



## “KHASI MATRILINY: A HISTORICAL APPROACH”

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**Abstract:** Matriliney is a way of reckoning descent from a female ancestress or female line. No doubt, there are researches on origin and development of matriliney including studies on the social and state formation in Khasi society. Despite these researches indicate the role of women in society and economy, yet, there are limited studies highlighting the changes in the position of women from a historical point of view. Even though the Khasis trace descent from the mother, the maternal uncle called u *kni*, the male kin, enjoys the executive and judicial authority. In Khasi society, one must noted that descent and property rights have been passed down from the mother to the daughter since time immemorial. However, the colonial rule and the impact of Christian missions from the nineteenth century and the governments of post-1947 period have brought direct and indirect changes in the system. Thus, it is in this background that this paper will focus on the role of the youngest daughter or *khatduh* in Khasi society especially that of ancestral property in changing times; mainly probing the changes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

**Keywords:** Ancestral Property, Khasi, Maternal Uncle, Matriliney, Youngest Daughter.

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The Meghalayan people were referred to as ‘Khasi’ by the Bangladeshi residents of the Sylhet district, with whom they had trade relations. These people called their territory ‘Khasia Pahar’ or ‘Khasi Pahar.’ On the other hand, these people were called the Hynniew Trep (Seven Huts) people in Khasi mythology. The British administrators gave them the Cossyeahs and Jynteahs (later referred to as ‘Khasi’ and ‘Jaintia’) in writing, thus solidifying the name Khasi (Talukdar, 2004:8). The Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, and Lyngngam are now collectively referred to as Khasi. In Meghalaya, the Khyntiam Khasis occupy the central

region, the Pnars, also called Jaintias, live to the east, the Bhois live to the north, and the War Khasis live on the southern slope. In the western part, which borders the Garo Hills, live the Lyngngams. Among the tribes of Northeast India, the Khasis are distinct in many ways (Bareh, 1974: 68-69). R T. Rymbai (Choudhury, 1996: vi), a well-known Khasi author and former IAS officer, said that 'the Khasis are an island by themselves.' Colin Wanniang classifies the indigenous Khasis into Khasi Khynriam, Khasi Pnar, Khasi Maram, Khasi Bhoi, Khasi War, Khasi Lyngngam, and Khasi Khyrwang (Shillong Times, 2012, 1-3). Hence, the term 'Khasi' is applicable to all sub-groups (Shillong Times, 2001) mentioned above. The distinction is strictly territorial. Differences in dialects, economy, social usage, and political organisation result from the groups' ecological and political historical conditions. They do, however, share a common origin, language, social structure, and culture.

E. Adamson Hoebel (Hoebel, 1949:123) remarked that patrilineal descent connects an individual to a group of kinsmen related to him or her solely through males, whereas matrilineal descent connects an individual to a group of relatives exclusively through females. Among the Khasis, people trace their ancestry back to the female line, with children inheriting the mother's name, joining her clan, and living in her social group. It is in this regard, the mother-child bond is the strongest kinship tie (Nongbri, 1996: 336). Hammond (Hammond, 1971:175) a well-known anthropologist, viewed matrilineal descent as typically associated with primitive farming, where women do the work. Thus, to him, a matrilineal system is a typical form of semi-agricultural society in which female labour plays a dominant role. Some Khasi scholars today provide a compelling explanation as to why the Khasis chose to trace their descent from women (Syiemlieh, 1994: 8). Some opined that when the Khasis were at war with their enemies, the men were never certain of their return home, so in order to preserve their identity and tribe, they entrusted their property and lineage to the women. H. O. Mawrie (Mawrie, 1981:72) supported the above theory by explaining that when the Khasi ancestors weighed the father's and mother's rights over the child; the balance leaned towards the mother as she is the one who bears the pains and responsibilities of childrearing; and it was on the basis of this very ground that matriliney got its sanction, a custom which consequently helped to progressively elevate women in society.

