasi society; he has to ensure that members of the clan adhere to the customary rules and norms. As *u kni* he has important roles such as in matters relating to (i) the birth of a child and the naming ceremony; (ii) engagement and marriage of his sister's children; and, (iii) death' [17]. And as *u kpa*, 'he is the main pillar supporting and sustaining the family. The sound of his *hookah* brings security to the household and his coughing symbolises the strength and power that controls the whole household; he earns for his children and enhances his earnings for his children's wealth and progress; his children are taught to show respect and not to behave in a way which displeases him or causes any dissatisfaction to him' [18]. Mawrie further explains 'the relation between a husband and a wife rests on the understanding that they have a crucial role to play for the family

which they have just started. Their responsibility to their children is profound and overriding. Neither the husband nor the wife has a position lower than the other in their relationship. A woman has her own status as a mother, and a man his status as a father and it is their business to manage and run their own household according to their wisdom, mutual understanding and cooperation [19].

### 3.2 Role of the women

The Khasi saying is, “*long jait na ka kynthei*” (from the woman sprang the clan) [20]. The Khasis, stress the role of the mother (wife) in reproduction. Because Khasi physiology stresses the centrality of the woman in the process of reproduction; she is also seen as the center of the family circle. She is... expected to be fully responsible for the nurturance and care of her children. She is...the repository of family honour [21]. Amongst the Khasis, “especially that of the home, is in the hands of the women. It is, therefore, perhaps not to be wondered at, considering the important status assigned to women by the Khasis, that women should inherit the property and not men. The rule amongst Khasis is that the youngest daughter “holds” the religion, ‘*ka bat ia ka niam*’. Her house is called ‘*ka iing seng*’, and it is here that the members of the family assemble to witness her performance of the family ceremonies” [22]. The *Khadduh* ‘has to ensure that family rites are organized in their due course’ [23]. ‘It is her duty to perform the family ceremonies, and propitiate the family ancestors’ [24]. ‘She cremated her mother, and if she be *ka Khadduh* of the whole family she puts the bones of all members in their final resting place under the stone (*mawbah*) of the clan’ [25]. ‘As a nurturer of the family line, the *Khadduh* has a significant role in the domestic sphere. On her devolves the responsibilities of caring for and protecting all members of her matrikin. She is to look after her aged parents and other members of her matrikin, should they suffer from any misfortune. The *Khadduh* also has a duty towards her brothers and sisters, should they be stranded in life or facing extraordinary hardship. She has to help them out, even, give them shelter and food if they are sick or disabled, and have no one else to look after them. The obligation to care also includes the children of her sisters. In case of death of a sister, she becomes responsible for her children. The husband or father is not expected to look after them, although he might provide a sum of money for their maintenance. The *Khadduh* is the keeper of the house for her old parents. However, she cannot sell family property without the knowledge and consent of the uncles and brothers. All sisters have a right to occupy a portion of the family land as co-parceners, and *Ka Khadduh* cannot deprive them of this right’ [26].

In a matrilineal Khasi society, protecting and maintaining the well-being of the members of the matrilineal group is the role of mother’s brother (*U Kni*). I.M. Syiem maintained that ‘The *kni* among other things is the spiritual and moral guide for his sister’s children, and at times even provide them should the need arise...In marriage negotiations he is the main spokesman between the two families concerned...There is another important area where the maternal males control and influence are felt. This concerns the economic interest’, particularly the ancestral property (*ka Nongtymmen*) which has been accumulated for two-three or more generations which is held in trust and transmitted from the youngest daughter (*Khadduh*) to youngest daughter. The author further maintained that the role of mother’s brother ‘in reproduction consists of giving seed (*bet symbai*) in another matrilineal group (*Kur*). It works as a system of exchange in which males from another group will provide the same service to ensure the continuity of the other matrilineal group’. Further, with ancestral property, the *Khadduh* ‘is entrusted with the parents’ house, land, gold and other items of property. She has a special role to play as custodian of family property, and as the central pivot in whose house all family social, kinship and religious activities are performed. Her home functions as a social welfare centre for the destitute, the sick, the divorced and widowed and the social misfits who are her siblings of members of the extended *iing* including her mother’s siblings and their maternal off springs’ [27].

