

***Ka Īawbei* (ancestress): Matrilineal Society of the Khasis**

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The Khasis are the most advanced tribe of North East India. They dwell in Meghalaya with Shillong as the capital, carved in the early part of 1972. Prior to the arrival of the British in 1834, the region was under *Hima* (kingdom) Shillong. The matrilineal principle of descent, succession and inheritance is a distinctive feature of the Khasi society. The status of women is exclusive where lineage is drawn from the mother's side. She is the bearer of the clan name through her children. The Khasi word *Kpoh* traces descent from *Ka Īawbei* (the great grandmother). It explains the *kpoh* as a group of matrilineal kin usually confined to one domestic family or household. Amongst the Khasi, while reckoning or descent they speak of the brother and sister who are the great grandchildren of one great grandmother (Gordon 1914).

The Khasi-female centric practice perhaps should not be confused with matters which surround the term Matriarchate which states that 'Women are leaders', there is hardly any evidence anywhere to show that a society is completely under the control of women. It may be noted that in the Khasi matrilineal system the executive and judicial authority lies with the male kin – *U Kñi* (maternal uncle). In descent and inheritance the line passes from mother to daughter but succession to political offices is from maternal uncle to sister's son. This system existent since bygone generations has survived amidst western influence. Since the structure connects properties and clan descends solely to women, multiple problems arise when slight clefts develop. For instance the system poses a problem when a Khasi male marries a Non-Khasi female, as their child/ children cannot inherit or be endowed with the clan name of either the father or mother. The father has no legitimate right to bestow his clan on his child/children as it is not the customary practice of the matrilineal Khasi Society, nor can the mother (Non-Khasi) come forward to save her child/ children from being an individual without a clan as she does not belong to the Khasi Society.

The Khasis believe that human beings cannot be identified before God the creator *Khlem Kur Khlem Jait* (without a clan name). The offspring cannot retain the father's clan name, firstly it is against the Khasi custom and secondly to retain the father's clan after death the uncalcinated bone cannot be deposited in the clan ossuary in case of those that still adhere to *Ka Niam Khasi* (Khasi Religion). To do this amounts to defilement and pollution of the clan ossuary. The children of such union cannot adopt their mother's clan name (or caste) as they will not be accepted as Khasi and secondly it would be against the norm of her (mother's) society (patrilineal). Thus descendants of any such union are given a new clan name either mother's name, combination of mother and father's name or after their own personal names. The Khasi custom and tradition material and non – material will have to be followed. "Gradually, such individuals are inducted and assimilated into the Khasi cultural fold" (Nongbri 1984:6; Khongphai 1974:10; Mawrie 1970; 72) hence, the Khasi forefathers created or invented a system known as "*Tang Jait*" (creation of a new clan).

Tang Jait – consists of two Khasi words: '*Tang*' which can be explained as to '*pynkyntang*' (consecrate) and '*Jait*' means a new Khasi kinship with a new title-name usually prefixed with the word '*Khar*' – signifying Non-Khasi mother married to a Khasi male so that the issues of the union are not omitted from the Khasi way of life and identity. The *Nongkñia* (performer or religious practitioner) in consonance with the *Meikha* (paternal grandmother) solemnizes the ceremony according to the norms prescribed in her family tradition with intimation to the members of the *Seng Khasi* a socio-cultural organisation and the *Rangbah Shnong* (village authority or headman) for proclamation. Special emphasis is given to the *Meikha* (paternal grandmother) among the Khasis, for it is through her son that the clan shall grow. It is from the paternal side that a child is born, from the blood of the father the child is conceived hence she is given respect in the entire society. Her presence in functions whether in naming or marriage is important.

The Khasis deter trading or misusing kinship title to fit in the matrilineal concept envisaged by the ancestors on the blood tie traced through the ancestress - *Ka Īawbei*. The '*Tang Jait*' is a tradition of the Khasi society and the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council empowered by the rule passed a bill known as the Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Khasi Social Custom of Lineage) Act 1997 to codify this customary practice of the area. The Council empowered by the Constitution enacted a law of *Tang Jait* to allow initiation of a new clan in the Khasi Hills. The ceremony is conducted in the presence of the *Rangbah Shnong* or headman and the family of the couple who are the originators of the new clan as prescribed in the Act. Para 3 of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India.