With regards to Khasi matriliney, several scholars and researchers have incorrectly characterised Khasi society as 'matriarchal' (Giri, 1998: 8) with women holding all the power, in their attempts to understand matrilineal

relationships. Women are accorded a proper position in the home, clan, and society, and their line of descent is determined by their 'Mother' rather than by their 'Woman.' It would be incorrect, though, to claim that a Khasi man occupies no position whatsoever in this matrilineal system. A Khasi always say, 'from the woman comes the kind, from the father comes the stature.' Hence, the notion that men have no voice in Khasi society, as expressed by some non-Khasi writers, is completely unfounded. For instance, the phenomenon of the *dorbar* clearly demonstrates that men make important decisions that affect society as a whole (Lyngdoh, 1991:33) while women are respected as the propagators of *ka kur-ka jait*, or the clan, and as such have been custodians of property for generations, enjoying comparative freedom. Since women have no political or administrative rights; they cannot attend a *dorbar* and are barred from participating in legislative, administrative, or judicial proceedings (Roy, 1934: 87). There is a saying among the Khasi that says, "*Wow la kynih ka 'iar kynthei, ka pyrthei ka la wai*" meaning that when the hen crows, the world will come to end or will be in destruction. Just as only the cock crows, so also the crowing job should be carried on by men only; a subtle way of discouraging women from coming out on a public platform (Roy, 1986: 5-6). Women are, thus, never permitted to attend *dorbars* or village councils, or to participate in political affairs. In theory, she may be bestowed with numerous rights and properties; she may gain access to property and be regarded as the family priestess; however, in reality, she cannot do anything without the consent of male relatives. Their activities are limited to other socio-economic activities. Her role as a wife and mother is socially celebrated and the social values and rights conferred on her within the family and society are enormous (Lyndem, 2002:103). With regard to the role of the male members, a Khasi male serves two roles – 'father' to his children and 'uncle' to his maternal nieces and nephews thereby acting as a link between his wife and children's clan including his own. David Roy has quoted that "It is true that the *kni*, the mother's eldest brother is the head of the house, but the father is the executive head of the new home, where after children have been born to him, his wife and children live with him...u *kni* while in his own family circle as father and husband is nearer to his children and his wife than u *kni*" (Roy, 1937). When one looked into how Khasi men administered their territories, even prior to British intervention, the chiefs did not transfer power to their sons. The chiefs (*syiems*) were men but the right to chieftainship was passed down through the chief's youngest sister, with the exception of Hima Khyrim, where succession was passed down through the chief's eldest sister (Mawlong, 2016:191).

While studying the matrilineal system of the Khasis, one cannot avoid how festivals reflect the roles of both women and men in society. For example, the *Shad Suk Mynsiem* or Khasi Thanksgiving Dance explains the foundations of a Khasis' entire being. During the dance, the man's right hand holds a sword representing defence for his motherland, self, home, and kin; while the *sympiah* (fly flab) in his left hand represents his gentle and warm advice to his sisters, brothers, nieces, and nephews. On the ground, the young woman with her eyes downcast embodies humility, obedience, and submission; the 'crown' atop her head symbolises the dignity and respect accorded to her; the *lasubon*, a delicately yellow-textured flower attached to the crown, represents purity and beauty; and the slow, rhythmic movement of her feet to the accompaniment of drums, cymbals, and flute synchronises the fact that she must follow the man in order to receive love, shelter, protection, and respect. The dancing arena's gold and silver display is a representation of laborious effort. The young and old men encircling the maidens symbolises the man's sacred duty to lay down his wife in order to protect her honour, chastity, and purity. Despite the fact that a Khasi man is '*u rang khat-ar bor*' (a man with twelve powers) and a woman is '*ka'thei shibor*' (woman with one power), they have mutual respect for one another. In this respect, the man defends the woman, and the woman keeps the trust (Giri, 1998: 9).