The Khasi matrilineal system is being embraced and revered by each and every member of the Khasi community as one’s own deity. I.M. Syiem maintained that ‘the belief that *Ka Leilongkur*, *Ka Leilongiing* (Clan deity) is actively involved in the function of procreation and preservation of the clan, in essence, in the survival of the Khasi society’ [28]. When such is the case of embrace and reverence, the system is blindly followed and practiced by all whatever may be the criticism against it. By virtue of the system, the youngest daughter of the family plays an unenviable role in the family. Once the youngest daughter fails to perform her sacred duty, the structure of that family is doomed towards destruction. The youngest or elder daughter in the case of certain ‘*Kur Syiem*’ [29], is adored as the soul (*sad*) of the Khasi matrilineal family. In this way, she becomes the undisputed symbol of authority to be respected and loved by each and every member of the family. In the case of the *Kur Syiem*, a male member of the family having no daughter stands disqualified to be a candidate as a ruler (*Syiem*) of the *Syiemship* (Kingdom). So also is the case of a male member of the family having no daughter, that is to say, when such is the situation, the male member loses his credibility to be called *U Kni* or *U Suidnia* in his family. The interesting part that can be seen in the system is that nobody makes or receives order in the discharge of his or her duty as a member of a family. It is inherent and sacred obligation on the part of each and every member to discharge his or her family independent of anybody’s direction. Each and every one knows his or her duty and he or she intuitively and willingly performs one’s role without fail.

We must bear in mind that democratic principles are the pillars of the Khasi way of life in every sphere of activity. In other words, as members of the Khasi society are equal with no classification this way or that way. So are the members of the family. Authority is not an absolute identity as far as mother's brother and mother is concern. The mother cannot infringe upon the authority of the mother's brother and vice versa. At the same time, the authority is so interlink between that of the mother's brother and the mother in such a way that no authority can be exercise without the existence of either of the gender. In this way one is wondering as to how the day to day requirement of Khasi family are run and managed when there is no one to look after the interest of the family of equal members.

#### **IV. CHALLENGES INVOLVED AND THE SUSTENANCE OF THE SYSTEM**

Many are apprehensive about the stability and the resilient nature of the society to deal with internal and external pressures. The Khasi matrilineal society is especially facing tremendous pressures. However, Coser explained that a society does not die the way biological organism do, nor is there a precise point of birth [30]. Furthermore, a society may change or form a new system rather than die'. They merely adapt and change. The following are some of the challenges involved and the sustenance of the Khasi matrilineal system

Firstly, the matrilineal system is still in vogue among the Khasi-Pnar tribals despite the fact that certain sections of people amongst them are practicing patrilineal system contrary to the general pattern of the society. Moreover, there are sections of the people, negligible though, who have started a campaign to do away with the matrilineal system in favour of the patrilineal one. Secondly, the Khasi Hill Autonomous District Council (formerly the United Khasi Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council) are among the oldest Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) established in the United Khasi Jaintia Hills District where one of its function is to protect and safeguard the ethnic identity of the people. But it is a matter of a sad state of affairs that the Autonomous District Councils have failed to safeguard and to develop the matrilineal interest of Khasi and Jaintia Hills as they have on several occasions moved away from the mandate given to them by the Constitution and have been marred by controversy, alleged corruption and lack of administrative acumen. Thereby making a day to day erosion of the system as could be seen today. But the tradition of being matrilineal was deeply rooted in the way of life of the people to the extent of individual and social efforts to build up a true matrilineal order of the society against disruptive forces at work to destabilise and disintegrate the matrilineal form of the Khasi society. Thirdly, the Khasi custom and practices are inseparably embedded with land. Nongkynrih has classified many types of land holding system prevalent among the Khasis. However, it may be noted that one of the factor that the Khasis are unable to part or alienate themselves from land is because land is the main source of income of the people. The fear and unwillingness of the Khasis to part or alienate from land is because people are given to believe that land survey means forfeiture of their land. With the influence of modernization and economic compulsion there arises a challenge through adjustment with the demands of changing times.

#### **V. CONCLUSION**

In the light of the above statements the tradition of matrilineal practice is being questioned explicitly or implicitly by many about its relevance in the present day generation. But it is heartening to note that whatever may be the question there is no dearth of the answer for it. The Khasi society today is witnessing changes by means of modernization and other factors. As such, the mind set of many has become critical in their opinion for or against anything that is in their way of life. But even when such is the case, the belief of being matrilineal is so deep rooted in the heart of Khasi men and women that they find it hard to depart from it. In conclusion, it may be said that the Khasi matrilineal system is an on-going dispensation.

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