The Khasi Hills Autonomous District (KHADC) Act describes '*Tang Jait*' as a ceremony for adopting a *Jait* (clan name) with a prefix of "*Dkhar*" or simply "*Khar*" for a person or persons born of a Khasi father and

a non-Khasi mother who have been assimilated into Khasi Society. The wife or the non-Khasi mother is conferred the title of *Ka Īawbei Tynrai* (the clan mother) and the Khasi father is given the title of *U Thawlang* (the clan father) of the new clan. The progenitor of the new clan bears upon him a heavy responsibility as they are in some way legends of their own. It is expected of the family to adopt the Khasi way of life, learn the language through every day conversation, the religion, *Ka Kheĩn Kur Ka Kheĩn Kha*, the cognates and agnates should be adopted on the basic principles laid by the Khasi religious thought. Though lineage is through the mother the patrilineal trait is firmly considered, as children cannot marry even four degrees of relationship to the side of the father which is as good as consanguinity within the blood called *Shong Sang*. Children of the brothers of the father though married into another clan are forbidden to marry for it is a taboo termed as *Sang Shi Para Kha*. Marriage between a nephew and his *kĩi*'s (maternal uncle's) daughter is not welcome either because to a Khasi a *kĩi* is regarded the role of authority in his sister's house but the father is not devoid of power either. The clannishness of the Khasis is held in high esteem both relatives of mother (*kur*) and father (*kha*) are respected and honoured.

In the past intermarriage between a Khasi male and a non-Khasi female was somewhat encouraged for firstly, it was considered rare for a Khasi male in marriage to attain his own *Jait* (clan). Secondly, *tang jait* was looked at as a perform to increase the population of the Khasi Society. The latter however is in consonance with the olden days when population was minimal. In recent times however, intermarriage is mainly due to personal choices. The Khasi consider *tang jait* necessary to avoid 'ka byrsieh ka byrsang lane ka kha khun-anna khun-pongkha'¹ (taint and taboo through marriage leading to the birth of special children). Also, the Khasi consider "Ka Īawei ka ri hi, ka shong ha ki soh ki syntiew kiba long ki khun ki kt"ⁱⁱ (the future of a nation is dependent on the young generation).

Findings reveal that confusion exists about *tang jait* among the Khasi of *Ka Niam Khasi* and the Khasi converts. It is majorly misunderstood that the mother of the offspring too is given a new clan. It may be mentioned that *Tang Jait* is meant only for the offspring of a Khasi male married to a non-Khasi female. The mother cannot bear the clan name for she is not a Khasi and that her blood line is not of a Khasi. The first baby female of this new clan shall be known as *ka Īawbei* (ancestress) and the first baby male shall be known as *u suidĩia* (great grand uncle). It has been observed that in some cases offspring seem confused about their roots, food habits and minimal dialect are the only convenient adjustments made. The religious aspect does not find mention in the sphere.

In fact the very concept of *tang jait* does not find reference in most hearths and homes. The recent trend is that offsprings are known by the clan names of both the father and mother or by the father's clan name. This practice is observed not only in cases of intermarriage but also where both parents are Khasis due to gratitude or idolizing their fathers. However such practices lead to confusion not only in *ka kheĩn kur ka kheĩn kha* (blood relations) but also in *ka shong kha ka shong man* (marriage). *Ka shong sang* once a taboo leading to exogamy is now brushed under the carpet and find significance in a Chinese whisper.

Though Khasis are matriarchs, *ka tang jait* was formed to safe guard the actions of men alone resulting from the marriage of a Khasi male and a non-Khasi female (emphasis added). In the past such union was encouraged for it was a measure to increase the population since the society was small as compared to the present day. On the other hand women are barred from let alone marriage but even being seen with a *dkhar* or a *mynder* (a non-Khasi male). The famous slogan "Wat ai lad ĩa u mynder" (bar the non-Khasi) is unanimously adopted. It was opined that such acts of detests spring from incidences of ulterior motives of a non-Khasi male towards a Khasi female due to their naive thought pattern and that the non-Khasi male are too comfortable in the ethnic way of life.

Due to the customary law that governs the Khasi social system, the matrilineal system of the Khasis is greatly misunderstood. In terms of residence after marriage the man moves to his wife's residence or mother in law's house especially in cases of marriage to a *Khatduh* (youngest daughter). *Ka khatduh* inherits the ancestral property and she is the custodian of the trust. In most families the *ĩing khatduh* (house of the youngest daughter) is the center for ceremonial and festive activities. In case, the youngest daughter dies before inheritance the next in line will inherit the property. If property is invested by the parents it is divided amongst siblings depending on the decision and managerial ability of the parents. However ancestral property is solely inherited by the *Khatduh*.

Change is inevitable in every society perhaps due to the emergence of nuclear families and modernization. Though Meghalaya is known for its matrilineal system, interception of patriarchal ideologies and matrilineal principles seem to be the system of operation in the present scenario. Traces of predominant male involvement in economic, academic and social activities are seen and demand for a girl child in a family is solaced when a boy child is born.

¹Kharshiiing, P. R. 2014, *Ka Shongkha Khleh, Ka Bishar Bniah ĩa ki nobel Khasi*. Riwar Offset Press, Upper Shillong. p. 101

ⁱⁱIbidp. 111