A researcher cannot conceptualise the Khasi matriliney without first understanding its kinship structure. The Khasis' most notable and unique social institution was their matrilineal system. Except for the Garos, the system was less rigid and did not exist among other races or hill tribes in North East India. In this manner, the Khasi institution may be regarded as unique (Nakane, 1967:117). The Khasis' matrilineal system and social structure originated with the clans. As per tradition, the Khasi ethnic origin descended from the '*Hynniew Trep Hynniew Skum*' or 'Seven Huts Seven Clans'. The Khasi referred to the '*trep*' (hut) as a '*kur*'. A *kur* (clan) traced its lineage back to '*ka Iawbei Tynrai*', or 'root ancestor'. Each clan has a triad: *ka Iawbei*, the ancestral mother or the progenitress; *u Thawlang*, the ancestral father or the progenitor; and *u Suidnia*, the maternal uncle and eldest son of *ka Iawbei* (Nongkynrih, 1979:95). As time passed, the *kurs* proliferated and as a result, members of some *kurs* migrated in search of new lands for agriculture, better means of subsistence, and other facilities. This further resulted in the formation of '*ka jait*' i.e., descended from the *kur*'s common *iawbei tymmen* or old ancestress (Gurdon, 1907:63). A *kur* is then divided into *ka kpoh* which Nakane explained how the nature of the *kpoh* as a group of matrilineal kin usually confined to one domestic family or

a group of households is linked by direct extension of the main household, and each *kpoh* is then separated into *iings* (houses or families) (Nakane, 1967: 119). It must also be noted that the *jait* may take on a new name as a result of migration; the *jait* can also be integrated into the same *kur* as another *jait* through acts of kindness performed by one *jait* towards the other but must retain the same ancestry and *kur* (Giri, 1998:12). Among the Khasis, there are clans who traced their ancestry to a goddess who would later become ruling families; for example, the origin of Shyllong *Syiemships* revolves around *ka Pah Syntiew*, a divine being who comes to live among mortals. In a Khasi society, there is a system known as *ka jing-iatehkur* (inter-clans covenant), which is formed between two or more clans and members of such clans are never allowed to intermarry. The term *shikur* (related clan) is also used among the Khasis to indicate the relationship of two or more clans. It is also interesting to note that since time immemorial, the Khasis have practiced *tang-kur tang-jait*, which usually occurs when a Khasi man marries a non-Khasi woman. Such marriage resulted into a new clan, formed through a religious ritual known as *tang-kur*, with the woman becoming the clan's first ancestor. Thus, in this manner, the Khasi surnames beginning with the prefix '*khar*' came to find its ground (Choudhury, 1996).

To a Khasi, marriage is a social contract governed by clan, religious rites, and practices (Snaitang, 2017: 56). It is a significant social institution which determines the matrilineal residential pattern (Sinha, 1970). Because Khasi society is matrilineal in character, as have mentioned, the children are always given the names of their mother's clan. Renowned anthropologists such as Robin Fox argued that kinship is more than just biological as it is also about social relationships (Fox, 1973:83). No denying the fact that the Khasis share this aspect of kinship, in addition to consanguinity but they strictly practice exogamous marriage or unions outside of the *kur*. And marriage is viewed as a divine bond that unites two people or '*kurs*.' There is, therefore, '*ka khein kynsai*' or elaborate examination, prior to marriage. Marrying within one's own clan is considered the greatest sin among the Khasis and a marriage as such is termed as *ka khong sang* or incestuous act (Nongkynrih, 1979). When someone commits an incestuous act, the *kurs* are forbidden to have any ritual rites or ceremonies performed for them in their religion, and when they passed away; their bones are not to be interred in the cairns of the *kur* (Giri, 1998:13). Even with the arrival of Christianity in the region, Khasi Christians and Khasis who still follow their own traditional religion (*niam tynrai*) continue to abide the existing customary laws of consanguinity, which is seen as the secret to the Khasis' survival as a



race (Giri, 1980: 93). Marrying one's sister-in-law or mother-in-law known as *ka shong sang synri* which is an unpardonable sin among the Khasis is also another notable feature that is worth mentioning. In addition, marrying the children of one's father's brother or father's sister known as *ka sang sohpet kha* is another incestuous act to have ever committed by a Khasi man or woman. However, a Khasi man can marry his cousin (*bakha*) which is his uncle's daughter but cannot marry his paternal aunt's daughter (*nia-kha*) because it violates a taboo known as *ai khaw kylliang*, which is an insult to the father because it means a return of bread and luck. Added to what O.L. Snaitang has pointed out, the Khasis view marriage as a sacred union between a man and a woman rather than just as a 'contract.' It is thought that God ordained it (*ba la phah da u Blei*). This view finds its common ground with the arrival of Christianity when a popular saying emerges – '*ba la ia thoh ka shyieng krung*' (when the ribs match). The latter concept represents the evolution of Khasi thought under the influence of Christianity (Giri, 1998: Ibid). As expected, the mother is to train and shape her children in accordance with Khasi norms and ways of life, and the line of descent is taken from her, yet, the father is the centre of the family. The children regard their father's mother as *mei-kha*, his sisters and brothers as *niakha-pakha* (paternal aunts and uncles) and their offspring as *khun-kha*. Incidence of divorce is considered by some as a common occurrence. Gurdon, for instance, pointed out that there were several causes and that it was fairly common. Nakane asserts that either the wife or the husband can cause a marriage to end, but it usually comes down to the wife's actions. Nakane also believes that marriages with non-heiresses are more stable and successful because a husband is more comfortable in an elementary household (Choudhury, 1998:148). Relationships involving the wife's maternal uncle or brother, who is in a position of authority, and the husband, who is, at most, a new member of the family, are inherently tense psychologically. Though it does not result in divorce, a significant number of husbands have a strong preference to spend the majority of their time at their sister's house. In terms of bride price, such a custom is non-existent possibly due to the society's matrilineal structure and the issue of compensation for divorce is rarely raised. After the divorce, the liberal opportunity for remarriage for a widow or divorcee eases the transition to a new life. Numerous social concepts have changed as a result of external influences, especially Christianity. As a result, there has been a growing need to adapt to new social concepts. The old socio-religious sanction regulating social actions is gradually losing its influence on the younger generation as a result of increased use of technology in daily life, the introduction of cash

crops like potatoes and oranges, and the opening of newer avenues of gainful employment for both men and women. This has further resulted in a greater number of domestic households called nuclear family consisting of only the mother, her husband, and their children. Traditional 'parent-settled' marriages are now giving way to 'self-settled' marriages based on individual preference and selectivity. However, the strong principle of matriliney remains in place. There is also an increased emphasis on uxorilocal marriage because a woman prefers to marry someone who is willing to come and live with her. Hence, economic cooperation and the husband's participation in domestic venture management are becoming increasingly popular (Ibid).

Coming to the institution of *ka khatduh* and female succession, the institution was not only ancient but also highly revered. The Khasis also followed a matrilineal form of acquiring property i.e., handed down ancestral property from mother to daughter. In this regard, the *khatduh* or youngest daughter has the advantage of inheriting the majority of her parents' property, including their home, whereas her other sisters received only a portion of the inheritance that has been parted by the mother. The status of the *khatduh* is, thus, especially important because she represents everything that is enduring and sacred in the Khasi concept of family. As per the customs of Khasi culture, the youngest daughter is merely responsible for taking care of her mother's properties, which are supposed to be managed by her uncles and her brothers after they passed away (Passah, 2017:74-75). Naturally, the youngest daughter carries a lot of responsibilities and benefits, who would also inherit the role of family property and religious custodianship in every generation (War, 1992:15). However, in relation to the religious custodianship and other sacerdotal rights, the responsibilities are not uniform everywhere, for instance, in *hima* Khyrim or Khyrim state; it is the eldest daughter of the family especially that of the ruling family who holds the responsibility in carrying out the ritual rites and duties as per tradition. It is also worth mentioning that among the Khasis, the rite and ritual practices such as birth naming ceremonies, marriages, funerals and others, are performed on a family (*ing*) basis, although some are performed at the level of the clan (*kur*), the village (*shnong*), the association of villages (*raid*), and the state (*hima*); because to a Khasi, religion starts from home, and it is particularly through this very reason that the importance of a maternal uncle (*kni*) comes in; who then acts as a priest alongside his youngest niece who assists him in the preparation (Shangpliang, 2013:545-46). The *khatduh*, whose house is called *ka ing seng*, *ing niam*, and *ing kur*, meaning the organising house, religious house, or clan's house, is in charge of all family religious rites.

Her home is thus sacred; and serves to uplift the family's members as well as provide refuge or shelter for the impoverished members of the family. She is responsible for covering the costs of the ceremonies including her parents' funerals and especially the significant ritual of moving the deceased's bones from under the family's small stone cist, known as the *mawshyieng* to the larger stone ossuary, known as the *mawbah*. Even though the *khatduh* is responsible for covering all of these costs, the deceased's children do contribute in some way. Besides the *khatduh*, the maternal uncle, or *u kni*, is highly respected and always influential in the family. In spite of this, he does not view the family's father as inferior to him; rather, he is well-regarded in both his own and his wife's families (Shadap-Sen, 1981: 17-18). Among the Khasis, property is classified as either alienable or inalienable. Ancestral property or *nong-tymmen* is an inherited property that cannot be sold without the approval of the entire family or clan. The second kind is called *nong-khynraw* (self-acquired property) which only consists of the current members' earnings. Despite Khasi women's elevated status, men also play their important roles. They serve as mentors and protectors for his nephews and nieces in addition to being the sisters' maternal uncles and sons as depicted through the dances. A Khasi man played both as a husband and a father who raises and provides for the children in his wife's home. The Khasi used to refer to their father as 'the one who gives the stature' (*u kpa u ba ai ia ka long rynieng*). Although there was no such thing as a will or gift in Khasi society, it was customary to honour parents' or grandparents' wishes regarding what should happen to their property after they passed away, particularly if it included named property that should go to a specific child (David Roy, 1934:95).

When analysing the custom of property inheritance, it is evident that the Khasi society has been undergoing significant transformation, especially since the arrival of the British in the hills during the nineteenth century. A significant portion of the populace had accepted Christianity, which had started the process of change. Mr. C. Lyngdoh has rightly says that 'a Khasi is a Khasi because of his religion more than anything else...that religion plays so prominent a part as in the law of inheritance' (Rymbai, 1974). It is only fitting that the institution of the *ka khatduh*, which was formerly closely associated with the Khasi religion, experiences a shift in meaning within the current social movement. It goes without saying that those who converted to Christianity no longer follow the traditional Khasi religious rites. A convert to Christianity automatically loses the right to inherit if the original status of *ka khatduh*—being the guardian of the family religion—remains intact (Cantlie, 1934). In



the changed context of the society, which now includes Christians as well as adherents of the traditional Khasi religion, a redefinition of the institution of *ka khatduh* is required. The term ‘representative owner’ is now widely regarded as the most accurate and true representation of *ka khatduh* (Rymbai, 1974). In other words, a secular meaning is increasingly being attached to the institution of *ka khatduh*, which still remains in place. Cantlie notes that hostility subsided and Christians were allowed to inherit from non-Christians. It is now common law that Christians may inherit from non-Christians (Cantlie, 1934). The most striking fact in this regard is that, while advocating changes and adjustments to inheritance law in light of changing societal conditions, Khasi community leaders, including intellectuals, agree that the matrilineal structure should be preserved at all costs. They argue that matriliney gives Khasi society its distinct identity and serves as the basic foundation upon which the society is built (Choudhury, 1998: 153). Choudhury has pointed out that S. J. Duncan believes that the Khasis based their customary laws of inheritance on the principles of their ancient religion. Now that many people have become Christians and have abandoned the religious rites and forms of worship based on old beliefs, the system of holding lands solely on the performance of those religious rites and functions is no longer viable. This is especially true of the common belief that the *khatduh* inherits all of the family’s properties because she is responsible for the family’s religion. As a result, it is up to the parents to divide their property in the manner that they see fit. In terms of maternal descent, Khasi custom should prevail because when the fundamental structure of Khasi society is destroyed, the entire concept of Khasi society collapses and loses its meaning (Ibid). As per the Land Reforms Commission, R. T. Rymbai mentioned that a Khasi person’s way of life has undergone significant change while maintaining much of his customs and usages. Today, the Khasis rely on small-scale trading in addition to agriculture as a means of subsistence. Natural disintegration is occurring within the clan, which was centred mainly on the land. These unique single-family homes are no longer under the control of the clan or branch of the clan, represented by uncles, as they once were. As uncles turn to their own children, women are more likely to rely on their husbands in recent years (Rymbai, 1974). One should also take note of the institution of *pynkam* or property which has no official ownership or a will made by verbal dispensations in the Khasi law of inheritance. It seems that the institution of *pynkam* was misunderstood in order to reconcile it with the Khasi general principle of inheritance. There was a strong presence of the time-honoured practice of *pynkam*, which allowed a donor to vocally dispose of their belongings in front of witnesses while they

were still living (Choudhury, 1998). Hoover Hynniewta also argued that a mother can divide the ancestral property (*nongtymmen*) among her sons only for the duration of their lives. Regarding self-acquired property (*nongkynti*), parents can *pynkam* self-acquired property among any of their own sons or any other children they choose, and this *pynkam* can be revoked at any time. However, in the event that the mother dies, the father cannot deprive the children of their share. If any son or daughter violates parental command, the father may give his or her share to any son or daughter as he sees fit (Rymbai, 1974). During the British period, the practice of making *pynkam* of properties fell out of favour, either because British administrators failed to understand or appreciate the institution of *pynkam*, or because they were hesitant to recognise verbal testaments as legally binding. The Khasi intelligentsia generally agrees that this good and ancient custom should be preserved and given the status of 'enacted law', as it is natural that with the spread of literacy, written testament should be preferred over verbal *pynkam* (Ibid).

Another agency of change as can be seen during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was that of mixed marriage. Although the Khasis' land physical characteristics kept them apart from the outside world, there were some interactions. Those who lived on the southern slopes in particular experienced the transitions. People living in the *war* area (southern slope) traded frequently with those living in the plains as the plains produced marketable items like iron, cotton, limestone, oranges, betel nuts, bay leaves, and other natural products (Allen, 1906:70-78). As trade contacts were restricted to the southern borders of the region, it may be assumed that such interactions had a wider impact on the worldviews of those engaged in the trade; however, there is no proof that this resulted in any general change in Khasi society (Snaitang, 1993:38). The issue, though, is whether or not mixed-married children have the right to be considered legitimate Khasis. A. S. Khongphai expressed the opinion that there is no issue with illegitimate children among the Khasis because the children always belong to the mother (Khongphai, 1974). He also added that the non-controversial definition of a Khasi is a person born of a Khasi mother, irrespective of the fact whether the father is a Khasi or a non-Khasi. Further, the general consensus seems to support the idea that any Khasi person, male or female, who chooses to adopt a different lineal system of descent and gives up their traditional way of life, customs, and usages will lose their right to inherit ancestral property, which consists of land, whether it is at the *Ri Raid* (land of the *raid*) or *Ri Kynti* lands (ancestral and self-acquired lands). An additional intriguing perspective holds that a Khasi woman who

marries a non-Khasi person can still obtain properties based on her birth as a Khasi, provided that the *raid*, in the case of *raid* land, the owners of *Ri Kynti* land, and private owners, in the case of private lands, approve of the acquisition (Choudhury, 1998). Hence, customary law primarily governs the upkeep of ancestral properties. The importance of familial ties has significantly decreased in areas where it is acknowledged that all children must have equal opportunities. Tracing one's lineage back to the man is, however, rejected. The people's culture will vanish if the society changes because its matrilineal nature is its fundamental component. For the Khasi people, maintaining their culture therefore, means maintaining their matrilineal nature. It is clear that urban families have changed. Consequently, married families are valued more, with the emphasis now being on one's own family members, including sons and daughters (Mawlong, 2017:93).

On the basis of above discussion, by way of conclusion it can be suggested that matriliney has been continuing as the core of the Khasi society, though changes have been witnessed from the nineteenth century, with the influence of the British rule and Christianity. The changes have also been evolving due to modern economic avenues and emergence of nuclear family in practice in the last couple of decades. The Land Reforms Commission Report of 1974 has also brought about some regulation in the traditional society; however, some more attempts from the side of the Government and the society at large have to be initiated to establish gender and socio-cultural parity in the Khasi society strongly. Due to limitation of the length of the paper this aspect has not been discussed in details here, and will form part of another paper.

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